

## *The OT and Christian Faith*

1. Story/
2. Prophecy: Jesus
3. Prophecy: Jesus
4. Deut/
5. Psalms
6. Deut/

Christian faith focuses on Jesus Christ, and we learn of him from the New Testament. So what significance attaches to the Old Testament, the Hebrew-Aramaic Bible, the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings, the Scriptures accepted by the Jewish religious community to which Jesus belonged? Within the New Testament there is variation in the extent to which different books refer to these Scriptures, and some variety in the way they use them. As it happens, however, the opening pages of the New Testament offer a particularly instructive set of concrete illustrations of what the Old Testament means in the context of the gospel of Christ.

### *1 Matthew 1:1-17: The Old Testament Tells the Story of which Christ is the Climax*

To the eyes of most modern readers, the opening verses of the New Testament form an unpromising beginning, with their unexciting list of bare names. Our attention soon moves on to the inviting stories in 1:18 – 2:23. But the Jewish reader who came to faith in Christ through reading these verses responded to them in a way Matthew would have appreciated. This reader had seen that this genealogy embodies a particular assertion about Jesus. It establishes that he was a Jew. Indeed, it is a genealogy of a particular kind: his ancestry not only goes back via the exile to Abraham, but also marks him as a member of the clan of Judah and of the family of David, and thus gives him a formal claim to David's throne. It is a genealogy that (unusually) includes the names of several women, names that draw attention to the contribution made by some rather questionable unions to this genealogy even before and during David's own time, so that the apparently questionable circumstances of Jesus' own birth (1:19) can hardly be deemed unworthy of someone who was reckoned to be David's successor. It is a genealogy arranged into three sequences of fourteen names, a patterning that itself expresses the conviction that the Christ event comes about by a providence of God that has been at work throughout the history of the Jewish people but now comes to its climax.

The genealogy appeals to the historical past, to real history. Matthew assumes that a person has to be a descendant of David to have a claim to David's throne, and a descendant of Abraham to have a 'natural' share in Abraham's promise, still more if he is to be recognized as *the seed of Abraham*. Matthew has in mind legal descent; someone can be adopted into a family and then come to share that family's genealogy as fully as if they had been born into it. Thus Jesus has a claim to David's throne via his adoptive, legal father Joseph. In this sense Matthew is talking about the real ancestry of Jesus, the real historical antecedents to the Christ event. At the same time, he schematizes the past when he appeals to it. There were not factually fourteen generations from Abraham to David, from David to the exile, and from the exile to the Christ (1:17). By shaping the genealogy as if there were, Matthew creates something more artistic and easier to remember than it might otherwise be, and something giving explicit expression to the way a providence of God had been at work in the ordering of Israelite history up to Jesus' time, as it was in his birth, life, death, and resurrection.

These two aspects of Matthew's appeal to the historical past are consistent features of the Gospels and of Old Testament narratives. The evangelists are concerned with the real historical Jesus, but they tell his story in a schematized way, selecting and ordering material in order to make the points of central significance clear. Matthew 4 tells us of three temptations Jesus experienced; Luke 4 includes the same temptations, but orders them differently. Matthew tells us of the beginning of Jesus' ministry in Capernaum; Luke precedes this by the account of his rejection at Nazareth, which comes later in Matthew. It is not that either Matthew or Luke has made mistakes in his presentation, but that sometimes a reordering or rewriting makes a story's significance clearer than a merely chronological account does.

The Old Testament narratives that were among the evangelists' models, such as Genesis and Exodus, Kings and Chronicles, were likewise concerned with real historical events, but they, too, select, order, and rewrite their material so as to make the message of history clear for their contemporaries. Much of the material in the opening part of Matthew's genealogy comes from Chronicles, which well illustrates this combination of a concern for real people and events with a presentation making explicit their significance for the writer's day. It is the latter interest that explains the substantial difference between Samuel-Kings' and Chronicles' presentation of the same story.

Matthew's example, then, directs us towards a twofold interest in the Old Testament story. We are interested in the real events of Old Testament times that led up to Christ. It is this instinct, in part, that made generations of students feel that their library was incomplete without a volume on the history of Israel on their shelves. If this history is the background to the Christ event, we had better understand the actual history of Israel. We are also interested in the way this history has been shaped as narrative by the writers of both Testaments. We are not reading mere chronicle or annal but a story whose message is expressed in the way it is told. So as well as books retelling the history of Israel, we need books on the interpretation of biblical narratives to help us interpret the story of Israel as the Old Testament itself tells it.

In practice, it is easy to let one interest exclude the other. Either readers assume that we are concerned only with the events, and ignore the literary creativity in biblical narrative. Or they become so aware of this creativity that they cease to recognize the fact and/or the importance of the fundamental historicity of Israelite history. Like the Old Testament narratives themselves, Matthew implies that both matter.

Matthew assumes, then, that readers need to know something of the history behind Jesus if they are to understand Jesus himself aright. This assumption applies to every historical person or event. We understand another person aright only if we know something of their history, experiences, and background: it is these that have made them what they are. We understand complex political problems such as those of the Middle East only if we understand their history. We understand the Christ event aright only if we see it as the climax to a story reaching centuries back into pre-Christian times, the story of a relationship between the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Israelite people whom God chose as the means of access to the world as a whole. The Old Testament story has an importance for Christians that (for instance) Indian or Chinese or Greek history does not have, because this is the story of which the Christ event is the climax.

In relating Jesus' genealogy, Matthew gives us one instance of what is meant by understanding the coming of Christ in light of the story of Israel. His example also encourages us to ask with regard to other aspects of the Christ event, what light is cast on it by its background in Abraham's leaving Ur, Israel's exodus from Egypt, David's capture of Jerusalem, Solomon's building of the temple, Ephraim's fall in 722 and Judah's exile in 587, the Persians' allowing the exiles to return and Alexander's unleashing of Hellenistic culture in the Middle East,

the events that make up the story that is the background to Christ's coming. The Old Testament is Act I to the New Testament's Act II,<sup>1</sup> and as in any story, we understand the final scene aright only in light of the ones that preceded.

The converse is also true. As well as understanding Christ in light of the Old Testament story, Matthew understands the Old Testament story in light of the Christ event. Matthew's claim is that the story from Abraham to David to the exile to the Second Temple period comes to its climax with Christ's coming, and needs to be understood in light of this denouement. (He does not imply that Israel's history comes to an end with the exile, as Christian readers often do. He follows the Old Testament itself in seeing this story continuing into the Persian and Greek periods.)

This is not the only way to read Israel's history. A non-Christian Jew will understand it very differently. Whether you read Israel's story in this way depends on what you make of Jesus. If you recognize that he is the Christ, you will know he is the climax of Old Testament history. If you do not, you will not. (Conversely, for a Jew at least, whether one recognizes that Jesus is the Christ may depend on whether it seems plausible to read Israel's history in this way; a subtle dialectic is involved here.)

Once we do read Israel's history thus, it makes a difference to the way we understand the events it relates. The significance of Abraham's leaving Ur, Israel's exodus from Egypt, David's capture of Jerusalem, and so on, emerges with greater clarity when we see these events in light of each other and in light of the Christ event that is their climax

The interpretation of the exodus provides a useful example, both because of the intrinsic importance of the exodus in the Old Testament and because of interest in this event in various forms of liberation theology. On one hand, understanding the Christ event in light of the Old Testament story supports the assertion that God is concerned for people's political and social liberation. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is one who is concerned for the release of the oppressed from bondage; the nature of the Christ event does not change that. On the other hand, understanding the Old Testament story in light of the Christ event highlights for us the concern with the spiritual and moral liberation of the spiritually and morally oppressed that is present in the exodus story and becomes more pressing as the Old Testament story unfolds. Any concern with political and social liberation that does not recognize humanity's fundamental need of spiritual and moral liberation has failed to take account of the development of the Old Testament story after the exodus via the exile to Christ's coming, his death, his resurrection, and his pouring out of the Spirit.

Matthew himself later issues his own warning about misreading Israelite history, relating the warning John the Baptist gave his hearers: 'Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father'' (3:9). Merely having the right history does nothing for you. It places you in a position of potential privilege, but it requires that you respond to the God who has been active in that history if you are to enjoy your privilege. The story is quite capable of turning into a tragedy if you allow it. 'The axe is laid to the root of the trees' (3:10). That God has been working out a purpose in history is of crucial significance for Christian faith. But it effects nothing until it leads us to personal trust and obedience in relation to God.

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<sup>1</sup> John Bright, *The Authority of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon/London: SCM, 1967), p. 202.

## 2 Matthew 1:18 – 2:23: The Old Testament Declares the Promise of which Christ is the Fulfillment

For most readers Matthew really begins with the five scenes from the story of Jesus' birth in 1:18 – 2:23. How do these relate to the Old Testament?

Each gives a key place to a reference to a prophecy that is 'fulfilled' in the event related. First, Joseph is reassured that his fiancée's pregnancy results not from her promiscuity but from the Holy Spirit's activity that will bring about the birth of someone who will save his people. The point is clinched by a reference to the fulfillment of what the Lord had said by means of Isaiah concerning a virgin who would have a child called 'God with us' (1:18-25; Isa 7:14). Second, the place where 'the king of the Jews' is to be born is discovered to be Bethlehem, through a consideration of the prophecy in Micah concerning the birth there of a ruler over Israel (2:1-12; Mic 5:2). Third, the account of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus' sojourn in Egypt is brought to a climax by describing this event as the fulfillment of what the Lord had spoken by means of Hosea about his son having been called out of Egypt (2:13-15; Hos 11:1). Fourth, the story of Herod's massacre of baby boys is brought to a climax by its being described as a fulfillment of Jeremiah's words describing Rachel mourning for her children (2:16-18; Jer 31:15). Then fifth, the account of the family's move back to Nazareth is clinched by describing this as a fulfillment of the statement in the prophets that the Messiah was to be called a Nazarene (2:19-23).

The reference of this last passage is unclear, there being no prophecy that says 'he will be called a Nazarene'. Three passages have been suggested as perhaps in Matthew's mind. Isaiah 11:1 and other passages describes a coming ruler as a 'branch' growing from the 'tree' of Jesse, which was 'felled' by the exile, using the word *neser* for 'branch'. So describing Jesus as a Nazarene, a *nosri*, could be taken as an unwitting description of him as 'Branch-man'. Then the description of the servant in Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12 as despised and rejected could link with Nazareth's being a city in the despised and alien far north, Galilee of the Gentiles, the land of darkness (Matt 4:14-16, quoting Isa 9:1-2); it was a city proverbially unlikely to produce anything good (John 1:46). So a Nazarene was likely to be despised and rejected, as prophecy had described Yahweh's servant. A third passage is the angel's appearance to Samson's mother, when he describes Samson's calling to be a Nazirite to God from birth (Judg 13:5); the events surrounding the birth of Jesus' forerunner also recollect that angelic visitation to Samson's mother (see Luke 1:15; also 1:31 itself).

In each of these vignettes from the opening years of Jesus' life, then, a key place is taken by a reference to a Old Testament prophecy, as if to say, 'You will understand Jesus aright only if you see him as the fulfillment of a purpose of God contemplated and announced by God centuries before'. In particular, if you find it surprising that he should be conceived out of wedlock, born in a little town like Bethlehem rather than in Jerusalem, hurried off to Egypt at an early age, indirectly the cause of the death of scores of baby boys, and eventually brought up in unfashionable Nazareth, then consider these facts in light of what the prophets say.

Is the utilization of prophecy by Matthew and other New Testament writers in this way mere 'proof from prophecy', designed to remove the scandal from the story of Jesus and to win cheap debating points over against non-Christian Jews?<sup>2</sup> Matthew's use of prophecy is of a piece with his interest in other aspects of the Old Testament. He is concerned with understanding Jesus and understanding the Old Testament; he is not out to prove something to

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<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Friedrich Baumgärtel, 'The Hermeneutical Problem of the Old Testament', in Claus Westermann (ed.), *Essays on Old Testament Interpretation* (London: SCM, 1963) = *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics* (Richmond: Knox, 1963), pp. 134-59 (see p. 143).

unwilling hearers or to explain away something to disciples of shallow faith. He knows that Jesus is to be understood in light of the promise of which he is the fulfillment, and he therefore seeks to interpret his significance in that light. This understanding of Matthew's attitude is supported by the next episode he relates, the ministry of John the Baptist (3:1-12). Here too, a passage from prophecy has a key place: John is the voice preaching in the wilderness that is spoken of in Isaiah 40:3. The idea that Matthew is utilizing apologetic 'proofs from prophecy' is even less plausible here.

These passages raise a further question about Matthew's interpretation of prophecy. The modern instinct is to interpret prophecy, like other biblical material, by concentrating on the meaning the prophecy had for its author and hearers. A passage such as Micah 5 is future-oriented in its original context, and in this sense Matthew's use of it is quite in accord with its original meaning. One cannot prove exegetically that Jesus is the ruler spoken of there; Matthew's use of his text goes beyond its statements, in light of his faith in Jesus. Nevertheless, his use of his text is not alien to it. At another extreme, his appeal to Hosea 11 takes the text in a totally different way from its inherent meaning. Hosea 11 is a record of God's inner wrestling over whether to act towards Israel with love or with wrath. It opens by recalling the blessings God had given to the people, beginning by calling them out of Egypt at the time of the exodus. Hosea 11:1 is not prophecy in the sense of a statement about the future that could be capable of being 'fulfilled' at all. It is history.

Between these two extreme examples there are passages among the ones Matthew quotes that are future-oriented, but relate to the future within the prophet's day (Mic 5, too, may have had such a shorter-term future reference to an imminent king). Rachel's weeping (Jer 31:15) is the lament she will utter as Judeans trudge past her tomb on their way to exile. The voice in the wilderness (Isa 40:3) is a voice commissioning Yahweh's servants to prepare the road for Yahweh's return to Jerusalem. The child of Isaiah 7:14 is a more controversial figure. Let us assume that 'virgin' is the right translation of the word '*almah*' (though that is itself a controversial question). This need not mean the girl in question will be a virgin when she conceives and gives birth. The Prince of Wales will one day rule Great Britain; this does not mean he will rule as a prince but that he will become king and will then rule. In Isaiah 7 the prophet is promising that by the time a girl yet unmarried has had her first child, the crisis Ahaz fears will be over; she will be able to call her child Immanuel, God is with us, in her rejoicing at what God has done for the people. Finally, if 'he will be called a Nazarene' refers to Judges 13, this reference, too, takes up a statement about a specific imminent event; if it is an allusion to Isaiah 11 it more resembles the appeal to Micah 5. If it alludes to Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12, it more resembles the appeal to Hosea 11. Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12 is not a prophecy about the future; at least, it does not present itself to us as such. It presents itself as a vision or picture of someone whose humiliation is past and their exaltation future. Nor is it directly a portrait of crucifixion and resurrection. Nor does it prove that Jesus is the Messiah. As Jews who believe in Jesus can find Jesus in the chapter, Jews who do not believe in Jesus can point out ways in which it does not literally apply to him. Indeed, part of what happens when we study this passage is that knowing Jesus is the Messiah helps Christians make sense of this otherwise enigmatic picture.

In most if not all these cases, then, Matthew sees significance in these prophecies that they would not have had for their authors. In speaking of their prophecies as being 'fulfilled', Matthew means more (or less) than we would mean by it. The verb does not mean that these prophecies were statements about the future that now come true. The word usually translated 'fulfilled' is *plero-o*, the regular verb meaning 'fill'. Applied to a prophecy, it could suggest 'filled' or 'filled up' or 'filled out' as well as 'fulfilled' in the sense of 'caused to come true'. The other New Testament verbs are *tele-o* and *teleio-o*, meaning 'complete' or 'accomplish'. Being

‘fulfilled’ means something like being filled out or brought to its goal. In this sense Isaiah 53 is certainly fulfilled by Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection. And it is in this sense that one might think in terms of the New Testament revealing the ‘fuller meaning’ of a prophecy, though the expression is misleading if it implies that the New Testament is unveiling the prophecy’s own inherent meaning. It is rather seeing a fuller meaning for later readers; I would rather call it a fuller significance. The Old Testament Prophets were a resource for the New Testament church, and continue to be a resource for us, in understanding who Jesus is, and Jesus was a resource for their understanding of the Prophets, and continue to be for ours.

A story in John 11 suggests the way of thinking that may lie behind Matthew’s interpretation. Caiaphas declares, ‘it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish’; Jesus must be killed lest he continue to arouse messianic expectations and ultimately cause a revolt that the Romans would have to crush violently. John can see a hidden significance in Caiaphas’s words: ‘He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation’ (11:50-51). Of course, Caiaphas did speak of his own accord, and knew what he meant. But in light of later events (the fact that Jesus did die for the nation, in a different sense), John intuits that Caiaphas spoke the way he did by a divine prompting that gave his words a second significance. Jesus will die to avert from his people not merely Rome’s wrath but God’s wrath.

John’s words suggest a way of understanding Matthew’s assumptions about the prophets. Whatever meaning prophecy may have had historically, he finds within it particular sentences that were in a special sense not spoken by the prophets ‘of their own accord’ but by a divine prompting that gave them a significance that the prophets and their original hearers could not have perceived but that is apparent in light of the event they refer to. All a prophet’s words had a God-given historical meaning; some also had a God-given messianic significance, a way in which they illumine the significance of Jesus. It is this latter significance to which 2 Peter 1:21 refers. When New Testament writers looked back to the words of the prophets in light of Christ, sometimes they found statements so appropriate to the Christ event that this reference must have been present in them from the beginning by God’s will, if not in the awareness of their human authors. Like John, they moved from some aspect of the later event back to a passage that turned out to illumine it; no one would have thought that a passage such as Hosea 11:1 was a prophecy awaiting fulfillment until someone considered it in light of what happened to Jesus. (This, incidentally, reduces the plausibility of the theory that stories in the Gospels were developed to provide fulfillments of prophecies. The hermeneutical movement is *from* the puzzle of Jesus’ flight *to* a reinterpretation of Hosea 11, not from the natural meaning of Hosea 11 to a story that assures people that it has been fulfilled.)

If Matthew ignores the Old Testament’s historical meaning, does this undermine our conventional emphasis on texts’ historical meaning? John does not suggest that every human statement, or even every statement by a high priest, or even every statement about the future by a high priest, or even every statement about the future by this particular high priest in this particular year, has a double significance. Rather, occasionally the words a particular person uses may be so striking in some other connection to raise the question of a second significance. The way he can identify this second significance is by considering what he knows about Jesus as the Christ.

Can we continue to interpret prophecy in Matthew’s way? There is a possible instance in Psalm 22, the lament of someone abandoned by God and attacked by enemies; it is several times quoted in the New Testament as fulfilled in Christ. In verse 16 the suppliant says, ‘they pierce my hands and my feet’ (so TNIV; the text and translation are problematic, but for the sake of argument we will assume a version that is most open to a prophetic interpretation). This verse

is not quoted in the New Testament, but many Christians have found a prophecy of the crucifixion here. There is no hint that the psalm's author saw this lament as a prophecy, nor that other Israelites would have understood it so. The suggestion that it refers to Christ works back from the Christ event to the text and intuits that the facts of the crucifixion must have been in the back of God's mind when God welcomed this prayer by an afflicted Israelite into the Psalter. This seems feasible, though it is difficult to see how one can establish whether or not it was the case. Such 'inspired' interpretation of Scripture is similar to other forms of inspired utterance: difficult to test, possible sometimes to disprove, but hard to prove. I accept Matthew's intuitions about the Old Testament because I believe he was inspired; I could not ask you to accept mine on the same basis. Yet I do rejoice in the fact that God speaks to me and through me by means of interpretations of Scripture that do not correspond to their original meaning and that I believe come from the Holy Spirit.

The advantage of a historical approach to interpretation is that it is easier to argue for or against a historical understanding of what a text will have meant for its human author in a particular context. Theologically, the basis for an emphasis on understanding Scripture in this way is the awareness that God indeed spoke and acted in history. Some passages of Scripture may have an inspired second significance, an extra level of significance in the back of God's mind that is difficult for us to identify. All Scripture has an inspired first meaning, its meaning as a communication between God and people in a particular historical context, to which we can have access by the usual methods for interpreting written texts.

Similar considerations apply to the study of the precise form of the biblical text. In Psalm 22:16, the Masoretic Text actually reads not 'they pierce my hands and my feet' but 'like a lion [at] my hands and my feet' (cf. TNIV margin) or 'my hands and feet have shriveled' (NRSV). The familiar translation follows the Greek, Syriac, and Latin versions of the psalm. Thus the Christian textual tradition preserves a reading amenable to a Christian interpretation, while the main Jewish textual tradition preserves one that is not. It is difficult to say which is right, because either could be working back from what they believe: Jesus is the crucified Messiah, and the text can be expected to hint at that; or he is not, and the text cannot be expected to hint at it. The text's preservation can be influenced by the same factors as its interpretation; the movement is from contemporary beliefs to the text, as well as vice versa.

This post-New Testament phenomenon is paralleled within the passages from Matthew that appeal to prophecy. The quotation from Micah (Matt 2:6) instances it most clearly, since Micah's 'insignificant Bethlehem' has become Matthew's 'by no means insignificant...', which was the result of Micah's prophecy being fulfilled. It is characteristic of textual work in New Testament times (within the New Testament and, for instance, at Qumran) to pay close attention to the text itself in the awareness that one is handling Holy Scripture; and the conviction that one now sees God acting in fulfillment of promises enables one to specify in Scripture itself the nature of the fulfillment. As with his way of interpreting prophecy, Matthew's way of handling the text of prophecy is one that we sometimes follow; we sometimes choose the translation that best makes the point we want to bring home to people. We need to be self-conscious about what we are doing and complement that with a concern to work with a text of Scripture as near as we can to the one that issued by God's providence from its human authors.

If our study of Old Testament prophecy is to attend to its meaning for its authors and their hearers, our interpretation of passages such as the ones Matthew quotes will not be limited to noting the meaning he finds in them when he interprets them in light of the circumstances of Christ's coming. Isaiah 7, for instance, belongs in a context of dire peril for preexilic Judah, and relates how its king was challenged to a radical trust in God despite the reality of this threat. Such a trust would issue in doing the right thing before God and before

human beings, despite the temptation either to yield to Syria and Ephraim's attempts to lean on him to join their rebellion against Assyria, or to seek help against Syria and Ephraim from Assyria itself. The power of Syria and Israel threatens to destroy Judah; but within a year (says Isaiah) it will all be over, and you will know it is true that 'God-is-with-us'. That promise is reserved in Scripture for the impossible situations that most need it (see e.g., Gen 28:15; Exod 3:12; Jer 1:8; Matt 28:20). In those contexts it lifts people back on their feet, promising that they do not face the future alone and that God will deal with whatever crisis threatens. So it does in Isaiah 7:14 (see also 8:8, 10), and in the situation of crisis in Matthew 1:18-25.

Isaiah 9, too, needs understanding in its own right. Its context speaks of the darkness, anguish, gloom and distress of war (Isa 8:21-22), and of more than that, for these are the darkness, anguish, gloom and distress of the Day of Yahweh (cf. Amos 5:18-20), embodied in historical events for Ephraim, now the despised 'gentile Galilee'. But then it portrays darkness dispelled, anguish and distress comforted, the grief of a funeral replaced by the joy of a wedding (Isa 9:1-2). It goes on to speak of a son of David ruling the world by the faithful exercise of authority (9:3-7); not a vision we yet see fulfilled, but one that must be fulfilled.

What of the branch, the *neser*, in Isaiah 11:1? If a branch can grow from the trunk of a tree that has been felled, then no one and nothing is ever finished. If God says there will be new growth, there will be. For five centuries it must have seemed as if that promise was as dead as the trunk it referred to, but then there *was* new growth, in the person of the Nazarene.

To see the implications of such prophecies for the significance of the Christ event, we need to go back to the prophecies themselves. We can also take Matthew's appeal to particular aspects of particular prophecies as an encouragement to undertake a broader study of the more general pattern of God's promises in the Old Testament so that we can learn more about Christ from them. Matthew's utilization of a number of specific passages (and the references elsewhere in the New Testament to other passages) hardly indicates the total range of Old Testament prophecies that are to illumine the Christ event for us. They only instance the process of understanding Christ in light of prophecy, and invite us to look at the total range of these prophecies in order more fully to understand the Christ in whom all God's promises find their 'Yes' (2 Cor 1:20). These promises extend right back even beyond God's promise of blessing to Abraham to the words of God about blessing in the opening chapters of Genesis.

In Genesis to Kings these promises keep receiving fulfillments, yet none is complete or final, and each experience of fulfillment or of loss stimulates renewed hope in God's overarching promise. This hope becomes more overt in the prophetic books themselves. What they offer is an updated version of God's ancient promises. It is this overarching and ever reformulated promise that is fulfilled in Christ. He is to be understood in light of the ongoing promise, and we are encouraged to look at those promises in order to understand what he came to achieve. As much interest then attaches to aspects of those promises that did not obviously find their fulfillment in the Christ event as to aspects that did. Insofar as all God's promises are reaffirmed in him, all reveal aspects of his significance and calling. If, for instance, the hopes of a new world in which authority is exercised in faithfulness have not been fulfilled through Christ's first coming, they will be through his second coming. They must be, because (if one may put it this way) if Jesus is truly God's Messiah, he has no choice but to be the means of fulfilling all God's promises.

Matthew's example also suggests a converse of this point. As well as understanding Christ in light of prophecy, we understand prophecy in light of Christ, as the one who fulfills it. The notion of 'God-with-us' is capable of suggesting a presence of a much fuller kind than we would have guessed from the words in their Old Testament context. The darkness into which God brings light is not merely the darkness of this-worldly suffering but that of God's absence. In

the person of the Branch-man, the growth from the felled tree is more extraordinary even than Isaiah pictured it.

These considerations put question-marks alongside the approach to prophecy taken by the books abounding in Christian bookstores and the sites abounding on the web that refer prophecies to events in the Middle East in our own day. These ignore the meaning that their texts had for the prophet God inspired and for the readers God addressed through them. Of course Matthew does that too; the question is, can such interpretation be acknowledged as inspired like Matthew's? It fails one test: Matthew begins from the Christ event and interprets prophecy in light of it. His interpretation has part of its justification in its faithfulness to God's revelation in Christ. The newspaper is not as inspired a starting-point.

### *3 Matthew 3:13-17: The Old Testament Provides the Images, Ideas, and Words with which to Understand Christ*

The Gospel 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.

They combine phrases from three passages. 'This is my son' recalls Psalm 2:7, part of a king's testimony to Yahweh's word to him. The king need not fear being unable to maintain control of subject nations because Yahweh has made him sovereign over them; he recalls Yahweh'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 could become linked to Israel's hope that one day it will again have a king for whom God will fulfill this commitment. In taking up these words, God the Father declares that Jesus is the anointed one ('Messiah') there spoken of (Ps 2:2).

'My beloved, in whom I delight' recalls Isaiah 42:1. Isaiah 42:1-9 describes the role Yahweh's servant is expected to fulfill. The role is in some respects quite similar to the king's calling, but the portrait of the servant in Isa 40 – 55 makes 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 people. It is this calling that God the Father places before Jesus.

These two passages could 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. 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. Its importance in Jesus' day suggests it also lies behind God the Father's words in Matthew 3:17: Jesus is the only Son whom God loves and is willing to sacrifice for the sake of the world, and Jesus is called to imitate Isaac's availability.

In Jesus' life and ministry, his baptism and 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. And 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 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 that actually quotes from the Old Testament to make what we might call a theological statement, but the utilization of the Scriptures in connection with making theological statements pervades the chapters' background. The vast bulk of the way the New Testament pictures God and humanity 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 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 will come 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' is less puzzling when looked at in light of the Old Testament speech since Amos 8:2, if not Gen 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 discusses fundamental questions in Romans. After stating his revolutionary gospel in 3:21-26 (itself thought out in fundamentally Old Testament 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 Romans 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 affect this understanding of God's ways has on the position of the Jews, and this question is taken up systematically in Romans 9 – 11, where the theological argument is conducted entirely in terms of the exposition of Old Testament Scripture.

As in Sections 1 and 2 above, there are two further points to be made. The first is that if the New Testament views the Old Testament as its major resource for a theological perspective or context for understanding Christ, 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, and 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', 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 that 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 human-like figure that in Daniel 7 is simply a figure in a vision,

representing Israel, has become another symbolic redeemer figure, 'the Son of Man'. Often the New Testament 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 Testament, though hardly a difference of principle. The New Testament is in a similar position in relation to the Old Testament to that of subsequent centuries (including our own) 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 light of the Old Testament's theological perspective as a whole, in the terms of its language world. The converse point is that we also come to understand Old Testament theology and images in light of the Christ event. No one had previously brought together the figures of the powerful king, the beloved son, and the afflicted servant. They are diverse figures and it would have been difficult to see how one might go about relating them. They are brought together only in light of the Christ event, which enables one to look back at Old Testament events or themes and see interrelationships that were imperceptible before or make relationships that were not there before, because their principle of interrelationship, the one to whom they referred in 'many and various ways' (Heb 1:1) was not yet present. Jesus' baptism is a 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 had no precise Old Testament antecedents. The Christ event brings new religious practices and new religious language as well as new collocations of old texts. It not only supplements but also refocuses and redefines biblical faith. The incarnation does so; we have noted that '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 humanity stated in the Old Testament). The cross does so, bringing to clearest external expression that unprecedented paradoxical collocation of kingly glory, fatherly sacrifice, and personal suffering stated at Jesus' baptism. The resurrection does so, making the hope of our resurrection central rather than marginal to biblical faith and promising 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. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit does so, bringing home the significance of Jesus and thus opening up new possibility of living a holy life.

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 light of the Christ event. The exodus and conquest, or the persons 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) that is now a fuller reality in Christ. The Old Testament realities provide the images and concepts for understanding the Christ event, and the Christ event provides more 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 Us 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 his basis for doing so. Each time he responds, 'It is written...', and quotes from Deuteronomy. A person 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 God will keep promises of protection but rather to trust God 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 worldwide authority and glory that do ultimately belong to him.

The quotations come from Deuteronomy 5 – 11 (8:3; 6:16; 6:13), the section of Deuteronomy that describes basic attitudes God expects of people as they keep their side of the covenant relationship. Jesus presupposes that his life should be shaped by these imperatives expressed in the Torah God gave 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 it.

At each point Jesus is able to draw from the stock of knowledge of the Torah that he had acquired as a Jew a passage that goes to the root of the wrong attitude to God that the devil's suggestions involve. Part of the story's challenge is our need for a knowledge of the Scriptures (including the Old Testament) good enough to enable us to evaluate suggestions from demonic agencies, whether or not well- disguised. Often such advice may have plausibility on its side. Is it not natural, for instance, to utilize your gifts to meet your personal needs? No compromise need be involved; 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 misguided requires a profound and wide grasp of Scripture and the insight to perceive its application to us.

In connection with Scripture's application to behavior, the areas of the Old Testament that will be especially significant 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 that often crystallize the moral attitudes to be embodied in lifestyle, and the wisdom books (especially Proverbs) that establish the links between areas often kept separate such as religion and ethics on one side, shrewdness and success on the other.

A knowledge of this material as a whole is needed in order to set in the context of the rest of Scripture's teaching on a topic an insight that taken out of that context 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 odd out of the context of this range of materials that as a whole recognizes the complexity of factors that need to be taken into account in coming to decisions about attitudes and behavior.

The middle of Jesus' three temptations in Matthew illustrates this point. 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. What is the difference between the use and abuse of Scripture?

The devil's application of Psalm 91 was entirely Christ-centered. That principle did not prevent his abusing Scripture. Perhaps he needed to be more God-centered, for Jesus responds to the devil by quoting a fundamental principle of our relationship with God: we are not to put

God 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. Personal application of Scripture is tested by being set in the context of the direct teaching of Scripture elsewhere. The need for a wide knowledge of Scripture is underlined by the nature of the devil's misuse of it.

In this particular case, further, misuse of Scripture involved taking verses out of their original context. Psalm 91 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 promises God's protection to the king. If it was a royal psalm and was as such understood messianically by Jesus' time, this would give special point to the devil's quoting it. He is inviting Jesus to prove that the psalm's promise about the (coming) king is true about him. It is here that the devil's hermeneutic goes wrong. The psalm speaks of God protecting someone in whatever danger or attack comes to him. It says nothing about his courting danger or taking risks he could avoid. The devil is able to abuse the text in applying it because he has abused it in the course of his exegesis, taking particular phrases and promises out of context.

Another priority for the study of Scripture is a skill in exegesis that is able to handle particular sections of Scripture in a way faithful to their particular witness. Collections of texts in devotional books that work by drawing our attention to verses isolated from their context can express helpful devotional truths, 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 likewise'), then John 13:27 ('Do quickly what you are going to do') contains a warning about a devotional use of Scripture that risks paralleling the devil's.

### *5 Matthew 5:1-12: The Old Testament Describes the Kind of Life with God that a Disciple 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 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 ago declared good news of freedom, vindication, and restoration. Isaiah 61 was an important passage for Jesus. He quotes it in his sermon at Nazareth in a passage Luke includes at an equivalent place in his Gospel to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew (Luke 4:16-21), and he echoes it in describing his ministry to John the Baptist (Matt 11:2-6).

Succeeding verses in Matthew 5:1-12 recall the Old Testament more directly. 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted'? 'Yahweh has anointed me... to comfort all who mourn' (Isa 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 labor for that that does not satisfy' (Isa

55:1-2; the gift Yahweh is offering here is righteousness in the sense of doing right by the people by delivering them from Babylon). 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy'? 'With the merciful you will show yourself merciful' (Ps 18:25, following the Revised/American Standard Version translation). 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God'? 'Who shall ascend the hill of Yahweh?... The person 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. It was the interweaving of petition and praise in a lament such as Psalm 22 that provided Jesus with the means of expression for his own anguish at the prospect of betrayal and abandonment (see especially Matt 27:46). In this same 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>3</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 seeming to have abandoned me, and with an anticipation of renewed praise for God's turning to me 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 find it difficult to get beyond the Psalms' culture-related talk of bulls of Bashan and Moabite washpots, but the effort to do so is worthwhile, for in the Psalms we are given Scripture's own collection of things that it is okay to say to God. To summarize Athanasius' exposition of this point in his 'Letter to Marcellinus', 'Most of Scripture speaks to us while the Psalms speak for us'.<sup>4</sup> Once again, however, it is a half truth to describe the Sermon on the Mount as implying that the Old Testament tells you the kind of life with God that a believer can live. While most of the raw material for the Blessings comes from the Old Testament Scriptures, out of this raw material Jesus creates something 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, 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 that offers the listener a new total portrait of that life with God that was already the Old Testament's concern.

Yet Jesus' crucial contribution to the shaping of our life with God is not his teaching but his life, and especially his death, resurrection, and giving of the Holy Spirit to his people. Insofar as the New Testament brings insight going beyond that of the Old Testament, it is insight that

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<sup>3</sup> *The Praise of God in the Psalms* (Richmond: Knox, 1965/London: Epworth, 1966), p. 154.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., B. W. Anderson, *Out of the Depths* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Louisville: WJK, 2000), p. ix; this actual summary is not from Athanasius.

can emerge only now on the basis of these events. 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 pouring out of the Spirit (John 7:39); nor could he speak of taking up the cross or enjoying resurrection life until crucifixion and resurrection were taking place. When those events have happened, the dynamics of life with God can be thought through with new depth in light of them (as happens, for instance, in Rom 3 – 8). It is not that life with God is different at every point (people were put right with God by grace through faith under the old covenant); rather it is that the way in which life with God works can now be freshly conceptualized in light of realities (cross, empty tomb, giving of the Spirit) that can now be pointed to and explicated.

It is particularly instructive to set the ‘vindictory’ psalms and the Christ event alongside each other. There is a big difference between these prayers for redress for people who have wronged us (e.g., Ps 137:7-9) or who are opposed to God (e.g., Ps 139:19-24) and any prayers we are told Jesus ever prayed for such people. The psalmists were not insensitive, unspiritual, or immoral people (the rest of Pss 137 and 139 show that), nor was God’s love for nations other than Israel unknown in their day (various passages at least as old as these psalms indicate that it was well known), nor did Old Testament ethics allow people to do what they liked to their enemies (the context of the exhortation to love your neighbor indicates that the neighbor in question 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.<sup>5</sup>

So were the psalms’ prayers for God’s judgment valid before Christ but inappropriate after Christ? One should be wary of drawing too sharply the contrast between the attitude of these psalms and that of the New Testament. John the Baptist did address people as a viper’s brood about to be overtaken by God’s wrath, trees that have failed to fruit and will be felled and burned (3:7-10), and the Sermon on the Mount makes clear that Jesus accepts John’s understanding of what Jesus’ coming will bring for the impenitent (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 Yahweh 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 people 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 (Luke 18:1-8) and reassures the martyrs that the moment of vengeance will come (Rev 6:9-11). The two Testaments dovetail and complement each other.

#### *6 Matthew 5:17-48: The Old Testament Provides the Foundation for Christ’s Moral Teaching*

Christ comes not to annul the Torah and the Prophets, but to fulfill them (Matt 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 that could be interpreted messianically (e.g., Gen 3:15;

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1974), pp. 56-60.

49:9-10; Num 24:17; Deut 18:15-19). Yet Matthew refers to none of these passages, though Numbers 24:17 presumably lies behind Matthew 2:2. Neither does the rest of the New Testament see Jesus as the fulfillment of these passages except for Deuteronomy 18:15-19; it refers most often to Jesus as fulfilling the promise to Abraham (e.g., Gen 12:1-3). Matthew's many quotations from the Torah, including the ones that dominate this chapter, relate to its teaching on behavior. The 'fulfilling' of Torah and Prophets might then involve confirming them (God really made these promises and warnings, God really gave these commands), embodying them (Jesus' own life puts into practice what the Torah demands and makes actual what the prophecies picture), and filling them out (Jesus will work out the deeper implications of the Torah and the Prophets). At least, this is 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 being committed to the Torah standing forever at every point. Admittedly, most of the acts whereby Jesus offends some other Jews such as his 'breaches' of the sabbath can be reckoned to constitute a different way of understanding the Torah rather than a breaking of it. The same is true when Jesus declares that it is what comes out of our mouths not what goes into them that makes us impure, though Mark can reckon that he has hereby declared all foods pure (Mark 7:19), which points to an abrogation of the Torah itself (cf. Acts 10). In line with these characteristics of Gospel material elsewhere, Matthew 5:21-48 approaches the Torah with a 'yes, but'. He affirms and extends its ban on murder and adultery, but undermines its acceptance of divorce and makes the same penalty apply to attitudes and apparently lesser deeds as applies to the act itself. He takes further its insistence on only true oaths and only equivalent redress: now there are to be no oaths and no redress. He implicitly thus abrogates the rule about oaths and redress. He makes explicit that its exhortation to love one's neighbor applies to one's enemy; neither the Old Testament nor Jewish sources contains an exhortation to hate one's enemy, but 'love your enemy' is not said in so many words in the Torah. So Jesus affirms and develops strands of Old Testament attitudes as he puts a question-mark by them.

What, then, is the relationship between Jesus' challenges and those that appear in the Old Testament? Jesus is not merely working out the implications of the Torah but affirming some more far-reaching demands, but he is not doing so merely because the Torah was inevitably primitive in its expectations, whereas the fully mature form of Jesus' ethics could emerge only when humanity had passed through more primitive stages of thinking. The model of evolutionary development (which appears in a baptized form as the theory of progressive revelation) is misleading when applied to the Bible (and most other areas of the Humanities, as far as I can tell).

Three alternative models are more helpful. One is that of foundation and superstructure. The external commands of the decalogue provide the necessary basis for more demanding requirements that 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 behavior beyond which 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 behavioral style and attitude appropriate to this country.

Given such models, it is easier to see the complementary nature of the decalogue's negative and external commands and the demands 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 John 8:11) but in both. The New Testament writers are not interested in the law of Christ rather than the decalogue (Ephesians supports its teaching by quoting from the latter in 6:1-3, and repeats one of its prohibitions in Eph 4:28) but in both.

Jesus' own teaching suggests the third model for understanding differences in level among scriptural commands. His comments concerning divorce in the Sermon on the Mount are expanded elsewhere (Matt 19:2-9), and this further treatment of the topic offers us a clue to perceiving the significance of much of the Torah. 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 (Deut 24:1-4)? That was given 'for your hardness of heart'; divorce and remarriage are really only a form of legalized adultery (except in the case of *porneia*, he adds: the word often means 'fornication', but its precise significance here is the subject of debate). But because of human sin marriages will break down, so the Torah 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 that 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 that issue from this. 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 that it can lead (especially for a woman) than to refuse to recognize such realities. The 'low standard' of some of the Torah issues from the fact that it comprises rules designed for sinners. Such rules contrast not only with the exalted standard of the Sermon on the Mount but 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 that appear in the Torah (and in the prophets and wisdom books), but also from the perspective on human life that appears both in the story of creation (humanity as made in God's image) and in the story of redemption (humanity as freed from bondage), from the values that are asserted especially in the prophets and the wisdom books (values such as justice, faithfulness, and compassion), and from the concerns regarding human life that run through the whole Old Testament, concern with areas such as marriage and sex, politics and land, work and pleasure, family and community.

This element of condescension in the Torah, and the background of Old Testament ethics in creation as well as in redemption, point to the possibility of applying God's standards to our own actual world. They show how in Israel God 'compromised' in relating to humanity in its stubbornness, rather than either insisting on a standard it would never reach, or abandoning it because it would not reach this standard. It thus offers us a paradigm for our application of God's ultimate standards to the situations of humanity that we encounter. Indeed, the way the Torah applies God's standards to humanity suggests one aspect of the answer to the question whether the expectations attached to Yahweh's covenant with Israel can apply outside the covenant people. One reason they can be generally applicable is that they were given to an ordinary human people, even though they were a people invited into a special relationship with God. They can also be generally applicable because they are fundamentally teaching based on creation as well as on redemption; their background lies in the nature of humanity as humanity and in humanity's relationship with its creator. Similar considerations also suggest that it is appropriate to apply the prophets' attitudes to fairness in society to the ordinary nation today,

and appropriate to apply to it promises about the blessing that can come when a people returns to the ways of God (2 Chr 7:14): indeed the book of Jonah pictures a prophet doing this.

The element of condescension in the Torah is also present in New Testament teaching. Paul, after all, makes observations about slaves and free people that reassert their oneness before God at creation, but he nevertheless accepts that institution (in its Roman form, a much more vicious one than the debt servitude of which the Torah speaks) and bids slaves obey their masters. Indeed, perhaps compromise is present even in Matthew 19, when Jesus' ban on divorce is qualified by his making an exception in the case of *porneia*. No such qualification appears in Mark's account. Does Matthew merely make explicit what the Markan version 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 that Jesus turns away from in a chapter such as Matt 15. Both the rites of sacrifice and the place of sacrifice (the temple) first appear in Scripture as human ideas that are accepted by God (with overt misgivings, in the latter case), rather than as originally divine intentions (Gen 4:3-4; 2 Sam 7). Perhaps regulations concerning cleanness and taboo 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, prophecy, theology, spirituality, and ethics be shaped by the joint witness of the two Testaments. By interpreting Christ in light of the Old Testament, the New Testament invites us to take up the Old Testament's own concerns in all their width of interest. By interpreting the Old Testament in light of Christ, the New Testament invites us to look at all those concerns in light of his coming.