

STUDY 8

The Gospel Comes to Israel— Matthew to Luke

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INTRODUCTION

Most Bible's have a few blank pages and some introductory notes between the Old Testament and the New Testament. If scholars revised this time honored approach, and in the next *New Revised Version* they included Matthew, Mark and Luke in the Old Testament, and began the New Testament with John, Acts and Romans, how—after the outrage settled—might that affect our reading of the Bible as a whole? It may indeed highlight one primary purpose being served by the synoptic Gospels.

THE GOSPEL TO ISRAEL

Most would agree that the synoptic gospels are a most unusual, unique genre of writing, in which all of the authors share a common conviction concerning a Jew, named Jesus of Nazareth. The authors or editors of Matthew, Mark and Luke were undoubtedly writing in the midst of local ecclesial communities. Of Matthew and Mark, C. F. D. Moule says, 'they are undoubtedly Church-books'.¹ However, was the prime focus of these Gospels upon the problems and interests of the early Christian Church? Many of the 20th century commentaries argued that way. It may seem obvious to some, but W. J. Dumbrell argues—against the tide of scholarship—claiming that the synoptic gospels are primarily telling us of the incarnation ministry. They are a record of:

- The ministry of Jesus to Israel
- The rejection of the nation as the chosen people of God
- The consequent destruction of Jerusalem, and
- The end of the age of the Mosaic covenant.²

The synoptic gospels are a narrative of the closing chapter of God's story with Israel. At the same time, they launch a new era of covenant grace flowing out to *all* nations.

¹ C. F. D. Moule, *The Birth of the New Testament*, Adam and Charles Black, London, 1962, p. 86.

² William J. Dumbrell, *The New Covenant*, The Bible Society of Singapore, Singapore, 1999, p. 13.

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JESUS COMES TO ISRAEL

Jesus came to his own people preaching. He came overflowing with a merciful, yet urgent recall to re-embrace God's purposes as his covenant people:

He took His mission to Israel with entire seriousness. With all His heart He taught not only the lost sheep, but at first the national soul. But without the effect He sought. He failed with His public. And it was His failure as prophet that extorted His resources as Redeemer. The Kingdom, His great theme, could only be established in His Cross. It was His desertion as preacher that cast Him on His greatest work of becoming the preacher's Gospel. It was His ill-success with Israel that turned Him to a world commensurate with the super-national greatness of His soul. And the Cross, which seemed to His own at first but as a martyrdom, became His one grand work. Israel's martyr became the world's Saviour. When the Cross was forced upon Him (at whatever point this came home), it broke open as the world-Cross. It was and is the universal element in Christianity, as the conscience it saved is in Humanity. And when the agony seized Him, its immediate grief was the grief of the spiritual patriot at the loss and guilt of His land. It was His poignant insight into the doom which His very Grace had brought to His own through its refusal. If His deepest woe was His sympathy with the holy Grace of God in its wound, perhaps His nearest was the fearful judgement which seemed to Him the one result of His life to His own; whom yet He had not come to judge with wrath but to save with all the love of His divine heart.³

He was not consciously using an Israel hopeless from the first as a mere sounding-board to reach the world. Israel was not His mere audience for posterity. His conceptual world was that of Israel. It was God's old controversy with Israel that He entered, Israel's historic mission and problem. He did not speak the language nor seek the ideals of pagan culture. He did not make any overtures or concessions to it. His teaching took up the Jewish tradition.⁴

While agonisingly unsuccessful (Matt. 23:37–39; Isa. 6:9–10), Jesus's rejection, his death on a cross, and his resurrection as Lord over all, accomplished a final work of judgement and of grace, both for his people Israel, and for all the nations of the world. It would prove to be the final chapter for Israel, as uniquely God's people.

THE CLIMAX OF GOD'S STORY

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God (Mark 1:1, RSV).

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of *the events that have been fulfilled among us* . . . I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first . . . (Luke 1:1, 3).

An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham (Matt. 1:1).

Matthew 1 shows that Jesus is Israel's long awaited *righteous* Davidic King, the Messiah. Matthew deliberately arranges his genealogy with theological purpose (like Chronicles). With small significant comments, he points to Jesus as being supremely the focus of God's plan, all in the *fulfillment* of Scripture—a continual emphasis.⁵

³ P. T. Forsyth, *The Preaching of Jesus and the Gospel of Christ*, p. 5–6.

⁴ P. T. Forsyth, p. 6.

⁵ Matthew 1:22 'All this took place to **fulfill** what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet': See further use of prophecy and fulfillment in passages such as Matthew 2:15; 2:17; 2:23; 3:15; 4:14; 5:17; 8:17; 12:17; 13:14; 13:35; 21:4; 26:54; 26:56; 27:9; 27:35.

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The promises to Abraham concerning the blessing of the nations, had *now* reached their zenith—‘Now’, he says ‘the *genesis* of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way’ (Matt. 1:18). After fourteen generation from Abraham to King David (Matthew 1:6), Israel had *royal power*. Then after fourteen generations from David to the time of the deportation to Babylon (Matt. 1:11), Israel had a *loss of royal power*. Then after fourteen generations ‘Jesus was born’ (Matt. 1:16), and this marks the *revival of royal power* in a new and open-ended way—which is now flowing out across the nations (Matt. 28:19), following Jesus death and resurrection. Dumbrell says:

The death and resurrection of Jesus moved us from the history of Israel, which in some sense the death of Jesus brought to a close, into a new universalism that will finally issue into the complete triumph of God’s kingdom (Senior, 1991, 251–252).⁶

Mark uses a Christological title, ‘the Son of God’, which does not fit naturally with his focus upon the incarnation ministry that follows, immediately. Rather, it pertains to the final revelation that becomes clear only after the resurrection, namely, that this man Jesus is *the second person of the Trinity*.⁷ Mark’s gospel unfolds the Messianic secret, the mystery hidden for ages⁸ in the heart of the Story of God.

- Mark 4:41 reads: ‘And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”’
- Mark begins in Galilee (1:2—8:21) moves onwards (8:22–10:52), to the climax in Jerusalem (Mark 11:1—16:8). John *baptises* calling Israel—like their second exodus from exile in Babylon to a return to the land—to follow the lead messenger (cf. Exod. 23:20) John and Jesus to the sealing of the covenant (Exod. 24:1–8).
- Malachi 3:1, 4:5–6 highlight promises; and warnings of curse if rejected.
- Expectations of Isaiah 40–55 are fulfilled in a new exodus and new covenant.
- The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near (‘now’ that John is arrested).
- Mark 13 on *The Fall of Jerusalem* is jammed in between the Triumphal Entry and the Passion and functions here as Israel’s ‘last will and testament’.⁹
- The cross was the throne of the Messiah, the King of the Jews. This was Israel, the Servant of Yahweh (Isa. 53). The death of Jesus was to be the death of Israel. He was given up to death by Israel. He died the death that was rebellious Israel’s death and in Israel’s place as representative for the whole world. He fulfilled Israel’s role as a light to the Gentiles. He is every nation’s future. His powers were cosmic (Mark 4:41), his victory at the cross is cosmic, defeating the powers of evil.
- The Resurrection account is brief, but the new story has now just begun (Mark 1:1).

⁶ William J. Dumbrell, *The New Covenant*, The Bible Society of Singapore, Singapore, 1999, p. 86.

⁷ W. J. Dumbrell, p. 88.

⁸ Ephesians 3:9.

⁹ W. J. Dumbrell, p. 134.

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Luke begins and ends his first volume of *the events that have been fulfilled* in the coming of Jesus, by setting his story in the temple (Luke 1:5—2:52, 24:53). It is a major concern of Luke's to show the continuity between the Judaism of his day, and the message Jesus preached of the kingdom of God, having arrived. This is a story of the continuity of Israel, not in the way that they had been functioning as God's people, but *in the new Jesus movement*.¹⁰ This is something that has not happened in a corner but they are events that have been *fulfilled among us* (Luke 1:1). Right from the beginning of his ministry, Jesus confronted the assumption of the Jews that they alone somehow had a special relationship with God (Luke 4:24–27).¹¹ Yes, they had a covenant purpose, in a covenant love, but the time had come, for the arrival of the One in whom salvation had come—righteous and devout Simeon guided by the Holy Spirit, came into the temple and recognised Jesus—'a light for revelation to the Gentiles *and* for glory to your people Israel' (Luke 2:32).

THE KINGDOM OF GOD—OF HEAVEN

Jesus the 'new Moses' (Matt. 5–7) calls Israel back to covenant relationship. The character of the kingdom of God, unfolds in surprising new ways—especially for those not doing so well—poor in spirit, mourners, those persecuted for righteousness sake. This Word of a gracious Kingdom bestowed blessing, forgave sins, evoked new hope:

- 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven' (Matt. 5:3).
- This is 'not the ethics of obedience, but the ethics of grace'.¹²
- Jesus comes not to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them
- Jesus transcends the Torah, 'giving expression to its innermost spirit'.¹³

'DON'T HATCH IT!'

But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them (Matt. 23:13).

By locking people out of the kingdom of heaven, and refusing to go in themselves Israel were hindering the flow of life—hatching God's gifts.¹⁴ The Word is creative, dynamic, fruitful, overcoming and fulfilling of God's plan. In the coming of Jesus Christ there came an end to Israel's hatching the gifts God gave them (Rom. 9:4–5). That story was over. It ended in the death of Jesus Christ.

¹⁰ W. J. Dumbrell, p. 214.

¹¹ In Luke's second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, he continues to trace the story of faith in Christ, as people of all nations, succeed the focus of Israel alone. Yet this story climaxed in Jerusalem, and its first heralds, and repentant converts, were Jews.

¹² William J. Dumbrell, *The New Covenant*, The Bible Society of Singapore, Singapore, 1999, p. 30.

¹³ William J. Dumbrell, p. 37.

¹⁴ As kids, we shouted: 'don't hatch it!' like an egg, to any kid who sat or lay on top of a public football (AFL rules), preventing others from playing. In real matches, any kid who hatched it soon drew the wrath of the umpire.

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Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom (Matt. 21:43).

‘Which of the two did the will of his father?’ They said, ‘The first.’ Jesus said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you’ (Matt. 21:31).

If the synoptics have emphasised Jesus as concluding the Old Testament story, then John’s gospel, Paul, Peter and Acts, open up the powerful proclamation of Christ’s new story, going forth now—the Word of his cross. We who preach Christ, secure in the covenant relationship can, strangely enough, repeat some of Israel’s recalcitrant old patterns, repeating the chant: ‘The Temple of the Lord’ (Jer. 7:4).¹⁵

¹⁵ Of 75 million people in Turkey, there are only 3,500 Christians. In 1960 there were only 10 Christians.