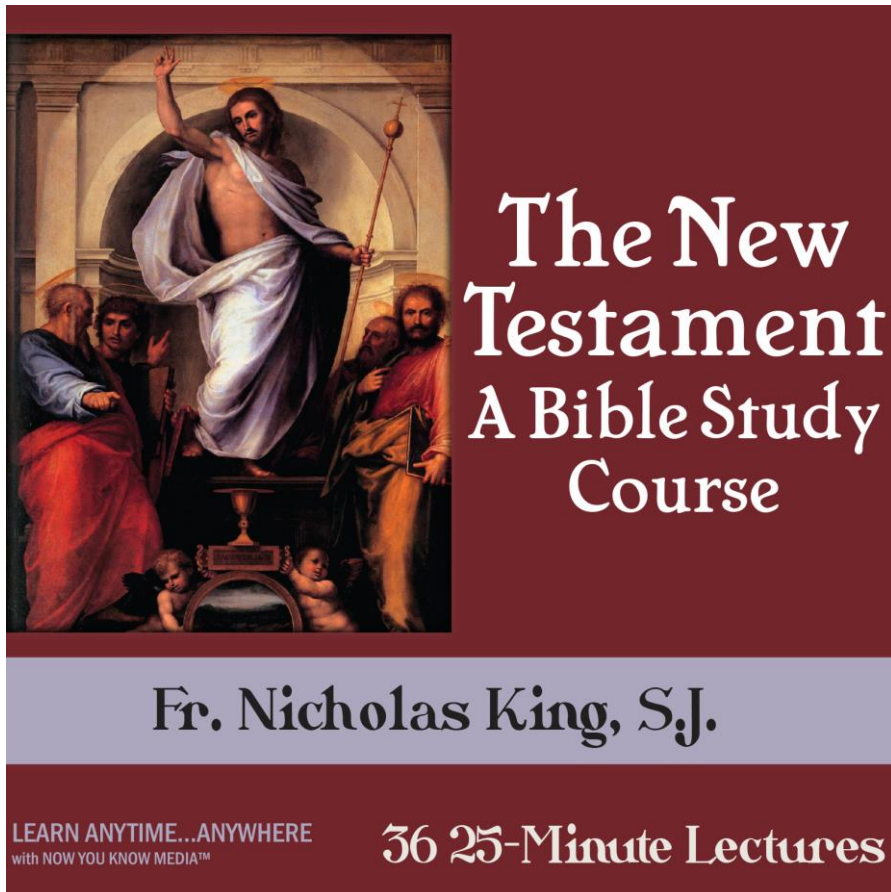


A
NOW YOU KNOW MEDIA
STUDY GUIDE

The New Testament: A Bible Study Course

Presented by Fr. Nicholas King, S.J.



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Course Overview

Gain fresh insights into the New Testament in this life-changing course.

Perhaps no other text has so greatly influenced Western civilization as the New Testament. Beyond serving as the foundation of Christianity, it has influenced everything from great works of art to modern literature. And yet, it also remains widely misunderstood—even among lifelong Christians.

Now, *The New Testament: A Bible Study Course* answers your most important questions about its twenty-seven books. Taught by Fr. Nicholas King, a longtime Oxford lecturer and Bible translator, these 36 engaging talks give you access to modern scholarship on the New Testament. Fr. King's original translations breathe new life into the words you have so often heard and studied, accurately conveying the mood of the original documents.

After a fascinating general introduction to the New Testament, you will take a fresh look at the Pauline epistles (both those written by the apostle himself and by his followers), believed to be the earliest texts. Then, you will enjoy four lectures on each of the Gospels, exploring the nuances of the Synoptics and the powerful Christology of the Fourth Gospel. Next, you will look at how the Word of God spread in the Acts of the Apostles and the general epistles. You will also explore Revelation, a text that is both beautiful and often misunderstood. Finally, you will consider the important themes of Christ's Resurrection, divine inspiration, and the necessity of understanding the New Testament as a continuation of the Old Testament.

Above all, you will gain a fuller sense of the figure of Jesus who underlies these texts. As you will come to understand, Jesus was a devout Jew who was telling the old story of God and the People of God in a new way. Our age needs to hear this message once more and understand that, as Jesus preached, the gospel is open to all.

This scriptural journey will fill you with the excitement and freshness that pervades the writings of the New Testament. Embark on it today.

Lecture 1. Introduction: Welcome to the New Testament

Overview

What is the New Testament? It looks like a book and sounds like a book, but it is actually better to think of the New Testament as a library with twenty-seven texts in it. What are these twenty-seven texts? To start with, there are thirteen letters attributed to Paul. Then there are four gospels, Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John, as well as the Acts of the Apostles. Then there are some more “letters,” such as 2 and 3 John. There is also an extraordinary piece of theological thinking, the Letter to the Hebrews. Finally, there is the Book of Revelation, as it is called in Latin, or “Apocalypse,” as it is known in Greek. That is a book that terrifies the wits out of some people, and towards the end of this course we shall be talking about it and inviting you to read it.

I. Why Just These Documents?

- Chances are that you have heard of other “gospels”: the Gospel of Thomas, for example, or the gospels of Mary, Peter, or Judas, and the Protevangelium of James.
- You can find all these apocryphal gospels translated into English and printed for you to read. I suggest that you spend some time with them. I suspect that if you move from these texts to the four gospels in your New Testament and read them through, you will find yourself admiring the Church’s sobriety in selecting just the gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John.

II. Writing the Gospels Down

- The only evidence of Jesus actually writing anything can be found in the story at the beginning of chapter 8 of John’s Gospel. Early Christians followed Jesus’ example, spreading their message primarily through talking. However, as the firsthand witnesses of Jesus began to die off, the question of how to pass on the message began to arise.
 - 1) The author we know as “Mark” was the first to put an account of Jesus’ life down on paper (or rather papyrus).
 - 2) Matthew and Luke used Mark’s account as the basis for their gospels.
 - 3) The author of John’s Gospel may also have known Mark, Matthew, and Luke, but he produced something rather different.
 - 4) All of them relate the same basic story, of Jesus from his baptism to his death and the emptiness of his tomb on that momentous Sunday morning; and it is recognizably the same story. More importantly, it is recognizably the same person we encounter as we listen to all four of these gospels.

- The gospels were very likely written to particular communities in particular circumstances. As you read them and notice the differences between them, simply ask yourself what kind of a group each gospel was written for.
- Why are there four of them?
 - 1) The idea of reducing the four to one, likely in the interest of greater efficiency, goes back at least to the second century. In that century, Irenaeus said that we need four gospels because there are four winds and four points of the compass.
 - 2) The Church has always insisted on keeping all four, and has, in my view, shown immense wisdom in doing so, precisely because of all their differences and their unique angles on the mystery of Jesus.

III. The Pauline Letters

- Paul wrote his letters prior to the appearance of the gospel narratives.
- This fiery character, who claimed to have met Jesus after his death and fell head over heels in love with him, spent the rest of his life walking and sailing around his world, telling people about Jesus. And when anyone took any notice, he would stay a while in that place, normally a largish Greek city, and organize the group of believers so that its enthusiasm would not evaporate for lack of structure.
- Once he had moved on (and Paul was always moving on, desperate to tell other people about his beloved), he kept in touch by post and dealt with problems as they arose. That is the source of the seven (or thirteen) Pauline letters that the tradition has handed down to us.

IV. The Destruction of the Temple

- When considering the origins of the New Testament, we should bear in mind the destruction of the Temple and of Jerusalem in 70 AD, when the Romans took revenge on the Jewish nationalists who had tried to reassert Israel's independence after far over a century of Roman occupation.
 - 1) Among the Jewish groups affected was that group of people who were convinced that God's Messiah had come, and that after he was crucified by the Romans, God raised him from the dead, proving that Jesus was God's Messiah, or "Christ."



The Destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by Francesco Hayez, 1867

- 2) While one group of Jews coped with the Temple's terrible destruction by replacing it with what they called Mishnah, the "repetition of the Law," Christians replaced the Temple with the resurrected person of Christ. They came to realize that Jesus himself was the new Temple, "not made by hands."
- That tragedy, and the meaning that God brought out of it, lies in the background of the New Testament.

v. Outside Sources

- One last question may occur to you, and you will often hear it raised in our secular age. The question is this: surely the New Testament is a prejudiced witness, and so we can't really believe what it is telling us. Aren't there any outside sources that we can consult?
 - 1) The Rabbinic authors
 - 2) Titus Flavius Josephus, author of *The Antiquities of the Jews*
 - 3) Roman historians, such as Suetonius and Tacitus
- With the four gospels, we have more information about Jesus than we have about his contemporary, the Emperor Tiberius. You could argue that the evidence is prejudiced, in the sense that each of the gospel writers is, in their different way, devoted to Jesus. Even so, there is enough difference in perspective for us to be able to get close to the facts about Jesus and to form a recognizable picture of him.
- Listeners should ask themselves: Does my reading of these twenty-seven texts bring me any closer to recognizing this strange character, the Galilean rabbi called "Jesus of Nazareth"? And, if so, do I feel in any way drawn to give my life over to this man?

Review Questions

1. What do you think the New Testament is for?
2. Do you think that the New Testament is “true”?
3. If we have a New Testament, does that mean we don’t really need an Old Testament?

Lecture 2. Starting with Paul: The Earliest Texts

Overview

We tend to think of the gospels coming first for two reasons: one, they come earliest in the New Testament, and two, the life of Jesus seems logically prior to everything that follows. Actually, the first person to put the implications of Jesus' message down on paper was the prickly, passionate, and powerful personality whom we know as Paul (or Saul) of Tarsus. Paul's letters are often hurried responses to particular crises in the churches he founded. They are not carefully worked out treatises, and therefore we should not expect consistency. We can, however, learn a great deal from Paul's writings.

I. Letters in the Ancient World

- Paul tends to follow the structure of letters in the ancient world:

- 1) Author's name
- 2) Greetings to audience
- 3) Thanksgiving for their good qualities
- 4) Main body
- 5) Final salutations

- The only letters in which Paul flouts this standard structure are Galatians and 1 Corinthians. In these cases, he is so cross with his audience that he doesn't give thanks.

- 1) "I'm astonished that you are so quickly transferring from the one who called you in the grace of Christ and gone to another gospel" (Galatians 1:6).
- 2) In Galatians 3:1-5, he asks a series of angry questions.



Saint Paul Writing His Epistles, attributed to Valentin de Boulogne, ca. 1618-1620

II. The Life of St. Paul

- We should be grateful to those who made Paul cross, because when he is annoyed, he gives us autobiography. For example, in 2 Corinthians, he tells us about his sufferings on the mission (2 Corinthians 11:9–12:13), and his mystical experiences in the “third heaven” (2 Corinthians 12:2-4).
- We will concentrate on Galatians 1:10–2:14. Here, he is trying to prove to them that his gospel came from God and Jesus Christ, not human beings.
 - 1) He calls himself a slave of Christ.
 - 2) He says that this is a gospel message from God and Jesus Christ.
 - 3) He is a convinced Jew, who once persecuted Christians.
 - 4) God revealed His Son, Jesus, in Paul.
 - 5) In that encounter, he discovered that God gave him the job of preaching to non-Jews.
 - 6) Paul spent time in Arabia (probably Petra, Jordan).
 - 7) Paul went back to Damascus (where he originally converted).
 - 8) After three years, he went up to Jerusalem (1:18).
 - 9) After arriving in Jerusalem, he talked to Kephass for a fortnight and to “James the brother of the Lord.”
 - 10) Then Paul went back to Asia Minor (1:21).
 - 11) He emphasizes that Judean churches didn’t know him by sight.
 - 12) After fourteen years, he returned to Jerusalem with Barnabas and Titus (both mentioned in Acts of the Apostles).
 - 13) A crisis arose about circumcision. Questions arose around whether Gentiles who had joined the Church had to be circumcised and keep kosher. Paul is convinced that they don’t.
 - 14) He talked to the “so-called pillars [of the Church].”
 - 15) Paul says that James, Kephass, and John “gave me and Barnabas the right hand of solidarity: we were to go to the Gentiles and they to the Jews.”
 - 16) “They wanted us to look after the poor” and Paul points out his enthusiasm for that.



*Saint Peter and Saint Paul by
Jusepe de Ribera, ca. 1616*

- 17) Later on, there was crisis with Kephas at Antioch. Paul confronted him face to face for hypocrisy. Initially, he ate with Gentiles, but when people came from James he retreated and set himself apart (2:12), and even Barnabas fell into the trap: “How come you’re forcing Gentiles to play the Jew?”
- Why is Paul so annoyed? As he said to both the Galatians and the Corinthians, it was a question of getting the gospel wrong. For Paul, the letter to the Galatians is about *freedom*: “spy out our freedom...in order to enslave us” (5:1; 2:4). Paul is a slave only to Jesus Christ.
 - That is why Paul is so cross; and at times the emotion is running so high that his argument is not altogether clear. At other times he uses language that he might later have regretted. For example, at 5:12 he wishes that those who are disturbing the Galatians about the need for circumcision “might castrate themselves.”
 - If you want to get into the heart of this letter and to be captivated by Paul’s genius, look at the following passages to understand why he still exercises such a hold on us today:
- 1) 2:20: “It is no longer I that live, it’s Christ that lives in me.”
 - 2) 3:28: “all of you who have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is no such thing as ‘Jew or Greek,’ no such thing as ‘slave or free,’ no such thing as ‘male or female.’” Human categories of race or religion or gender or class are artificial and not to be taken seriously.
 - 3) 4:19: Paul compares himself as a mother to the Galatians.
 - 4) 5:16-26: Paul explains to the Galatians what the gospel offers, contrasting the “works” of the flesh against the “fruits of the Spirit”: “Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness, and self-control.”
 - 5) Reading Paul’s letters is somewhat like only listening to one side of a telephone conversation. Savor the lines where Christ comes alive and try to understand why people are still drawn to these letters today.

Review Questions

1. Do you find yourself getting annoyed with Paul? If so, why?
2. Does all the world love a lover?
3. Who does Paul think Jesus is? Who do *you* think Jesus is?

Lecture 3. Romans: An Attempt at Being Diplomatic

Overview

Paul's letter to the Romans is perhaps the most influential text in the entire New Testament. It was of great importance in the disputes of the sixteenth century during the Reformation. Romans is not an easy letter; you will have to keep coming back to it in order to truly understand it. There are various theories regarding the letter's purpose. Paul may have been attempting to address the issues in Galatians, such as circumcision, more diplomatically. It could be a summary of Paul's thought, though most scholars do not hold this view today. Finally, Romans may be Paul's account of what God had done in Christ.

I. Paul's Diplomacy in Romans

- Examples:
 - 1) 1:9-10: "God is my witness...asking in my prayers that somehow one day I may succeed by God's will in coming to you."
 - 2) 1:11: "For I *long* to see you in order to give you a spiritual gift, for you to be strengthened."
 - 3) 1:12: Then he remembers: "I mean to be comforted among you, through the faith that is in each of us, yours and mine."
 - 4) 1:15: "I am longing to preach the gospel to you people in Rome." Things are difficult because he did not found the church in Rome, and because he thinks that they may have heard about the letter to the Galatians.
- Paul was eager to come to Rome. In 15:14, he says "I am persuaded about all of you that you are jam-packed with goodness, and filled with all knowledge." That is Paul being very diplomatic. But the next verse tells us that he is worried because of his mission to the Gentiles.
 - 1) The church in Rome was originally a Jewish one, but in 49 CE the Emperor Claudius had expelled Jews, or perhaps Jewish Christians, from Rome because of squabbling among them. Chances are that the Gentile Christians had come into their own and taken over the leadership of the church. When Jewish Christians were allowed back under Nero, there would probably have been tension, and that may well be the background of the letter

II. Paul's Mission

- Paul is convinced of his mission: "I have written to you a bit more audaciously, so as to remind you because of the grace that was given me by God—for me to be a minister of Jesus to the Gentiles, doing the sacred work of the gospel of God, in order that the offering of the Gentiles might become acceptable, consecrated by the Holy Spirit" (Rom 15:15-16). Several of the words

in this passage are cultic words, referring to the Temple services; they are taken from the Greek Bible that the Jewish Christians of Rome would have had at their fingertips, and we may see this as Paul sending a signal to them.

- He expresses the urgency of his travel plans (15:23): “having had a desire to come to you, these many years.” Then, however, to prevent them from thinking that he’s going to be imposing on them forever and a day, he mentions a planned visit to Spain (15:24), and expresses a hope that they will send him on his way.
- Paul then introduces the issue of his travels to Jerusalem: “Now I am on my way to Jerusalem, in the service of the saints.” Paul is determined to bring his collection to the Jerusalem church. He often expresses his enthusiasm for this project (1 Corinthians 16:1-2; 2 Corinthians 8:1-9:15; Gal 2:10; Philippians 4:10-19), though here the collection is for Paul himself.



Saint Paul by Adam Elsheimer, 1604

- 1) In this letter, Paul is afraid that the church in Jerusalem might refuse his offering. He begs the Roman church (15:30-31), “through Our Lord Jesus Christ and through the love of the Spirit to fight at my side with your prayers for me to God, that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judaea”; and it turns out that what he is hoping for is that “my service of offering for Jerusalem may become acceptable to the saints, and so I may come to you through God’s will, to relax in your company” (15:32).

III. Concluding Salutations

- Toward the end of his letter to the Romans, Paul produces a long list of names. Though Paul often ends his letters with a list of salutations, this case is quite different: much longer, and crossing a number of boundaries.
- 1) The first name mentioned is that of Phoebe, who is described as “a fellow Christian and deacon of the church which is in Cenchreae.” We discover that this woman has been “a benefactress of many people, including myself.” She is clearly important; and she is also, we should notice, a woman, and may serve to check the too-ready assumption that Christianity has been against women from the outset.
 - 2) The list is inclusive in a number of ways. In addition to including many women, there are Jewish, Greek, and Latin names, as well as several names that may have belonged to slaves.

- Paul's strategy, we presume, is to make the Romans aware that there are people there who can vouch for him. Paul is pulling out all the stops in his diplomatic onslaught, persuading the Romans that he is someone to reckon with.

IV. The Shape of the Letter

- The first chapter is of immense importance. Paul sets out where we are going.
 - 1) In the very first line, Paul describes himself as a "slave of Jesus Christ, called as an apostle, set apart for the glory of God."
 - 2) Paul stresses the continuity of this gospel with the old story of Israel and its God, which finds its fulfillment, according to Paul (1:4) in the person of his beloved (Jesus Christ).
 - 3) In 1:16-17 Paul offers what many people think is a summary of his message: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel; for it is God's power, for all those who believe, Jews first and then Greeks; for God's righteousness is being revealed, from faith to faith, as it is written, "The one who is just will live out of faith."
 - (a) Return to this summary when you have read through the letter and consider whether these two lines summarize Paul's message.
- After that, Paul talks about the need that the Gentiles have for what God offers in Jesus.
 - 1) Ultimately all of us, Jew and non-Jew, need what God is offering to us in Jesus.
- The arguments of chapters 3 and 4 are very difficult.
- In the next four chapters, Paul tells the Roman church, both Gentile and Jew, the grounds for their confidence.
- After that, the more thoughtful listeners will have noticed a problem: if the gospel is indeed "first for Jews and then for non-Jews," what about the plain fact, in Paul's day and in ours, that for the most part Jews have not been seized by the gospel message? In the next three chapters (9–11) Paul gives expression to his longing for his fellow Jews to come into Christ.
- The rest of the letter explores, in various ways, the implications of this for the Roman Christian community, with all their tensions and difficulties.
 - 1) Make a list of the number of issues Paul raises and see if you can get a sense of the context in which Paul was writing.

Review Questions

1. What is Paul's letter to the Romans about?
2. Why is this letter important?
3. What do you like most about this letter?
4. What do you think the Romans would have made out of this extraordinary letter?

Lecture 4.

1 Corinthians: Dealing with a Divided Church

Overview

It is to be hoped that by now you are coming to see that Paul was dealing with real issues, besetting real people. Now we are going to look at an embarrassingly real church with uncomfortably real problems. The biggest of these problems, though by no means the only one, is the fact that they were squabbling. We tend to assume that everything was fine in the early Church, and then look with sadness and embarrassment at our present plight, thinking, “If only we were back in the good old days.” But look again: those good old days never existed, and Christians have found reasons to be divided from the very beginning. This was particularly true in the case of the church in Corinth.

I. The City of Corinth



Ancient Corinth

- Corinth was a lively and enormously wealthy port city.

- Like many of such cities, it was notorious at several periods of its history for a lively sex life and considerable social divisions.

- 1) The population is thought to have been roughly one-third slaves, one-third free, and one-third “freedmen” or ex-slaves, and it is likely that the Christian population in Corinth reflected these demographics.

- Divisiveness and fighting were major issues for the Christians in Corinth. Paul attempts to address these problems in both of his letters to them.

- 1) Paul was unable to put an end to the fighting. His last surviving written words to the community are, “The grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the solidarity of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Corinthians 13:13), presumably because they were deaf to grace, immune to love, and had failed at Christian solidarity.

- 2) Half a century later, Clement writes from Rome to Corinth because the Corinthians were still fighting.

II. Responding to Disunity

- The Corinthians had sent a previous, complacent letter to Paul.
- In his response, Paul uses a series of passive verbs, making the point that anything that they have done right is not their doing but God's. They have been "made holy."
- "I beg you all...to say the same thing...and that there be no division among you" (1 Corinthians 1:10). Paul tells them how he knows about their fighting. He then deals with their division in a number of different ways.
 - 1) Paul tells them that "the rhetoric of the cross is stupidity," not knowledge (1:18), and that when he arrived in Corinth from a tricky experience in Athens, "I decided to know nothing but Jesus Christ—and him crucified."
 - 2) That they must be prepared to be foolish (see 3:18).
 - 3) That Paul and Apollos are only servants, working in God's garden or God's building (3:7-17; 4:1).
 - 4) That Paul reminds the Corinthians several times (8:1; 10:23; 14:4) that the only thing that matters is to build up the body.
 - 5) They are told that, because of their divisions, when they come together it is not the Lord's Supper that they are eating (11:20).
 - 6) That Paul draws the picture of the body (12:12-31).
 - 7) His last attempt to stop the fighting is a beautiful hymn to love.

III. Other Issues

- Paul also addresses several other issues that were plaguing the church in Corinth.
 - 1) The question of sex:
 - (a) Paul had heard that one of the members of the church was committing incest with his stepmother (5:1), and others were using prostitutes (6:16-20). Some Christians had been visiting the temple of Aphrodite.
 - (b) The Corinthians had also been asking, perhaps naively, whether all sex is bad. Chapter 7 is mainly devoted to that tricky question.
 - 2) Eating food offered at temples:
 - (a) Priests often sold the meat after making the sacrifice. Getting meat from a temple could be a cheap way for citizens to come by some protein. Second, if you are a Christian in Corinth, and a friend invites you to a meal in the temple of Asclepius, for example, is it permissible to accept? Does going to a pagan temple amount to betraying Christ?

(b) Paul is well aware that false “gods” don’t really exist (8:4), but even so, in case he might damage a sensitive fellow Christian, he says that he is ready to abstain from meat (8:13); we are not to share a table with demons (10:14-22). Christians should consider the reactions of other people.

- 3) Paul refused money offered by the Corinthians.
- 4) Corinthian women were not wearing veils.
- 5) There were social divisions at the Eucharist.
- 6) They wondered how to discern the Spirit. This has been an issue throughout the history of Christianity.
- 7) There was chaos in the liturgy.
- 8) Women were to stay silent in church.
- 9) Some Christians were doubting the Resurrection. Paul averred that Resurrection is central to the gospel.



Apostle St. Paul by El Greco, ca. 1610–1614

- 10) There were problems with getting the collection to Jerusalem.
 - 11) Lastly, Paul tells the Corinthians to respect Timothy (16:10), Apollos (16:12), and “the house of Stephanas” (16:15-18).
- Paul deals skillfully and, on the whole, compassionately with people who were marginalized, but it was not easy for him, and we may find common ground with him in our churches today. Read this letter as a treatise of our times.

Review Questions

1. Now that you've read the letter, what do you think was the problem in Corinth?
2. Do you think that social divisions were there in the church? Did they help destroy the church?
3. Are there social divisions in the Church today?
4. What do you think about Paul's teaching on sex?

Lecture 5.

1 Thessalonians and the Letter to Philemon

Overview

It seems quite important to open these two letters with both awe and care. In the case of Paul's letter to Philemon, that is because it is perhaps his most charming letter, hardly more than a postcard in length, but packing a punch. 1 Thessalonians demands our respect because many, if not most, scholars think that it is Paul's earliest letter. When you hear it or read it, you are dealing with the first surviving attempt of a Christian to write down reflections on the implications of the gospel message.

I. The Context of 1 Thessalonians

- 1 Thessalonians may have been written around 51 AD, based on Acts 17.
- Some people think that 1 Thessalonians may in fact be two separate letters combined. In this course, we will read it as one letter.
- Listeners are invited to take a look at a map of Greece to get a sense of Paul's journey.
 - 1) Paul's journey from Troas in modern Turkey would have taken him across to Neapolis, then to Philippi, where Paul tells us (in 1 Thessalonians 2:2) he came under stress in his attempt to preach the gospel. He then traveled 100 miles along the great Roman road, the Via Egnatia, and arrived in Thessalonica, where, evidently, he met with some success.
 - 2) It is possible that the hassle he describes meant an untimely departure from Thessalonica, and that is why the letter is so affectionate.

II. Paul and His Fellow Christians

- The letter is addressed to the "assembly," or "church," in Thessalonica, rather than to particular individuals. The word, *ekklesia* in Greek, is of immense importance to Paul, signifying the group of Christians in a particular place. Paul wanted to make sure that they were united; otherwise, Christ would not be present.
- You might notice the bracketing, in a single breath, of "God the Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ." One of the questions that the early Christians, including Paul, had to ask was about the relationship of Jesus to God, and whether they had abandoned their old Jewish monotheism in asserting Jesus and God in the same breath.
- Paul again mentions the three great virtues we saw in 1 Corinthians. He speaks of "the work of faith, the labor of love, and perseverance in hope" (1 Thessalonians 1:3).

- The letter seems to contain two thanksgivings (1:2 and 2:13).

III. Paul and the Thessalonians

- Paul writes that he is “orphaned” because he is not with them, and how he “longed enormously to see your faces, with immense desire.” He is well aware of the merits of the Thessalonians.
- Paul is immensely grateful for the way they received the gospel, which, he says, has gone out not only to Macedonia, the northern part of Greece where Thessalonica is, but also to Achaia, the southern part where Corinth is.
- We learn that the Thessalonians were not a Jewish group, but Gentiles, since Paul speaks of them as “turning away from idols” (1:9).
- We also learn that they are expecting Jesus to come again soon. They are “Waiting for His Son from heaven, whom God raised from the dead” (1:10).
- Paul is very fond of the Thessalonians.

IV. Paul’s Teachings to the Thessalonians

- Most of the letter is a matter of reminding them what he had taught when he was with them, including the example that he gave them, “working night and day, so as not to put a burden on you when we preached the gospel of God” (2:9).
- There is one new teaching. The Thessalonians may have written to Paul asking for help with a difficulty. Paul may have heard of the problem through the grapevine or from Timothy.
 - 1) He speaks of “those who have fallen asleep” (4:13). Perhaps some of them had died since he left them, and they were worrying about their fate, or whether they had failed in some way. So Paul carefully reminds them of the central importance of Jesus’ death, and argues that “God will bring those who have fallen asleep through Jesus with him.” Building on apocalyptic literature, he gives a picture of what the second coming might be like (4:16):
 - (a) At a command
 - (b) At the voice of an archangel
 - (c) And at God’s trumpet call



Icon of the Second Coming, ca. 1700

(d) Jesus will come down from heaven and the dead in Christ shall rise first. He insists that they are not to expect to know when it will happen (5:1). The solidarity of the group is most important. He concludes, “therefore comfort each other, and build each other up into one” (5:11).

- Like many Christian groups down through the centuries, they were experiencing disciplinary problems: they are told to “recognize those who labor among you and who admonish you” (5:12). They are all instructed to “admonish the disorderly.” There is nothing new about divisions in the Church.

V. The Letter to Philemon

- We do not know when or where it was written, except that Paul was in prison and he refers to himself as an old man.
- Audience:
 - 1) Philemon, described as “beloved and a coworker”
 - 2) Apphia
 - 3) Archippus
 - 4) The “congregation/church in your house”
- Philemon is being asked to receive Onesimus, a runaway slave, who deserved the direst punishments, as a brother.
- The point that Paul is making is that the gospel transforms our relationships and illuminates the irrelevance of terms such as “slave” and “master.” Paul pursues his aim with all kinds of clever wordplay.
- Philemon is obligated to grant Paul’s request.
- What about slavery?
 - 1) If Jesus was coming back very soon indeed, then there are more urgent things to attend to than undermining that essential economic institution of the Roman Empire.
 - 2) If we have properly understood the gospel and Paul in this letter, we should realize that it is impossible for Christians to have slaves. It is true that Christians have not always grasped this. But I suggest you read carefully through this lovely letter and see what you think.

Review Questions

1. What do you think 1 Thessalonians is really about?
2. Do you think that it makes a difference that 1 Thessalonians is the earliest of Christian texts?
3. What do you find charming about the letter to Philemon?
4. Do you think Paul should have said something about the institution of slavery in the ancient world?

Lecture 6.

2 Corinthians and Philippians: Different Challenges

Overview

Each of Paul's letters is different, because the community he is writing to in each case is different. If we watch him carefully, we can see how he thinks on his feet in response to various crises. In his second letter to the Corinthians, the main problem seems to be a breakdown in relations between Paul and this community, of which he was very fond despite everything. It seems that things had not gone well since 1 Corinthians. Paul had not arrived when he promised and, in the meantime, other apostles had come to Corinth and attacked Paul. To his fury, the Corinthians had believed them.

I. Letter Fragments of 2 Corinthians

- You do not need to worry too much about when scholars break up the letters of Paul in this way. You are quite entitled to insist on doing what Christians have done for two thousand years and read the letter as a single unit.
 - 1) Paul wrote a letter in his defense. Some scholars think that we can find parts of that letter at 2 Corinthians 2:14; 6:13; 7:24, and some material about the collection for Jerusalem in chapters 8 and 9.
 - 2) After that angry letter, it seems that Paul visited Corinth and was publicly insulted (see 2 Corinthians 2:5-8).
 - 3) Paul went back to Ephesus and wrote another letter "with many tears," as he says at 2:4. That letter is referred to in 7:8-13. Eventually, he met up with Titus, who had been acting as a "go-between," in Macedonia, though he had hoped to meet him sooner, and from him discovered that the crisis was over, and that the Corinthians were repentant.
 - 4) Because of that, it seems that Paul then wrote a joyful letter, and those scholars who like to excavate bits and stitch them together think that it may have been in 2 Corinthians 1:1-2, 13; 7:5-16.
- Whether you break up the letter or not, you can see easily enough that there are many different moods; and if you look at the opening verses (1:3-8), you will see an alternation of words that mean "tribulation" and words that mean something like "comfort" or "consolation," and that may help you to catch the mood of this letter.
- As I have said before, however, when Paul gets cross he "does" autobiography, and for that we must be grateful to those who annoyed him.
 - 1) Paul discusses things that have been done to him because of his mission (11:23-33).

- 2) He relates his own mystical experiences. The phrase “thorn in the flesh” has been interpreted in many different ways, but Paul’s admission suggests that he is telling the unvarnished truth.
- 3) The Corinthians were well off, but they had very deep pockets and perhaps didn’t really trust Paul. In these two chapters, Paul attempts to shame them into generosity.
- 4) To understand Paul, read what he says about his task: “Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your slaves because of Jesus” (4:5). That is all you need to know.
 - (a) Keep this double sense of being a slave both to Jesus and to those to whom he was preaching in mind when you turn to Paul’s letter to the Philippians.

II. Philippians

- Philippi was a big Roman town on the way to Thessalonica. From Acts 16 we gather that Paul, along with Timothy and Silas, experienced a great deal of suffering there, including flogging and imprisonment.
- The Philippians, however, were very fond of him, and had proved extraordinarily generous to him (see Philippians 2:25 and 4:10-15). Recall that Paul was writing this letter from prison (see 1:7, 13-14, 17), and was facing death.
 - 1) Despite that uncertain future and confined existence, this is easily Paul’s most joyful letter.
- Consider the love, for Christ and for his Philippians, that radiates from this remarkable letter. See 1:20-21 to grasp the importance of Christ for him, even to the point of embracing death.

III. The Hymn to Christ

- The great “hymn to Christ” (2:5-11) is one of the best-known passages in Philippians.
 - 1) Consider the context: in the opening verses of the chapter, he is speaking of “comfort” and “consolation” and “solidarity” and pity and joy, and asking them to “think the same thing” (which he had already asked, unsuccessfully, of the Corinthians), presumably because some of them had been quarrelling. Paul reminds them of Jesus and asks them to “think what Jesus thought.”
 - 2) He does this by quoting (scholars think) a hymn that was already known to them, which emphasizes Jesus’ very high status, and at the same time his readiness to let go of his status of equality with God. This is meant to persuade the Philippians to “have the same love, not quarrelling...but in humility thinking others as better than you are.”
- At 4:2, two ladies named Evodia and Syntyche, whom he describes in glowing terms as great “fighters with me in the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow-workers” (4:3), are exhorted to “think the same thing in the Lord.”

IV. Women in Philippians

- Women seem to have played an important role in the church at Philippi from its beginning, in the house of the wealthy purple-dye merchant, Lydia, who more or less forced Paul and Barnabas to found the church there. Then there are Evodia and Syntyche, of whom Paul evidently approves as pastoral workers, even if they are fighting.
- It is also possible that Paul's wife was present in Philippi. For just as he is asking the two of them to "think the same in the Lord," he turns to someone whom he addresses, possibly as "noble Syzygus," or possibly as "noble yoke-fellow." Syzygus is not attested as a name in Greek, but it is used to refer to cattle or horses who are together "under the yoke," and is often used to mean a "spouse."
 - 1) In 1 Corinthians 7:8, Paul addresses the "unmarried and widows," and tells them that it is "good for them to remain as I am," which is often read as referring to Paul's celibacy. But it is also possible that Paul is implying that he does not visit prostitutes when separated from his wife. Indeed, when Paul is talking about the rights of apostles, at 9:5 he asks, "Don't I have the right to eat and drink, and the right to take a Christian wife around with me, just like the other apostles, and the brothers of the Lord, and Kephas?"
 - 2) This is something for listeners to think about when forming a view of Paul.

V. From a Roman Prison

- Keep in mind that Paul is writing from a Roman prison, and look out for evidence of his attitude towards the Roman Empire.
 - 1) Paul seems to have felt drawn to Rome and sensed that his apostolic work was incomplete until he had preached the gospel there. At the same time, he was well aware that his values were not those of the Empire, which at this stage was starting to allow even emperors to be worshipped as gods, something that Paul, as a good Jew, could not possibly tolerate.
 - 2) He speaks at 1:13 of his "chains becoming obvious in Christ to the whole praetorium"; and that Latin word stands symbolically for Roman imperial power. Paul is well aware that his values are not those of the Roman Empire, for one very good reason, Jesus was Kyrios, or Lord.
 - 3) Paul insists that Jesus is Lord, not just at the climax of his great hymn to Christ in chapter 2, but also at 1:2, 14; 2:19, 24, 29; 3:1, 8; 3:20; 4:1, 2, 4, 5, 10, and 23. He says that Christians' citizenship



Saint Paul in Prison by Rembrandt, 1627

is in heaven, making clear just how different Christians are from the Roman vision of the world.

- Philippians is a thoroughly subversive document. Much more important is the joy that wells up from it, even though Paul is in prison, and I hope that it is the joy above all that will seize you as you read this lovely letter.

Review Questions

1. What differences do you notice between 2 Corinthians and 1 Corinthians?
2. Why do you think Paul is so cross in 2 Corinthians?
3. Why do you think the letter to the Philippians is so joyful, given Paul's situation?
4. What do you think about Mrs. Paul?

Lecture 7.

The Disputed Pauline Letters

Overview

Of the thirteen letters attributed to Paul in our New Testament, only seven are undisputed as being authored by him. In this talk, we will look at the question of “pseudonymity,” or ascribing a letter to someone who did not write it. We will look at 2 Thessalonians, Colossians, and Ephesians, and examine some of the reasons why scholars think that they may not be from Paul himself. Finally, I want to briefly tell you why I think you should read each letter.

I. Pseudonymity

- Pseudonymity: writing a letter in someone else’s name.
- In the Jewish culture that produced our New Testament, writing a text or letter in someone else’s name was not uncommon.
 - 1) For example: the various books of Enoch, the Apocalypse of Abraham, and various “testaments” attributed to characters of Israel’s past, such as Moses or the twelve sons of Jacob.
- Since the three letters we are looking at in this talk are part of our New Testament, the Church thinks that they are good for us to read and ponder.

II. 2 Thessalonians

- One scholar once said, “The problem with 2 Thessalonians is 1 Thessalonians.”
 - 1) Given the existence of both of these letters, it is hard to see how to fit them into what we know of Paul’s career. 2 Thessalonians is much less warm and personal than 1 Thessalonians. It is clearly intended as a successor to 1 Thessalonians (2:15), and it seems to imitate it, with two thanksgivings and some very similar vocabulary.
 - 2) However, if it was not by Paul, Marcion and Polycarp of the second century AD knew of this letter and assumed that it was written by Paul.
- So why should you read it? One thing that the author stresses is the importance of work, even if the world is coming to an end soon. He is concerned with toning down the expectations of Jesus’ return, and makes a slogan of “no work, no food” (3:10).

III. Colossians

- Why don’t scholars think that Paul wrote it?

- 1) It focuses more on the “Church Universal” rather than the local churches, which scholars detect in the genuinely Pauline letters.
 - 2) The style is somewhat different, with long sentences and strings of words that you don’t find in the seven letters that are universally agreed to be written by Paul. However, we should be cautious of making too many over-confident statements about style or theology on the basis of too small a sample.
- Colossae was a small town not far from Laodicea and Hierapolis, and about 100 miles inland from Ephesus in modern Turkey.
 - As in most of his letters, Paul starts with a thanksgiving.
 - Pay special attention to the “hymn” from 1:15-20 to Christ, “image of the unseen God, the first-born of all creation...” Many scholars regard this as a meditation on the first words of the Bible, “In the beginning,” applied to Jesus, who was present at creation and therefore superior to all that threatens us, including perhaps, the sinister angelic powers that were part of the teaching of the opponents in Colossae.
- 1) Notice in particular the development of the idea of the “body” from 1 Corinthians: “he is the head of the Body, the Church.” This is a step further than the idea of the body in that 1 Corinthians.
 - 2) Notice also Jesus’ lofty relationship to God: “in him the fullness was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile everything to him, after making peace through the blood of the cross.”
- 
- The Garden of Eden by Lucas Cranach the Elder, 1530*
- 3) As you read through it, allow yourself to be startled by Paul’s idea that “I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions, in my flesh, on behalf of his body, which is the Church.”
- When you read through chapter 2, see what you think might be going on in Colossae that the author wants to defeat.
 - 1) Scholars have several views on the matter, but generally suppose that there was a shaky amalgam of offbeat Jewish and pagan ideas, reflecting the mixture of cultures in that part of the province of Asia.
 - You will find a lovely passage to pray through at the opening of chapter 3: “given that you have been raised with Christ, seek the things above, where Christ is seated on the right side of God.”

- There is a passage about how to operate within families that you might wish to reflect on, addressing husbands and wives, children and parents, and slaves and their masters. That you will find at 3:18-4:1. This part of the text fundamentally asserts the equality of all the baptized, and *not* the superiority of men over women, adults over children, or slave-owners over their slaves, as is often supposed.

IV. Ephesians

- The author of this letter thoroughly understood Paul's vision. Ephesians seems to be based on Colossians, and like Colossians it has quite long sentences and seems impersonal. Scholars also point to "non-Pauline vocabulary," but that is an argument that requires handling with care.
- Why should we read it at all?
 - 1) Although it can come across as a bit impersonal, it offers a lovely vision of what God has done in Christ. As you read it, get a feel for the author's strong sense of the Universal Church, and for his lofty Christology, and how Christ and the Church are not to be separated. This doctrine is very important for us today.
- When you look at 2:11-22, remember the Temple in Jerusalem and its concentric walls keeping Gentiles, women, and laymen out of the Holy of Holies.
 - 1) Note how our author meditates on that in terms of what Jesus has done for us: "you, gentiles in the flesh, the ones known as 'uncircumcision' by those known as 'circumcision,' were alienated from belonging to Israel, and strangers to the covenant of promise, with no hope, and no God in the world."
 - 2) He then contrasts that with their present state: "As it is, in Christ Jesus, you who were once a long way off are now near in the blood of Christ." And see how he plays with the image of the walls round the Temple; instead of being divided, both sides are "reconciled to God in one body through the Cross..." Read carefully through 3:14-19, and see the magnificent climax it reaches: "to know the love of Christ that surpasses all knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."
- In chapter 4, the author presents a moral exhortation as to how they are to behave: "anxious to preserve the unity of the Spirit, in the bond of peace: one body, and one Spirit, just as you have been called in one hope of your calling: one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (4:3-6).
- That is the context in which we must read the moral exhortation that now follows, and the famous "household code" at 5:21-6:9. There are two important things to remember as you read it.
 - 1) It begins: "You are all to be subordinated to each other in the fear of Christ." When the author goes through the three pairs, wife-husband, child-parent, slave-master, he is not commanding the subordination of the weak to the strong, but calling for a community where each loves the other and helps them.

- 2) Look carefully at 6:5-9, and listen to it with the ears of a slave. Paul is making a very clever point, using the Greek word *kyrios*, meaning both “Lord” and “slave owner,” to remind both slaves and their masters in the Church that although they may have “lords” whom they have to obey, they are not just to please human beings “but as *Christ’s* slaves doing *God’s* will.” The “lords” are reminded that they are to behave properly, “knowing that they and you have a Lord in heaven.” There is no comfort here for the upper classes that want to keep their place.
- In 6:13-20, the author draws a picture of a soldier putting on his armor for battle:
 - 1) “Take God’s panoply that you may be able to resist on the evil day and stand up to all those who do evil things. So stand there with your loins wrapped around with truth, your breastplate of righteousness, your feet bound with...in every respect take on the shield of faith with which you may be about to resist the evil one.”

Reflection Questions

1. Do you think it matters if some of the letters attributed to Paul weren't written by him?
2. What do you like best about the letter to the Colossians?
3. What do you think about the household codes?
4. What differences do you notice between the letter to the Colossians and the letter to the Ephesians?

Lecture 8.

The Pastoral Letters

Overview

In this section, we will discuss the three letters known (at least since the time of Thomas Aquinas) as “the pastorals” to Timothy and Titus, so called because they give advice to “pastors.” Few contemporary scholars believe that Paul authored these letters. Scholars contend that the vocabulary and style is at a higher level than what we normally find in Paul, and that there is a high proportion of words that are not to be found Paul’s letters. In the pastorals, there is no sense of preparing for Jesus’ imminent return. Correspondingly, there is much more interest in church structures and the roles of “bishops” and “deacons” (or “overseers” and “servants”). In addition, there is a role for women, under the heading of “widows.” These women may have had a formal role in the church, although the author had misgivings about women taking an active role in the Church.

I. 1 Timothy

- The author and those whom he is addressing—apparently the heads of the Christian communities in Ephesus and Crete—are facing the urgent need to get the structure of the church right.
 - 1) This was part of the effort to keep hold of the basic insight into who Jesus was. This involved making sure that the right sort of officials were in place.
 - 2) The author outlines the qualities required in Church officials, the *episkopoi* (1 Tim 3:1-7) and the *diakonoi* (3:8-13).
 - (a) The early Church was starting grapple with how to select officials. Not everyone was qualified. The important thing, for us as for them, is that we must always come back to Jesus, “who appeared in the flesh, and was justified in the spirit, who appeared to angels, who was proclaimed among the Gentiles, who found faith in the world, and was taken up in glory” (3:16).
- As discussed earlier, widows seem to have a definite role in the Church. The letter insists above all that they have to keep their eyes on God (5:3-16).
- Elders must be treated properly (5:15-17). For some reason, elders are to get double pay, and Timothy is not to hear any accusations against them, except on the basis of two or three witnesses (5:17, 19). This last instruction had uncomfortable implications when it was read in a way that evaded accusations concerning the sexual abuse of children. But, once again, we have to read these lines in their original context; the same is true, of course, of the well-known advice to Timothy against drinking neat water, but to take a little wine with it, possibly to kill the germs.

II. 2 Timothy

- The author of 2 Timothy is much warmer and has a stronger pastoral instinct.
 - 1) The author describes his vocation as the author's "herald and apostle and teacher" (2 Tim 1:12).
 - 2) He references his mother and grandmother, Lois and Eunice.
 - 3) The author reports something that happened to Paul in his apostolate: "You have followed my teaching, my leadership, my purpose, my endurance, my love, my stamina, my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me in Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra. I endured them all, and from them all the Lord delivered me." (3:10-11).
 - (a) Autobiographical fragments such as these make some scholars think that 2 Timothy is based on genuine fragments from Paul himself.
- The author emphasizes the importance of the true gospel (1:9-18) and the need for authentic teaching (2:1-7), especially when the false teachers are claiming that the Resurrection has already happened (2:18).
- The author meditates on his imminent death: "For I am already poured out like a libation, and the time for my dissolution has drawn near. I have fought the good fight, I have completed the Marathon; I have kept the faith. For the rest there is stored up for me the Gold Medal of righteousness, which the Lord, the just judge will give me on that day; and not just to me, but to all those who have loved his appearing" (4:6-8).

III. Titus

- Titus was pastor of the Christians in Crete and carried Paul's "tearful letter" to Corinth, and managed to produce a diplomatic reconciliation.
- As with the two other pastoral letters, there is emphasis on the existence of false teachers, described as "many disorderly people, utterers of vain words, and mind-beguilers." In particular, he singles out "those of the circumcision, whom it is necessary to silence, for they turn over whole houses, teaching what they should not, for the sake of base profit" (Titus 1:10-11). Titus is to make sure that they do "not pay attention to Jewish stories and commandments, belonging to people who pervert the truth" (1:14).
- For the author, the reason for getting the right sort of teachers is connected with the need to get the doctrine right. This is not the kind of issue that would be to the forefront in the earliest part of Paul's ministry.



Saint Titus, 14th c.

- 1) The author describes the right kind of teacher: male elders are to be temperate, serious, sober, and healthy in faith, love, and endurance; while female elders are to be “fitting for priesthood in their array, not slanderers, or enslaved by much wine, good teachers, to give the young women instruction to love their husbands and their children: sober, chaste, working at the house, good, and with a proper relationship to their husbands, to prevent God’s word from being insulted” (2:1-5).
 - 2) Likewise, Titus is to remind people to be “subordinated to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, and ready for every good work, and show gentleness to all human beings.”
- We have to be aware of transferring the needs of our own time to those of another era, and we should be prepared to make a distinction between the kind of teaching that was necessary in Jesus’ day and the kind of teaching that was required in another era, when the Church was trying establish itself.
 - 1) There can be more than one correct approach to doctrine and to the holding of Church office and to the powers that be.
 - Finally, if you want one passage in the letter to Titus that makes it worth your while coming back to it again and again, you might try the following, look at 3:4-7.
 - The pastoral letters give us a vision of the Church in a very different stage of its development than in the gospels or the letters of St. Paul.

Review Questions

1. Do you think there is a different mood in the pastoral letters?
2. Do you find it interesting to see the institution of the Church growing?
3. Do you feel that the pastoral letters are different from the other Pauline letters?

Lecture 9. The Evangelist Mark: The Inventor of the Gospel Form

Overview

In this section we will begin our explorations of the gospels with Mark, who was the first to write a gospel, and whom we may therefore reasonably call its inventor. In this talk, I will discuss the Gospel of Mark's strange beginning and its even stranger ending; Mark is "the strangest gospel." It starts with the word "beginning," which must inevitably have reminded his first hearers of the opening words of the Bible.

I. The Beginning of the Good News

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Messiah, Son of God.

As it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

"Look – I am sending my messenger before your face,
who will prepare your way,
the voice of one crying in the desert:
'Prepare the way of the Lord –'"

- We discover that it is the beginning of the "good news," or "gospel," echoing a Hebrew word from the Old Testament, about what God has done. Mark also challenges a word used in the Roman Empire about the great things that the Emperor has done. So it is a subversive gospel that is built on the Old Testament and its story of God, but it is also one that challenges the dominance of the Roman Empire.
- It is the good news of Jesus Messiah. The only people to whom the document is of any interest are those who have actually heard of Jesus.
- Finally, in many but not all manuscripts, Jesus is described as "Son of God"; whether or not this is what Mark wrote in this first verse, it is certainly what he believed.
- Mark tells us that it is "as it was written in the prophet Isaiah," but quotes the line, "Look! I am sending my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way." As Mark's first hearers would have known, that line was not from Isaiah, but from Malachi or Exodus.
 - 1) Finally, we get to Isaiah in the next line: "a voice of one crying in the desert, prepare the way of the Lord."
 - 2) We are then introduced to John the Baptist, who relates a message: "repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (1:4), which is addressed to "all the Judean region and all the Jerusalemites, confessing their sins." John the Baptist fits into the story of those people whom God has sent in the past.



St. John the Baptist Baptizes the People by Nicolas Poussin, ca. 1635

- At last we hear about Jesus: “there is coming the One Stronger than Me after me, of whom I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I baptized you with water, but he is going to baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (1:7-8).

II. Jesus of Nazareth

- Jesus finally arrives, and we are told that “he was baptised into the Jordan by John.” Then God takes a hand in the story, for “immediately coming up out of the water he saw the heavens opening [so we know that God is at work] and the Spirit like a dove coming down upon him.”
- Next, we are allowed to eavesdrop on what God says to Jesus: “You are my Son, the Beloved; in you I am well pleased.” According to the rules of story telling, we now know, therefore, that Jesus is a good thing, and that he fits the old story of God and the people of God. We probably also have a hint that the story is going to be an uncomfortable one.
- Soon, Jesus is tested by Satan. Jesus is not in charge of his own mission; he shares the human experience of temptation. He has endured the loneliness of being with the wild beasts, but also the helpful presence of the angels.

- By verse 13 of chapter 1, Jesus has hardly done anything at all, and you may be feeling that this is all a bit strange, since this gospel is supposed to be about him. Now at last Mark permits us to see Jesus doing something; but we should notice the circumstances: “after John had been handed over” [in chapter 6 we shall discover that he was beheaded on Herod’s orders, so this too is rather strange].
 - 1) Jesus goes back to his home region of Galilee, and Mark tells us that he was “preaching the gospel of God, and saying, ‘the time has been fulfilled, and the Reign of God has drawn near. Repent and believe in the gospel.’”

III. Jesus Gains Followers

- We should pay some attention to the way Mark sets the scene. Jesus is walking by the Sea of Galilee and sees two sets of brothers: first, Simon and Andrew, exercising their profession as fishermen, and then “Jacob the son of Zebedee and John his brother.”
- For some reason, both sets of brothers obey the summons, to our astonishment. Indeed, the sons of Zebedee abandon not just their nets, but also the boats, their father, and the hired servants. So now this strange new project has one leader and four followers.
- Next, Jesus enters the synagogue on the Sabbath; and later in the gospels we shall learn that virtually every time this happens, there is going to be trouble. And there are signs of it here: “he started to teach.”
 - 1) Jesus’ teaching makes a very considerable impact: “they were amazed at his teaching” because “he was teaching like one who has authority.”
 - (a) The word, “authority” runs all the way through Mark’s Gospel, and is precisely the dividing line between Jesus and his opponents.
 - (b) Mark notes that Jesus is not teaching like the scribes, or the opposition, and this means trouble. Remember what we heard at Jesus’ baptism, that he is God’s beloved son, “in whom I am well pleased.” But, to our astonishment, this brings him into conflict with the religious authorities.
- Nor does the conflict end here, for we are still in the synagogue, and he has his first battle with demons, which once again culminates in the verdict: “a new teaching, with authority: he even commands the unclean spirits—and they obey him!”
 - 1) Mark’s Gospel is a story about a battle between God and the opponents of God.



The Calling of Saint Peter and Saint Andrew by James Tissot, 1886–94

IV. The Resurrection

- Mark's verses take us to the tomb in which Jesus was subsequently placed on the last Friday of his life. If you look at your copy of the Bible, you will find that there are perhaps three endings given in Mark's Gospel.
 - 1) There is the "short ending," which has the women reporting "concisely" back to Peter about what they have seen, and Jesus himself given them their mission.
 - 2) Then there is the "long ending," which is generally printed as 16:9-20. If you look closely at that, you will see that it is taken from other gospels, especially Luke, but also Acts and Matthew and John.
 - 3) Neither of these endings sound like Mark. It is likely that they were added because Mark's original ending seemed a bit puzzling to his early readers. I want to suggest to you that this very odd ending is precisely what Mark originally intended. This was almost certainly 16:1-8.
- Chapter 16 starts, "When the Sabbath was finally over."
 - 1) Mary Magdalene and the other two women "went and bought spices" in order to come and anoint Jesus, meaning they did not believe in the Resurrection (because otherwise they would not have tried to anoint the corpse). Then we watch them as "very early on the first day of the week, they come to the tomb." When they get there, Mark comments that "the sun has risen."
 - 2) The next thing that Mark does is allow us to overhear the women wondering how to get rid of the stone that Joseph of Arimathea had rolled in front of the door.
 - 3) All is well however, because "looking up" (this verb can also mean "recovering their sight"), "they see that the stone has been rolled away." The phrase "has been rolled away," is what they call a "divine passive": God has intervened. Then the evangelist comments, "for it was very big". Now you will not believe this, but there are scholars, sober and apparently in their right minds, who claim that that comment, "for it was very big" really belongs in the previous verse, when they were worrying about getting the stone rolled away. That is to miss the point; Mark is drawing our attention to how easily and effortlessly God acts—and that may be in a context of his writing for an audience who are wondering seriously whether God can cope.
 - 4) When they enter the tomb, they encounter a young man, "sitting on the right," which, incidentally is what Jesus had predicted, in his trial before the High Priest, would happen to the Son of Man. Not only that, but the "young man" is wearing a white garment, possibly reminding us what had happened at the Transfiguration (9:2-9), at that moment when God told Peter, James, and John that Jesus was indeed his beloved son, and that they must listen to him.
 - 5) The women "were amazed," which in this Gospel is a regular term for what happens when human beings encounter the divine. And the young man, like so many angels in the Old Testament, tells them, "Don't be amazed," a command which he backs up by revealing that he knows what is going on here, for he says, "It's Jesus you are looking for, the crucified one."

- 6) “He has been raised—he is not here.” Dimly we remember that on each of the three occasions when Jesus predicted his passion (which we shall look at in a later talk), he also predicted his Resurrection, but we did not notice it. As evidence of Jesus’ absence, the “young man” points to “the place where they put him,” and there is nothing there: no decomposing corpse, nor a body torn by dogs or vultures, just an empty tomb.
- Then the women are told to tell Jesus’ disciples. Peter and the disciples are thus very gently brought back into Jesus’ group to which they had been called at the beginning. And we learn that “he is going before you into the Galilee,” where the whole adventure had started, and now they are to go back, armed with a deeper understanding of the Jesus story, “you will see him there.” But it is not just for them, but also for the reader, for you and me. We are now invited to go back to the beginning of the Gospel, and to read it with new eyes.
 - The ending of the Gospel is perhaps the strangest of all; for as the narrator continues we hear him say, to our astonishment, “they went out and ran away from the tomb. For trembling and amazement had seized them. And they said nothing to nobody. For they were afraid...”

Review Questions

1. What does Mark's beginning tell us about what we are about to read?
2. What do you think of Mark's ending? Where did he intend his gospel to end?
3. Do you agree that Mark is a very strange gospel?

Lecture 10.

The Marcan “Sandwich”

Overview

In this talk, we will look at a device that Mark often uses as a way of getting his listeners to pay attention. It is called the “sandwich” or “interpretative intercalation,” where Mark wraps one story around another, and the clue for the hearer is to interpret one story through the other. I am going to talk about just five of these “sandwiches.” Scholars often find other “sandwiches,” and as you read the text of Mark, you might look out for other possibilities.

I. The First “Sandwich”

- In chapter 5 of the Gospel of Mark, just after the cure of the Gerasene demoniac, we are told two stories:
 - 1) The first, what you might call the “bread,” is that of a sick daughter.
 - 2) The second, the filling of the sandwich, is that of the woman with the hemorrhage.
- When Jesus returns from his trip across the Sea of Galilee he is beset by crowds.
 - 1) A synagogue ruler, Jairus, begs Jesus to save his daughter. Jesus goes with him.
 - 2) The crowds reappear at this point, “and they were pressing upon him”; but here they function as cover for the bleeding woman. We are given an account of her situation, which immediately wins our sympathy: “she had suffered at the hands of many doctors, and spent all that she had, and was not helped, but had got worse.” She moves through “touched his cloak,” which makes Jesus ritually impure. Then Mark, as he often does, allows us to overhear her thoughts: “if I just touch his clothes, I’m going to be saved.”
 - (a) The result is electrifying: “and immediately the fountain of her blood was dried up, and she knew in her body that she was healed of her scourge.”
 - (b) She has not yet been “saved,” which is what she and Jairus are hoping for. Jesus feels the power going out of him and his disciples jeer at him, pointing to the crowd, but Jesus takes no notice of them. The Greek now makes it clear that he knows it is a woman who has touched him. So now she comes forward, and admits what she has done.
 - (c) Jesus calls her “daughter,” and says “your faith has *saved* you.” He continues, “go in peace—and be healed of your scourge.”
 - 1) Returning to the bread of the sandwich, “They come from the synagogue ruler’s house and tell him that his daughter has died. Jesus tells Jairus not to be afraid. He goes into where the child

was, ignoring rules of social propriety, takes her by the hand, and tells her in Aramaic, “little girl I’m telling you, ‘Rise.’” The inevitable happens, “and immediately she arose and walked!”

- There are four results:
 - 1) We are told her age, which is 12, that is to say as long as the other woman had had her affliction;
 - 2) This is greeted with “great amazement.”
 - 3) He commands them to an impossible silence.
 - 4) Finally, in a lovely touch, “He said that she was to be given food.”
- These two stories together take us deeper into the strange tale of Jesus:
 - 1) We learn that Jesus brings salvation as well as healing; he does not mind about ritual impurity; he is open to everyone, even synagogue rulers; he gets jeered at for his pains; and he issues impossible instructions about not telling anybody. This is the hero of this very strange Gospel.

II. Mark 3:20-35

- This sandwich begins with “his people” trying to arrest him, thinking he is crazy, because he doesn’t have time to eat. Remember that in Jesus’ culture, if a member of the family does not eat, it reflects on their honor.
 - 1) In the middle story, “scribes from Jerusalem” accuse Jesus of “having Beelzeboul, and casting out demons by the prince of demons.” Effortlessly, he rebuts their accusation, proving that it is impossible for Satan to cast out Satan, and warning them that this is the worst kind of blasphemy.
 - 2) After that, the “bread” of the sandwich is completed with the arrival of Jesus’ mother and brothers, and he redefines family in terms of those who “perform God’s will.” This is a strange combination of stories, but together they take us deeper into the mystery.

III. Mark 6:7-33

- The same thing happens with our next sandwich. The bread consists of sending the twelve apostles out in twos on their first mission, with authority over unclean spirits and instructions to travel light.
 - 1) Mark then inserts the lively story of the execution of John the Baptist. Read this story carefully, and notice that it takes John offstage for the final time, but also tells us what is likely to happen when disciples do what God wants them to do, culminating in the disgusting picture of the Baptist’s head being presented on a dish to Herod’s wife and her unengaging daughter.

- 2) Once John's disciples have safely buried their leader, Jesus's disciples return in triumph, and are invited to a bit of peace, which as a matter of fact is never given them because the crowds follow Jesus.
- From reading these two stories together, we learn something about the nature of our mission as disciples, something about the hostility we may expect to arouse, and perhaps also a glimpse of what will happen to Jesus in the end.



The Beheading of St. John the Baptist by Caravaggio, 1608

iv. Mark 11:11-25

- Here Jesus has entered Jerusalem, which we have foreseen for a while. We have already been told that this means death at the hand of “chief priests and scribes” (10:33), the Temple authorities.
 - 1) Now the Messiah actually comes to the Temple, and to our astonishment (this is a very strange story) “he looked round at everything, and because the hour was late he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.”
 - 2) He returns the next day and we learn the extraordinary story of the cursing of the unfortunate fig tree, which is wrapped round Jesus’ expulsion of the sellers and buyers from the Temple, and the overturning of the tables of the commercial interests, and a departure from the city.
 - 3) The rest of the story is picked up the next day (11:20), with the discovery that the fig-tree has “dried up from the roots.” It is a strange story, until we realize that the fig tree, the ancient symbol of Israel, stands for the Temple’s failure to be “a house of prayer.” We are not to imagine Jesus as petulantly punishing the tree for not producing its fruit when the time was not right. All Jesus will say is “have faith in God...and may your Father, the one in the heavens, forgive your trespasses.”

v. The Final “Sandwich”

- Our final sandwich opens the story of Jesus’ passion.
 - 1) The background is “Passover and Unleavened Bread” and the plan on the part of the high priests and scribes to kill Jesus by guile, with the proviso that they did not want it to be during the festival, because of the danger of popular unrest.

2) In verse 10, Judas Iscariot volunteers to help them in their plan.

3) In between, Mark has placed the captivating story of the anointing at Bethany, “at the house of Simon the leper.” Once again, Jesus is in an impure setting, made more risky by the sudden appearance of a woman where no woman should be, with an extravagant quantity of the best oil; her generosity is underlined by the fact that she “broke the alabaster jar,” meaning that



Christ in the House of Simon by Dieric Bouts, ca. 1420–75

the entire quantity had to be used. She anoints him, leading to an element that we have seen in each of these sandwiches, namely a certain hostility from the establishment. Here it is a complaint about the very high value of the anointing oil, which could, they say “have been given to the poor.” Jesus then rereads the woman’s gesture; he does not deny that it was a Messianic anointing, but reveals what kind of a Messiah he was, namely one who had to die: “She took the myrrh ahead of time to anoint my body for its burial.” He decrees that this woman is to be immortalized for her generosity: “What she has done will be spoken of in memory of her.”

- The contrast between the establishment plot to kill Jesus and the woman’s loving attentiveness to the dying Messiah gives us the lens through which we are to read the subsequent story of how the religious and political authorities apparently succeeded in their objective. This is a sandwich of immense importance in assisting us to understand how Mark’s Gospel works at this climax of the narrative.

VI. Other Sandwiches

- These are not the only possible example of Marcan sandwiches, but they will give you an idea of how our evangelist works. Here are some more examples that stretch out over a longer portion of the text:
 - 1) The first you will find at 1:10-11, at the baptism of Jesus, where Jesus sees “the heavens tearing open and the Spirit coming down like a dove, and the voice from heaven tells him ‘You are my Son, the Beloved.’” Then, at 15:38-39, the same word for “tearing open” is used, this time with regard to the “veil of the sanctuary.” Clearly we are to understand this as God’s comment on the passion of Jesus. A voice from a centurion who is used to the death of foolish criminals, who declares, “Truly, this man was Son of God.”

- (a) These two texts, taken together, bracket the entire Gospel with the affirmation of Jesus' identity as a dying Messiah.
- 2) Another sandwich that I should like you to look at for yourselves begins and ends with a cure of a blind person.
 - (a) The first takes place at 8:22-26, at Bethsaida; the cure is not mentioned in Matthew or Luke, possibly because it involves the use of spittle and because the cure is not at first complete.
 - (b) The second healing is that of Bartimaeus, which takes place immediately after James and John have shown their catastrophic failure to understand Jesus. On the way out of Jericho we encounter the blind beggar sitting "*beside* the road." Like others in the sandwiches he encounters hostility from the crowds. At Jesus' call he takes off his clothes, and blunders naked through the crowd at Jesus' command, then has his sight restored. Then he follows Jesus *on* the road to Jerusalem; so he is now a disciple.
 - (c) And what is the filling in the middle? It is the threefold prediction, each time followed by catastrophic misunderstanding on the part of the disciples, that Jesus is a dying Messiah. The blindness of the two men who make up the outside of the sandwich is matched by the blindness of the disciples, who have no real understanding that Jesus must die, and that his Messiahship has nothing to do with gaining status, and everything to do with what God wants.

Review Questions

1. Do you think Mark is deliberately using this sandwich technique?
2. If so, what is Mark trying to tell us?
3. Have you noticed any other sandwiches in your reading?

Lecture 11.

Mark and the Passion Story

Overview

From what we have already seen in the preceding talks, we know that the Passion is of huge importance in this strange Gospel. Just count the number of verses in chapters 14 and 15 given dedicated to the story, and you will see what scholars mean by calling this Gospel a “Passion Narrative with an extended introduction.” In this talk, I’ll say a bit about how the Passion Narrative works in Mark’s Gospel. But it goes wider and deeper than that, for in chapters 8–10, bracketed by two healings of blind men, who perhaps stand for the blindness of readers who are reluctant to face the truth about Jesus, Jesus predicts his Passion three times. And before that, the theme of the Passion is played out in what I like to call various “straws in the wind,” which indicate that Jesus has enemies.

I. Straws in the Wind

- Jesus is described as teaching “not as the scribes” (Mark 1:22). Scribes and demons are placed on the same level.
 - We next hear of the scribes at 2:6 when “some of the scribes” make the allegation of “blasphemy” against Jesus. This is followed in 2:16 (where Mark mentions “scribes of the Pharisees”), and 18, where it is just the Pharisees who complain.
 - Another “straw in the wind” is found at 3:2 “in the synagogue.” Notice that “*they*” (unidentified) were watching him.” Notice Jesus’ anger in verse 5. So we are not surprised when at the end of that story, at 3:6, we heard that “the Pharisees went out immediately, and made a plot with the Herodians against him on how they might destroy him.”
- 1) This is of course very much of a piece with 3:22, where we hear the verdict of the “scribes from Jerusalem” that “he has Beelzeboul.” See once again the connection between Jesus’ opponents and unclean spirits.
- At 5:17 the Gerasenes beg Jesus to leave. One common response to Jesus is mockery, even by those who are not religious authorities.
 - Then at 6:3 Jesus encounters rejection in Nazareth (family and friends rather than authorities).
 - Then there are the constant arguments with Pharisees and scribes (see 7:1-15; 8:11).
- 1) At 8:15, Jesus tells the disciples, “Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod,” which they misinterpret as a rebuke for their failure to bring a picnic. All of these are straws in the wind, which make it no surprise when things turn darker in the second half of the Gospel.



The Denial of Saint Peter by Gerard Seghers, ca. 1623

II. “Who Do You Say I Am?”

- Almost exactly halfway through this Gospel, the question is put to all of the disciples: “Who do you say I am?” On their behalf, Peter gets it right: “the Messiah.” But when Jesus goes on to predict his sufferings, Peter will not have it.
 - 1) From this point on, things change in the Gospel; the crowds that were everywhere in the first half virtually disappear, there are hardly any miracles, and the three predictions of Jesus’ passion overshadow everything else.
- After each of the Passion predictions the disciples get it badly wrong and have to be rebuked.
 - 1) At 8:32-33 Peter responds to Jesus’ prediction by grabbing hold of Jesus “and began to rebuke him.” Jesus rebukes him, and tells him “Get behind me, Satan.”
 - 2) The second prediction takes place at 9:30-50. The response of the disciples is catastrophic, as Jesus is compelled gently to show them by asking a mild question: “What were you arguing about on the way?” This silences them, because they know they have got it wrong—they were arguing “on the way” about which of them was Mr. Big. They have to be gently educated by Jesus using a child as a visual aid.
 - 3) The third passion prediction takes place in chapter 10:32-34. It is followed by two blunders on the part of the disciples, the first by James and John, bidding for the best places on either side of Jesus when he comes in his glory. Then comes the second blunder, as the other ten disciples get annoyed at this bid for power, and it must be explained to them that in the Jesus movement, leadership is all a matter of service and slavery.

III. The Passion Narrative

- The Passion Narrative was foreshadowed at 3:6, when the Pharisees and Herodians decided that Jesus had to die; and perhaps there was a hint of it also at the Baptism, if “my son, the Beloved” (1:11) is meant to echo the “Suffering Servant” of Second Isaiah (42:1).
- 1) We cannot grasp the Jesus of Mark without the Cross. Moreover, it is because of the Cross that Mark’s Gospel is worth reading in a broken world where there is too much suffering: all human life is in this marvellous story. The evangelist is asking a double question, why should Jesus suffer? And, why should we?
- Mark almost certainly had existing material handed down to him, but you can feel his hand at work. We saw in a previous talk how he has used his “sandwiching” technique to insert a passage right at the beginning (14:3-9) to help us read the Passion Narrative.
- There are also some marvelous stories. Notice how these stories both advance the narrative and create a somber mood in chapters 14 and 15. The evangelist does not just tell stories for stories’ sake. See the following stories, and consider the atmosphere that they create:
- 1) The Last Supper
 - (a) Organizing the Passover meal (14:12-16)
 - (b) Prediction of betrayal (14:17-21)



The Last Supper by Giovanni Pietro Rizzoli, ca. 1520

- (c) The shadow of death: “this is my body, my blood of the covenant, poured out for many” (14:22-26)
- (d) Jesus is abandoned (14:50)

- Read the stories of Gethsemane (14:32-42) and Peter's denial (14:66-72). Both these stories have a three-fold structure. With the second story, notice how skilfully Mark builds up the atmosphere: 14:29-31. Mark makes a clear contrast between the Peter story and the parallel narrative about Jesus (14:53-65)
- Then there is the phrase "King of the Jews," which Mark uses with some skill: it does not appear until almost the end, and then it figures quite prominently, on the lips of the soldiers, mockingly, and the civil administrator, questioningly, before, finally, being placed above the cross, as "the inscription of his criminal case":
 - 1) 15:2: "Are you the King of the Jews?" - Pilate
 - 2) 15:9: "Shall I release the King of the Jews for you?" - Pilate
 - 3) 15:12: "What am I to do with the King of the Jews?" - Pilate
 - 4) 15:18: "Hail, the King of the Jews!" - Soldiers
 - 5) 15:26 "The King of the Jews" - The Roman verdict
- Then things go from bad to worse, as Jesus is mocked by soldiers (15:16-20), passers-by (15:29-30), High Priests (15:31-32), and even his fellow convicts (15:32).
- Finally, at 15:34, comes the terrible moment of abandonment when he cries out, *Elohi, Elohi, lema sabachtani?* (He may have been quoting Psalm 22.)
- We notice the reference to Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus at 15:21.
- Jesus' death was not the end of the story:
 - 1) 15:39: The Christological climax, when the centurion asserts that "truly this fellow was Son of God"
 - 2) 15:40-41, 47: We realize that Jesus was not after all quite alone: the faithful women were there.
 - 3) Lastly, at 15:43, the mysterious figure of Joseph of Arimathea emerges from the woodwork.
- In these moments we are given a glimpse of victory... This is a bleak and powerful story that hints at God's future.

Review Questions

1. How important do you think the Passion Narrative is to Mark?
2. Do you think that the story is completely dark? Point to parts of the text that show either darkness or lightness.
3. What do you think of the contrast Mark makes between Jesus and Peter at the end of the story?

Lecture 12.

Mark . . . and Some Question Marks

Overview

Mark's Gospel makes its way by asking questions of the reader. In this final talk, we will make a list of some of these questions and show how they invite us to go deeper into the mystery of Jesus. Very often, the questions are answered with counter questions, which offer a different angle. The point is this: if you chase up the questions in the Gospel—the gaps where Mark allows you, the reader, to fill in—then you will get very close to what he is doing. Ultimately, Mark is coping with just two basic questions: “Who is Jesus?” and “What must Jesus’ disciples be like?” At the end, you may find yourself agreeing that each of the following questions lead us towards an answer to both of those basic questions.

I. Questions from Jesus’ Followers and the Crowds

- The first question you will find is at Mark 1:23. The demons ask, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?” Then the crowds exclaim, “What is this? A new teaching with authority?” (1:27). These questions force us to give an answer.
- When the paralyzed man has been let down through the roof, and Jesus is heard to say, “Child, your sins are forgiven you.” Suddenly there are scribes present, who ask an important question: “Why is he talking like this? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins, except One, namely God?” (Mark 2:7). Jesus responds with a counter question: “Which is easier, to say your sins are forgiven you or to say pick up your stretcher and walk?” and then effortlessly demonstrates his power.
- There are other questions, too: 2:16 “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” or 2:18 “why do your disciples not fast?” This produces another counter question: “can the wedding-guests fast?” And compare another aggressive question from the religious authorities: “Why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?” and Jesus’ counter question: “have you never read what David did?” Which locates the question squarely in its Old Testament background (2:24-26).
- Sometimes you get an implicit question: “they watched him” (3:2), which provokes a devastating counter question from Jesus (3:4): “Is it permitted on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil?” At 3:22, we get an implicit question from Jesus’ enemies: “he has Beelzeboul, and by the ruler of demons he casts out demons.” This provokes the counter question from Jesus, “How can Satan cast out Satan?” The reader should pause here and reflect.
- Occasionally you get a really big question. After Jesus has given his parable discourse, he and his disciples board the boat in which he had been preaching, and Jesus is fast asleep when the storm



Christ in the Storm on the Sea of Galilee by Ludolf Bakhuizen, 1695

answer to that question is not given, but the reader is once more invited to “fill in the gap.” At 6:37 when the disciples are told to feed the 5,000, they ask, incredulously, “Are we to go off and buy 200 denarii’s worth of bread and give them to eat?” Jesus, once more, offers a counter question: “How many loaves do you have?” (8:4-5). Or listen to the volley of sharp questions uttered by Jesus in the boat at 8:17-21, revealing the ignorance of his dim-witted disciples, ending with, “do you not yet understand?”

- Another significant question emerges at 8:27-29; first, “Who do people say I am?” and then “What about you? Who do you say I am?” This is aimed at the reader.
- Notice the reaction of the disciples to the second Passion prediction at 9:30-32: “They did not know the thing. And they were afraid to ask.” Clearly we are supposed to ask questions when they occur to us.
- Jesus’ religious opponents reappear at 10:2, when Pharisees ask the question, “Is it permissible for a husband to divorce his wife?” The evangelist comments, not that we really need it, that they were “testing him”; and so we are not surprised when Jesus answers with a counter question: “What did Moses command you?”
- Likewise, there is the rich man, who asks (10:17), “Good Teacher, what am I to do in order to inherit eternal life?” That is clearly the wrong question, and not at all what Mark’s Jesus is about, and so he too gets a counter question: “Why do you call me good?” Which should give the reader pause for thought.
- James and John pose an implicit question: “whatever we ask you,” and it produces a counter question, “what do you want me to do for you?” so they are enabled to reveal the extent of their

hits. They wake him, in a panic; with absolute authority he calms the storm. The disciples’ response is formulated as a question, and the reader is invited to attempt an answer: “Who is this, then, that the wind and the sea obey him?” (4:35-41).

- There are smaller questions too, of course, but each of them helps with the picture: at 5:9, Jesus asks the demons, “What is your name?” and effortlessly gains power over them; at 5:30 Jesus asks “Who touched my clothes?” as the woman with the haemorrhage is cured”; and at Jairus’ house Jesus asks the mourners, “Why are you mourning and weeping?” At 6:3 Jesus’ compatriots in Nazareth ask, “where did he get all this?” The

hunger for power. He puts the same question, later in the chapter, to blind Bartimaeus (10:50), who simply says, “that I may see again.”

II. Questions from the Authorities

- Once we get to Jerusalem and Jesus performs his prophetic gesture in the Temple, we return to the question that surfaced right at the beginning, about Jesus’ authority.
- This then, as the tension rises, and Jesus’ death at the hand of the establishment comes evidently closer, provokes a further series of questions and counter questions. The Pharisees and Herodians get together at 12:14, and ask, “Is there authority to pay census tax to Caesar or not?” This was a lethal question, aimed at either his life or his prestige. They get a counter question: “Why are you testing me? Whose likeness is it?”
- We get the same with the next trick question, from Sadducees on “divorce” and the counter question, “Is not this why you are wrong? That you do not know the Scriptures?” And the Sadducees, of course, only accept the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. Brilliantly, Jesus takes a text from Exodus and offers a most original interpretation of it to demonstrate that “He is God not of the living but of the dead.”



Christ in Front of Pilate by Mihály Munkácsy, 1881

here, and the scribe applauds him, and is told “You are not far from the Kingdom of God.” After that, “No one any longer dared to ask him a question” (34).

- The next question also seems to be a trap, for it is asked by a “scribe,” who have always meant trouble so far, and it takes the tricky form of “What is the number one commandment of all?” Jesus does not hesitate and produces in answer: “Hear O Israel: the Lord your God is One God, and you are to love the Lord your God with all your heart...” and even gives a second commandment into the bargain: “you are to love your neighbour as yourself.” To our astonishment, there is a rare meeting of minds

III. Questions from Jesus’ Passion

- And then we are into the story of Jesus’ Passion; and when it starts with his anointing at Bethany there are more questions: “Why this waste of oil?” (14:4), and the counter question from Jesus “Why do you give her hassle?” (14:6). There is a slightly dim-witted question at 14:12 from the disciples: “Where do you want us to prepare for you to eat the Passover?”

- Then as we go deeper into the darkness, there are other questions; when they are told that one of them is to betray him the disciples ask, “It isn’t me, is it?” When Jesus prays he has to ask Peter, (14:37) “Simon, are you sleeping? Did you not have the strength to stay awake for a single hour?” At 14:48 the arresting party is asked, “Have you come out as against a robber?”
- Then we come to the trial before the Sanhedrin, and before Pilate. The High Priest asks several questions in order to trap him: “Have you no answer? What are they testifying? Are you the Messiah the So Blessed One?” (14:60), and when Jesus is finally persuaded to tell the truth, a final, damning question: “What need do we still have of witnesses?”(14:63).
- Then there are the questions asked by Pilate: “Are you the King of the Jews?” “Do you want me to release the King of the Jews to you?” “What am I to do with the one you call King of the Jews?” and “What evil has he done?” (15:2-14); each of these questions takes us deeper into the mystery of Jesus’ identity.
- The next question is very big indeed, for we hear Jesus bellow, “*Elohi, Elohi, lema sabachthani*” (15:34), which Mark kindly translates for us: “My God, My God—why have you abandoned me?”
- The most important question of all comes from a passage that we looked at in the previous talk, the brave women going to Jesus’ tomb, at 16:1-8. They are to tell Jesus’ disciples—and Peter—what has happened. Mark ends his Gospel with the statement “And they said nothing to nobody—for they were afraid.” And what do you, reader or listener, make of that? For the implicit question is addressed to you: are you going to be afraid, with trembling and amazement? Or are you going to tell the disciples what has happened?

Review Questions

1. Do you think Mark deliberately asks these questions?
2. Do you agree that Mark's Gospel has to do with two questions: Who is Jesus? What must his disciples be like?
3. Do these questions help your journey through the Gospel?

Lecture 13. The Evangelist Matthew: The “Schoolmaster” to Mark

Overview

Now we come to Matthew’s Gospel. We do not know much about this author, except what we can guess from his work. Even his name may only be an intelligent second-century surmise based on the fact that at 9:9 the evangelist gives the name of “Matthew” to the tax collector whom Mark and Luke know as “Levi.” However, since it is virtually certain that he was working on an edition of Mark’s Gospel, and may indeed be said to be Mark’s first revising editor, we can guess a bit about him on the basis of what he does to Mark’s text.

I. Matthew’s Changes to the Gospel of Mark

- Sometimes the author corrects Mark’s Greek.
 - 1) At Matthew 13:31, he changes Mark 4:32, correcting a slightly ungrammatical hanging participle.
- Sometimes he corrects Mark’s theology.
 - 1) At Matthew 13:58, the author changes Mark’s account of the events in Nazareth (Mark 6:1-6) from “he was unable to do any miracle there” to “he did not do many miracles there, because of their unbelief.”
- There is something else that Matthew does. To illustrate it, look at the following five verses, because they reveal something really important about Matthew:
 - 1) The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:28): “And it happened when Jesus had finished these words...”
 - 2) The missionary discourse (11:1): “And it happened when Jesus had finished giving instructions to his twelve disciples...”
 - 3) The parable discourse (13:53): “And it happened when Jesus had finished these parables...”
 - 4) The church discourse (19:1): “And it happened when Jesus had finished these words...”
 - 5) The last discourse (26:1): “And it happened when Jesus had finished *all* these words...”
- If you look through Mark’s Gospel, you will see that he often refers to Jesus as a “teacher” and describes him as “teaching.” Matthew clearly approves of Mark, because he has taken over his basic outline. But Mark does not go into detail about the content of Jesus’ teachings. Matthew adds the five great discourses that give a new shape to his Gospel and ends each of them with the verses quoted above as a signal to the reader.

- Look at those discourses and consider the difference that they make to the overall shape of Matthew's Gospel. We do not have time to go through all of them, but it might be worth pausing for a while to look a bit more closely at the first discourse, the Sermon on the Mount.

II. The Sermon on the Mount

- The structure of the Sermon on the Mount is very difficult to grasp. It has a puzzling shape, partly because Matthew collected material from various places.
 - 1) It starts with Matthew 5:1-12, when Jesus goes up to the mountain and begins to teach.
 - (a) "Congratulations to the destitute in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of the Heavens..."
 - 2) Jesus then says, "You are the Salt of the earth and light the light of the world." Matthew emphasizes that he is still telling the old story of God and the people of God, as we hear Jesus say, "Don't think I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets" (5:13-20).
 - 3) Jesus then presents the Six Antitheses (5:21-48): "You have heard it said..." What follows is a radical reinterpretation of Israel's scripture: what matters is what goes on inside a person.
 - 4) Three pillars of Judaism (6:1-18): almsgiving, prayer, and fasting.
 - 5) The pattern is shattered by Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer (6:9-15).
 - 6) Toward the end are a bunch of seemingly rather unrelated sayings (6:19-7:27).
- Notice the oddity of Matthew 6:9-15. The Lord's Prayer completely interrupts what Matthew has been carefully building up, the pattern of observing those great pillars of Judaism—almsgiving, fasting, and prayer—shrouded with some very sound teaching about doing these important things in secret, for God, and not to show off for other people.
- The broken structure gives us the clue: the center of the Sermon on the Mount is the Lord's Prayer. God's Fatherhood, so important to Jesus, is the central insight, and everything is related to it.
- The unrelated sayings at the end of the Gospel start to make sense in the context of God as Father.
 - 1) "Treasure up treasures in heaven" (6:19-21).



Sermon on the Mount by I. Makarov, 1889

- 2) “The Light of the body is the eye,” opens you to God’s creation (6:22-23).
 - 3) God and Mammon: there is one God. No one can serve two “lords”...you cannot be the slave of both God and Mammon (6:24).
 - 4) Jesus says not to worry about what to eat or drink or wear because God is Father (6:25-34).
 - 5) “Do not judge,” because we are all *brothers and sisters* and God is your Father (7:1-6).
 - 6) “Ask and you will receive, seek and you will find, knock and it will be opened to you.” Do not doubt, because God is Father (7:7-11).
 - 7) The Golden Rule (7:12-14): “Everything that you want people to do for you, you yourselves should do for others.”
 - (a) Matthew ends, “For this is the Law and the Prophets”: the old story of God and the people of God. This saying and the one about entering by the Narrow Gate carry the same idea—that we should implicitly trust the Father.
 - 8) Trees and their fruit (if you belong to the Father): “from their fruits you shall know them” (7:15-20).
 - 9) Jesus is not to be taken for granted (7:21-23).
 - 10) There are two possible foundations: reality (Father) or unreality (Mammon) (7:24-27).
- Jesus ends with the final parables of two ways of building: on rock or on sand (Palestine).
 - The whole of the Sermon on the Mount turns out to be a meditation constructed on the Lord’s Prayer, which has been put, slightly artificially, right at its center.
 - Notice the comment from the crowds at the end of this great Sermon: “they were amazed at his teaching; for he was teaching them like one who had authority, and not like their scribes” (7:28). Matthew has taken this line more or less precisely from Mark 1:22. However, Mark does not indicate what Jesus taught, and indeed, when that remark is repeated at Mark 1:27, it refers not to teaching but to Jesus’ authority over unclean spirits.

III. Matthew the Teacher

- There are other “school masterly” aspects to this Gospel: Matthew is, as we have seen, a skilled organizer of his material. He leans heavily on the Old Testament. He has, as all good teachers should, a sense of humor.
- Matthew the teacher can be detected emphasizing that Jesus too is a teacher.



Jesus Teaches the People by the Sea by
James Tissot, ca. 1886–94

Review Questions

1. What do you think of the idea of Matthew as a teacher?
2. Do you think that the Sermon on the Mount hangs together around the Lord's Prayer?
3. Do you enjoy Matthew's Gospel?

Lecture 14. The Beginning and the Ending of the Gospel of Matthew

Overview

We have observed that Matthew borrowed Mark's basic structure, so he presumably approved of Mark's Gospel. We have also seen, however, that he thought that there was something missing, so Matthew took it upon himself to add his five great discourses to give the feeling of Jesus the teacher. But there are other additions that he makes, and in some ways the most striking are the two chapters he puts at the beginning of his Gospel and the way he ends it, taking up from Mark's very striking ending. In this lecture, we will take a look at what Matthew has added to the beginning and end of his Gospel.

I. Matthew's Genealogy

- Matthew gives a heading to his Gospel, which can be translated as something like “The book of the origin of Jesus Messiah, Son of David, Son of Abraham,” which tells us a good deal about what we are about to hear.
- 1) Matthew is telling us something very important when he describes Jesus as “Son of David, son of Abraham.” For Matthew, Jesus sums up all Jewish history.
 - (a) Jesus' ancestry is traced through David, the founder of the royal dynasty, and from whom it was assumed the Messiah would be descended.
 - (b) It is also traced through Abraham, who was called in Genesis 12 and who was promised that he would be the ancestor of descendants as many as the stars (Genesis 15:5). Matthew traces the descendants of these two senior figures, fourteen generations from each of them.
 - (c) The third group is headed not by the name of an ancestor, but by “after the deportation to Babylon.” Count carefully the number of generations in this section, and you will find that there are only thirteen. Jesus is the fourteenth. What Matthew seems to be suggesting is that the whole of Israel's history as People of God is summed up in the coming of Jesus the Messiah.
- To put this in context, it may be necessary to remind



King David in Prayer by Pieter de Grebber, ca. 1635–40

ourselves that what is sometimes referred to as “the synagogue across the road,” Matthew’s fellow Jews in Antioch, may have been telling him that he has sold the pass of their Jewish identity. Matthew is determined not to let that view go unchallenged. What better way to make his point than to place Jesus solidly at the heart of Jewish history?

- Quite unusually, there are four women named in this genealogy: Tamar, a Canaanite woman who pretended to be a prostitute; Rahab, the lady in Jericho who actually was a member of that ancient profession; Ruth, from Moab, who got up to some obscure activity late at night with Boaz and became the great grandmother of King David; and the wife of Uriah, David’s Hittite general.
- 1) What is Matthew saying here? Some suggest that all these women had some kind of sexual irregularity, so the fact that Mary is pregnant when she is only engaged to Joseph, not married, fits in with the general truth that God writes straight with crooked lines.
- 2) Others point to the fact that in various ways the women are on the edge of Israelite society, which fits with the idea that Matthew’s Church is opening out to the Gentile world.
- 3) More recently, other scholars have argued that Matthew uses these women and Mary as a feminist counter-narrative to challenge the domination of men in the story.

II. Five New Scenes

- Matthew adds five scenes before we get to John the Baptist. Look at these five scenes and ask yourself, “What is Matthew doing here?”
 - 1) Jesus’ birth (1:18-24)
 - 2) The Magi come from the East (2:1-12)
 - 3) The flight into Egypt (2:13-15)
 - 4) The slaying of the children (2:16-18)
 - 5) The return from Egypt to Nazareth (2:19-23)
- If you read carefully through all of these, you will get a sense of how Matthew operates. Feel the shock at the announcement of Mary’s pregnancy, and feel the relief at the end of verse 18 when we are told that the child is of the Holy Spirit. Feel Joseph’s pain, and how it is suddenly relieved by the presence of the Lord’s angel in a dream. Joseph does what he is told to do (a model for all who read this Gospel).
- The second scene is an extraordinary one. The Magi cause a terrible shock in Jerusalem by asking to be allowed to “worship.” This was not the most diplomatic question they could have asked, because Herod is reigning as king of Jerusalem. Herod then pretends that he wants to “worship,” consults his religious experts, discovers that the Messiah is to be born in Bethlehem, and sends them on their



The Adoration of the Magi by Jan de Bray, 1674

way. Happily, God is in charge and the Magi, having given their three gifts (gold, frankincense, and myrrh), go home by another route.

- The third scene describes the flight into Egypt. Once again, Matthew draws our attention to the fulfillment of scripture.
- The fourth scene is the horrible story of the murder of the innocent children. This story is not known from other sources, but what we know of Herod tells us that he was perfectly capable of such an act.
- Finally, the fifth scene gets Jesus from Egypt to Nazareth, from where he will emerge at Matthew 3:13.
- Sit with these five scenes and ask yourself what Matthew was doing when he placed them so carefully at the beginning of Jesus' life, immediately after his extraordinary genealogy, with its stress on God's role in the story of Jesus.

III. Matthew's Ending

- Once again, we should look carefully at Matthew's changes to understand what he was doing.
- Additions to the Passion story:
 - 1) Judas is given thirty pieces of silver to betray Jesus (26:14-15).
 - 2) In Gethsemane while Jesus is praying, he quotes Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer.
 - 3) Pilate's wife says, "Have nothing to do with that just man" (27:19).
 - 4) Pilate takes water and washes his hands in front of the crowds and says, "I am innocent of this blood," and the crowds reply, "his blood be on us and our children" (27:24-25).
 - 5) Matthew adds an earthquake when Jesus dies to indicate God's anger.
 - 6) He introduces a series of Roman guards who are bribed to make sure Jesus isn't resurrected and later to lie about what happened to Jesus' body.
- What follows is a deliberately crude and literal translation of the final ten verses of the Gospel of Matthew:

But they, the eleven disciples, journeyed to the Galilee
To the mountain which he had appointed for them, Jesus
And seeing him they worshipped
But they doubted
And coming forward Jesus said to them
"It is given to me, all authority
divine passive
In heaven and on earth.
That is throughout the universe
Therefore journeying disciple all the Gentiles

Baptizing them
Into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit
Teaching them to keep everything whatsoever I have commanded you
And behold
I am with you Emmanuel all the days
Until the completion of the age.”

Review Questions

1. What do you feel Matthew is doing in his Gospel with the five “new” scenes at the beginning?
2. What do you feel Matthew is doing in his Gospel with the six additions to the Passion story?

Lecture 15. Matthew: “The Gospel of the Church”

Overview

The word for “church,” *ekklesia* in Greek, appears three times in Matthew’s Gospel (16:18; 18:17) and in no other. There are several senses in which Matthew’s is a “church” gospel. It comes first in the New Testament, and it was the principal gospel used in church throughout history until recently. The Gospel of Matthew is also a book at the service of the Church, likely written at a time when the first witnesses of Jesus were dying off and there was a felt need to put something in the hands of teachers to help them instruct those who were attracted to this new movement.

I. Contrast Mark and Matthew

- Contrast Matthew 16:13-20 and Mark 8:27-30:
 - 1) For Mark, as we saw in a previous talk, this episode comes right in the middle of the gospel, and although Peter gives the correct response to Jesus’ question: “What about you—who do you say I am?” when he replies, “You’re the Messiah,” Mark’s interest is really in showing how Peter then gets it wrong.



Saint Peter by Paolo Emilio Besenzi, 17th c.

- 2) Matthew tells the story differently. Peter makes a much fuller declaration: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.” Jesus responds, “You are to be congratulated, Simon Bar-Jona, because flesh and blood did not reveal it to you. No—it was my Father, the one in heaven. And I am telling you that you are ‘Rock,’ and on this Rock I am going to build my Church; and the gates of Hell shall not be strong against the Church. And I am going to give you the keys of the Kingdom of the Heavens. And whatever you bind on earth will be bound in the heavens; and whatever you untie on earth will be untied in the heavens.”

- 3) Matthew’s insertion balances what happens a few verses later, when Peter is unable to cope with Jesus’ first prediction of his passion: the one who was called “Rock” is now a “scandal” (a tiny stone). And the one of whom Jesus had said that the Church would be built on him as a base, and that the Gates of Hades would not be strong against it, is now

renamed again as “Satan.” The one whom Jesus congratulated for having revelation from “my Father” is now told that he is not, after all, thinking “God thoughts” but “human thoughts.” This is a very strong teaching about the Church.

II. The Church in Matthew

- In chapter 18, Matthew has taken a good deal of material that appears in all kinds of different places in Mark and Luke and organized it into a treatise about the Church, even though he mentions the word only once.
 - 1) Jesus defines what it means to be “Church”: “when two of you agree on earth about anything that they are asking for, it will happen to them from my Father, the One in the heavens.” Why? Because “where there are two or three gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them.” That is what “Church” means to Matthew.
 - 2) Finally in this chapter, Matthew puts on Peter’s lips a question about how often to forgive a fellow Christian and caps it with the parable of the Unforgiving Servant (18:23-25), which does not appear in any other gospel.
- There are other, smaller details. There are, for example, two parables about Church.
 - 1) The story of the Ten Virgins, about the need for the Church to stay awake and be ready for the coming of the bridegroom.
 - 2) The story of the Sheep and the Goats (25:31-46), which is not really about the “goats,” but about those who unexpectedly discover that they have been giving Christ food, drink, hospitality, clothing, and visiting him. That is the Church, when it is functioning, as it should.
- Occasionally, it seems you can hear excerpts from the liturgy in Matthew’s Church.
- You can also find various warnings to the Church of Matthew’s day:
 - 1) Look at 7:21-23: “It’s not everyone who says ‘Lord, Lord,’ to me who will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father in Heaven.”
 - 2) Then there is chapter 23, where six times Jesus bellows, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” All these charges could be laid against not just “scribes and Pharisees,” but religious people of any group, including Matthew’s contemporary Church.

III. Walking on Water

- Finally, let’s look at what Matthew has done in a story about Jesus walking on the water, in which he invites us to see the Church as a boat.
 - 1) Mark 6:45-52 tells the story quite simply: after the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus tells the disciples to go across to Bethsaida while he gets rid of the crowds. It turns out this is all about Jesus taking much-needed time to pray. They get into trouble with the waves, so Jesus walks across the sea to them. Mark mysteriously adds, “He wanted to pass them by.” In both narratives, the disciples

panic because it is clearly a ghost, and Jesus calms them down by saying, “Be brave—it is I.” But Matthew adds something that would certainly have spoken to the Church of his day.

- Peter responds (14:28), “Lord, if it is you, order me (*Kyrie keleuson*) to come to you on the waters.” And Jesus simply does what Peter asked, and says “come.” And, as the Church does from time to time, Peter obeyed the Lord “and walked on the water, and came to Jesus.” But then, “He saw the strong wind, and was afraid, and began to go under, and cried out saying, “Lord, save me” (*Kyrie soson*). This is what the Church does from time to time, and, as always, Jesus “stretched out his hand, took hold of him and says to him, ‘O you of little faith—why did you doubt?’” a question that can often be put to the Church. Then Matthew rejoins Mark’s version: Jesus and Simon Peter board the boat. Then Mark comments “they were excessively very much amazed in themselves.” In Matthew, “Those in the boat worshipped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God.’” We are surely not wrong in reading this as a picture of the way the Church operates in Matthew’s view and in his lifetime.
- Matthew is very much a Church Gospel.



Christ Walking on the Sea by Amédée Varin, 19th c.

Review Questions

1. What do you think it means to call Matthew the “Church Gospel?”
2. Do you think Matthew’s use of the story of Jesus walking on water effectively conveys his point?

Lecture 16. Matthew's Gospel and Judaism

Overview

Since the terrible events of the Holocaust, Christians have properly been examining our consciences to see how we contributed to the disaster. Matthew's Gospel has come under its share of examination in this respect. Some people describe it as "the most Jewish and the most anti-Jewish of the gospels." In this talk, we will look at some portions of the text that has been labelled as anti-Jewish, and explore some alternative ways of looking at them.

I. Anti-Jewish

- There is the famous scene where the Jewish King Herod is presented as believing that the Messiah, King of Israel, has indeed been born, and is shaken "and all Jerusalem with him" (Matthew 2:3), and is quite clear that any children who might be the newborn king must be exterminated.
 - 1) We have to be aware that many of Herod's fellow Jews would have had reservations about him; indeed some of them would have doubted whether he was a Jew at all.
- Matthew picks up a usage of Mark, who talks about *their* synagogues, and greatly expands it (4:23; 9:35; 10:17; 23:34).
- Then there is that terrible moment in Matthew's Passion Narrative where Pilate washes his hands of Jesus' innocent blood while "the whole people" said "his blood be on us and on our children." Throughout history, many Christians have used this as a justification for violence against the Jews, but both Pilate and the crowd are resorting to well-tried Jewish texts.



Pilate Washes His Hands by
James Tissot, 1886–94

II. Other Interpretations

- Rather than gross anti-Semitism, read what you find in Matthew as yet another example of inner-Jewish debates that can be found in the first century on either side of the birth of Jesus.
- Matthew can actually be read as a deeply Jewish gospel. Many scholars see Matthew as offering a Jesus who is a "new Moses," who, like his predecessor, goes up into the mountain—though admittedly whereas Moses went to receive the Law, Jesus is giving it—and in Matthew's version of the Transfiguration, Jesus appears just like Moses on Matthew Sinai (17:2).

III. The Sermon on the Mount and Judaism

- Matthew is quite clear in the Sermon on the Mount that his fellow Christians are to continue with the three great pillars of the Jewish religion, but not to put on a show for other people. This is a very Jewish debate, and many of Jesus' fellow Jews will have applauded his sentiments.
- At a very important moment early in the Sermon on Mount, we hear Jesus say, "Do not think that I have come to destroy the Law or the Prophets" (5:17). Matthew's group of Christians are still Jews, still telling the old story of God and the People of God. Jesus uses very strong language about this: "I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For Amen I'm telling you: until Heaven and Earth pass away, not a single yodh nor a single serif shall pass away from the Torah, until it all happens."
 - 1) They are warned that anyone who undoes "one of the least of these commandments is going to be called least in the Kingdom of Heaven" (5:19).
 - 2) Matthew is a good Jew, but that is not to say that he does not have disagreements with his fellow Jews, so they might have been startled to hear Jesus say, "I am telling you that unless your righteousness is more abounding than that of the scribes and Pharisees, no way will you enter into the Kingdom of Heaven" (5:20).

IV. Observant Jewish Group

- Matthew expects his Christians to wear phylacteries and tassels on the end of their clothes and to keep the Sabbath, for when Matthew's Jesus is talking about the end time, they are told to "pray that your flight does not happen in winter or on the Sabbath" (24:20). The picture that emerges, then, is of a thoroughly observant Jewish group that will have been much like any other such group in the first century.
 - 1) You can occasionally see this in the way he rewrites Mark. Compare what you find in Mark 7:18-19, where after the remark about the food going into the latrine we hear the evangelist's comment, "[thus] pronouncing all foods clean." Matthew simply omits that, which presumably means that his group kept kosher. And something similar happens when Matthew reports the Marcan story about the disciples plucking grain on the Sabbath, he omits Mark's very sharp comment that "the Sabbath was for human beings, and not human beings for the Sabbath."

V. The Temptation Story

- In the story of the temptation in the desert, as scholars have remarked, Jesus and the devil are like Rabbis swapping scripture quotations. Or look through the Gospel and count the number of times that you meet the phrase "this was to fulfill what was spoken in the prophets."
- When telling the story of the temptation of Jesus, Matthew and Luke both add three temptations. For Luke, the Temple forms the climax, but in Matthew we find a very important word, which we can translate as "worship," that is very important in Matthew's Gospel. It is a word that we first encountered when the Magi turned up in Jerusalem, wanting to "worship" Jesus. The next time we meet the word, it is in chapter 4, the climax of the temptations. For Matthew the final temptation is

that Jesus should “worship” the Devil. Jesus’ response is an interesting one: “The Lord your God shall you worship, and him alone shall you adore.”

VI. Matthew’s Jesus

- We are dealing here with a Jewish group whom we have to call Christian, because they believe that the Messiah (or “Christ” in Greek) has come, and this group is opening up to non-Jews.
- Matthew’s Jesus represents something very new in Judaism. Jesus represented something new in the old story of God and the People of God. The Resurrection meant that suddenly the Jews who thought Jesus was the Messiah were living in a new world, for they discovered that their monotheism, which they still cherished, had to be understood in a completely new way. Many of their fellow Jews thought that they had betrayed the ancient tradition.
- Matthew did not agree, obviously, but if he thought for a moment that his views on Jesus and Judaism would give for a second any support to the view that Christianity meant getting rid of Jews by any means at all, he would have said that was simply missing the point. Matthew was a deeply faithful Jew.



Temptation of Christ by Philips Augustijn Immenraet, 1663

Review Questions

1. Do you think that Matthew is anti-Jewish?
2. Do you think Christians have a responsibility to handle the gospel today in a way that is sensitive to our Jewish brothers and sisters?

Lecture 17.

Luke: The Supreme Artist

Overview

It is a fair bet that if I were to ask you to list your favorite gospel story, you would pick something from Luke's remarkable pen. For example, you would almost certainly mention the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), or the story of the Good Samaritan (10:25-37), or maybe Paul's encounter with Jesus on the Damascus Road, told for the first of three times at Acts 9:1-16. Or there is the lovely story of the Annunciation to Mary (Luke 1:26-38), which a thousand artists have attempted. At the other end of the Gospel is the extraordinary narrative of the two disciples on the Emmaus road (24:13-32). However, we are not to think of Luke as just someone who hangs our favorite paintings in his house. He has a theological point to make to us. In this lecture, we will take a look at each of these stories, and see what Luke is trying to tell us.

I. Luke's Infancy Narrative



La Visitation by Philippe de Champaigne,
ca. 1643

- To help you in this, I'd like to go through some of the lovely stories that the evangelist gives us in his first two chapters, what we call the Infancy Narrative.

1) The first of these is the beautifully drawn story of the annunciation to Zechariah of the birth of John the Baptist (1:5-25), which starts us on the journey through the Gospel. Look at it carefully and make a list of the things that puzzle you. Then read that other annunciation to Mary and try to find similarities and differences. Luke brings the two stories together with the consummate artistry of the story of Mary going to visit Elisabeth in the hill country of Judah. Notice that it is Elisabeth, not Mary, who has Luke's attention in this encounter between two remarkable women. You may also be struck by the encounter between their two unborn sons.

2) Luke gives us another double picture, of Mary and Joseph, framed by the powerful (Caesar Augustus and Quirinius) on the one hand, and the weak (a bunch of disreputable shepherds) on the other. This contrast is very much grist to Luke's

mill, for this is the Gospel of the poor.

- 3) Luke's Infancy Narrative ends with a striking story, artistically recounted to help us grasp more about who Jesus really is.
 - (a) Jesus' parents fulfill all that they are supposed to do in the Law: the baby is circumcised and (in accordance with Gabriel's instructions at 1:31) named Jesus. Then Luke introduces the two great characters of Simeon and Hannah (2:22-38). Mary and Joseph are similarly observant Jews, but open to the new thing that God is doing. This story creates a thoroughly Old Testament atmosphere.
- 4) Not only is Luke the longest of the gospels, but this Gospel is the first of two volumes, and watching the way Luke manages his material can be very instructive for our reading of Luke's Acts of the Apostles.

II. The Disastrous Dinner Party

- There are, depending on how you count them, something like eight "disastrous dinner parties" in Luke's Gospel that may give you an idea of how the evangelist operates.

- 1) At Levi's house (5:27-39): It is clearly the case that Jesus frequently went in for celebratory meals, and this is one of them. Here there are two lots of criticism against Jesus, all at the same dinner party, apparently. First there is the difficulty that he is eating with all the wrong sort of people, and second that his disciples don't fast. On top of that he tells a parable that indicates the newness of what he is doing.



Christ at Simon the Pharisee by Peter Paul Rubens, ca. 1618–20

- 2) At the house of Simon the Pharisee (7:36-50): Perhaps the most surprising thing about these dinner parties is the number of times that Jesus is a guest of the Pharisees. In this case, there is a woman involved. It looks (though not all scholars agree) as if Luke has taken over the story of the anointing of Jesus, which in Mark was the prelude to the Passion. Luke has placed this story rather early in Jesus' ministry and turned it instead into a beautiful story about love and forgiveness. Read it attentively and notice how very shocking it is.
- 3) At the house of Martha and Mary (10:38-40).

- 4) At the house of a Pharisee (11:37-54): Scarcely have we had time to digest the oddity of the invitation than once again disaster is beckoning, as the Pharisee host is pursing his lips in disapproval at Jesus' failure to observe the correct rituals.
- 5) At a Pharisee's house (14:1-24): This dinner takes place on the Sabbath. Almost in the first line we discover that "they were watching him."
- 6) At Zacchaeus' house (19:1-10): This actually works out quite well, despite the complaints of certain onlookers about Jesus' terrible choice of dining companions.
- 7) Emmaus (24:28-31) and the Eleven Plus Two (24:36-43): both of these meals are after the Resurrection, and neither of them are really disastrous, but they have an element of disarray and doubt. In the second, the disciples are unable to cope with the return of Jesus from the dead, even though he has appeared to Simon and to the Emmaus Two, so that eventually Jesus has to show them his wounds and eat a portion of grilled fish before their astonished gaze.

Review Questions

1. Is Luke's artistry concerned with history or religion, or something else?
2. Do you agree that Luke is a supreme artist?
3. What is your favorite picture in Luke's Gospel?

Lecture 18.

The Lucan Journey

Overview

One of the extraordinary things about Luke's Gospel is that it presents itself as a journey. You can see that quite clearly if you read Luke's two opening chapters, which function like the overture to an opera, spelling out the themes that the Gospel will explore. So Luke starts the story off with no less than twelve moves (depending on how you measure it), so that right from the beginning we are aware of being "on the move." We shall continue to be on the move all the way through the Acts of the Apostles. There is another way in which Luke presents the idea of journeying, what I call the "ripple effect," where Jesus' word to continues its journey and spreads outwards.

I. The Journey of Mary and Joseph

- After the opening address to Theophilus, we start at a particular time ("the days of Herod the King of Judea"), which also gives us the place; for it is in Judea that Zechariah and his wife Elisabeth live, and it is in the "Temple of the Lord" (1:9) that the angel of the Lord appears to him. The next move is to Nazareth, and once again it is the angel Gabriel who is involved, but we are also taken there, to the betrothed virgin (1:26-38). After that the move is southwards once more, to "the hill-country, to a city of Judah," where Elisabeth and Zechariah live (1:39-56). That episode concludes with Mary returning to her home back in the North. Then the narrative returns to Judah, and Elisabeth produces her child, who is duly given the appropriate name. The child is then sent off into the "desert places until the day of his showing to Israel" (1:80).
- Chapter 2 starts with a glimpse as far away as Rome, to the office of Caesar Augustus. The journeying continues once more as Joseph and Mary make the weary trek from Nazareth to Bethlehem, not very far from Judah. There, the child is born and feted by a cast of odd characters including shepherds (2:6-20). He is properly circumcised and named. The next turn that the narrative takes is, presumably after forty days, to Jerusalem for that important encounter with Simeon and Hannah (2:22-38). When all that has been completed, we are on the road



Joseph and Mary Arrive in Bethlehem by William Brassey Hole, 1906

again when Jesus gets lost in Jerusalem for three days. We breathe a sigh of relief as we hear that the adolescent Jesus “went down with them, and came to Nazareth, and was subjected to them.”

II. The Journey to Jerusalem

- If you look at Mark 6:45–8:26, from the feeding of the 5,000 to Caesarea Philippi, and 9:41-10:12, and you will see that Luke omits these stories. Instead, at 9:51, Luke starts us on the journey that will lead us to Jesus’ suffering and death in Jerusalem.
- Introduced by “as they were journeying on the way,” we meet three potential disciples.
 - 1) The first offers to follow Jesus, “wherever you are going” (9:57), and gets the fairly discouraging response, “The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.”
 - 2) The second is invited to follow Jesus and asks for time to bury his father. He gets the chilling response, “Let the corpses bury their corpses” (9:60).
 - 3) The third is willing to follow, but first wants to say goodbye to those at home, and is sternly rebuked. This journey of discipleship is not for the faint hearted.
- In Luke and Acts, the author uses this word we have translated as “journey” well over a hundred times. No other New Testament author gets much above single figures. At times you can almost translate it as “pilgrimage.” The whole of Acts of the Apostles is a journey, as we shall see; you will not be surprised to know that Luke uses the verb especially very frequently in his second volume.
- The climax of this pilgrimage-journey is Jerusalem. In Acts of the Apostles the story begins there and keeps coming back until, at 21:30, the Temple doors are slammed shut. In the Gospel, it is of a piece with the journeying theme that Luke offers us no less than four “Jerusalem oracles.”
 - 1) So at 13:34 we hear Jesus responding to the Pharisees’ warning him against Herod in these words, “Today and tomorrow and the next day, I must journey,” because it is not permissible for a prophet to die outside Jerusalem. He continues, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kill the prophets and stone those who were sent to her.”
 - 2) At 21:20 there is the prediction of the siege of Jerusalem: “When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that her desertification has drawn near.”
 - 3) At 21:24 he speaks of “Jerusalem trodden down by the Gentiles.”
 - 4) As he is carrying his cross at 23:28, Jesus speaks to the mourning women: “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep over me—instead, weep over yourselves and your children.”

III. Arrival in Jerusalem

- We have known for several chapters that Jesus will die in Jerusalem, but after Emmaus we discover that it is not an ending, but only a new beginning.
 - 1) Jesus offers a short sermon indicating that this was all part of God’s plan, that “the Messiah should suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance should be proclaimed

in his name to all the Gentiles.” Then comes the key journeying phrase: “beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of this” (24:47). And Jesus promises to send “My Father’s promise upon you—and you are to sit in the city until you are clothed with the power from on high.” The journey is not under their control. They cannot start the journey until they have had the Spirit. It is their duty to continue Jesus’ journey, and we shall watch them doing so in Acts of the Apostles.

- Luke’s Gospel ends, “And they returned to Jerusalem with great joy—and they were all the time in the Temple blessing God.” The story began in that same Temple, with the annunciation to Zechariah. Something very important has happened during all those 24 chapters, and now the infant Church is ready to get under way, and to continue the Jesus journey.

Review Questions

1. Do you agree that Luke turns his Gospel into a journey?
2. Why do you think that Luke is so keen on a journey?

Lecture 19.

Luke: The Gospel of the Holy Spirit, Prayer, and Joy

Overview

Luke is very much the Gospel of the Holy Spirit, and this carries consequences. The Spirit is Luke's way of expressing that God is at work in this narrative. The idea runs all the way through both volumes of Luke's work. Prayer is also very important to Luke's Gospel; Jesus prays at every significant moment of his life. Finally, Luke is the Gospel of joy. In this lecture, we will explore these three themes to see how they might be connected and what they tell us about Luke's Gospel.

I. The Work of the Holy Spirit

- Start with the opening lines of the Gospel, where the evangelist is, on the face of it, telling Theophilus that he proposes to give him an accurate account of Jesus' story. Luke talks of "the things that have been fulfilled among us." When you use words like that, you are thinking in terms of what God is doing, or, in Luke's terms, the work of the Holy Spirit.
- It becomes more explicit at the annunciation at Nazareth, when Mary asks, "How can this be?" and Gabriel gives her the answer: "the Holy Spirit will come upon you," and then translates this as "the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore that which is being begotten shall be called Son of God."
- In addition, several people in the story are described as "filled with the Holy Spirit."
- All three of the Synoptic Gospels agree that the start of Jesus' mission, following immediately on from the baptism, was under the impulse of the Holy Spirit:
 - 1) Mark says that "the Spirit drives him out into the desert."
 - 2) Matthew says that Jesus was "led up by the Spirit."
 - 3) But Luke alone has Jesus "full of the Spirit," which emphasizes slightly more Jesus' ability to make his own decisions.
- It is only Luke who places the episode at Nazareth immediately after the baptism and temptations of Jesus. Again, we can feel the Spirit at work, for Luke has Jesus quote Isaiah 61, that "the Spirit of



The Annunciation by Francesco Albani, 17th c.

the Lord is upon me.” Then he preaches his sermon, the shortest in history: “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing”; and we have seen already how the word “fulfill” is for Luke a sign of the Spirit of God at work. Then in the passage about “Ask and you shall receive,” which is also in Matthew (Matthew 7:11; Luke 11:13), Luke adds “the Holy Spirit” to what the Heavenly Father will give to those who ask him.

- When we come to look at Luke’s second volume, Acts of the Apostles, we shall see how the Spirit drives the narrative. Indeed, that work may safely be called the “Gospel of the Holy Spirit.”

II. The Gospel of Prayer

- There is another aspect of the Spirit that is of immense importance in Luke’s Gospel, namely prayer. Read slowly through chapters 1 and 2, which do so much to set the atmosphere for the Gospel, and notice the signs of prayer.
- It is no surprise, therefore, that Luke has Jesus pray at every important moment of his life. Luke sets the teaching of his version of the Lord’s Prayer in a context where Jesus has been praying. Look now at the various episodes where Luke has Jesus pray.
 - 1) The first is at the baptism; unlike Mark and Matthew, in Luke it is when Jesus is praying that he sees the Spirit. There is a brief summary at 5:16. Luke often paints the picture by way of a summary of Jesus’ activity, but here it is worth noticing that Jesus was “going in the desert places and praying.”
 - 2) Then Luke’s Jesus prays before selecting his disciples: “it happened in those days that he went out into the mountain to pray. And he was praying all night in his prayer to God.” Then the disciples are summoned and named.
 - 3) Luke does it again before that moment which Mark places at Caesarea Philippi, asking the disciples, “whom do the crowds say I am?” and then the more important question, “what about you—who do you say I am?” The setting is, once again, that Jesus is at prayer (9:18-20).
 - 4) Later in the same chapter, at 9:28-29, Jesus prays prior to his transfiguration. The way Luke tells the story suggests that it is the fact of Jesus’ prayer that enables the change in his features: “It happened *while he was praying* that the appearance of his face became different, and his clothing flashing like lightning.”



Jesus Goes Up Alone onto a Mountain to Pray by James Tissot, 1886-94

- 5) The next time we learn of Jesus praying is at 22:32, during the Last Supper, when he turns to Simon and indicates that he has already prayed for him: “Look! Satan sought to sift you like wheat,” he says, “but I prayed for you that your faith should not fail. You are to turn and strengthen your brothers and sisters.” Neither Jesus nor his disciples can do their job, according to Luke, without prayerful assistance.
 - 6) We next watch Jesus at prayer on the Mount of Olives (22:40-46), where all the disciples are instructed to “pray not to enter into temptation.” Then eavesdrop on his prayer to the Father, “If you are willing, take this cup from me. But not my will but yours be done.” We are allowed to see an answer to the prayer in the strengthening presence of an angel, and Jesus sweating drops of blood.
 - 7) Then Jesus prays again as they crucify him, “Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (22:34), and, lastly, when he is at the point of death, “Crying out in a loud voice Jesus said, ‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit,’” which is quite different from Mark’s “My God, My God—why have you forsaken me?” and slightly changes the atmosphere.
- In addition, Luke has four pieces of instruction on prayer in his Gospel: 11:5-13, 18:1-8, 18:9-14, and 21:36.

III. The Gospel of Joy

- See how the idea of joy threads through Luke.
 - 1) In the first two chapters, look at 1:14, where Zechariah is told that “there shall be joy for you, and exultation” and 1:28, where the angel Gabriel tells Mary, “rejoice—graced lady”; and the dialogue between Elisabeth and Mary at 1:42-45, where it is a matter of the tone of Elisabeth’s remarks, rather than the words that she uses. Mary’s Magnificat immediately follows this, which is indeed a joyous occasion (see especially 1:46-47). Then we meet joy at 1:58, in the reaction of Elisabeth’s neighbours and kinsfolk to the news of John’s birth, not to mention the joy of Zacchary (1:64; 1:68). In the same context, you might look at 2:10, 14, and 20, where several different words are used to convey the joy of Jesus’ birth announced to the shepherds: “preach good news,” “glory,” “peace among human beings of good will.”
- And there is plenty of joy to find elsewhere in the Gospel.
 - 1) A different Lucan word, “glorify” appears after the healing of the widow’s son at Nain (7:16).
 - 2) Another word conveying joy, the idea of gospel or “good news,” is to be found at 7:22.
 - 3) At 10:17, the 70 or 72 whom Jesus has sent out at the beginning of the chapter “returned with joy,” because the demons had been subordinated to them.
 - 4) At 10:21, the link is made explicitly between the Holy Spirit and joy, when Luke says that Jesus “rejoiced in the Holy Spirit.”
 - 5) Then of course there is the lovely chapter 15, where you get a series of stories about rejoicing over the return of what was lost: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. In that chapter you

might look at verses 6, 7, 9, 23, 24, 32 (and contrast the dreary lack of joy on the part of the elder brother in verse 29).

- 6) Also joyful is the story of the healing of the ten lepers (17:11-19) and the gratitude of the one who was a Samaritan.
- Finally, at 24:52-3, the Gospel ends on an appropriately unambiguous note of joy: “when they had worshipped [Jesus], they returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were all the time in the Temple, blessing God.” For Luke there is a clear connection between this joy and prayer and the accompanying presence of the Holy Spirit.

Review Questions

1. Is it true to call Luke the “Gospel of the Holy Spirit”?
2. Is there a link between the Holy Spirit and joy?
3. Do you agree that Luke is the “Gospel of prayer”?

Lecture 20.

Luke and Judaism

Overview

You often hear it said that Luke was a Gentile dealing with the problems of the Church coming to grips with the fact, bewildering to most of that first generation of Christians, that while this new movement based on Jesus took off in the most remarkable way among non-Jews, Jesus' fellow Jews for the most part were not attracted to it. A question arises: Was Luke hostile to the Judaism from which Jesus emerged? When you come to Luke, the feeling that you get from both volumes of his work, but perhaps especially from Acts of the Apostles, is that Luke, like Paul, is more at home in the great Greek cities like Rome, Athens, Ephesus, Corinth, and Antioch, where Jews and Gentiles were rubbing shoulders every day.

I. Dates in Luke

- There is one interesting thing that Luke does with regard to dating. At the beginning of each of his first three chapters he makes a reference to what sounds like a Gentile way of dating, but in each case he brings us to realize that he is really talking about is the old story of God and the People of God.
- 1) The first “date” is “it happened in the days of Herod the King” (1:5). But Luke is really interested in Zechariah and his wife Elisabeth, those exemplary Old Testament figures. So let us bow graciously in the direction of this very smart evangelist, who is reminding us of what really matters in life.
- 2) Luke plays the same trick on us at the beginning of the next chapter (2:1-4), when we read, “It happened in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the entire inhabited world should be registered. This first registration took place when Quirinius was procurator of Syria.” So we, priding ourselves on being alert readers, say to ourselves: “now Luke is making it quite clear that he is writing for the Gentile world,” but hardly have we breathed this sentiment when we read, “Joseph also went up from the Galilee, from the city of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem.” This is not the Gentile world, but a thoroughly Jewish one. Luke is far more interested in the obscure couple Mary and Joseph, and in the two wholly unknown towns of Nazareth and Bethlehem than in Rome and Augustus, the most powerful person in the entire world, and Quirinius, his local representative. This is clearly going to be a Gospel that will turn all our expectations upside down.
- 3) At 3:1-2, Luke treats us to a very solemn sounding date (the only date in the entire New Testament, as it happens): “In the fifteenth year of the Imperium of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilatus was procurator of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of the Galilee, and his brother Philip was tetrarch of Iturea and the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene,

in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to..." That fifteenth year of Tiberius, by the way, takes us to roughly the year 29 or 30 AD. Anyway, just as you were reflecting that this sounds like serious history about the Gentile world, and the people who are really powerful in it, Luke once more plays his trick, and reveals who he is really interested in, the person to whom "the word of God came," and it was "John, son of Zechariah, in the desert!" This is of course John the Baptist, who will later be executed by the Herod the tetrarch.

- We should be careful about getting too certain about Luke's audience. Notice where this Gospel begins and ends. It starts, as we have seen in previous talks, in the Temple in Jerusalem with Zechariah performing his priestly duties and the people of Israel waiting prayerfully outside (1:9-10). The Temple is where the Gospel ends, with the community at prayer: "They were all the time in the Temple, blessing God" (24:53).

II. The Three Canticles

- The three canticles that Luke inserts into his Gospel are also thoroughly Jewish:
 - 1) Mary's Magnificat (1:46-55)
 - 2) Zechariah's Benedictus (1:68-79)
 - 3) Simeon (2:29-32)

III. Jerusalem

- Jerusalem is of immense importance to Luke. Sixty percent of all the Synoptic Gospel references to the city are in Luke, so that simply carries on the tone of the opening chapters, where, as we have seen in a previous talk, the narrative starts in the Temple and keeps coming back.
 - 1) We should notice especially 2:22-24, where we are clearly meant to applaud Jesus' parents for bringing the child "to Jerusalem, to offer him to the Lord, as it is written in the Law of the Lord." This sort of language is not that of one who thinks that Judaism has been superseded.
- Similarly we should take seriously the language of 2:41-51 and the story of Jesus escaping their vigilant attention. The family was engaged upon the eminently Jewish business of journeying "to Jerusalem, for the feast of Passover," and the twelve year old goes missing. Obviously they must have been in a panic. But that is not the main point. The deeper point is that they went straight back to Jerusalem, and to the Temple; they knew that was where he had to be.
- The mood created with regard to Jerusalem and Judaism in the first two chapters is reinforced by the old-fashioned charm of the three couples, Zechariah and Elisabeth in Judea, Simeon and Hannah in the Temple, and even Joseph and Mary, even though they are Galileans with strange accents, who keep coming back to Judea and to the Temple. We are clearly intended to approve of them, and indeed of Jerusalem, which is the pivot on which the whole narrative turns and the destination of the Lucan journey.
- Jerusalem as a kind of climax in Luke also comes out in the story of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. For the third temptation, "[The devil] took him to Jerusalem, and put him on the pinnacle

of the Temple, and said to him, ‘If you *are* the Son of God, throw yourself down from here...’” (4:9) and Jesus refuses. Luke tells the temptation stories in this order precisely because of the importance that the Temple holds for him.

IV. The Four Oracles

- Then there are the four “Jerusalem” oracles in the Gospel, which we mentioned in a previous talk, but in a different context.
- 1) The first is at 13:31-35. The context is of a warning from some friendly Pharisees of Herod’s lethal intentions for Jesus. Jesus’ response has to do with the certainty about where prophets have to die. Then we hear the oracle: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those who are sent to you, how often I longed to gather your children, like a mother bird gathers her offspring under her wings.”
- 2) In the next oracle (19:41-44), Jesus once more weeps over Jerusalem, saying, “If only you also had known on this day the things that make for peace!” This is then followed by a clear prediction of the Roman invasion: “they shall not leave a stone upon a stone within you.”
- 3) The third of these oracles is at 21:20-24, again a prediction of 70 AD, “when you see Jerusalem encircled by armies—then you will know that her desolation has drawn near.” In a sense there is nothing new about this; there is plenty of Old Testament precedent for the judgement of God on the city. That sort of oracle is a very Jewish thing to deliver.
- 4) The final oracle is at 23:27-31, when Jesus, on the way to Calvary, meets the women of Jerusalem and tells them, “Do not weep for me, daughters of Jerusalem, but for yourselves and for your children...” Does this imply hostility on Luke’s part towards Jerusalem? Not really. Once again we are hearing an inner Jewish debate. Look, for example, at Jeremiah 9:16-21 and Hosea 10:8, which are both echoed here.
- The fact is that Jerusalem is a problem for the whole of the New Testament. It was the center of the Old Testament promises, but also the place where Jesus was rejected and where he died. And it is, we must never forget, a problem also for us Christians, after the Holocaust. Luke is writing from a particular point of view. He is trying to cope with the fact that on the whole Jews have resisted the appeal of Jesus, and, unexpectedly, Gentiles have come flocking to the Church. But Jerusalem remains central to the plan of God, even when its Temple has been destroyed. We should not think of his as pro-Gentile or anti-Jewish.



Jesus Carried up to a Pinnacle of the Temple by James Tissot, ca. 1886–94

Review Questions

1. Do you think that Luke was anti-Jewish?
2. Do the first two chapters of the Gospel of Luke help answer that question?
3. Where do you think Luke was most at home?

Lecture 21. The Gospel of John and Its Prologue: A Different Approach

Overview

The part of the Gospel of John that is known to everybody is its astonishing prologue. There was a time when it was fashionable to argue that the theology of the prologue was so sophisticated that it must have been written much later than the rest of the Gospel. Nowadays, scholars are much more confident that it belongs with it. In this talk, I will go through the prologue and the rest of chapter 1 and explore how John's Gospel works as it invites the reader to go deeper into the mystery of who Jesus is. One of the things that the prologue does for us is to tell us, right at the beginning, that we are in a different world from that of the Synoptic Gospels.

I. John's First Chapter: The Word

- In those first verses we hear a hymn to “the Word,” which is not identified at all, though we assume it to be Jesus: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was towards God, and the Word was God.”
- Quite abruptly, from high poetry up there with God, we land with on the ground, with John the Baptist, and prose (16-8); but it is still part of the same story, and deals with the central question of John's Gospel, “Who is Jesus?”
 - 1) Notice the language used of John: “a man,” “Sent from God,” “witness” (both as verb and as noun), “light,” and “believe” (or “come to faith”). This is all language that you will hear again and again in the fourth Gospel. It is part of the journey into the mystery of Jesus on which we are engaged.
- At 1:9-11 we are back up there in that upper world where the Word belongs, with the entry of light into the world.
 - 1) “Light” is an idea that we shall come across again and again in this Gospel. Indeed, chapter 9 can be seen as a dramatization of what it means for Jesus to be “light of the world.”
 - 2) “World” is another word of considerable importance in the Gospel of John: it stands for that which God loves, and also for those forces arrayed against God's project that we encounter in Jesus. Every time that you meet it, try asking yourself whether it is the good or the bad meaning that you are dealing with.
 - 3) Here you should notice the theme of rejection, which we shall encounter quite frequently: “He came to his own, but his own did not receive him.”

4) We should also remember what happens at the end of the Gospel, when the dying Jesus said to his mother, “woman, behold your son,” and to the Beloved Disciple, “behold your mother”; then we hear that the Beloved Disciple “took her to his own” (19:26-27), and so founded the community that carried on the project of God’s word. These are the ones described in verses 12-13 as “children of God,” “those who believe in his name, who were born, not of bloods, nor of the will of flesh, nor of the will of a man, but were born of God.” That, among others, is you, the reader or hearer of John’s words. Because you, the hearer, from now on will understand virtually everything which Jesus says and you will often notice that you will witness conversations between Jesus and other interlocutors, where they have no idea what Jesus is talking about, and we the reader complacently preen ourselves because we do understand.



Saint John the Baptist Points Out Jesus to Saint Andrew by Ottavio Vannini, 17th c.

- Then, in verse 14 we come to the astonishing statement, which is right at the heart of the gospel, and must stay with us in our reading: “The Word was made flesh and pitched his Tent among us.”
- In 1:15-18 we once again encounter John the Baptist and his “witness” of pointing to the Logos or Word, and a contrast: “Law came through Moses” and “grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” So now at last we know that the Word is indeed Jesus Christ.

II. Trying On Hats

- And the revelation now continues in the rest of chapter 1, with the process that I call “trying on hats”: various titles are offered for Jesus, to see if they fit, and as we watch the process we go ever deeper into the mystery. It starts with John the Baptist once more. Here the process is negative, confirming that John is not the Messiah, or Elijah, or “the Prophet”; then they ask why he is baptizing if none of the above. The answer is that his task is to point to Jesus, “The One in your midst.”
- Then, finally, we actually encounter Jesus at 1:29. It is day two of his mission and now we start the serious business of trying on hats.
 - 1) The first hat is “Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” What does it mean? There are several possibilities:
 - (a) There is the Passover Lamb, for one, and in John’s Gospel Jesus dies at the time when the Passover Lamb is sacrificed.

- (b) Then there is the scapegoat, who does not die, but symbolically carries Israel's sins out into the desert on the Day of Atonement.
 - (c) It may also represent a victorious lamb.
 - (d) It may be another word for "Messiah."
 - (e) There are too many possibilities, and you may need to stay with all of them; but notice the "of God" part of the phrase, which we shall find elsewhere in this gospel in "Son of God," "Chosen One of God," "Gift of God," "Bread of God," and "Word of God." This Gospel is the story of God, freshly revealed in Jesus. What we are calling the "hats" are a part of this.
- 2) The next hat is in 1:34, where Jesus is revealed as Son of God.
- (a) Then at last we hear the "Word's" first words: in the story they are spoken to these two disciples of John the Baptist, but they leap off the page to us, the reader: "What are you looking for?" (1:35). There is a sense in which the whole journey of this extraordinary Gospel is from a "what" to a "who." Then listen to the response of these two ex-disciples of the Baptist: "where do you stay?" That word "stay" can also mean "dwell," "abide," or "remain," and it will come up quite frequently in the Gospel, so watch out for it. Notice that these two disciples then "saw where he stayed" and then "stayed" with Jesus for the rest of that day. Something irrevocable has happened to them, and to us who read the words. And the reason that it has happened is that Jesus has said something else to them that likewise leaps off the page at the reader: "Come, and you will see." That is what is going to happen to us as we read through the text.



Adoration of the Mystic Lamb by Jan van Eyck, 1432

- 3) Now it is time for another "hat." Andrew goes to his brother Simon Peter and announces, "We found the Messiah" and then brings him to Jesus. This provides the first of several examples where Jesus shows unexpected knowledge: he addresses Peter by his full title, "Simon, son of John," and offers him a nickname of "Rock."
- 4) On day four, Philip introduces Jesus to Nathanael with the title, "the One whom Moses and the prophets wrote about," and specifies him as "Jesus Son of Joseph the one from Nazareth" (1:45). There is barely time for Nathanael to issue his contemptuous dismissal before we are into another piece of supernatural knowledge on Jesus' part: "an Israelite without guile."
- 5) When Nathanael asks, "From where do you know me?" we are suddenly presented with three more hats: "Rabbi, Son of God, King of Israel," the last of which makes the seventh in all.

III. The Final Hat

- In the last verse, we learn the last hat in this extraordinary first chapter, as Nathanael has to be told about “angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” The evangelist does not reveal what Nathanael made of this final hat, but we move into chapter 2 quite ready to go deeper into the mystery of who Jesus is.

Review Questions

1. In this extraordinary chapter, which “hat” do you think fits Jesus best?
2. Why does the evangelist call Jesus the “Word” or “Logos”?
3. What is the function of John the Baptist in this first chapter?

Lecture 22.

The Johannine Jesus

Overview

The question that most matters in this extraordinary Gospel is “Who is Jesus?” And from the very beginning, we know that we are to understand him as part of the old story of God and the People of God. In those astonishing opening lines of the Gospel, we hear that the Word “was in the beginning near to God—and the Word was God.” But now here is a problem: the author of our fourth Gospel and the people he was writing for, and indeed Jesus himself, are all good Jews. One of the things that all good Jews know is that there is one and only one God. One thing that good Jews simply cannot do is to say that human beings are gods.

I. Blasphemy

- Again and again in John’s Gospel, we hear accusations of blasphemy against Jesus. It is not just a problem for the fourth Gospel, because all of our New Testament authors recognize that if they are to get Jesus right, they have to use language of him that has been hitherto reserved for God. It did not come easily to them, but they knew they had to speak of this newly discovered richness of God; but they also had to face the difficulty that this posed for their beliefs about the oneness of God. That is why we encounter all those accusations of blasphemy against Jesus in John’s Gospel.
 - 1) For example, at 5:18 we read, “the Judeans sought all the more to kill him, because not only did he undo the Sabbath—but he also made God his own Father, making himself equal to God.”
 - (a) Jesus responds, “The one who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him.”
 - 2) The Gospel is well aware that Jesus’ identity is a life and death question: when at 10:30 Jesus says “the Father and I are one,” “the Judeans picked up stones to stone him.” When asked the reason for this aggression, they simply respond that “it is for blasphemy—because you, who are a human being are making yourself God.” This also leads to the question of whether human nature is so constructed that we can reveal God. Jesus simply challenges his opponents to decide: “If I am not doing the works of my Father, then don’t believe me.”
 - 3) Likewise, in that strange trial before Pilate, the Judeans terrify Pilate by insisting on death: “We have a Law, and according to the Law, he has to die, because he made himself Son of God” (19:7). At this point you and I have to decide: are we going to abandon the struggle, as Jesus’ opponents do, or are we going to allow the puzzle to do what the fourth Gospel wants and go deeper into the mystery?



Ecce homo by Antonio Ciseri, ca. 1860–80

II. Who Is Jesus?

- The prologue gives us a few clues about who Jesus is, for it says both that the Word “was towards God” and that he “was God,” and that he was involved in creation. The heart of the matter for Jews and for Christians is that God is love, and that means a certain untidiness that holds the mystery open for human beings. There is one and only one God, but the mix is very rich; and Jewish thinkers were already starting to think of “Wisdom” as a kind of personification that was and also was not God, present to God in creation. There is a real tension here in both Judaism and Christianity, for both want to affirm the oneness of God.
- You can feel the tension in John’s Gospel too. On the one hand we hear Jesus say things like “the one who sees me sees the One who sent me” (12:45), which asserts his identity with the Father, or “the one who has seen me has seen the Father” (14:9), and on the other hand we hear him say “the Father is greater than I” (14:28). What we have to do is sit with the tension and allow it to point us to the identity of Jesus.
- Very important here is the basic insight, a sound Jewish view that “no one has ever seen God.” You will find that in the prologue, at 1:18, and the important next step in the Gospel: “the one and only God, the one who is in the bosom of the Father, is the one who has explained God.” You are invited to sit with it as you go through the Gospel, and go deeper into the mystery. The essential thing is not

to pick out one phrase or another, but to allow the gospel to form us in the picture of Jesus, and to hold several phrases together, even if on the face of it they seem to be contradictory.

- The important question is the one that the representatives from Jerusalem put to John the Baptist at 1:19: “Who are you?” And the invitation to face that question also helps us to face the real question, “Who is Jesus?” and that other related question, “Where is he from?”

III. Revealing the Mystery

- So this Gospel is about “revealing the mystery.”
 - 1) At 1:31 we listen to John the Baptist telling his disciples, “I did not know him, but in order that he might be revealed to Israel, that is why I came.” If you go carefully through chapter 1 you will see that revelation is indeed John’s function.
 - 2) The revelation, though, is always about Jesus, and so at 2:11, after Cana, we read that “this Jesus did as the beginning of his signs; and he revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him.” That “belief” is what you and I are invited to do as we read and marvel.
 - (a) The “glory” mentioned there is all about his relationship, obscure but unmistakable, to God. The revelation also has to do with us, though, because at 3:21 we are warned that “those who do the Truth come to the Light, that their works may be revealed, because they are done in the light.”
 - (b) Similarly we are told of the man born blind that his blindness, oddly enough, was not because of sin but “in order that the works of God might be revealed in him” (9:3). This revelation is right at the heart of the Gospel.



Woman at the Well by Carl Heinrich Bloch, ca. 1865–79

- A good example of revealing the mystery comes in chapter four with the story of the Samaritan woman. Every step on the woman’s journey is also a step on our journey: first she asks, “Where from do you have this living water?” (4:11); then, hesitantly, “Are you—can you be—greater than our father Jacob?” Next (4:19) she goes a bit further: “Lord, I see you are a prophet.” Her next move is to raise the Messiah question: “I know that Messiah is coming, the so-called Christ.” and now, because of her openness, the revelation comes loud and clear: “I AM, the one who is speaking to you.” In the end, the quest goes even deeper, and this time it is not the Samaritan woman but her compatriots, who are able to say, “we know that this one is truly the Saviour of the World.”

- There are many examples of going deeper into the mystery in the Gospel of John, where Jesus explains who he is.

IV. Final Observations

- So what is our way into the mystery of who Jesus is?
 - 1) We are not alone in our journey into the mystery. Jesus has left us what in the fourth Gospel is called the “Paraclete.” If you turn to what is called the “Last Supper Discourse” in chapters 13–17, you will find this character, possibly the fourth evangelist’s greatest gift to us, at 14:15-17; 14:26; 15:26-27; and 16:7-15. Just stay with those four passages, and ask to be led deeper into the mystery.
 - 2) Where does the journey end? In a sense it never does, but it does reach a climax at the end of the story, at 20:28. Jesus invites Thomas to touch his wounds and Thomas cries, “My Lord and my God.” That is the end of the journey, but we shall not have grasped it unless we have looked into the darkness and the puzzlement of Thomas and all the others who meet Jesus on the way.

Review Questions

1. Why is the question of who Jesus is in the fourth Gospel so difficult?
2. What is the best answer that John's Gospel gives to the question?

Lecture 23.

The Passion Narrative in John

Overview

The Passion Narrative in the Gospel of John, like every other part of the Gospel, as we have seen, takes us deeper into the mystery. In the Passion Narrative, the fourth Gospel reaches its climax. It does so in a way that is quite different from that of Mark, Matthew, and Luke. Where Mark's story of Jesus' suffering and death was bleak, John offers a Jesus who is very much in charge, and a cross that is a royal throne.

I. The Last Supper Narrative

- Before John's account of Jesus' Passion is the Last Supper Discourse, which sets Jesus' death in context as an act of love.
 - 1) The Last Supper begins and ends with the mention of love.
 - (a) It starts, "having loved those who were his own in the world, he loved them to the end."
 - (b) At the end we hear Jesus pray to the Father that "the love with which you loved me may be in them, and I may be in them."
 - (c) John chooses to begin with the acted parable of Jesus washing his disciples' feet.
- We won't understand the Passion Narrative that follows unless we remember that example of love.



Christ Washing the Feet of the Disciples by Paolo Veronese, ca. 1850

II. Judas' Betrayal

- At 18:2 you will see that Judas “knew” the garden across the Wadi Kedron where the arrest takes place, and takes a cohort with lamps and torches because he has gone out into the dark and is arresting the Light of the World. Judas knows the trivial things, the things that do not really matter; no doubt he has visited the place with Jesus and the rest of them.
- Jesus, by contrast, knows something much more important, namely what is coming (18:4), and does not need any light or any show of force, for he is “The Light of the World.” Jesus is utterly in charge and runs the whole show. He interrogates the arresting party, for example, “Whom are you looking for?” and when they tell him “Jesus of Nazareth,” he says “I AM,” and his authoritative statement simply knocks them over, and they fall backwards (18:6). It is Jesus who gives the orders: “If it is me you are looking for—let these people go” (18:8), and the evangelist notes that this is so that scripture fulfilled. It is not just Jesus, but also, God who is in charge.

III. Peter's Denial

- This contrasts with the inept attempt by Simon Peter, using his sword on the unfortunate servant of the High Priest (18:10), cutting off, absurdly, “his earlobe, the right-hand one.” Jesus, who remains in charge, smartly rebukes this useless gesture.
 - 1) In his favor, however, we should notice that Simon Peter is still there, in company with another disciple.
- This is the start of the all-too-sad story of Simon's denial of Jesus, which shows Jesus as very much in charge. John manages this by careful storytelling, so that where Jesus is inclined to say “I AM,” telling the truth, Simon Peter (18:18) lies when asked if he is a disciple of this man, and says, abjectly, “I am not.”
 - 1) When Jesus is interrogated, it is clearly he who takes charge: “I spoke openly to the world; I always taught in synagogue and in the Temple...and I said nothing in secret. Why ask me? Ask those who heard what I said to them.” That earns him a slap, to which Jesus responds, regally, “If I have spoken badly, give evidence of the badness; if I have spoken well, why strike me?”
 - 2) The authorities cannot cope with this figure, and Jesus is despatched to Caiaphas, just in time for another contrasting picture of Simon Peter, warming himself, who once again says, “I am not,” even when confronted with evidence. Then, of course, the cock crows.

IV. Pilate's Interrogation

- Caiaphas evidently cannot cope with Jesus for very long, and he comes to the Praetorium and the interrogation before Pilate. The authorities are reluctant to enter because they might get defiled and be unable to eat the Passover (as though a murder plot were not sufficient defilement for them!).
- Then John does something quite interesting, creating two stages by his careful use of the words “inside” and “outside.” You will see the alternation of these two stages in 18:28, 29, 33, and 38; then Jesus is flogged at 19:1, which we presume takes place inside, before the pattern continues at 19:4,

5, 19:9; 12, and 13. I'd like to suggest that by setting the next episode on these two stages, outside and inside, and dividing the episode into seven scenes, the evangelist is inviting us to go deeper into the mystery of Jesus and to grasp his quiet, but unmistakable, authority.

- 1) Outside there is a crowd, egged on by the authorities, who are closed to all reason and noisily demanding Jesus' death.
 - 2) Inside there is Jesus, who speaks when he chooses to and conducts a quiet and civilized debate with Pilate, largely about the nature of kingship. Pilate, who does not appear here as a figure of immense moral stature, scurries like a frightened rabbit between the two stages, trying to keep peace outside, but inside endeavouring to make sense of the quietly authoritative figure that is Jesus.
- It may be worth pausing to listen to this debate. When the Judeans are offered the possibility of executing justice themselves (18:31), they respond, significantly, "we're not allowed to kill anybody," which reveals their agenda. At this Pilate goes back inside and addresses Jesus, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answers a question with a question: "Do you say this on your own account or did others say it to you about me?" Pilate is not used to this kind of interrogation, and asks, "What have you done?" Then Jesus gives him the answer he was looking for: "My kingdom is not of this world; if my kingdom, my servants would have fought for me. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here" (18:36). Pilate asks, "So you are a king, then?" and gets an answer which may not have satisfied him, but which speaks regally down the centuries: "You say I am a king. It was for this that I was born and for this that I came into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice." Pilate comes back with yet another question to evade the challenge: "What is truth?" However, we notice that he then rushes outside and proclaims Jesus "Not Guilty."

v. The Royal Road

- Next, John presents the regal appearance of Jesus.
 - 1) Jesus is now ironically mocked, precisely as a king, with a flogging and a crown (but of thorns, not jewels), and an appropriate purple robe. He is then produced in his royal garb to the stage outside with the entry cue: "Behold the man." This produces such anger that Pilate has to rush once more inside, where he asks, for once, the right question, "Where are you from?" (19:9); and to his astonishment Jesus refuses to respond. Pilate is not in charge of Jesus or the noisy crowd, who threaten his status, accusing him of being "no friend of Caesar." But of course, though Jesus is a king, he never says so, nor does he claim to rule. Instead, Pilate proclaims him king: "Look! Your king!" and when he tries to quieten the bellowing with "Is it your king you want me to crucify?" they come back with the appalling betrayal



Christ Crowned with Thorns by Anthony van Dyck, ca. 1618–20

of their nation's history: "We have no king but Caesar."

- "Carrying his cross for himself," Jesus goes out and is enthroned (19:18). Remarkably Pilate's verdict is now given in writing, and, to make sure that there can be no mistake at all about it, Pilate himself (that is what the text seems to mean) writes in three languages, so that there can be no doubt about the verdict, in Aramaic, Latin, and Greek. John comments that "many of the Judeans read this verdict, since the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city." The authorities want Pilate to change the verdict, and turn it into a statement of Jesus' preposterous claims, and at last, Pilate finds the courage to stand firm (only it is too late): "What I have written, I have written." And that is it: Jesus is King.
- Not only that, but Jesus founds a dynasty once he is "lifted up," as he had predicted back in chapter 3:13-14. For after royally bequeathing his undivided robes to the accompanying soldiers (19:23-24), he addresses his royal mother.
- The story of God has run its powerful course. Then the evangelist makes an important point to support this idea, "in order that the Scripture might be fulfilled," Jesus "said, 'I thirst,'" citing Psalm 22. This provokes a misunderstanding in the shape of a sponge filled with vinegar, which might revivify him, but would certainly not quench his thirst. As they make this unsatisfactory gesture, we might reflect another day when Jesus asked for a drink (4:7); and he did not get that drink either! Graciously, Jesus accepts the vinegar and proclaims, "It is accomplished." Then, in a regal gesture, "he bowed his head," giving acquiescence to the what is taking place, "and died."
- This moment of crucifixion is also Pentecost for the fourth gospel. And we think back to 7:37-39, and particularly the last of these verses, where Jesus says, in the Temple, "If anyone is thirsty, let them come to me and drink; but the one who believes in me, as Scripture says, rivers shall flow from his belly, of living water." Then the evangelist offers a gloss on this: "he said this about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were about to receive. For there was not yet the Spirit—because Jesus had not yet been glorified." "Glory" in John's Gospel refers primarily to Jesus' royal crucifixion.
- The scripture is fulfilled with the flow of blood and water, and Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus spring up from nowhere and give him a royal funeral with no less than 100 litres of an alloy of myrrh and aloes.
- This Passion Story of Jesus is indeed a royal road.

Review Questions

1. Is it accurate to call the Gospel of John's Passion Narrative an exaltation?
2. Is it true that for the fourth Gospel, Good Friday is also Easter Sunday and Pentecost?
3. What is the function of the Beloved Disciple and the Mother of Jesus in John's Gospel?

Lecture 24.

The Resurrection Stories in John

Overview

So we come to the end of the mystery. And to some extent it remains a mystery, for in this resolution of what has been an extraordinary story, we are given no less than four endings in chapter 20, with a concluding summary, and three further episodes in chapter 21, again with a concluding summary. In a way, the stories can be read separately (indeed they generally are), but taken together they put the cap on the mystery that we have been following all this time.

I. The First Story

- Unlike in the Synoptic Gospels, Mary Magdalene is on her own and finds the stone rolled away from Jesus' tomb. This causes her to "run" to Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple and give them the news, not that Jesus is risen, but that "they have taken the Lord from the tomb." This sets Peter and the Beloved Disciple on another jog, to the tomb, but "the other disciple ran quicker than Peter, and got to the tomb first."
 - 1) We should notice those who were closest to him are continuing here the mystery of Jesus, even after his death: Mary Magdalene, powerfully attached to him, Simon Peter who had said, "Lord, to whom shall we go?" and the "one whom Jesus loved." Only those who share this attitude of love can really grasp the mystery.
 - 2) When the Beloved Disciple arrives at the tomb, "he saw and he believed." This is an invitation to us to accept the mystery. The evangelist makes the point that they had not hitherto grasped what had happened.
- That more or less ends the first episode, as the male disciples, rather oddly, just go home.

II. The Second Story

- Mary Magdalene stays and "stood by the tomb weeping," having not yet come to a view about the Resurrection of Jesus. Still weeping, she looks inside, and sees, not the grave-cloths that were visible to the other two, but, quite unexpectedly, "two angels, sitting in white." It is slightly surreal, and when we are told that "one was at the head and one at the feet," we briefly suppose that perhaps Jesus was there after all. However he is not, only two angels, and they address her, not unkindly, "woman—why are you weeping?" She makes it quite clear that she has certainly not reached Resurrection faith, by replying, "They have taken away my Lord and I don't know where they have put him." Once again, there is no indication about who "they" might be. However that now becomes irrelevant, as someone else appears on the scene. It is, of course, Jesus, though she does not know it. Jesus then repeats the angels' question, "Who are you looking for?"

- We are then told that Mary thought that this was a passing gardener, who might have stolen the missing body; but we should notice that she gets him right, in one respect, since she addresses him as “Lord” and asks to know where he has put him. Then comes a beautiful moment when she gets very close to the heart of the mystery, in the only way that is possible, not by an intellectual grasp but by that deeper inner journey that is love, when he addresses her by name, and she in return responds in astonishment “Rabbouni!” She is then given a job to do, which is not to carry on touching him, but to tell the brothers that “I am going to my Father and your Father, and my God and your God.”
- So Mary carries the message, and that brings us to the third episode.



The Risen Christ Appearing to Mary Magdalen
by Rembrandt, 1638

III. The Third Story

- This episode takes place almost as though neither of the others had happened (for we are dealing with mystery here). It starts with the doors closed “for fear of the Judeans.” The mystery has not yet fully dawned upon the disciples. Effortlessly, Jesus walks through the locked doors, arrives in their midst, and offers them the ancient Hebrew greeting of “Peace.” Then he shows them his hands and his side, presumably to indicate that, as in Luke’s Gospel, they require proof that it really is him. After that, they finally consent to rejoice.
- As in all Resurrection narratives, they are given a job to do. For Jesus “breathed on them, and says to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit—whoever’s sins you let go, they are let go; and whoever’s you hold fast, they are held fast.’” This mission that they now have is not perhaps absolutely clear, but is often taken to indicate the power of exercising God’s reconciling ministry. In chapter 1 Jesus was identified as “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.” Now, the disciples are seen as taking over his role.

IV. The Fourth Story

- It looks, however, when we get to episode 4, that episode 3 has not really made its full impact upon them. They are still frightened enough to lock the doors again. Thomas is not much better, of course, for when they tell him of the privilege that they have been given, he makes an astonishingly crude demand to see Jesus’ wounds.
- Jesus returns a week later and greets them with “Peace.” Then his attention is all on Thomas, who is told, “bring your finger here, and see my hands; and bring your hand and throw it into my side. And don’t be an unbeliever but a believer.” We wait with some interest for the skeptic’s response, and when it comes, it goes far beyond what we should have predicted: “My Lord and my God!” Thomas

is mildly rebuked; “because you have seen me have you come to faith? Happy are those who have not seen but have believed.” That, we presume, refers to you and to me who have read the Gospel.

- We are still not finished, however, for now the evangelist gives us what sometimes sounds like an ending of the Gospel, with a frank admission that he has not told us everything, only sufficient to take us into the heart of the mystery: “Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written on this scroll.” Then he explains why he has written anything at all: “that you may come to faith that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.” At this point we are near to the heart of the mystery.

v. Three More Episodes

- So let us look at the final chapter and see what it says to us about the mystery into which we have been journeying all this time. It comes in three episodes. The first of these goes from 21:1-14, and constitutes the bulk of the chapter. The other two are reflections on the implications of the main episode, and have to do with the status of two of the most significant disciples in the post-Resurrection community. The function of this community is to continue presenting the mystery.
 - 1) The first episode in chapter 21 is now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he had been raised from the dead. It takes place on the Sea of Tiberius and seven of the disciples go fishing with Peter. It is a very familiar story, an all-night failure at fishing, with Jesus on the shore at dawn, although, very importantly, the writer suggests, “they did not know it was Jesus” (so they had not penetrated yet to the heart of the mystery).
 - 2) The Beloved Disciple appears and interprets the mystery: “It is the Lord!” Later, they are invited to breakfast, and we learn that “none of the disciples dared to ask ‘Who are you?’ they knew that it was the Lord.” We notice that even now the risen Jesus retains an air of mystery. Then Jesus does something that sounds very like a Eucharist; he takes the bread and gives it to them.
 - 3) Nor does it end there, for Simon Peter has to have a conversation with the Lord that he may have been dreading, for the last time we heard him saying anything he three times denied that he had ever heard of Jesus.
 - (a) There are many explanations of the conversation, but clearly it has to do with Peter’s treachery and with bringing him back to a place in the story of the community that is charged with the mystery, so three times he is asked if he loves the Lord, and three times given a mission to shepherd or feed them. This



The Miraculous Draught of Fishes by Raphael, 1515

concludes with a prediction of Simon's death, but we notice that at the end of it Jesus says, "follow me," so he is in there as a disciple.

- 4) Peter has a question about the Beloved Disciple, from which scholars deduce that he has indeed gone to his reward, and that this may have been a problem for the community.
- Finally we get to the end of our journey into the mystery, and here are the final lines—reflect on them, and ask, what do we now understand of the mystery? "This is the disciple who bears witness about these things and who has written these things, and we know that his witness is true. There are many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written down one by one I don't think that the whole world would hold the books that were written." It is a powerful ending to an extraordinary story.

Review Questions

1. Do you think that it is true to say that John's Gospel gives us four alternative endings, after the Resurrection?
2. In what ways does the ending of the Gospel bring the mystery to its climax?
3. Do you think that chapter 21 was originally intended to be part of the Gospel?

Lecture 25. 1, 2, and 3 John: The Deeper Meaning of the Gospel

Overview

These three very charming letters are dealt with quite naturally after the Gospel of John. Many people think that they come from the same author. They certainly breathe the same air as the fourth Gospel. One possible explanation of their origin is that 1 John came after the gospel and was meant to exclude certain readings of it, particularly anything that might suggest that Jesus only *seemed* to be human—what is technically known as “Docetism.” Some people think that 2 John may have been an accompanying note for 1 John, but the evidence for this is a bit vague, and we might be best to admit that we really don’t know.

I. 2 and 3 John

- We will begin with 2 and 3 John, which are good examples of the kind of letters that the ancients sent to each other, with opening greetings, rejoicing, the main body, and concluding greetings.
 - 1) 2 John is addressed to “the elect lady and her children (2 John 1:1),” which some scholars think may have been a code of some kind, possibly to steer clear of imperial examination of the correspondence.
 - 2) 3 John is addressed to Gaius; this name belonged to the person who had the biggest house in Corinth, where the Christians in that city used to meet.
- In both letters, the problem seems to be that there are divisions in the church.
 - 1) But it is not only that, for “deceivers have come in the world” who “do not admit that Jesus Christ is coming in the flesh—that one is the deceiver and the anti-Christ” (2 John 1:7), and they are also described as “going ahead and not remaining in the teaching of Christ” (2 John 1:9).
 - (a) Sanctions are invoked, so that if anyone comes “and does not carry this teaching,” then the elect lady is not to greet them (2 John 1:10-11).
 - (b) There is also a certain reluctance, possibly because letters are insecure, on the writer’s part to commit himself (or, just possibly, herself) to paper, but he says, “I am hoping to come to you and speak face to face, so that our joy may be fulfilled” (2 John 12). In order to really understand what is going on here we need to be “the elect lady” ourselves. As is sometimes said of the letters of St. Paul, we are hearing only one side of the conversation.
 - 2) 3 John is perhaps a bit less encrypted, assuming that “Gaius” is not also a coded symbol. Here the problem seems to be the very unchristian one of refusal of hospitality (3 John 1:10). There is someone called Diotrephes who “likes being Number 1,” and who refuses to acknowledge the author’s authority.

- 3) Someone called Demetrius, on the other hand, who is likewise unknown to us, has credentials from “everybody, and from Truth itself,” and, indeed, from our author. One thing we can take away from our reading of these letters is that divisions are not a recent invention in the Church.

II. 1 John

- 1 John is a beautiful letter, and clearly from the same stable as the fourth Gospel. It is not a proper letter, and it is very hard to see who the addressees might be, except that they are a community with “young men...fathers...children” (1 John 1:12-13). As with 2 and 3 John, there are opponents in view, and they are categorized as “liars,” but also as those who fail to keep Jesus’ commandments: “anyone who says, ‘I know him’ and fails to keep his commandments is a liar; and the Truth is not in that person” (1 John 2:4). In 2:22 it becomes a little bit more specific: “Who is the liar, except the one who denies that Jesus is the Messiah. Such a person is ‘antichrist,’ who denies both Father and Son. Anyone who denies the Son does not have the Father either; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also.”
 - 1) The writer is addressing a theological question about the identity of Jesus.
 - 2) There is another feature of these “liars,” their attitude to fellow Christians: “If anyone says ‘I love God’ and hates their fellow Christian is a liar; for anyone who does not love their fellow-Christian whom they have seen, is quite unable to love the God whom they have not seen.”
- It is not always easy to follow the structure of 1 John, but we can see that the author stresses the importance of love, the importance of faith, and the humanity of Jesus (1:7; 2:2), and that this letter has a clear relationship to John’s gospel.
 - 1) In a sense, the electric introduction of 1 John gives you the whole of this document. One thing that you cannot miss is that it echoes the Gospel of John: “in the beginning,” which takes us back to the prologue of the fourth gospel and to Genesis 1.
 - 2) Many of the other words in these verses are familiar in the Gospel of John: “hear,” “see,” “life,” “reveal,” “witness,” and “announce.” It also offers a sequence that may explain what the writer thinks he is doing, and which also echoes what the fourth Gospel is doing: first “reveal,” then “see,” then “bear witness,” and finally “announce to you,” indicating a process that never stops, until the last person reads the last word of the text.
- Once you start to look for the basic structure of the letter, it falls apart; and if you look at the various scholarly writings on the subject, you will find many different structures confidently indicated in the literature.



Christ with Thorns by Carl Heinrich Bloch, 19th c.

- 1) The author starts to work out the implications of the revelation that we are talking about. In 1:5-10, the revelation is expressed, in language that we recognize from the fourth Gospel, as “light” not “darkness,” but also the reality of sin, and the importance of Jesus’ blood.
- 2) In the next section (2:1-8), the author picks up another important theme from John’s Gospel, that of the Paraclete, although here it is Jesus, not the Spirit, who is the Paraclete. We are told that our task is to keep his commandments or “word.” This is the new commandment, which is also old: that we love the “brothers and sisters.”
- 3) At 2:12-14 the author addresses all the members of the community. In the following verses, 15-17, we pick up another theme from the Gospel, namely the “world,” which stands in enmity to God’s project. This is then followed by warnings about “antichrists,” apparently ex-members of the community, who denied that Jesus is the Messiah.
- 4) The deepest message of the text is that Christians are to “love one another,” and the corollary, that we should expect the world’s hatred.
- 5) After that, in 3:19-24 we are exhorted to another Johannine value, that of Truth, to make sure that our hearts do not condemn us. But that cannot be done unless we are open to spiritual influences and recognize that they are ambiguous. The test is this: do they confess that Jesus came in the flesh? Do they lead us to love one another? Are they signs of the presence of God?
- 6) So we near the end (5:1-12) with the assertion that Jesus is Messiah, so that, once again, we are to love God and the children of God, so as to win victory over the world. Then we have the slightly baffling reference to the evidence, Spirit, water, and blood.
- 7) Then, finally, we are at the end (5:13-21) with the very Johannine themes of eternal life and concern for the brothers and sisters. The last words of the 1 John are “Children—steer clear of the idols.” What are the idols? They are any of those unrealities with which we attempt to distract ourselves from our deepest reality, which is God.

Review Questions

1. Do you feel comfortable with the suggested refusal of hospitality to spiritual opponents within the community?
2. Can you describe 1 John's attitude toward Jesus?
3. Do you find it interesting to know that there were such strong disagreements in the early Church?

Lecture 26. The Letter to the Hebrews: A Great Theologian Talks about Jesus

Overview

It is only fair to warn you that the Letter to the Hebrews is probably the most difficult document of the entire New Testament, but it is important not to get put off by this, because it really is worth reading. I shall try and thread a way through the maze and not make it too repellently obscure. Even though many unanswered questions about the letter remain, I want to suggest to you that the main message of this remarkable document is simply that “Jesus Christ is the real thing,” and that Christianity is the only serious option for an intelligent person.

I. Unanswered Questions

- There is a lot that we simply do not know about this remarkable document:
 - 1) Who wrote it: many people have thought it was by Paul, and other names suggested, of those we know in the New Testament, have included Apollos, Barnabas, Silvanus, and Priscilla.
 - 2) When it was written: the key question is whether it was written before or after the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. Perfectly good and competent scholars have taken different sides on the question.
 - 3) Who it was written to: it was given the title of “To The Hebrews,” probably some time in the second century, and that may simply have been a guess, based on the kind of material that we find in it. Some people actually argue that the intended audience was pagan rather than Jewish, because “Hebrews” are never mentioned in the text, and because at 6:1-2 it tells the hearers to have “faith in God...in the Resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgement,” which you would probably not need to say to a Jewish audience.
 - 4) Where it was written: there is a reference at 13:24 to “those from Italy,” which might mean that the letter was written in that country, but it could equally mean that it was written somewhere else where there were émigrés from Italy.

II. The Message of the Letter to the Hebrews

- There are two words from the beginning in particular that you might like to reflect on: “reflection” and “stamp.”
 - 1) A “reflection” makes it easier to understand God, but it is still possible to say that if you want to know what God is like, then look at Jesus.

- Then the next thing that our gifted theologian does is try to offer various ways of thinking about Jesus. You can imagine a Jewish theologian saying to him, “Ah! So you mean that Jesus is like an angel, then?”
 - 1) That is the argument that takes him from 1:4–2:9, and he does it with some skill, making use of scriptural texts to distinguish what it says about angels: “[God] makes his angels spirits/winds and his servants flames of fire.” To make it clear that they are inferior to Jesus, the author quotes Psalm 45 and says that it is addressed to Jesus: “To the Son ‘Your throne, O God is for ever and ever.’”
 - 2) The author quotes Psalm 8 and argues that “Son of Man” here must refer to Jesus, and then continues the quotation “you made him for a short time lower than the angels.” So we are talking here about what John’s Gospel refers to as “incarnation,” “the word made flesh and pitched its tent among us.” Then, triumphantly, he finishes the quotation: “with glory and honour you crowned him, you put everything under his feet.”



An Angel Comforting Jesus Before His Arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane by Carl Heinrich Bloch, 1873

- (a) Jesus started higher than the angels, took on the lower, human existence, and then resumed his previous exalted status.

III. Both Human Being and High Priest

- This argument allows our author to explore two other themes.
 - 1) First, that Jesus is very much, and very importantly, a human being, utterly identified with the “brothers and sisters.”
 - 2) Secondly, the author has now introduced what in some ways is his most important category for Jesus, that of High Priest.
- Jesus both is and is not a High Priest according to Hebrews. If he is, it is because he makes a link between God and humanity, but if he is not, that is because the all-too-human High Priests in the Temple could not do for worshippers what Jesus has been able to do.

IV. Moses

- Moses is something of a test for religious figures within Judaism, and in Matthew's and John's Gospels, Jesus is often compared with Moses. So it is not surprising that Hebrews considers the question: if Jesus is superior to the angels, how does he stand with regard to Moses?
 - 1) The answer, once again by way of skillfully selected quotations from Scripture, is that Moses is a "servant," or perhaps a "slave," in his house, whereas Christ is a "Son" over the house that God created.
- The next stage of his argument uses Psalm 95, which will run through a good deal of chapters 3 and 4. Here, it seems the author is using it to make sure that his audience is paying *good attention*: "Today, if you listen to his voice, don't harden your hearts." The point here is that the children of Israel did precisely that in the desert, and we are being warned not to repeat their failure. But our author is a very sophisticated operator, and he is doing more than just telling us to stay awake, for the psalm goes on to say that the Israelites "shall never enter his rest," for which they and we are destined, and to which the Son is leading us.
 - 1) In addition, however, in a brilliant theological coup, he links that "rest" with the same word that is used at Genesis 2:2, which speaks about God "resting on the seventh day, from all his works." That is the rest to which we are invited, the rest to which Moses was unable to lead them; but it was not just Moses, but his appointed successor, who was unable to lead them into their rest, when they reached the Promised Land. And who was this successor? We call him "Joshua," but in Greek and Hebrew it is the same word as we use for the "Son," namely "Jesus."



Moses Shown the Promised Land by Benjamin West, 1801

V. God and Humanity

- Now we come to the theological coup de grace. Our author continues his meditation on the idea of Jesus the High. The point of a priest, of course, is the link between humanity and our utterly remote and transcendent God.
 - 1) This theme is developed at 3:1, where Jesus is described as the "Apostle and High Priest of our profession."
 - 2) Then at the end of chapter 4, he gets really down to business, and in verse 14 Jesus is described as "the great High Priest who has gone through the heavens." Jesus represents our point of entry into the inaccessible. However, this is not a High Priest who demands perfection of us, but who is "able to feel for our weaknesses, because he has been tempted in exactly the same way, but without sinning" (Hebrews 4:16).

- Then he gets down to business, and makes the point that you have to be called to priesthood, quoting Psalm 2. Then he quotes Psalm 110 with the slightly mysterious remark, “You are a priest for ever, according to the order of Melchisedek,” which starts another theme that is intended to take us deeper into the mystery of Jesus.
- One of the problems with ordinary High Priests is that, unlike Jesus, they are sinners, and have to offer sacrifice for their own sinfulness (5:3), and they die. And at 7:26-28, our author shows how Jesus triumphs over them in these two respects.
- And there are two more important points about the idea of Jesus as High Priest.
 - 1) The first is the question of what Jesus has done for us: he has given us *access* into the sanctuary. At 10:19, the effect of this remarkable High Priest is described as giving us “confidence” to enter the Holy of Holies; and here he uses a word that the early Christians often employed to describe what God in Christ had given them. Literally it means the “ability to say anything,” and perhaps the nearest equivalent is the Yiddish word “*hutzpah*.” That is what Jesus the High Priest has done for us.
 - 1) But there is another aspect of Jesus’ priesthood, one that has already been hinted at, namely his sympathy with the weak, which we saw at 4:15 and 5:2. This is dramatically expressed at 13:11-13, where the argument goes in three stages:
 - (a) First, the author reminds us that the corpses of animals sacrificed for sin offerings are to be “burnt outside the camp,” according to Leviticus.
 - (b) Secondly, and because of this “Jesus dies outside the gate, in order to make the people holy through his own blood.”
 - (c) Thirdly, therefore, we are invited to “go out to Jesus, bearing his reproach, for we have no abiding city here, but are looking for the one that is to come.”

VI. Exhortation

- In the Letter to the Hebrews, we find not just “theological argument,” but what scholars call “exhortation,” encouraging us to live in a particular way. And, unlike most preachers, he talks to himself as much as to the objects of his preaching.
- We get the strong sense here of the urgency of our author’s appeal. In the final chapter they are exhorted to stick to love of the brothers and sisters, hospitality to strangers, looking after prisoners and those who are abused, and a strict view of the sanctity of marriage (13:1-5). Not only that, but “the way of going on must not be money-grubbing, but content with what we have”; and they have to pay attention to their leaders (13:7-9), and “not get carried away by sophisticated external teachings.” And, finally, they are told, “pray for us, for we are convinced that we have a clean conscience, wanting to live morally in every respect.” So we are all in it together, and this difficult teaching is profoundly relevant to living in the contemporary world.

Review Questions

1. Do you find Hebrews difficult to understand?
2. Does it help if you think of the message of the book as “Jesus, the Real Thing”?
3. Does the author of Hebrews do enough to show how his message is relevant to our time?

Lecture 27. 1 & 2 Peter: How to Live in the Church

Overview

Welcome now to two documents attributed to Peter, who seems to have exercised leadership in the early Church. Many scholars are doubtful about the possibility of a Galilean fisherman writing either letter. In this talk I should simply like to indicate to you what you might enjoy in reading these two documents, and how they might speak to you today. As you read, you might like to reflect on what the two letters might tell us about how to exercise leadership in the Church today. That is an issue that remains very topical indeed, and in recent years we have learnt to see and admire a new way of exercising authority in the See of Peter.

I. 1 Peter

- The letter is addressed to chosen strangers and sojourners who don't belong in society.
 - 1) There are instructions here on how to live in the present situation, which seems to be one of persecution or, at any rate, unpopularity.
 - 2) These basic themes speak to our day: the great joy of being Christian and the necessity of sharing in the Passion of Christ.
 - 3) The blessing in 1:3-16 speaks of the imperishable inheritance (4), of the salvation ready to be revealed (5), of the invitation to rejoice in suffering (6), and of the efforts of the prophets to find meaning in suffering (10).
- As always in the New Testament, notice how naturally the author expresses himself in Old Testament language, including the all-important command to be holy (16) and the contrast with idolatry (18-20). But this is a Christian document, so notice above all the centrality of God and Resurrection (21).



Christ Crowned with Thorns by Matthias Stom, ca. 1633–1639

- The letter continues with some exhortation about imitating Christ in his suffering, and therefore not worrying too much about persecution. So he writes: “if you suffer for good reason, then congratulations; but don’t be afraid with the fear of them, and don’t be disturbed” (3:14).
- 1) In chapter 4, the suffering is placed in context: “the end of everything has drawn near” (4:7), “so be serious and sober, so that you pray for everyone with an intense love for each other.”
- 2) There is a coherent understanding here of the place of suffering in the Christian life; it is not the worst thing that can happen to us.
- After a final and well-known exhortation (5:8-11) this encouraging letter comes to its conclusion (5:12-14), where we find the mention of Peter’s secretary Silvanus, a reference to “the elect lady in Babylon,” which is often code for Rome in the New Testament, so it may be the Roman Church.
- Lastly there are the accustomed greetings, such as you always find in the Pauline letters; this gives a sense of the intimacy of those early Christians one with another.

II. 2 Peter

- 2 Peter breathes a very different atmosphere from its predecessor. It reads more like a “Last Will and Testament.” It is odd in some ways; for one thing, in the address (1:1-2), Symeon, rather than Simon is a Semitic name. For another, although it follows the opening of 1 Peter, it is all a bit vague, with the reference to the “equal value faith,” which sounds a bit like a modern advertisement.
- The big issue that the author is dealing with is approached at 1:16-21, where we have Peter’s teaching on the return of Christ. This was a major issue in the New Testament world.
- 1) It was a common view among those early Christians that Jesus would come back soon, and bring it all to an end. The author seems to offer a warning (1:20) that “no scripture prophecy comes with its own interpretation,” which may be an indicator of what they had been getting up to on this issue. Then there is a hint that there may have been, or the author has been accused of uttering, fictitious stories.
- 2) In that connection, there is a clear reference to the Transfiguration (17-18), and that worries some people. If the author is writing in Peter’s name and pretending to be him, when in fact it was not, how does that coincide with it being “inspired truth”?
- There is some kind of link between 2 Peter and the Letter of Jude. There are three possible explanations for this: 2 Peter used Jude, Jude used 2 Peter, or they are both indebted to a common source.
- It is only in chapter 3 that we come to the real problem with which the letter is dealing. We learn that mockers were predicted in Scripture (2-3), and that there are plenty of them around in the time when this work is written.

- 1) We are given a hint of the form their mockery had taken: “Where is the promised second coming?” they clamour, “for ever since the fathers fell asleep, everything remains just the same as it was in the beginning of creation” (4). You might hear just such an objection today.
 - 2) The answer is as valid now as then: first, destruction has certainly been prophesied by God (5-7); and secondly, to speak of “delay” is a misreading of God’s understanding of time (9-10). Salvation is a matter of patience, which the mockers are lacking (15).
 - 3) We are given a perfectly sensible reminder (16) that Paul is difficult to interpret (16). It is not really part of the argument, but may have some interest to us in that it suggests that Paul’s collected letters may have been circulating by now.
- So the letter ends with a warning not to be unstable, and, as always in our New Testament, to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. That may be a good place at which to leave this remarkable letter.

Review Questions

1. What do you think is the main point of 1 Peter?
2. Is 2 Peter just about the delayed second coming, or is there something else going on?
3. What do these two documents tell us about our forefathers in the faith?

Lecture 28. The Letter of James: Sharp Social Commentary?

Overview

Welcome the Letter of James, an interesting and unusual document. We call it a letter, but it is really nothing of the kind once you get past the first verse. Some scholars call it a “synagogue homily.” The assumption is that the author is, or is claiming to be, James the brother of the Lord, who was a witness of the Resurrection (mentioned at 1 Corinthians 15:7), and leader of the Jerusalem church in Acts of the Apostles. He is mentioned at the council where the Church decided what to demand of Gentiles who wanted to become Christians: should they be forced to be circumcised and to observe the Jewish law, for example about eating kosher food and keeping Jewish festivals. At the end of the debate, evidently having listened carefully to the arguments, James weighs in with a very balanced, moderate solution. Now we cannot be sure whether Luke got this right, but the episode, along with the existence of our letter, testifies to James’ importance in the early Church. It was the same James whom Paul mentions at Galatians 1:19, and 2:9, 12, and who recognized Paul’s mission to the Gentiles.

I. The Author

- Was it the same James? We saw with the letters ascribed to Peter that the standard of their Greek posed a problem for his being a Galilean fisherman, and the same would be true for the son of a carpenter from Nazareth. There is always the possibility, as with the letters of Peter, that he handed his material over to an educated Greek scribe.
- It must be said that this letter was not immediately accepted into the canon; it is not mentioned before the time of Origen, who definitely regards it as Scripture.
 - 1) A century later, Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea regards it as “disputed,” though he was inclined to accept it.
 - 2) Since then there have been no disputes until you get to the sixteenth century, when Martin Luther was inclined to regard it as “a letter of straw,” a verdict he subsequently moderated; but that was because his Catholic opponents made a good deal of it because of what they understood to be James’ attitude to “justification by faith,” an idea of immense importance to Luther, and one or two other features of the letter. To both Luther and those who disagreed with his Catholic opponents, this looked like what came to be called, disparagingly, of course, “early Catholicism.”

II. James Chapter 1

- James starts by warning his audience not to get too worried if temptations beset them; indeed, surprisingly enough, they are to greet them with “joy.” At verse 9 he starts on the theme of “social justice,” which is one of the reasons why the Letter of James has over the last couple of decades become a bit more widely accepted.

- At 1:9-11, he insists on the fundamental equality of those Christians who are of lower social status with those who are higher up. They are to boast of exactly what you would not expect, the lower classes of their “high status” (as Christians) and the other ones of their “low standing,” with a quotation from Isaiah thrown in to make the point that status is “as the flower of the field.” Then at verse 12 we go back to the idea of “testing” or “temptation,” which is not to be regarded as coming from God, since God can only give us what is good.



Martin Luther by Lucas Cranach the Elder, 1529

- Then he introduces another theme, about being “quick to listen, slow to speak,” which later he will exploit in what he says about the “tongue.” He is particularly warning here against anger, which does not, he says, “accomplish God’s righteousness.”
- Here he starts another theme that Luther found unacceptable in his own context, that of righteousness. It is nowadays generally accepted that James is not making a point against what Paul wrote in Galatians and Romans about the inadequacy of “deeds” or “works” to bring about our good standing before God. James is simply making the point that if you are in good standing before God, it will be evident from the way that you live and the things that you do.

III. Social Satire

- The sharp social satire in chapter 2 should still make us feel uncomfortable today.
- In a very lively illustration about the snobbery of Church people, he imagines someone joining the assembly “with gold rings and a smart suit” and someone else, a destitute person “with shabby clothes” (2:2-3), and the very different treatment that they are likely to receive from us. We should notice how what James says echoes the gospel. God has chosen “the destitute of the world, who are rich in faith, and are heirs of the kingdom he has promised to those who love him.” We are supposed to “love our neighbour as ourselves” (2:8). Like Paul (Galatians 3:10), James insists that if you want to operate on the basis of the Law, you must keep the whole lot (2:10-13); and, as in the Son of Man, we have to show mercy, or we shall not receive mercy.

2) Nor does the social justice theme go away; we have once more to grin shamefacedly as we hear the voice of the do-gooder that we are all capable of being, who says to a fellow Christian who has nothing to wear or to eat or drink, “Go in peace; keep warm, and have a good meal,” and then doesn’t give them what the body needs.

- Then, once again, he comes back to the question of “faith” and “works.” Then, like St Paul, he continues the argument on the basis of what Abraham did, referring to his willingness to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac in Genesis 22. He uses the same quotation as Paul from Genesis 15:6 to make the point that Abraham’s faith meant not just believing but also doing things.



Abraham Sacrificing Isaac by Laurent de La Hire, 1650

1) Is James specifically targeting Paul’s teaching here? Or that of some of Paul’s successors? Paul was as clear as James about the importance of faith actually leading to particular ways of behaviour, and was deeply critical of Christians who behaved in ways contrary to the gospel. What Paul is opposed to is anything that says that all you need to do is fulfill the commands of the Law. James produces the very striking example of “the prostitute Rahab” (2:25) as someone who was “justified by works.” The real point is the distinction between life and death: religious faith that makes no difference to the way we operate, especially with regard to the poor, is a faith that is dead, and both Paul and James want a faith that is visibly alive.

- Then the author goes on to the question of the “tongue” with some lively exhortation on the damage that the uncontrolled tongue can do. Once again, we find ourselves challenged to our embarrassment, and this continues as he speaks of those who think that they are wise or learned (3:13-18).
- Then, with no particularly discernible structure, James goes on to diagnose the fighting to which human beings are especially prone, and how the desires that underlie the evils of contemporary society all stem from not being properly in touch with God.

IV. Social Justice and Exhortation

- The final chapter begins with some more emphasis on the theme of social justice: 5:1-5, which has lost none of its power. Again, we are supposed to feel uncomfortable as James addresses us.
- Next comes the exhortation to patience, that great and essential Christian virtue: 5:7-11, another echo of the Sermon on the Mount (5:12), and encouragement to pray over the sick and anoint them, which is the start of an ancient tradition in the Church (5:13-15) and to confession of sins, which is another (5:16), to prayer, without which Christianity is no good at all (5:17-18); and an encouragement to look after those who drift away (5:19-20), with which the letter ends rather abruptly.

- So that is this lively and neglected letter. There are just two further points that I should like to draw to your attention.
 - 1) James' lively illustrations.
 - 2) The very sharp critique of the social status quo.

Review Questions

1. Do you think that the Letter of James is arguing with Paul or Paul's successors about the idea of justification by faith?
2. What do you make of James' social satire? Do you think it has something to say to us today?
3. What do you think is the main point of this letter?

Lecture 29.

Acts of the Apostles, Part I: The Gospel of the Holy Spirit

Overview

The next volume in our library that we shall be looking at is called Acts of the Apostles; it has been known by this name since at least second century. It is made up of the acts of Peter in the first half and Paul in the second half, with cameo appearances from Stephen, Philip, and Barnabas. More accurately, we should call it the “Acts of the Holy Spirit.” It is the story of the triumphant onrushing of the powerful force that the early Church knew under the title of Holy Spirit, that force that simply cannot be stopped, whatever obstacles human beings might throw in its way. Indeed the very last word of Acts is, typically, a Greek word that means, “without being stopped,” and that is what happens in Acts.

I. Overview

- Four points about Acts of the Apostles in general:
 - 1) The first is that “Luke” makes a deliberate link with the Gospel of Luke.
 - (a) Each of them has an account, slightly different in each case, of Jesus’ ascension into heaven.
 - (b) Another link is provided by the fact that the disciples in both cases return to Jerusalem after the Ascension.
 - (c) Finally, there is a link in the position of the Temple. Luke’s gospel started in the Temple and ended there. Acts also starts in the Temple, and the story keeps returning to it until finally at 21:30, the Temple doors are slammed shut behind Paul at the moment of his arrest, as they make an attempt on his life.
 - 2) The second point is closely linked to the first. Acts continues the story of the life of Jesus. In both volumes, the Spirit is unmistakably at work. In both volumes the heroes (Jesus and his successors in the early Church) are imprisoned and flogged, and they perform miraculous healings. In both their innocence is declared by Roman imperial authorities. In both volumes there is an enormous role for prayer. Early on in both we witness the descent of the Holy Spirit in bodily form, at Jesus’ baptism in Luke 3:22, and at Pentecost in Acts 2:2-4. In both cases, the representatives of the force for good find themselves doing battle with the Jewish religious leaders; and also there is, of course, a parallel drawn between the imprisonment of John the Baptist (Luke 3:19-20) and the arrest and murder of Stephen (Acts 6:8-15; 7:54-8:1).



Pentecost by Jean II Restout, 1732

- 3) The third point for us to observe is that there are about twenty-four speeches in Acts, which seem to function as the author's commentary on the action that is happening. That is to say that it does not so much matter to Luke whether the speeches were actually delivered in the way that he suggests. It is more a matter of ancient historians being allowed a certain freedom.
- 4) Then the fourth linking point to notice is that both works are rewritten as journeys. This story is nothing other than the story of God. The same story that is told in both volumes, except in Acts it has become that much clearer that the journey is driven by the Holy Spirit, "to Judea and Samaria" and then "the ends of the earth." In another sense, the journey reaches its end in Rome, where Paul arrives, under arrest, but free to hold conversation with all who visit him, about the Kingdom of God, and "without being stopped."

II. Outline

- With all that in mind, what I now propose to do is to take you through the broad outline of Acts of the Apostles.
- 1) Absolutely central to a proper understanding of the text is that it works itself out precisely in the absence of Jesus and with the driving presence of the Holy Spirit. It is the story of the Church as it is today.
 - (a) Included in that story is the fact that the disciples are not all that bright. But the story of these dumb disciples is also our story. What they have to learn to do, and what we have to learn to do, is to listen prayerfully in order to compensate for our dumbness.
 - (b) Before anything else can happen in the narrative, they have to give themselves over to prayer, along with the women.

- The first episode is to restore the number 12, which has been reduced to 11 with the suicide of Judas. They have now learned to trust in God, and so after prayer they cast lots and Matthias is counted with the eleven. One point to notice here is that Matthias is never heard of again: the main point is that after prayer the number should be restored, for God is in charge.
- That becomes clearer in the next and highly dramatic episode, the story of Pentecost and the coming of the Spirit in noisy and burning mode. The effect of the Spirit is a kind of foreshadowing of the history of the Church, the speaking of the “great things of God” in every known language and to all the regions under the sun.
- After Peter’s powerful speech on the day, explaining what is happening to the stunned inhabitants of Jerusalem (2:14-36), Luke starts to paint a picture of what life was like in this newly Spirit-filled Church; he manages this by way of what are known as “Lucan summaries,” where with a broad brush he deftly paints a picture of what it was like to be Church in those early days: listening to the teaching of the apostles, praying, and sharing Eucharist together. In addition they held everything in common, met regularly in the Temple and in private houses. It is a wonderful vision, even if it is not precisely a portrait of the Church as it was at any particular time in its history (2:42-47).
- Now at last the Church starts to act. The Church cannot simply *do* something until it has prayed and reflected before the Lord. A beggar is looking to the Church, in the shape of Peter and John, for alms but instead, he is healed and goes jumping around the Temple (3:3-10). That needs some explanation, of course, and explanation duly comes, in the shape of yet another speech from Peter.
 - 1) The answer is, first, that this miracle has nothing to do with Peter and John, but through faith in the name of Jesus (3:16).
 - 2) Second, this is all part of the old story of God, and was what the prophets had predicted.
- We are not, however, to expect that things are going to be easy for the infant Church (or in our contemporary life as people of the Church).
 - 1) Peter and John are arrested, mainly, it seems, because they have been preaching the Resurrection of Jesus.
 - (a) Once again Peter makes a speech, and once again the miracle is placed where it belongs, not with the apostles, but (4:10) “in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazorean, whom you people crucified, whom God raised from the dead.” That is the heart of the matter in Acts: it is the story of what God did in Jesus. The authorities can think of nothing better to do by way of riposte than warn them and let them go. Living as Church is uncomfortable at times, but it is the only way for us to live.
 - 2) The response of the community at large (4:23-31) is to pray, and the effect is an earthquake, a sign of the presence of the Spirit.
- Then, once again, Luke offers us one of his summaries, and we get this spectacular picture of the Church as it should be.

- Just in case you were starting to think that it was all different then, Luke now gives us the scandalous story of Ananias and his wife Sapphira, a scene of dark comedy, which ends up with capital punishment for the husband and wife for the sin of “lying to the Holy Spirit” (5:1-11).
 - Then, in case we should get too depressed by this tale of falsehood and death, Luke offers another of his charming summaries (5:12-16), which, inevitably, is only the prelude to the apostles being arrested again. But you cannot stop the Holy Spirit, and so angel of the Lord effortlessly opens the prison doors, and the apostles go and teach in the Temple.
- 1) Once again they are arrested and interrogated, and once again the authorities are blamed for Jesus’ death, but, once again, the apostles insist on the central fact that “God has raised Jesus from the dead” (5:30).

III. Problems for the Early Church

- And now to a complex series of events that could have destroyed the infant Church, but actually led to its growth.
- 1) It starts with racial and religious tension in the early Church, with Greek-speaking widows getting neglected at the food bank. To cope with the tension, the apostles decide to appoint seven “deacons” to “wait at table.” That seems to have solved the problem, since Luke tells us that “the word of God was continuing to grow.” We only hear of two of them ever again, namely Stephen and Philip, and neither of them is waiting at table. Stephen turns out to be a brilliant preacher, presumably in Greek, and in consequence gets accused of agitating against Moses and against God and against the Temple and the Torah. Then Stephen embarks on what turns out to be his final speech (7:1-53).
 - 2) The effect of the speech is to enrage his hearers, mainly, it seems, because they could not think of an answer. He is therefore stoned to death, having been granted a vision of Jesus “standing at the right hand of God” (7:56). As he dies he prays, as the Church must always pray, “Lord Jesus, receive my Spirit” (7:59).
 - 3) At the end we learn that “Saul,” is looking after the clothes of those who stoned him, and that he consented to the killing. Then we discover that persecution breaks out that scatters the Church throughout Judea and Samaria.



The Stoning of St. Stephen by Annibale Carracci, 1604

Review Questions

1. What do you make of the picture that Luke paints in the early chapters of Acts?
2. Do you sense the presence of the Holy Spirit in this extraordinary story?
3. What do you think Acts might have to say to the contemporary Church?

Lecture 30. Acts of the Apostles, Part II: The Word Spreads to the Gentiles

Overview

In the previous talk, we left the story of Acts at a critical moment: Stephen was dead, someone called “Saul” helped in the killing, and the Church is scattered to Judea and Samaria. We leave Saul endeavouring to destroy the Church, Christians piously burying Stephen, and the gospel scattered into Samaria (8:1-4). We should not be surprised, but the disaster turns into triumph, for in Samaria Philip finds a fertile place for preaching the gospel of Christ, and for preaching, with the characteristically Lucan result that “there was great joy in that city.” If we were starting to worry about what might happen to the future of the Church, we should recall that the Holy Spirit is in charge.

I. Saul’s Conversion

- Saul, whom we last saw doing his best to destroy the Church, is off to Damascus with a commission to bring back any Christians of either gender in fetters. It does not work out quite that way, however, for instead he encounters Jesus.
 - 1) He suffers a “light from the sky” and a voice that uttered the challenge, “Saoul, Saoul—why are you persecuting me?” Saul responds, “Who are you, Lord?” and is told, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” That is to say that Jesus and his Church are in some sense identical.
 - 2) Saul is blinded, and goes fasting to Damascus, and his life is forever changed. Then he is brought to another Christian, called Ananias, who has been forewarned of what was coming. Ananias overcomes his reluctance (it is what Jesus wants that counts), and lays his hands on Saul, for him to regain his sight, and be filled with the Holy Spirit.
- Saul starts proclaiming that Jesus is “the Son of God.” And his argumentation is so good that he confounds all his opponents. The gospel continues to get preached, over an ever-wider range of territory.



Conversion on the Way to Damascus by Caravaggio, ca. 1600–1601

- Then, however, if he is to go any further, he has to face those in Jerusalem whom he used to persecute. Not surprisingly they are far from enthusiastic about him, but, once Barnabas intervenes, Saul is accepted and preaches the gospel with the best of them, “in the name of the Lord.” However, as we saw with Stephen, successful preaching can be a death sentence, and when the Greek-speaking Jews debate with him, it all ends in attempted murder.
- So, once again the gospel is on the move, as Saul goes first to the port city of Caesarea, and then back home to Tarsus. When the Holy Spirit is driving the narrative, setbacks turn into successes.

II. Peter’s Vision

- With Saul now offstage, the attention turns back to Peter.
 - 1) The gospel is spreading further and further afield, and at last something happens that changes the story fundamentally, for Peter is brought face to face with a Gentile. This man, Cornelius, meets an angel, who persuades him to send for Simon Peter.
 - 2) Peter has a powerful vision to teach him that he does not need to worry any longer about the Levitical rules for purity. This vision takes the form of a sheet lowered to the ground, containing all kinds of animals, not just those it was permissible to eat. Peter is persuaded, three times, in this vision, and then the centurion’s emissaries arrive. Peter, significantly, gives them hospitality, so the vision has taught him something, and returns with the emissaries to Cornelius in Caesarea.
 - 3) This marks an extraordinary turn in the narrative, for it is Peter, of all people, who is opening the gospel to non-Jews. So he preaches a little sermon about Jesus and his gospel, and how “all the prophets bear witness to him, for everyone who believes in him to receive forgiveness of sins through his name.” The Holy Spirit is turning the gospel outwards to the whole of humanity.
- That insight is then dramatically proved by the fact that the same Holy Spirit comes upon the assembled Gentiles, and Peter baptizes them and accepts their hospitality.



Peter’s Vision of a Sheet with Animals by Domenico Fetti, ca. 1619

- Meanwhile the news has reached Jerusalem, and Jewish Christians are not at all pleased at this turn of events, so Peter tells the story of his vision and how he had remembered what Jesus had said to them. The point is that God and his Holy Spirit are at work here, and are not to be contradicted. This convinces his Jewish colleagues, and we know that the gospel is going to spread wider.

III. The Gospel Spreads

- Nothing can stop the gospel, and Luke reminds us of this in the next episode.
 - 1) Because the Holy Spirit is in charge, the gospel has continued to spread, as Luke reminds us: (11:19) “Those who had been scattered as a result of the trouble that arose because of Stephen got through as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch.”
 - 2) At this stage, and despite Peter’s example, he writes that they “were giving the message to nobody except Jews.” But you cannot stop the Holy Spirit, for in the very next verse we hear that some of them were Cypriots and people from Cyrene: so the gospel has now moved way beyond its origins in Galilee and Judea, down to the fertile plain, and to the islands of the Mediterranean, and even as far as North Africa and Asia Minor.
- Jerusalem has to get involved and Barnabas is sent as a delegation to check that all is in order in Antioch, and “when Barnabas got there, and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced, and encouraged them all to remain in firmness of heart for the Lord.” Then Barnabas goes on to Tarsus, where we last saw Saul, and brought him to Antioch. Antioch was a thoroughly cosmopolitan city, and inevitably, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the gospel will be preached much more widely there.
 - 1) In the meantime, however, all is not well in Jerusalem, for Herod has had James the son of Zebedee executed, and tries something of the same on Peter, and puts him in prison. Peter is set free by an angel (12:7-10), and rejoins his fellow Christians who are praying for him.
 - 2) This comes out in another way when at the end of the same chapter Herod is struck down, and eaten by worms, and dies. Luke makes no comment except to invoke a striking contrast in the very next verse after reporting the tyrant’s demise: “And the word of God was growing and multiplying.”
- At this stage, the infant Church is positively Catholic in its range of nationalities.

IV. Paul’s Mission

- Saul and Barnabas set off on a mission, across the Mediterranean to Cyprus, where Saul, who is suddenly also named “Paul,” wins a battle of magic with the sorcerer Elymas. Then it is off to the other Antioch, the one in Pisidia, where they enter the synagogue on the Sabbath, and Paul (we shall not henceforth know him by that other name) is invited to speak; and we listen attentively to this first performance. He gives an account of the history of Israel, and seeks to demonstrate that Jesus is the fulfillment of that history, after the Jerusalemites and their leaders had put him to death, and God had raised him from the dead. This first speech is a spectacular success, and Paul is invited back the following week; in the meantime he makes a good many converts among Jews and proselytes.

- In Lystra, they heal a crippled man, and suddenly the gospel is being preached to non-Jews, who decide that the two missionaries are in fact pagan deities. But the theme of resistance continues (14:19), and Jews from other cities stone them for blasphemy. But the Holy Spirit is in charge, and they are not killed, but stand up and get on with the mission. They go through several cities of Asia Minor, and finally get back to Antioch.
- You will not be surprised to learn that the triumphs of the Church do not mean, in either our day or Paul's, that we all live happily ever afterwards.
 - 1) There is trouble brewing in Jerusalem, and someone has been saying in Antioch that Christians have to be circumcised. This issue is one that could have torn the Church apart in its infancy. We are now in Acts chapter 15, and what is sometimes called the "Council of Jerusalem." They send Paul and Barnabas and others to plead their case in Jerusalem.
 - 2) Luke gives us a rough outline of the debate.
 - (a) We start with a report that "There arose from the party of the Pharisees who had come to faith," and we know what they are going to say: "they have to be circumcised." Then we listen, and watch for the movement of the Spirit.
 - (b) Peter makes a speech, describing his conversion to the Gentile mission, and arguing against putting obstacles in the way new converts.
 - (c) Paul and Barnabas then say their piece, though oddly Luke does not tell us what they actually said.
 - (d) Finally James, the leader of the Jerusalem church, makes his utterance: "stop troubling the Gentiles who are turning to God."

Review Questions

1. How do you think the Holy Spirit works in driving the narrative onward?
2. Why do you think that the gospel spread so powerfully?
3. What is the most striking episode for you in chapters 8 to 15 of Acts? What do you think is striking about it?

Lecture 31. Acts of the Apostles, Part III: To the Ends of the Earth

Overview

What have we seen so far in Acts? The first seven chapters gave us a powerful picture of the situation in Jerusalem, with the Holy Spirit encouraging the apostles to keep going, despite all obstacles and persecution, even through death and corporal punishment. In chapters 8 to 15, we saw how the story took a new turn, unexpectedly, but clearly under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, going out to the Gentiles with an ever-wider geographical sweep. It is the drama of the early Church and of our contemporary Church, for that matter.

I. Imprisonment

- Judea and Samaria have been left behind, and we are on the way to the “ends of the earth.” After the Council of Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas are cleared to continue their policy of not asking too much of their Gentile converts. Paul refuses to have John-Mark with them, and now he is to work with Silas and Timothy.
- Now the Spirit takes a hand again, for Paul believes that they should continue preaching in Asia Minor, but the Spirit stops them (16:6-7) and directs them across the water to Greece, by way of Troas. For the first time the gospel comes to Europe, by way of Samothrace, Neapolis, and finally Philippi, where they meet with some success. The powerful and well-to-do Lydia more or less forces them to set up the church in her house. But, as often enough before, the triumph does not last long, and Paul and Silas are put in prison because they have exorcised a slave girl who had a spirit of divination, and accurately stated who they were.
- Prison cannot long detain them, and God sends an earthquake as Paul and Silas keep the other prisoners awake by singing hymns. None of them escapes, and the prison commandant is prevented from committing suicide, with the result that he and his entire family join the Jesus-movement. Paul then has a minor triumph over the Philippi magistrates by insisting, when offered his freedom, that they, who have submitted a Roman citizen to corporal punishment, should come in person to set him and Silas free (16:25-40).

II. The Road to Athens

- Then the journey continues westward, down the Via Egnatia to Thessalonica. There, once again, Paul preaches in the synagogue over three weeks, but, in the familiar pattern, there is reaction against him, which continues as far as Beroea, the next stop on the road (17:1-16).
- This negative reaction leads to another major step on the way. Paul arrives in Athens, the intellectual center of the ancient world, and there, after ecumenical dialogue with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, he is invited to preach in the Areopagus.

- 1) Now here we may feel that we are near to fulfilling Jesus' program, way back at 1:8 of being his witnesses "to the ends of the earth." If you can get the message to the best minds in the world, then you are halfway there. And Paul, according to Luke, now delivers a carefully crafted speech, which is intended to flatter the Athenians and to engage their culture by referring to a particular altar erected "To the Unknown God," and by quoting Greek philosophers; then he gets down to business by talking about God and about Jesus, described as "a man whom God set apart."



St. Paul Preaching in Athens by Raphael, 1515

- 2) All goes well until Paul makes the further claim that "God gave grounds for faith by raising this man from the dead." At that point, they roar with laughter, though a few are impressed, and Paul leaves Athens with his tail between his legs (18:16-34).

III. To the Ends of the Earth

- What looks like success turns out not to be at all, but the Spirit is at work. Paul trudges miserably South to Corinth. Later he was to tell the Corinthians that he arrived "in weakness and fear and much trembling" (1 Corinthians 2:3). Corinth could not be called a promising city for the preaching of the gospel, with a lively sex life, immense social divisions, and far too much money for its own good.
 - 1) Against all his expectations, however, it turned out to be one of his success stories, at least until they all started fighting. For there he met two Jewish Christians, Priscilla and Aquila, whom we know of from Paul's own letters, and who were tent makers like himself, and who formed the basis of the lively Christian community there.
 - 2) As we have seen before, Paul starts by preaching in the synagogue, arguing that Jesus the Messiah has come. He is then rejected and goes to preach to the Gentiles.
 - 3) There he meets with some considerable success. The gospel is spreading wider and wider, even to Gentiles, including upper-class Romans.
- Then Paul sets off back east, through Ephesus, where he does not stay long and at Caesarea arrives back in the Holy Land, then sets off on another tour of preaching, through Antioch and Galatia and Phrygia.
- Then he arrives back in Ephesus, and now we are in chapter 19 of Acts. Here he is very active, converting some disciples of John the Baptist (19:2-6) and giving them the baptism not of water but of the Holy Spirit. He also debates in the synagogue, with more success than hitherto, for three

whole months, until a failure to convince them persuades him to go into a Gentile philosophical school.

- Then Paul moves on to Greece once more, but has to escape a plot against his life and journey back to Jerusalem.
 - 1) In Miletus, he summons the leaders of the church at Ephesus, and delivers them a long farewell address (20:18-35), where he tells them that they will never see his face again, and exhorts them to keep the Church going. All he knows is that “the Holy Spirit testifies to me, in each city, that imprisonment and tribulation awaits me.” So the journey is not to be triumphant, except when we get to the very end.
- Nothing, however, is going to stop Paul, and he goes on with the journey, eventually reaching Tyre, the ancient city on the Mediterranean coast, and then the Holy Land, at Caesarea, where we encounter Philip once more, now equipped with four prophetic daughters.
- Another prophet called Agabus warns Paul against going to Jerusalem, but Paul remains unstoppable: “I am ready, not only to be imprisoned, but even to die in Jerusalem, for the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.”
 - 1) On arrival in Jerusalem, they are greeted with surprising enthusiasm by the brothers, and there is a meeting with James, which goes quite well, except that Paul and his party are warned that there is a problem, for some Jewish Christians have been told that “you are teaching rebellion against Moses, saying that all those who are Jewish by race are not to circumcise their sons, nor walk in the ways of Moses.”
 - 2) They suggest a device to make it clear that Paul is still following the ancestral ways, of taking four men into the Temple to do the right thing, and make it clear where Paul stands within Judaism. This group does not want to revoke the generous allowance for Gentiles, but they do regard it as important to insist on proper observance on the part of those who are born as Jews.
 - 3) The stratagem works for a while, but after seven days, some Jews from Asia recognize Paul’s presence in the Temple, and in a piece of religious hysteria allege that Paul is trying to defile the Temple. A riot follows, the Temple doors are slammed shut, and the Roman army rescues Paul.
 - 4) Then Paul establishes something of a relationship with the Roman “chiliarch,” something like a military tribune, by establishing that he speaks Greek, and then being permitted to address his fellow Jews in Aramaic (21:40).
 - 5) The speech goes very well. Paul tells the story of his encounter with Jesus. When he indicates that the Risen Jesus has sent him to preach to the Gentiles (22:21) chaos breaks out, and once again Paul is rescued by the Romans. Paul reveals to the centurion that he is a Roman citizen, and therefore should not be flogged. The chiliarch comes back into play and we discover that he had bought his citizenship, while Paul was actually born into it.
- So Paul is set free once more, and a meeting with the Sanhedrin is arranged.

- 1) The High Priest orders Paul to be struck on the mouth, and Paul calls him a “white-washed wall.” Paul exploits the division between Sadducees and Pharisees on the question of Resurrection, and makes it clear that he is on the Pharisee side.
- 2) Once again, Paul has to be rescued by the Romans. This happens twice, in fact, because some radical hotheads make an oath to kill Paul, and so he is escorted, with a huge bodyguard, to Caesarea by night, since that is where the procurator lives (23:24).

IV. Paul’s Trial

- The chiliarch writes a letter to Felix, the procurator, and a man who was close to Nero. Paul is then imprisoned to await trial, and his Jewish opponents, led by the High Priest come down to Caesarea some days later, and we are allowed to listen to the trial, in which Paul handles the charges with some skill and wit, so much so, that he is invited to perform before Felix and his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish. It turns out that Felix was hoping for a bribe from Paul, but as Paul does not do that sort of thing, he is returned to prison for two years. So suddenly the action is slowed down, and we wonder what the Holy Spirit is up to. That is resolved when Felix is replaced by a new governor, Festus, and Paul’s Jewish opponents once more press charges against him.
- Paul successfully defends himself and refuses the offer of a trial in Jerusalem by appealing to Caesar. So the journey towards Rome is resumed, with a brief pause for an encounter with King Agrippa, the grandson of Herod the Great, and his wife Bernice, who was Drusilla’s sister, and would later be mistress to the emperor Titus.
- Agrippa in effect finds Paul “Not Guilty.” For a third time we are given the account of Paul’s meeting with Jesus (26:2-23), but this descendant of Herod, at home in both Jewish and Roman culture, points out that since he has appealed to Caesar, that is where he must go.



Trial of the Apostle Paul by Nikolai Kornilievich Bodarevsky, 1875

- 1) The reader of Acts knows that this is where the Holy Spirit has been driving the narrative all this time. So that is where we are going, and that gives us an adventurous couple of chapters, which I recommend that you read on your own.

Review Questions

1. What is Luke's attitude toward Judaism? Toward Roman culture?
2. Is it true to say that the Holy Spirit is driving the narrative of Acts?
3. Does Acts have anything to say to us today?

Lecture 32. The Book of Revelation, Part I: Introduction

Overview

The Book of Revelation, the last document in our New Testament and therefore in our Bible, is an extraordinary piece of work, dramatic and mind boggling, with a vivid power of description even when the reader is not quite sure what is going on. Many readers are very often simply put-off by the extravagant imagery and what they regard as savage predictions about the end of the world. My task is to encourage you to read this extraordinary document, and indeed all the other twenty-six documents of the New Testament. What I am proposing to do is to take you through the text, see what we can make of it, and consider why you might find it appropriate to read it today.

I. Common Words

- There are several common words used in the Book of Revelation that can help us figure out how the document is to be understood:
 - 1) The title of the work is “an apocalypse,” which simply means, “uncovering” in Greek. Its Latin equivalent is “Revelation.” This is a technical term for a Jewish style of writing that often emerges in times of persecution. These documents, often called “apocalyptic,” generally report visions of the heavenly world, and sometimes with a heavenly guide to assist, go in for quite extraordinary imagery, and give the reader a glimpse of the heavenly world. All that and more is going on here, but that does not mean that we know what it is about.
 - 2) Besides “revelation” or “apocalypse,” another word that this document uses to describe itself is “prophecy.” Now it is important to get the meaning of this word properly understood—prophecy is not prediction, foretelling the future, but speaking on behalf of God. If you are looking for a timetable for the end of the world, you are not going to find it here. Instead, you will do better to see it as a vision of God’s view of the world, God’s comment on what believers are suffering.



Saint John the Evangelist on Patmos by Hieronymus Bosch, ca. 1489

- 3) Another word often used by this text of itself is the word “scroll.” This word is used five times, all in chapter 22, at the very end, so possibly we should not make too much of this. In the ancient world, the ability to write and read was not as common as it is said to be in our world today. For that reason alone there is power in the ability to make and to decipher intelligible marks on paper, a power that in this document may be said to offer encouragement to the persecuted Christians of Asia Minor to whom it seems to be addressed.
- 4) The document also understands itself as a kind of letter.

II. Seven Letters to Seven Churches

- In chapters 2 and 3, we find no less than seven letters to seven churches in Asia Minor (modern Turkey): Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.
- Now you may already know that the number 7, the number of perfection, is very important in the Book of Revelation, where we shall find, as well as our seven letters, seven stars, seven golden lampstands, seven seals, seven trumpets, seven thunders, and seven plagues. So you may find yourself thinking that the seven cities to which the letters are sent are purely fictional, vehicles of the author’s vision. But this is not the case; for one thing, as I have already indicated, the seven cities are real cities, linked by genuine Roman roads; and for another the various bits of information about the seven cities fit well enough with what we know about them from other sources.

III. John’s Vision

- We have already seen how it begins, and we looked at some of the implications of this for how we are supposed to read it. It is, we saw, from John. We gather that he is in exile on the tiny island of Patmos, “because of the word of God and the witness of Jesus.”
- Then our attention is focused sharply with a trumpet blast and a divine figure (“one like a son of man”), who describes himself (1:18) as “the first and the last and the Living One. And I was a corpse – and look! I am living for ages of ages.” It is clearly Jesus, but quite different from the Jesus who preached and taught in Galilee in the gospels.
- Then this apparition instructs John to convey the vision, which he now starts to do in the shape of the seven letters.
 - 1) They all have the same basic form: an address “to the angel of the church in...”
 - 2) Then there is a series of possible titles of Jesus (for example, “the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand,” or “the first and the last, who died but came to life”).
 - 3) This is then followed by an account of what that church has been up to, for weal and woe.
 - 4) Then comes a rebuke for what they have got wrong, and also some encouragement.
 - 5) Finally they are warned to hear what the Spirit says to the churches, and a promise is made to anyone who is victorious.

IV. The Heavenly Liturgy

- In chapters 4 and 5 we are invited to join the heavenly liturgy.
 - 1) The point of good liturgy is to enable us to plod on with a sense of where God is inviting us. Look at chapter 4, which starts with “a door opened in heaven,” and the visionary is invited, “come up here” which causes him to “be in the Spirit,” sometimes translated as “in a trance,” and then we are offered a vision: “Look! A throne in heaven, and on the throne One Sitting. And the One Sitting was like a vision, jasper and carnelian; and a rainbow around the throne like a vision of emerald.”
 - 2) Clearly this is the throne of God, and twenty-four other thrones surround it, each with an elder in white garments and gold crowns. We allow our eyes to become accustomed to the brightness of the vision, and then we hear that singing is going on: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God the Almighty, the Was and the Is and the Coming One.” What is going on here is nothing less than the heavenly liturgy, worshipping the “One who lives for ever and ever.”
 - 3) We are invited to look at the right hand of the Sitting One, and we see that in it is a scroll sealed with seven seals. Now the visionary looks to see who might open this sealed scroll, and his attention is directed to “a Lamb standing as though slaughtered, with seven heads and seven eyes,” who comes and takes the scroll “from the right hand of the One Sitting on the throne.” This is the cue for more liturgical hymn singing by massed choirs.
- Now we follow the action, and we watch as the Lamb opens the first of the seven seals, and the tension rises as he opens them, one after another, each one producing all kinds of highly symbolic effects. After this, we are made to wait for the seventh seal, and we are granted a vision of the people of God, 144,000 from the tribes of Israel, and a number beyond counting for the rest of the world. All the time, the heavenly chorus continues its liturgical chant.
- And now at last we start to get the message; these are the persecuted, and the Lamb, who will now open the seventh seal, is going to shepherd them. The liturgy continues, with incense, the prayers of all the saints and a golden altar before the Throne.
- Our vision is not ended, however, for after the seven seals there are to be seven trumpet blasts, heralding destruction (although we realize that it cannot be complete destruction, because God is in charge. Six of the trumpets are blown, and then we turn to seven thunders, but as our author hastens to write them down, he is told not to: “seal it up, do not write it down.”



The Four and Twenty Elders by William Blake, ca. 1803–05

- The vision rages on, and now we are suddenly in Jerusalem, where the “two witnesses” are going to be killed by the beast who comes up from the abyss.

v. The Battle

- We are in the midst of a battle, but our liturgical glimpse of the truth is a guarantee that all will be well and that the Satan is to be flung down to the earth.
- Just when you think that you can see God’s victory dawning, you notice that the dragon is standing on the sand of the sea. Not only that, but in the very next verse, there is “a beast coming up out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads and ten diadems on its head, and on its heads are blasphemous names” (13:1).
- What is this beast?
 - 1) It is a Satanic parody of the Lamb, which, back in the liturgy of chapter 5, had “seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God.” So the beast is the Lamb’s enemy.
 - 2) The seven heads may well stand for the seven hills upon which Rome is built; so this is the Roman Empire by which the readers of this story are being persecuted.
 - 3) It also has “authority,” and “opened its mouth for blasphemies.”
- It is a battle to the death between the followers of the Lamb and the followers of the Roman Empire in its decadence and its attempt to take on the role that is reserved to God alone.

Review Questions

1. What do you think the Book of Revelation is really about?
2. Do you think that the imagery is meant to put us off or to draw us in?

Lecture 33. The Book of Revelation, Part II: A New Heaven and a New Earth

Overview

I have been suggesting that if you feel that the Book of Revelation is too bizarre to cope with, and if you feel that it threatens your sanity or your integrity, such that you might be better off not reading it at all, then you should look again at the question, and see whether after all it might not be a good idea to read this extraordinary, and extraordinarily influential, document. To that end, we journeyed through the first half of the Apocalypse, trying to see it for what it really is, a journey into hope, a liturgy. In this talk, which deepens our enquiry by going through the second half of the story, I am proposing to do more by way of reading from the text of the book, for in this case there is no substitute for getting to grips with what it actually says.

I. Babylon

- We start to see God's judgment visited on the enemy, who are code-named "Babylon" (14:8), which is almost certainly Rome. The writer recognizes that Christians are going to be martyred (14:13). We should be heartened when we hear the author say, "Blessed are they who die in the Lord," and that is a mantra that has given courage to Christians all down the centuries; it is right at the heart of our faith. We are promised victory.
- We proceed to the picture of Rome as the "Great Prostitute." Feminist scholars sometimes profess themselves a little uneasy at this apparent disparagement of women, but I don't think that is really the name of the game here.
 - 1) What is going on is a disparagement not of the weakest in society, but of the oppressor and the strong, the apparently unassailable Roman Empire under which they are suffering persecution. And how do we know that it is Rome? I don't think that there is much doubt about this, but you might like to look at the seven hills and ten kings. There is going to be a battle, but the oppressed Christians are not to fear, for the Lamb (a symbol of vulnerability, of course) is going to win in the battle.
 - 2) That is the truth that we start to hear in 18:2: "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the Great." Listen as the



The Whore of Babylon by William Blake,
1809

visionary depicts all the commercial and marine interests lamenting the destruction of Rome in chapter 18, and try to feel what it was like for those at the bottom of the heap.

II. Christ Fighting the Enemy

- Then, to make them feel stronger, we are offered the vision of Christ fighting the enemy.
- The enemy is going to be defeated, but it will not be a simple once-and-for-all victory. At first it will be only for a thousand years. After that, Satan will emerge from prison and be finally defeated (20:14). If it seems a long way off, then that is so as not to offer an unrealistic source of hope.
- We need to be aware, though, that the sigh of relief that we hear at this point is because the readers of this extraordinary text are in a really bad way, and cannot see any hope at all. That is why Apocalypse offers no easy answers. So in 20:7-10, when our visionary speaks of Gog and Magog, and the size of the army that opposes us and attacks the “camp of the holy ones,” we are meant to feel the note of realism, and to recognize that despite our apparently impossible situation, the victory is coming.
- Notice how this reading is absolutely redolent of Scripture, even though it is not always possible to be certain which particular bits of Scripture are being cited or alluded to.
 - 1) The message for the persecuted Christians is that we are here speaking the old story of God’s people, and their certainty that God is incapable of letting them down, no matter how grim things may seem. So when the One Sitting on the Throne dispatches “cowards and faithless people and the defiled and murderers and those who commit sexual immorality and who use drugs and witchcraft and all liars—their portion is in the burning lake of fire and sulphur, which is the second death,” it is not, as religious people all too often think, an invitation to rejoice in the fate of the ungodly.
 - 2) The interest in the Scripture is not in punishing the wicked but in offering hope to the oppressed and marginalized. That is what the Book of Revelation is about.
 - 3) You can see something of this in this next piece, about the “Bride of the Lamb.”

III. The Holy City

- And there you have it; the completeness of the city, and in a lovely vision, the author gives us a glimpse of something that the holy city offers: security and illumination.
 - 1) There is no Temple there, because God and the Lamb are the Temple.
 - 2) Notice, once again, that the attention is not given to the punishment of the wicked nearly so much as to the radiant vision of hope for the persecuted.



The New Jerusalem by Gustave Doré

(a) That vision is beautifully expressed in an ancient biblical metaphor of “water of life.”

IV. Conclusions

- What, then, are you and I to do with this prophecy remembering that it is not meant to be a prediction? The author concludes by suggesting no less than four ideas.
 - 1) We are to keep the message of the prophecy (22:7). We need to read it and learn from it and give it reality by the way that we live.
 - 2) It is our task to worship God (22:7). It is astonishing how very often we believers need to be reminded of that essential fact of our existence. It is easily forgotten, and we drift into forgetting about the reality of God.
 - 3) We have to recognize Jesus, who comes to us every day in unexpected guises, and whose only desire is to set us free and make us genuinely become whom we could be.
 - 4) We have to recognize that if we follow the road to which Revelation invites us, there will be suffering ahead. It was true for Jesus, it was true for those for whom this text was originally written, and, as you are probably already aware, it will be true for you.
- I hope that by now you see that the Book of Revelation is neither as bizarre nor as repellent as you may have feared, but that in fact it offers a beautiful vision of hope, one that has not lost its relevance in our present darkened age, but that speaks loud and clear, and offers us a beam of radiant light in our darkened world. Read it, and be inspired.

Review Questions

1. What do you think of the Book of Revelation now?
2. Does the Book of Revelation have anything to say to us today?

Lecture 34. The Importance of the Old Testament

Overview

Since at least the second century, there has been a tendency among at least some Christians to think that we don't need the Old Testament any more, now that we have the New Testament. Jewish friends point out, courteously, that it is neither Old (for it contains the undying freshness of God) nor a Testament, since it is not the last wishes of a person who is dying. What causes people to give up on the Old Testament?

I. Why Give Up On It?

- People will offer all kinds of reasons to give up on the Old Testament:
 - 1) They will allege that it is long and boring. Long it certainly is, but if you think that it is boring, then you have not been paying attention.
 - 2) Others will say that the Old Testament presents a very bad-tempered God, or one who petulantly demands that his enemies are butchered, or selfishly insists that he is the only “god” in town, when everyone knows that there are really lots of them.
 - 3) Then there are other people who will tell you that the Old Testament is against all the discoveries of modern science. That, of course, is a sure sign of a lazy reader.
 - (a) If you really want a sensible place to start, go to the psalms, the hymn book of the Temple, and see the wide range of emotions and feelings that are there, the innermost thoughts of a people utterly in love with its God, and able to sing songs of anger, joy, praise, gratitude, and misery. Or there are hymns to God the creator, royal songs for the coronation of a king, historical songs that tell the story of what God has done for Israel's past, and some hymns written especially for use in the Temple liturgy, as well as one or two written to instruct God's people in the wisdom that they needed.
 - (b) Anything that narrows the scope of our scriptures, whether what we call the Old Testament or what we call the New Testament, is missing the point. All human life is there, and what we have to fear above all is not the wrath of God, but the woodenness of the servants of God, and sometimes also the woodenness of their opponents.
- One of the earliest known examples of a Christian rejecting the Old Testament is the second-century radical known as Marcion. As far as we can learn from those who were his opponents, this wealthy ship owner rejected the Old Testament God, because he thought that Jesus revealed a different God and that Old Testament theology could not be reconciled with that of the New Testament.
 - 1) What is significant for our purposes is that Marcion found himself unable to accept much of the New Testament either.

- 2) We have to be grateful to him, of course, since his observations and his stern views on Scripture meant that Catholic Christians were forced to ask themselves the all-important question of which documents were and which were not, part of the New Testament canon, and the related question of which documents should be accepted in the Old Testament (the Greek and the Hebrew canons were different in some ways). One of the things that was undoubtedly going on in Marcion was more than a touch of anti-Jewish sentiment, something that has bedevilled Christians down the centuries ever since.

II. Why Is It Important?

- To start our inquiry, I should like to make four important points.
 - 1) First, all those first characters whom we encounter in the New Testament (and who follow Jesus) are Jews, including, of course, Jesus himself. Jesus appears as harbinger of a reform movement within Judaism, asserting, in good biblical fashion, the fatherhood of the one and only one God. Those whom he gathered around him were all good Jews, who owned and loved the Hebrew Scriptures as part of their heritage.
 - 2) Secondly, it is important to say that every one of our New Testament authors, like Jesus, leans heavily on the Old Testament for their landmarks on the journey to God, and depends on it in order to find their bearings in talking about Jesus.
 - 3) Thirdly, if you feel that the Old Testament is perhaps a bit daunting for you, it may be best to start with those parts of it that Jesus clearly relished, such as the psalms or Isaiah.
 - 4) Fourthly, once you start playing Marcion's game and cutting out the Old Testament, you very soon find that you have absolutely nothing left. It is not just a matter of obvious Old Testament quotations, nor even of just allusions; it is, rather, that the Old Testament creates a whole world in which Jesus and his disciples (then and now) operate, a backcloth against which the drama is played out, a source for all their efforts to try and make sense of life.

III. Understanding Jesus

- We cannot even begin to understand Jesus except against the background of the story of God and of the People of God, as we have frequently remarked in the course of these lectures.
- From the very beginning Jesus reveals himself as a faithful son of Israel.
 - 1) Jesus will certainly have been circumcised within a week of his birth and is often seen in the synagogue on the Sabbath day.
 - 2) Jesus knows the Scriptures by heart, like all good Jews. That is how he is able to make that devastating response to the Sadducees, which is recorded at Mark 12:18-27.
 - 3) If we can judge by what emerges in the gospels, he was particularly at home in the Psalms, which we have already seen to be Israel's hymnbook, and in Isaiah.

- (a) For a lovely example of his citing Isaiah, you might like to look at the story of what he did in the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:14-21), where he has that splendid text from Isaiah 61.
- (b) References to the Psalms come pouring from Jesus' lips in the gospels.

IV. Jesus' Followers

- Jesus' followers, trying to make sense of his story and to find meaning in it, had to go to the scriptures in which he and they had been brought up. Those texts, what Luke calls the Law and the prophets and the Psalms (Luke 24:44), represented the inherited wisdom of their culture, the only place to look if they were going to find out what to say about Jesus and the People of God.
- There are many examples of this in multiple texts in the New Testament.
 - 1) Paul, exploring the mystery of Jesus with his converts, can hardly write a sentence without mentioning his beloved Jesus; and, equally, he can hardly write a sentence without quoting the Old Testament.
 - 2) The Gospel of Mark starts in a deeply scriptural way, calling Jesus "Son of God" and then explicitly citing Isaiah, even playing a little joke with his Scripturally-minded readers because the lines he then quotes (Mark 1: 2) are not from Isaiah at all, initially, but from Malachi or Exodus.
 - 3) Matthew does the same, more consistently than Mark. One of the most striking examples is the way in which he stresses the way in which Jesus brings the Hebrew Scriptures to their proper fulfillment. He does this in two ways:
 - (a) By his outlining a possible genealogy of Jesus, divided, quite explicitly, into three groups of 14 (double the perfect number, as we saw in a previous lecture), and covering the high and low points of the history of Israel down to its climax in Jesus Christ.
 - (b) By emphasizing, almost to a fault, the phrase "this whole thing happened in order that it might be fulfilled what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet."
 - 4) Luke deliberately uses the language of the Greek Old Testament to locate Jesus firmly in the background provided by God's people. Examples abound in Luke, but you might think of those couples that come straight from the pages of the Old Testament, like Zechariah and Elisabeth, or Simeon and Hannah, or Mary and Joseph themselves.
 - 5) John's majestic prologue presents us with a Jesus who has a profound relationship with the One who is obviously the Old Testament God. There is only one God, it says, and that is the God of life, which is a very Jewish thing to say. Like Paul, it is into that context that John sets Jesus, as someone who is intimately related to God, and yet different from God. But the way he does this sounds nothing like the way pagan authors would deal with their deities. This is the God of the Old Testament, and Jesus' mysterious identity is set out in precisely that context. You cannot really understand the fourth Gospel except against the background offered by the Scriptures.

- 6) You cannot possibly make sense of the Letter to the Hebrews, that elevated theological treatise, unless you are prepared to accept all the Old Testament background and the scriptural allusions that it employs in its attempt to get Jesus right, and to demonstrate that Jesus is the real thing. Only a great Jewish thinker could have written this letter, and it is an extraordinary way of doing justice to the thoroughly Jewish identity of Jesus.
- 7) Finally, there is the Book of Revelation. It has been calculated that there are more citations or allusions or references to the Old Testament than there are verses in the book. It is unimaginable except in a Jewish setting.



The Finding of the Jesus in the Temple by William Holman Hunt, 1860

Review Questions

1. Do you agree that the New Testament is unthinkable without the Old Testament?
2. Is it possible to have a non-Jewish Jesus?
3. Why do you think people try to get rid of the Old Testament?

Lecture 35. Inspiration

Overview

Sometimes people get worried by the line of thinking that we have been taking in the course of these lectures, that, for example, the divine authors of the New Testament can make mistakes, or that they think that the sun goes around the world, or that we might not be able to get back to what Jesus originally said or did. Do different accounts of, for example, the Sermon on the Mount, or the feeding of the multitudes, or the Resurrection appearances, mean that it is all a pack of lies? Probably the difficulty here runs something like this: if the texts are inspired, doesn't that mean that they are the word of God, and if they are the word of God, how can they possibly make mistakes and prove fallible? Well, of course, it depends what you mean by "inspiration."

I. Inspiration as Dictation

- One particular understanding of the term is almost a matter of dictation, so that we have to imagine the Holy Spirit whispering in the ear of the gospel writers, who obediently write down everything that they have been told.
 - 1) Press it a bit, however, and you start to see some difficulties. For example, when you were young, you probably thought that St. Paul or the gospel writers wrote in English. Think about it for a bit, though, and you will realize that that was not the case, so that if you read the Bible in any language other than Greek for the New Testament (or Greek, Aramaic or Hebrew for the Old Testament), then you are dependent on a translator. And, if we are thinking about the doctrine of inspiration, are we to think that bible translators are inspired? There's a serious danger of this magical view of inspiration.
 - 2) The fact is that this attitude cannot easily deal with an important but perhaps rather surprising fact, namely that we do not necessarily know as much about "what the Bible says" as we think we do.
 - 3) We cannot be sure what the authors of the Old and New Testament meant by what they wrote.



The Evangelist Matthew and the Angel by Rembrandt, 1661

II. Inspiration as Commitment

- We can also understand inspiration in terms of “commitment”; and by that I mean not that the readers or hearers of the word are committed, but that the Word is committed, that in the pages of the Bible the Divine and Loving Mystery, whom we call by the deceptively simple name of God, is reaching out to God’s beloved humanity. In ways we cannot quite understand, the mystery reveals itself to us, and leaves us free to accept or reject what it reveals.
- In what we call the Bible, this Loving Mystery tells its story in all sorts of different ways, in songs and in narratives and in regulations for eating. But in all these millions of words that make up the Bible that you have on your desk, there is, we must always remember only one Word; and that is the single word that God unceasingly and faithfully addresses to his beloved humanity and to those portions of humanity who are singled out to be the People of God.
- That means that perhaps the word “Bible” is not after all a very helpful term, since using that word makes it sound as though all the many texts of which the bible is composed are all the same thing, and to be understood in each case in exactly the same way; but the mystery reveals itself in many different ways.
- There is only one Word, but this word is written down by fallible human beings, each with their own limitations and their own particular viewpoint, which scholars can, as we have seen, fairly easily detect in the different books that compose our Bible.
 - 1) The single, self-revealing word of God gradually reveals the mystery, though the mystery can never be exhausted, never fully revealed, and we must always be ready, thanks to the undying freshness of God, to apprehend the mystery from a different perspective.

III. Changing Doctrine?

- Does that mean that doctrine changes in the course of time? Well, yes and no. What does not change is that the mystery of love is right at the heart of existence. But then human beings, with their God-given intellect, start to question earlier solutions.
 - 1) Consider the mystery of what happens when life comes to an end, as it will at some point for all of us. The most obvious answer is nothing: look at dead bodies, and you see that once the life has left them, they rapidly start to decompose, more rapidly in the heat of the Middle East than in colder countries.
 - (a) So one solution, the earliest in the Bible, to what happens after death is that your memory lives on in your children and grandchildren; and that is not a bad solution. But then the problem arises, in the minds of questioning authors like Ecclesiastes/Qoheleth about whether this solution really works. One option is to abandon faith in the divine mystery, but those of questioning intellect who feel unable to take that solution are driven to find another solution.
 - (b) You can see an evolution of beliefs over the course of the Old Testament. Job says, “I know that my Redeemer liveth,” and we applaud the insight: that God is God, however difficult

things may seem to be. The psalmists lament the inevitability of death, and feel permitted to complain against God.

(c) Then things evolve, and later in Judaism, they move towards the idea of life beyond death. This is already clear in 2 Maccabees, which means that it was in the wind earlier; and it becomes crystal clear in a work like the Book of Wisdom, which was being composed perhaps at about the time when Jesus was exercising his mission, and which offers a full-blown account of life continuing in a deeper way after our present bodies die.

(d) Once you come to the New Testament, the Resurrection of Jesus makes all the difference, as we shall see in the next lecture.

- The unfailing inspiration of God's one Word speaks to our situation and encourages us to reflect on doctrines and beliefs that we have held for sure and to undo the woodenness and rigidity that we sometimes bring to our beliefs.
 - 1) Can you think of apparently unchanging religious beliefs that the divine mystery may be today asking us to rephrase and understand afresh?
 - 2) If that is the invitation of God, does this inspiration mean that we are being unfaithful if we contemplate new ways of expressing the mystery under the guidance of God's undying freshness?

IV. Reading the Different Texts

- So a truly respectful understanding of inspiration means that we have to recognize the wide range of documents in which the mystery presents itself in our Bible. Each different document has its own way of being read, and in each of them the inspiration of God means that they can speak to us in a number of different ways, not all of them being precisely what the original human author might have expected.
- Inspiration, that is to say, means that God's view of our world becomes slowly, and in each generation freshly, accessible to human beings, ever clearer as time goes on.
- The doctrine of the Holy Spirit, so closely linked to our word "inspiration," is of immense importance. The "Spirit of God" is already there in the Hebrew Scriptures, but something happens to that in the New Testament, where the Holy Spirit becomes a potent force.



The Holy Spirit by Corrado Giaquinto, ca. 1750s

- 1) In the Book of Revelation, John the Elder is "in the Spirit."
- 2) In Matthew and Luke, the Spirit is the Father of Jesus.

- 3) In John's Gospel, the Spirit is described, in a brilliant and powerful innovation as the "Paraclete," which means something like "Counsel for the Defense," the attorney who stands at your side in court; and it may also be understood as the "Comforter." What we are talking about here, you see, is the undying and fresh presence of the God who is Loving Mystery, guiding our steps on the journey. And because God is God, we cannot make any progress into the mystery unless God is beside us and within us and ahead of us; and that is "inspiration."

v. Revealing the Mystery of God

- The Old Testament and New Testament put us more deeply in touch with the ultimate mystery.
 - 1) This is what the Old Testament does. In Genesis, we learn that the mystery is deeply involved with human beings, even worried about them: "It is not good for the man to be alone," we hear it say in 2:18; and we watch in astonishment as God comes looking for Eve and Adam after they have eaten the forbidden fruit. God wants a relationship with his beloved human race. In 3:21, even though they have to be exiled from the Garden because of what they have done, God sits down and makes leather garments for them. This is a vulnerable God that puts itself at the service of human beings, and that is not the kind of God that you and I would invent for ourselves.
 - 2) The biblical texts are also very much aware that this God is way beyond anything that they can grasp; it is a God that powerfully liberates the people (look at the Exodus story), and a God that cares about the poor and marginalized; but it is also a God that is utterly remote. Inspiration also needs to teach us that we do not begin, ever, to be "worthy" of this loving Mystery that we call God.
 - 3) And yet this God is faithful, even when human beings are not. Look at the way the Mystery puts up with human sinfulness, with the people demanding a king, or the children of Israel accusing God and Moses of genocide in their weary march through the desert. The God revealed to us in the inspired pages of the Bible is one that will come to judgement and demand accounts of us, treating us as responsible, and of course beloved, adults. It is the God of the Psalms to whom the poets can sing in love and gratitude and intimacy, but to whom they know that they can also express anger and complaint. That Old Testament God is the God of the New Testament, and both these libraries of texts are inspired and reveal the mystery to us.

VI. Conclusions

- So, to end with, here is my suggestion about the doctrine of inspiration: the Bible may be said to be inspired if and only if as you read or hear the text, or see it engraved in stained glass or performed on stage, you encounter the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Or the New Testament is inspired if and only if as you turn its pages or listen to it speaking to you, it turns out that you encounter there the Jesus who spoke to his grieving disciples on the road to Emmaus.
- To conclude then, who do you think is inspired? Is it, in the case of our New Testament, those who originally saw the events as narrated? Is it the first oral reporter of them? Or the first person to put them down on papyrus? Or the person who edited the patchwork together? Or those who combined

sources like Q in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke? Or what about the final redactors of the gospels?

- Since most people do not know the original languages, are the translators of your version inspired? What about the scholars who can piece together the original events, who can use their brains and skills to interpret a cuneiform tablet that transforms our understanding of the biblical text or to excavate an ancient Israelite tell? Or is it the community for which the text were written and in which they are read today? We are dealing with mystery here, for we are dealing with the undying freshness of God.

Review Questions

1. What does “inspiration” mean?
2. Can the biblical authors make mistakes?
3. Does it matter if we are given different and contradictory accounts of the same event?

Lecture 36. The Resurrection of Jesus

Overview

Now we come to the question of Resurrection, which in some ways is the hardest to cope with, and the most important. It is hard because in our secular age the normal assumption is that anything that looks “supernatural,” or that seems to break the rules that science has laid down for our guidance, cannot possibly be true. And this is particularly so in the case of death; look at someone who has recently died, and the person is no longer there, and their body starts soon to decay. How then can Christians possibly maintain that there is “life after death”?

I. The Disciples

- But that is not quite what the documents of our New Testament mean by “Resurrection.” Consider the situation; the disciples had been with Jesus for a good long time, and it looks as though that they thought that something significant would happen when they went up to Jerusalem, for all Jesus’ predictions of arrest and death. Then they all ran away.
 - 1) It is important to recognize that fact, because all the gospels agree about it, and it means that the disciples, both men and women, were not expecting Resurrection. The men had disappeared in a panic, and although the brave women stayed to the bitter end, the fact that they eventually ended up bringing spices to the tomb to anoint his empty body means that Resurrection was not at all what they were expecting.
- The unassailable fact is that with the Resurrection something very new, very different, and very unexpected had taken place that now affected their theology in a very permanent way. This had three elements to it.
 - 1) It meant that their understanding of God had to change; it was not just a matter that God had vindicated Jesus, but that God could actually intervene even in the disgusting and brutally painful situation of crucifixion.
 - 2) It meant that their understanding of who Jesus was had to change. They realized that if they were to do justice to their experience of him, they had to use language that had hitherto been used only of God, and so their understanding of God became far richer.



Resurrection of Christ by Carl Heinrich Bloch, 1875

- 3) It meant that they had to proclaim this very new state of affairs.
- The result is that every single one of our twenty-seven New Testament documents pays tribute to the Resurrection of Jesus, and to the permanence of Jesus and his Holy Spirit with them. Because the authors are only human, they present this account of what God has done in their own unique way.

II. Paul's Account

- The gospel of four verbs:
 - 1) Christ died for our sins.
 - 2) He was buried.
 - 3) He was raised on the third day.
 - 4) He was seen.
- You can see the decisive impact of Paul's encounter with Jesus. Paul had fallen head over heels in love with Jesus, to the point where he could hardly write a sentence without mentioning the name of his beloved; and it brought Paul to a place where any problem that he encounters has to be solved in terms of the unfailing presence of the Risen Jesus.
 - 1) And remember his firm statement in Galatians that "for me, to live is Christ." Throughout all of Paul's letters, look for the phrase "in Christ," which is where Christians belong. Sit with it and ask Paul what he means by it.
 - 2) For a real encounter with that love, look at the very difficult letter to the Romans, at the end of a long passage where he is trying to give the Roman church reasons for confidence in what God has done in Christ.

III. The Gospel Resurrection Stories

- Does it matter that the gospel writers all tell a different story? What they do have in common is not a uniformity but a joint certainty, first that God raised Jesus from the dead, and second that this means that they have a job to do.
- Look at the Resurrections stories in each of the four gospels. Note what they have in common.
 - 1) In each one, Jesus' Resurrection brings about incredulity among all of the witnesses, but the authors all deal with this incredulity in different ways. Then as now, it seems impossible that death should not be the end.



Christ's Appearance to Mary Magdalene after the Resurrection by Alexander Ivanov, 1835

- 2) The victory of love is what is going on in the New Testament insistence on Jesus' resurrection. It is not a belief that you can take or leave, but as Paul told us at the beginning, if there is no such thing as Resurrection, as some of his Corinthians were inclined to believe, then there is no such thing as Christianity. It is not magic; it does not mean that we do not suffer or grieve, or that serious illnesses are miraculously cured. It does mean that at the heart of our faith, God is indeed in charge.

Review Questions

1. Does it matter that there are different accounts of the Resurrection in the New Testament?
2. Did God indeed raise Jesus from the dead, do you think?
3. Does the Resurrection make a difference to us?

Suggested Readings

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