

# The Old Testament and Christian faith: Jesus and the Old Testament in Matthew 1-5 Part 2

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*The author here continues his study of Matthew chapters 1-5 begun in the previous issue.*

### 3. Matthew 3:13-17 The Old Testament provides the images, ideas, and words with which to understand Christ

The account of John the Baptist's work closes with Jesus coming for baptism (3:13-17). At the moment when God the Holy Spirit comes to alight upon God the Son for his ministry, God the Father speaks from heaven: 'This is my son, my beloved, the one in whom I delight.' The words are not made up for the occasion: they are taken from the Old Testament.

Phrases from two or three Old Testament passages are combined here. First, 'This is my son' recalls Psalm 2:7. Psalm 2 is a king's testimony to the Lord's word to him. The king has no fear that he will be unable to maintain control of subject nations because the Lord has made him sovereign over them; he recalls the Lord's words of commission and assurance, 'You are my son, today I have begotten you.' After the exile, when Israel had no kings, such a psalm will have become expressive of Israel's hope that one day she will again have a king for whom God will fulfil this commitment; when God the Father takes up these words, he thereby declares that Jesus is the anointed one ('Messiah') there spoken of (v. 2).

'My beloved, in whom I delight' recalls Isaiah 42:1. Isaiah 42:1-9 describes the role that the Lord's servant is expected to fulfil. The role is in some respects quite similar to the king's calling, but the portrait of the servant in Isaiah 40-55 makes it clear that this role is not fulfilled by what we normally see as the exercise of power, but by accepting affliction and paying a huge personal price for the restoration of relationships between God and man. It is this calling that God the Father places before Jesus.

These two passages account satisfactorily for the words that appear in Matthew 3:17. But the middle phrase 'my son, my beloved' also recalls Genesis 22:2. In Genesis 22 God bids Abraham, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love' and offer him as a burnt offering to the Lord. In the end this sacrifice is not exacted, but Abraham shows himself willing to make it. His action (and Isaac's implicit willingness to be sacrificed) made a deep impression on Israel, and the passage was a much pondered one

among Jews of Jesus' day. It lies behind Paul's talk of God not sparing his only son in Romans 8:32. Given its importance in Jesus' day, it probably also lies behind God the Father's words in Matthew 3:17: Jesus is the only Son whom he loves but whom he is willing to sacrifice for the sake of the world, and Jesus is called to imitate Isaac's availability.

In Jesus' life and ministry, the occasion of his baptism and of the Spirit's coming on him is of key importance, and in the gospel tradition the account of this event has a key place. In the words he hears from heaven he receives fundamental guidelines for the way he is to understand himself. He has the authority of the Davidic king, given a special relationship of sonship to the God of heaven. At the same time he has the calling of the servant with its different form of power, exercised despite or through affliction. Indeed, if that point is not explicit enough, he is the beloved Son whom the Father is willing to sacrifice for the world's sake. Here, then, Jesus is given his fundamental theological orientation for his ministry, the key motifs that embody central aspects to his calling. They come from the Old Testament Scriptures.

This passage is the only one in Matthew 1-5 which explicitly utilizes the Old Testament to make a theological statement in this way. Indeed, theology as such is not an overt concern of Scripture. By its very nature the utilization of the Old Testament to make strictly theological statements is generally rather in the background of the New Testament. But it does pervade this background, for the vast bulk of the way the New Testament pictures God and man and the relationship between them assumes the way these realities are described in the Old Testament. The Old Testament is the New Testament's theological dictionary or its language world. What the word 'God' meant was determined *de facto* by what it meant in the Jewish scriptures.

This point can be illustrated from the present context in Matthew. John the Baptist urges repentance on the grounds that the rule of heaven is at hand, exhorts people to flee from the coming wrath, warns them that trees that do not produce fruit are to be felled, and describes one who is coming after him harvesting wheat and burning chaff (3:1-12). All these motifs and themes come from the Old

Testament. It is on the basis of people's knowledge of these scriptures that John makes his appeal to them. (It is extraordinary how many attempts to understand 'the kingdom of God' start from the New Testament! Further, the 'enigma' of the sense in which the rule of God 'is at hand' or 'has come' may be less puzzling when looked at in the light of Old Testament speech since Am. 8:2, if not Gn. 6:13.)

The principle that the Old Testament provides the theological framework for understanding Christian faith can easily be illustrated from elsewhere in the New Testament. It is very clear when Paul, for instance, discusses fundamental questions in Romans. After stating his revolutionary gospel in 3:21-26 (itself thought out in fundamentally biblical terms), he has to face overtly the question whether this gospel is acceptable — that is, whether it is biblical enough. He approaches this question in chapter 4 by considering the key case of Abraham and maintaining that Abraham's relationship with God had a similar basis to the one he speaks of — it too involved a righteousness based on trust. Old Testament theology thus supports and illumines the nature of faith in Christ. Romans 3 alludes also to the question what effect this understanding of God's ways has on the position of the Jews, and this question is taken up systematically in chapters 9-11. Here the theological argument is conducted entirely in terms of the exposition of Scripture.

As in sections one and two above, there are two further points to be made. The first is that if the New Testament views the Old as its major resource for the theological perspective or context for understanding the Christ event, it directs us to a systematic study of Old Testament concepts, motifs, and images. If Jesus is the Messiah, the only Son whom the Father loves, the suffering Servant, we need to investigate what these motifs mean in their Old Testament context. If the Old Testament provides the language world in whose terms the Christ event finds its meaning, we need to learn to think and speak in the terms of that language world. If it is the God of Old Testament Israel whom Jesus calls Father (and whose fatherhood he then shares with us), we need to discover who this Father is. This takes us into a study of Old Testament symbol and imagery, and also into a study of 'Old Testament theology', which is the current version of the kind of systematic study of the Old Testament to which the New Testament implicitly directs us.

Admittedly Jesus and other New Testament writers understood and handled concepts which go back to the Old Testament not in their 'neat' Old Testament form but with the connotations that subsequent exegetical and theological tradition had

given them. The word 'messiah', which in the Old Testament had referred to Israel's present anointed king (or to other anointed agents of Yahweh such as priests) now naturally referred to the future anointed king for whom Israel hoped. The son of man, who in Daniel 7 is simply a figure in a vision, representing Israel, has become another symbolic redeemer figure. The New Testament thus does not take up Old Testament theological motifs in their Old Testament significance, but refracted through their usage in Jewish tradition.

This makes a practical difference to the New Testament's theological use of the Old, though hardly a difference of principle. Indeed, the New Testament is in no different position in relation to the Old than subsequent centuries (including our own) are in relation to the Bible as a whole. In both cases, it is the texts' own way of looking at reality to which we commit ourselves, even if at points we unconsciously allow our understanding of it to be influenced by subsequent semantic or theological developments.

The New Testament, then, invites us to interpret the Christ event in the light of the Old Testament's over-all theological perspective, in the terms of its language world. The converse point is that we also have to understand Old Testament theology and images in the light of the Christ event. No-one had ever before brought together the figures of the powerful king, the beloved son, and the afflicted servant. They are highly diverse figures and it would have been difficult to see how one ought to go about relating them. They are only brought together in the light of the Christ event, which enables one to look back at Old Testament events or themes and see inter-relationships which were imperceptible before, because their principle of relationship, the one to whom they referred in 'many and various ways', was not yet present. The occasion of Jesus' baptism is a highly creative theological moment.

Again, if one looks once more at John the Baptist's ministry as a whole, by no means every aspect of its teaching derives from the Old Testament. Baptism with water and baptism with the Holy Spirit and with fire had no precise Old Testament antecedent. The Christ event brought new religious practices and new religious language as well as new collocations of old texts.

It is the three great moments of this Christ event which generate the insights that not only supplement but re-focus and re-define the nature of biblical faith. The first is the incarnation; as we noted in section 2 above, 'God with us' now means something more radical than was the case in Old Testament times (though something quite consistent with the view of God and man stated in the Old Testament). The

second is the cross, which brings to clearest external expression that unprecedented paradoxical collocation of kingly glory, fatherly sacrifice, and personal suffering first stated at Jesus' baptism. The third is the resurrection, which makes the hope of man's resurrection central rather than marginal to biblical faith and promises a resolution of the enigma and incompleteness of human life recognized by the Old Testament and instanced by Matthew's story of the death of Bethlehem's children and the prominence even in Israel's history of the likes of Herod and Archelaus.

When later parts of the New Testament describe the events, persons, and institutions of the Old Testament as types or symbols or foreshadowings of the realities of the Christian gospel, they are themselves going about this task of understanding Old Testament realities in the light of the Christ event. The exodus and conquest, or the person of Moses or Aaron, or Israelite rites of sacrifice were perfectly meaningful in their Old Testament context. But in retrospect Hebrews can see them as standing for something (release and rest, leadership and priesthood, means of gaining access to God's presence) which is now a reality in a fuller sense in Christ. The Old Testament realities provide one with the images and concepts to understand the Christ event, and the Christ event provides one with the deepest insight on the nature of salvation, in whose context Old Testament institutions need to be understood.

#### **4. Matthew 4:1-11 The Old Testament tells you the kind of life God expects his people to live**

Immediately after his baptism Jesus is led off into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil, who offers him three suggestions of greater or lesser plausibility: to satisfy his hunger by turning stones into bread, to throw himself down from the pinnacle of the temple secure in the promise from Psalm 91 that God would keep him safe, and to secure the kingdoms of the world and their glory by submitting to the devil. Jesus refuses each of these suggestions; what is relevant to our present concern is the basis on which he does so. Each time Jesus responds, 'It is written . . .', and quotes from Deuteronomy. Man is not dependent merely on bread for life, but on God's Word, and Jesus must rely on that rather than unilaterally use the powers available to him as Son of God for his own benefit. He is not to put the Lord his God to the test to see whether he will fulfil his promises of protection, but rather to trust him to do so when the moment requires it. He is to worship and serve the Lord alone; it cannot be right to ignore this fundamental principle even to gain the world-

wide authority and glory which do ultimately belong to him.

The quotations come from Deuteronomy 5-11 (8:3; 6:16; 6:13), the section of Deuteronomy which describes the basic attitudes God expects of his people as they keep their side of the covenant relationship. Jesus presupposes that his life should be shaped by these imperatives expressed in the law given to Israel. Perhaps there is an implication that here in the wilderness the 'one true Israelite' takes seriously that set of principles given in the wilderness to Israel as a whole but never properly observed by her.

One is struck by the way that Jesus is able to draw from the stock of knowledge of the Torah that he had acquired as a Jew at each point a passage which goes to the root of the wrong attitude to God which the devil's suggestions involve. Part of the story's challenge to us, then, is that we should know the Scriptures (including the Old Testament) well enough to be able to evaluate suggestions put to us either by evidently demonic agencies or by well-disguised ones. Often such advice may have quite a degree of plausibility on its side. Is it not natural, for instance, to utilize your gifts in order to meet your personal needs? No compromise need be involved there; one has to look after one's own needs if one is to be able then to minister to others. Perceiving that plausible advice is actually misguided requires a profound and wide grasp of Scripture and the insight to perceive its application to us.

If we are concerned with Scripture's application to our behaviour, the areas of the Old Testament which will especially involve us are books in the Torah such as Deuteronomy, stories written to offer examples of how Israel should or should not behave (e.g. in Numbers), the exhortations of the prophets which often crystallize the moral attitudes to be embodied in actual behaviour, and the wisdom books (especially Proverbs) which establish the links between areas that we often keep separate such as religion and ethics on one side, shrewdness and success on the other.

We need an over-all knowledge of this material because often a particular insight taken out of the context of the rest of Scripture's teaching on that topic will be misleading. Proverbs, for instance, collects a range of material on areas of life such as money or sex, and many an individual proverb (commending or downgrading riches, reminding men of their weaknesses or women of theirs) looks very odd out of the context of this range of materials which over-all recognizes the complexity of the factors we have to take into account in coming to decisions about attitudes and behaviour.

The middle of Jesus' three temptations in Matthew illustrates this point in a way that is particularly significant for our present purpose, for it involves an appeal to the Old Testament on the part of the devil as well as on the part of Jesus. The devil can quote Scripture, too. So what is the difference between the use and abuse of Scripture?

It may be worth noting that the devil's application of Psalm 91 was entirely Christ-centred. That principle did not prevent his abusing Scripture. Perhaps he needed to be more *God*-centred, for Jesus responds to the devil by quoting a fundamental principle of our relationship with God: we are not to put him to the test. (It is, indeed, attitudes to God that are the concern of each of the passages he quotes — submission to God's Word, trust in God's promise, and worship of God's name.) Jesus thus sets the clear, *direct* demand of a fundamental passage in Deuteronomy against the devil's *application* of another passage to a particular set of circumstances. The guideline for distinguishing between the use and abuse of Scripture offered here is thus, test alleged application of Scripture by the direct teaching of Scripture elsewhere. The need for a wide knowledge of the over-all teaching of Scripture is underlined by the nature of the devil's misuse of it.

But how was it that the devil could produce an application of a scriptural text that is (at least at first sight) relatively plausible? Can misuse of Scripture only be detected by looking at it in the light of other Scripture? It is significant that in this particular case, at least, misuse of Scripture involved taking verses out of their original context. Psalm 91 throughout promises God's protection to 'the one who dwells in the shelter of the Most High, who abides in the shadow of the Almighty'. In origin it may have been a psalm of assurance for any believer, though perhaps more likely it is a royal psalm, promising God's protection to the king in particular. If it was a royal psalm, and was as such understood messianically by the time of Jesus, this would give special point to the devil's quoting it: he is inviting Jesus to prove that what the psalm says about the (coming) king is true about him. But it is here that the devil's hermeneutics go wrong. The psalm speaks of God protecting his servant in whatever danger or attack comes to him. It says nothing about his courting danger or his taking risks that he could avoid. The devil is able to abuse the text in the course of his application of it because he has abused it in the course of his exegesis. He has taken particular phrases and promises out of context.

As well as ignoring the teaching of other parts of Scripture, then, the devil ignored the context of the words he quoted. This second error points to

another priority for our own study of Scripture, a skill in exegesis that is able to handle particular sections of Scripture in a way that is faithful to their particular witness. Many of us are attached to forms of devotional use of Scripture such as the collection of texts in *Daily Light* which work by drawing our attention to verses isolated from their context which express helpful devotional truths. Such collections can be helpful, but they risk imitating the devil's hermeneutic. The story of the man seeking God's guidance by opening Scripture at random, who found first Matthew 27:5 ('Judas went and hanged himself'), then — seeking something more congenial — Luke 10:37 ('Go and do thou likewise') contains a warning about a devotional use of Scripture which risks being abuse like the devil's.

### 5. Matthew 5:1-12 The Old Testament describes the kind of life with God that the believer can live

'Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down his disciples came to him. He opened his mouth and taught them saying: "Blessed are the poor in spirit. . . ." For many readers the 'Beatitudes' or Blessings with which the Sermon on the Mount opens constitute a high point in the New Testament Scriptures. Here is a deep and moving account of what it means to live with God. The Christian understandably assumes that they are wholly the creation of Jesus. In fact, the form and content of these Blessings derive substantially from the Old Testament. The declaration of blessing on people of a certain style of attitude and life recalls especially the opening psalm in the Psalter (also Ps. 128). The Sermon on the Mount follows the Psalter in beginning with a blessing on those who are open to walking in God's way. The poor in spirit to whom the kingdom belongs are those to whom Isaiah 61 long before declared good news (*cf.* Mt. 4:23) of freedom, vindication, and restoration. That chapter in Isaiah was an important one for Jesus. He quotes it in his sermon at Nazareth in a passage which Luke includes at an equivalent place in his gospel to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew (Lk. 4:16-21), and he echoes it in describing his ministry to John the Baptist (Mt. 11:2-6).

Succeeding verses in Matthew 5 recall the Old Testament more directly. 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted?' 'The Lord has anointed me . . . to comfort all who mourn' (Is. 61:1-2). 'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth?' 'The meek shall possess the land' (Ps. 37:11 — earth or land is the same word in Hebrew and in Greek). 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied?' 'Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters. . . . Why do you

spend . . . your labour for that which does not satisfy . . .’ (Is. 55:1-2; righteousness, in the sense of the Lord re-establishing his people’s rights by acting to deliver them from the Babylonians, is the gift the Lord is offering here). ‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy?’ ‘With the merciful you will show yourself merciful’ (Ps. 18:25, following RV). ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God?’ ‘Who shall ascend the hill of Yahweh? . . . He who has clean hands and a pure heart . . .’ (Ps. 24:3-4).

The depth of Jesus’ insights on what it means to live with God is in large part due to the extent of his soaking in the Old Testament. Psalms and Isaiah, the books most clearly reflected in these Blessings, are the books most often and most widely quoted in the New Testament. Psalms is, of course, the Old Testament book that most directly concerns itself with our life with God, our spirituality, our life of praise, prayer and personal commitment, and Jesus’ own example elsewhere in the gospels directs us to Psalms as our resource for our praise and prayer. For Jesus, it was the interweaving of petition and praise in a lament such as Psalm 22 that provided the means of expression for his own anguish at the prospect of betrayal and abandonment (see especially Mt. 27:46). But precisely in such a psalm Jesus found the psalmist’s characteristic insistence on looking beyond his anguish, as well as on looking that anguish in the face. Claus Westermann exaggerated only slightly (Ps. 88 seems to be an exception) when he declared that in the Psalms ‘there is no petition . . . that did not move at least one step . . . on the road to praise’, as ‘there is also no praise that was fully separated from the experience of God’s wonderful intervention in time of need’.<sup>1</sup> Certainly Psalm 22 holds together an openness to God over one’s feelings and needs with a striving nevertheless to maintain faith and praise towards the God who has cared for me in the past and is still ‘my God’ even though he seems to have abandoned me, and with an anticipation of renewed praise for his turning to me again at my moment of urgent need. The psalm’s successful battle to look beyond affliction as well as looking it in the face is reflected in the reference to it in Hebrews 2:12. The anticipatory praise of Psalm 22:22-31 was found on the lips of Jesus, as well as the present lament of the opening part of the psalm.

The resources of the psalms for our life with God are easily ignored by believers who perhaps find it difficult to get beyond the cultural conditioning of the psalms’ preoccupation with bulls of Bashan and Moabite washpots. The effort to do so is worthwhile,

for in the psalms we are given Scripture’s own collection of things that God is happy to have said to him; as Athanasius put it, most of Scripture speaks to us, but the psalms speak for us.

Once again, however, to say that the Sermon on the Mount implies that the Old Testament tells you the kind of life with God that a believer can live is to state a half-truth. It is also the case that the arrival of Jesus introduces an element of revolutionary newness into the biblical understanding of life with God.

This appears in the Blessings themselves. Most of their raw material comes from the Old Testament Scriptures. But out of this raw material Jesus creates something quite fresh and new, and greater than the parts it incorporates. What he does theologically (or what he hears theologically) in bringing together the figures of the anointed king, the beloved son, and the suffering servant, here he does devotionally in creating a new and profound whole from elements of largely Old Testament origin. The Blessings are not merely an anthology of half-familiar aphorisms but a profoundly ordered totality, a rounded whole which offers the listener a quite new over-all portrait of that life with God which was already the Old Testament’s concern.

It is probably fair to claim, however, that Jesus’ crucial contribution to the shaping of our life with God is not his teaching at all but his life — and especially his death, resurrection, and giving of the Holy Spirit to his people. In so far as the New Testament brings insight that goes beyond that of the Old, it is generally (perhaps invariably) insight that can emerge now and now only, through the events of Jesus’ incarnation, ministry, death, resurrection, and bestowing of the Spirit. The reason why new things can be said is not that the evolution of human thinking or the progress of divine revelation has developed to such a point that new statements can now be added to old less complete truths, but that new events make new statements possible and necessary. Jesus could not speak of the Spirit before the event of the giving of the Spirit (Jn. 7:39); nor could he speak of taking up the cross or enjoying resurrection life until crucifixion and resurrection had taken place. But when those events have happened, the dynamics of life with God can be thought through with new depth in the light of them (as happens, for instance, in Romans 3-8). It is not necessarily that life with God is different at every point (people were only put right with God through Christ and by faith under the old covenant); rather it is that the way life with God works can now be conceptualized in a fresh way in the light of realities (cross, empty tomb, giving of the Spirit) which are

<sup>1</sup> *The Praise of God in the Psalms* (ET Richmond: Knox, 1965/ London: Epworth, 1966), p. 154.

actual events that can be pointed to and explicated.

It is particularly instructive to set the 'vindicatory' psalms and the Christ event alongside each other. The Christian believer may be most immediately aware of the difference between prayers for vengeance on those who have attacked us (e.g. Ps. 137:7-9; 139:19-22) and any prayers we are told Jesus ever prayed for his enemies. Whatever the reasons for this, they do not include the possibility that the psalmists were rather insensitive, unspiritual, or immoral men (the rest of Pss. 137 and 139 show that), nor the possibility that in their day the truth of God's love for nations other than Israel was unknown (various passages at least as old as these psalms indicate that it was), nor the possibility that Old Testament ethics allowed people to do what they liked to their enemies (a passage such as Ex. 23:4-5 indicates that you have to love your neighbour even when he is your enemy). Theologically, perhaps prayer for one's enemies like that of Jesus on the cross is strictly possible only now, because it is the cross that makes forgiveness available to people; the psalms' prayers for judgment on the wicked are prayers for God's justice to be at work in this world, and it is the cross that is God's 'Yes' to their prayer for wickedness to be punished.

That insight might suggest that the psalms' prayers for God's judgment are, then, valid before Christ, but inappropriate after Christ. In fact, however, one should be wary of drawing too sharply the contrast between the attitude of these psalms and that of the New Testament. In these five chapters of Matthew we have already read John the Baptist's warnings to people he addressed as a viper's brood who are about to be overtaken by the wrath of God, as trees that have failed to fruit and will be felled and burned (3:7-10). The Sermon on the Mount makes clear that John's understanding of what Jesus' coming will bring about for the impenitent is accepted by Jesus himself (7:19). Those whose righteousness is only up to that of the scribes and Pharisees (!) will be excluded from the kingdom; anger, insults and contempt will mean fiery judgment; adultery, lust, and divorce will mean going to hell (5:20-32). The Day of the Lord will be the occasion of Jesus' repudiation of many who thought they belonged to him (7:21-23). Indeed (a saying from beyond the Sermon adds) it will see the sons of the kingdom cast into outer darkness where men will cry and groan in anguish (8:12). Nor is prayer for judgment like that of the psalms absent from the New Testament: the Lord promises that such prayer for vindication will be heard (Lk. 18:1-8) and reassures the martyrs that the moment of vengeance will come (Rev. 6:9-11). At this point, too, it transpires that the Testaments

dovetail and complement each other.

## 6. Matthew 5:17-48 The Old Testament provides the foundation for the moral teaching of Christ

Christ comes not to annul the Torah and the Prophets, but to fulfil them (5:17). What is this 'fulfilling'?

We would expect the word to have the same meaning with regard to both the Torah and the Prophets, and one suggested understanding of this kind assumes that the reference to the Torah is to passages within the Torah which could be interpreted eschatologically (e.g. Gn. 3:15; 49:9-10; Nu. 24:17; Dt. 18:15-19). But Matthew refers to none of these passages (though Nu. 24:17 presumably lies behind Mt. 2:2) and his many quotations from the Torah, including the ones that dominate this chapter, relate to its teaching on behaviour.

More likely the 'fulfilling' of Torah and prophets involves confirming them (God really made these promises and warnings, God really gave these laws), embodying them (Jesus' own life puts into practice what the Torah demands and makes actual what the prophecies picture), and broadening them (you will begin at the Torah, but then go beyond its demands if you wish to understand the full depth of God's expectations of his creatures; you will begin with these prophecies, but then go beyond what they envisage if you wish to understand the full depth of God's purpose of salvation). At least, this seems to be what Jesus actually does with both Torah and prophecy.

Subsequent events and teaching will show that 'not an iota' (the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet), 'not a dot' (the smallest part of a letter — cf. our 'dotting the i's and crossing the t's') (5:18) does not mean that Jesus is committed to observing the law at every point. Sometimes 'profaning' the sabbath is appropriate, given precedent in the Old Testament in the life of David and in the regulations for the priests, given the presence of something greater than the temple, given the priority of other principles from Scripture, and given the Son of man's precedence over the sabbath (12:1-8). Sometimes scriptural laws can be abrogated (rather than extended, as the Pharisees and scribes wished): far from worrying about traditional laws concerning ritual uncleanness, Jesus abandons a basic principle of scriptural law concerning such questions, asserting that the deeds a man does, not the food he eats, are what defile him (15:1-20).

In line with these characteristics of gospel material elsewhere, Matthew 5:21-48 approaches the Torah with a yes and a no. Its ban on murder and adultery is affirmed and extended, but thus its acceptance of divorce is revoked; the same penalty applies to the

inner attitudes that lie behind the acts of murder and adultery and the apparently lesser deeds that lie behind them. Its insistence on only true oaths and only equivalent vengeance is taken further: now no oaths and no vengeance at all. The law on oaths and vengeance is thus extended by being abrogated. Its exhortation to love one's neighbour is extended to include one's enemies: there is, of course, no Old Testament exhortation to hate one's enemies (here Jesus purges the law of post-biblical additional material) and there are some Old Testament pointers towards the opposite attitude, but 'love your enemies' has not been said in so many words in Old Testament Scripture. So Jesus affirms and develops one strand of Old Testament attitudes even as he puts a question-mark by another.

What, then, is the relationship between Jesus' challenges and those that appear in the Old Testament itself? Two common views seem to me to be mistaken. One is that Jesus is working out the implications of the Old Testament laws: the ban on murder in the decalogue, for instance, implies a ban on wrong attitudes to others. I cannot see that this is so. The ban on murder intended to ban murder. Other passages of the Old Testament may imply that hostile attitudes to others are wrong; but one cannot read this concern into the overt statements of the decalogue. The Sermon on the Mount draws attention not so much to the deeper meaning of the laws, but to the deeper demands of the same One who enjoined these laws.

An opposite view emphasizes rather than minimizes the gap between the Old Testament law and the Sermon on the Mount. Under the influence of the evolutionary thinking which pervades Western culture, the relationship between Old and New Testament morality has commonly been understood in developmental terms. The ethics of the Old Testament is, then, inevitably primitive compared with that of the New, but the fully mature form of Jesus' ethics could only emerge when man had passed through more primitive stages of thinking. Old Testament ethics can then be affirmed as a necessary stage in this development, but treated as out-dated because it belongs to an outgrown stage in this development. Such an approach to Old Testament morality (and theology) appears in a baptized form as the theory of progressive revelation.

In my view, the model of evolutionary development is fundamentally misleading when applied to the Bible (and most other areas of the Humanities, as far as I can tell). Three alternative models are much more helpful. One is that of foundation and superstructure. The external commands of the decalogue provide the necessary

basis for more demanding requirements which can be built on them. A second model is that of boundaries and what fills them. The negative commands of the decalogue mark the limits of acceptable behaviour — beyond this, one is in unequivocally foreign territory. But they are only boundary-markers; when they are established, one can begin to 'possess the land' by filling in the positive content of behavioural style and attitude that is appropriate to this country.

Given such models, it is easier to see the complementary nature of the decalogue's negative, external commands and those of the Sermon on the Mount, and the continuing significance of the former in relation to the latter. The building always needs the lower courses of bricks as well as the superstructure; the land need frontiers as well as policies for internal development. Jesus is not interested in internal attitudes *rather than* external actions (it is he who tells an adulteress not to sin again: see Jn. 8:11), but in both. Paul is not interested in the law of Christ *rather than* the decalogue (he supports his teaching by quoting from the latter in Eph. 6:1-3, and repeats one of its prohibitions in Eph. 4:28), but in both.

Jesus' own teaching suggests yet a third model for understanding differences in level among scriptural commands. His comments concerning divorce in the Sermon on the Mount are expanded elsewhere (19:2-9), and this further treatment of the topic offers us a helpful clue to perceiving the significance of much Old Testament law. The Pharisees ask his opinion on divorce, and he refers them to Genesis 1-2, whose account of the origin of marriage (he infers) indicates that divorce cannot really be recognized. What then of the Deuteronomic permission of divorce (Dt. 24:1-4), they ask? That was given, Jesus replies, 'for your hardness of heart'; divorce and re-marriage are really only a form of legalized adultery (except in the case of *porneia*, he adds: the word means 'fornication', but its precise significance here is the subject of debate). But because of human sin marriages will break down, so the law contains a regulation that applies to this circumstance.

Within the Torah, then, one can find both material that expresses the ultimate will of God and material which takes a realistic approach to the fact of human sin and contents itself with the attempt to control the extent to which God's ultimate will is bound to be ignored, and to minimize the ill effects which issue from its being ignored. Marriage breakdown is hardly reconcilable with Genesis 1-2; but it is better to acknowledge the fact of marriage breakdown and seek to lessen the further ills to which it can lead (especially for a woman) than to refuse to recognize such realities.

The 'low standard' of some Old Testament law is explained by the fact that it is law designed for sinners. Such law contrasts not only with the exalted standard of the Sermon on the Mount. It contrasts also with the exalted standard of the creation story and of the challenges of the prophets. Indeed, Jesus' appeal to Genesis 1-2 reminds us that the Old Testament's significance for our ethical questions emerges not exclusively (perhaps not even primarily) from the explicit commands which appear in the laws (and in the prophets and wisdom books), but also from the perspective on human life which appears both in the story of creation (man as made in God's image) and in the story of redemption (man as freed from bondage), from the values which are asserted especially in the prophets and the wisdom books (values such as justice, faithfulness, and compassion), and from the concerns regarding human life which run through the whole Old Testament — concerns with areas such as marriage and sex, politics and land, work and pleasure, family and community.

The presence of this element of condescension in Old Testament law, and the background of Old Testament ethics in the fact of creation as well as in the fact of redemption, point to the possibility of applying God's standards to our own real world. They show how in Israel God 'compromised' in his relationship with fallen humanity, rather than either insisting on a standard it would never reach, or totally abandoning it because it would not reach this standard. It thus offers us a paradigm for our own application of God's ultimate standards to the situations of fallen humanity that we encounter. Indeed, the fact that in Israelite law God's standards are applied to fallen humanity suggests one aspect of the answer to the question whether *Israelite*, covenantal law can apply outside the covenant people. In principle this law can be generally applicable, because it was law given to an ordinary human people, even though they were a people invited into a special relationship with God. It can also be generally applicable because it is fundamentally creation law as well as redemption law; its background lies in the nature of humanity as humanity and in humanity's relationship with its Creator. For that reason, too, it can apply outside Israel, as well as inside Israel. In principle, again, similar considerations suggest that it is quite justified

to apply the attitudes to social justice which appear in the prophets to the ordinary nation today, and quite justified to apply to it promises about the blessing that can come when a people returns to the ways of God (2 Ch. 7:14); indeed the book of Jonah pictures a prophet himself doing this.

Perhaps, however, the element of condescension in Old Testament law is also present in New Testament teaching. Paul, after all, makes observations about slaves and free men that reassert their oneness before God at creation and place a time-bomb under the institution of slavery. But Paul himself nevertheless accepts that institution and bids slaves obey their masters. Indeed, perhaps this element of compromise is present even in Matthew 19. Here, according to Matthew, Jesus' ban on divorce is qualified by his making an exception in the case of fornication; no such qualification appears in Mark's account of this incident. Does the Matthaean version merely make explicit what the Markan one took for granted? Or is Jesus, in Matthew's account, also condescending to the realities of human sin, failure, and suffering in the lives of his followers?

The principle of condescension may also explain the Old Testament's enthusiasm over ritual regulations which Jesus turns away from in a chapter such as Matthew 15. Both the rites of sacrifice and the place of sacrifice (the temple) first appear in Scripture as human ideas which are accepted by God (with overt misgivings, in the latter case), rather than as originally divine intentions (Gn. 4:3-4; 2 Sa. 7). Perhaps regulations concerning cleanness and uncleanness have a similar status: not *ultimately* good ideas, but helpful to people in certain cultures, and capable of being harnessed so as to embody real truth.

In the Bible's teaching on moral questions, then, the Scriptures written before Christ and the new insights of the Christ event complement each other. The Christian church's calling is to let its understanding of history, of prophecy, of theology, of spirituality, and of ethics be shaped by the joint witness of Old and New Testaments. By interpreting Christ in the light of the Old Testament, the New invites us to take up the Old Testament's own concerns in all their width of interest. By interpreting the Old Testament in the light of Christ, the New invites us to look at all those concerns in the light of his coming.