

# *The Presence Of The Old Testament In The Gospel Tradition*

Today I would like to broaden the scope of our thinking by visiting the theme of the Old Testament as a dominant force in the composition of the New, and particularly in the Gospel itself. Just as in the literary composition of the Gospels we have identified input at several levels, the influence of the Old Testament can be sensed in layers that are practically coextensive. We saw last time we met how the Gospel traditions begin with

- an historical happening or realisation in the presence of Jesus and as a result of his words and deeds. We saw how these stories and insights are transmitted beyond their original context by
- the preaching of the *kerygma* in its first oral form, undergoing a particular shaping as they are passed into new contexts. We then saw how these spoken announcements of the good news are gathered and
- cast into literary form by hands far from their Aramaic and Palestinian birthplace.

The scriptures of the Old Testament are powerfully influential *at every stage* of this process.

## **i Jesus himself**

We have to make ourselves sensitive, for a start, to the fact that Jesus himself was imbued with the Old Testament from his earliest years. His whole life as a religious leader is a response to the Scriptures he had heard in his family and in his synagogue experience. It is clear from the beginning that he displays a rare aptitude for them, and that he can draw on them - positively in his teaching, and in the negative mode of controversy, with the skill of a trained Rabbi, even though many remark throughout the Gospel tradition that he is precisely *not* a trained Rabbi. It is important that we assimilate this fact, because it helps us to know him as an actor on the stage of his religious world. As children we might have read that Jesus marvellously “fulfils the Scriptures” as if this were some kind of felicitous accident, like those Greek heroes who unconsciously step into situations governed by oracle and prophecy, and find themselves caught up into complex stories they themselves only slowly comprehend. In fact we should assume that he is choosing and willing and designing his way of fulfilling Scripture.

For example, take the moment where Jesus enters Jerusalem, and the incident known as *the cleansing of the Temple* takes place. No-one could mistake the care with which he stages his Entry into Jerusalem; it is a set-piece, drawing on the image of the humble king in Zechariah 9:9. The rather portentous way in which Jesus summons his mount for the occasion implies that he is taking great care of the presentation, the “props”. Zechariah is a prophet whose chief concern is in the setting to rights of Israel’s service of God, the cult itself. It would have been easy for Jesus to have gone directly from his echoing of the entry of the Royal Saviour to the correction of the misuse of the Temple. This is not how it happens in Mark’s Gospel. Across the whole tradition, it has been possible for people to read the incident as a tumultuous outburst of divine anger, displaying the burning wrath of Jesus towards abuse of the Holy Place. Many people who permit themselves to simmer with rage at the world or the Church appeal to this story as

a justification for their indulgence; *the Gospel*, they say, *gives us Jesus losing his temper*. If we read John's account in this state of mind, it may well seem patient of such an interpretation. If we read the account in Mark, which has priority, however, it will soon appear in a different light.

The first point to note is the position of the incident within the Gospel as a whole. John uniquely places it at the beginning, in chapter 2, immediately after the wedding-feast of Cana, where "he let his glory be seen and his disciples believed in him"; by the time we read these words, we have already read and absorbed the amazing theology of the Prologue, which speaks of the divine Word of God taking flesh, to live (more precisely, to *pitch his tent*) amongst us. This mention of the tent - a dwelling place that is transient, like the flesh itself - may well evoke the Temple, which embraces in its most sacred depths the mysterious Tent of Meeting between God and men; the account of its cleansing will end with the mention of the *destruction* of the Temple, which Jn tells us has reference to the Crucifixion, in which the body of Jesus will be destroyed (like a Temple holocaust).

We may well wish to meditate on the complexity of the Temple's mandate in the OT. When the beloved King, David, is moved to build a house for God, he is warned solemnly and severely *by God himself* - Nathan the prophet had no difficulty in endorsing the suggestion of a Temple - that this would be improper and unfit; indeed, it would imply the very opposite of the basis on which David relates to God. Far from David making a house for God, it is God who makes David a House (that is, a dynasty); and he does this without himself becoming part of the earthly economy. He does it, in fact, specifically *from the Tent*, from whence he has always done his deeds of salvation. David may wish to live in cedar; God's presence is *tented*. This hedge on the meaning of salvation is constantly central particularly to the message of the prophets; Ezekiel, for instance, depicts the *departure* of the glory of God from the Jerusalem Temple because of the derelictions of the kings and their subjects. When this happens the Temple falls, and becomes the symbol, not of the enduring covenant between God and Israel, but of its ruination by sin. Jeremiah prophesies specifically against the Temple itself as an occasion of sin:

**Jeremiah 7:1** The word that came to Jeremiah from Yahweh, saying,

<sup>2</sup> Stand at the gate of the Temple of Yahweh and there proclaim this message. Say, "Listen to the word of Yahweh, all you of Judah who come in by these gates to worship Yahweh.

<sup>3</sup> Yahweh Sabaoth, the God of Israel, says this: Amend your behaviour and your actions and I will let you stay in this place.

<sup>4</sup> Do not put your faith in delusive words, such as: This is Yahweh's sanctuary, Yahweh's sanctuary, Yahweh's sanctuary!

<sup>5</sup> But if you really amend your behaviour and your actions, if you really treat one another fairly,

<sup>6</sup> if you do not exploit the stranger, the orphan and the widow, if you do not shed innocent blood in this place and if you do not follow other gods, to your own ruin,

<sup>7</sup> then I shall let you stay in this place, in the country I gave for ever to your ancestors of old.

<sup>8</sup> Look, you are putting your faith in delusive, worthless words!

<sup>9</sup> Steal, would you, murder, commit adultery, perjure yourselves, burn incense to Baal, follow other gods of whom you know nothing? -

<sup>10</sup> and then come and stand before me in this Temple that bears my name, saying: Now we are safe to go on doing all these loathsome things!

<sup>11</sup> Do you look on this Temple that bears my name as a den of bandits? I, at any rate, can see straight, Yahweh declares.

The very notion of a holy place carries within itself the risk of delusion, so that it becomes a place of actual sin, at which God is disgusted, not honoured.

The ease with which, a generation after David, a Temple is constructed of quite inordinate size and splendour is instructive to us, as are the alterations rather blatantly made to the most solemn parts of the Scriptural tradition by the spin-doctors of Solomon's court. God's creation of a house for David - in 2 Sam 7 a direct contradiction of the idea of a Temple - is interrupted thus:

<sup>12</sup> And when your days are over and you fall asleep with your ancestors, I shall appoint your heir, your own son to succeed you (*and I shall make his sovereignty secure.*

<sup>13</sup> *He will build a temple for my name*) and I shall make his royal throne secure for ever.

Thus is a sacred and deeply traditional insight, described as emanating from God himself, wiped off the record in a generation of changed attitude to power and wealth.

This Temple is the place to which Jesus comes in triumph in Mk 11:11; here, if we were describing an outburst of anger, we should expect it to take place. Instead, Mk says:

<sup>11</sup> He entered Jerusalem and went into the Temple; and *when he had surveyed it all*, as it was late by now, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.

This *surveying of the Temple* reminds us powerfully of God's instruction to Ezekiel (40 - 48) to mark out the dimensions of the new Temple, when the old has been definitively defiled.

Mark follows this narrative with one of his characteristic sandwiched accounts, the story of the barren fig-tree (Mk 11:12-25), which embraces the story of the cleansing of the Temple. Clearly Mark intends us to read the stories together, and our understanding of the *two* stories will be illuminating of both individually. The pause between Jesus' survey and his reaction on the following day clearly give space for reflection, for the preparation of a deed that will appropriately express the significance of his arrival. We may remark upon one or two passages in the Old Testament that may have been in his mind during that night in Bethany. The first is already quoted in our Markan passage:

<sup>NJB</sup> **Isaiah 56:1** Thus says Yahweh: Make fair judgment your concern, act with justice, for soon my salvation will come and my saving justice be manifest.

<sup>2</sup> Blessed is anyone who does this, anyone who clings to it, observing the Sabbath, not profaning it, and abstaining from every evil deed.

<sup>3</sup> No foreigner adhering to Yahweh should say,  
 'Yahweh will utterly exclude me from his people.'  
 No eunuch should say, 'Look, I am a dried-up tree.'  
<sup>4</sup> For Yahweh says this: To the eunuchs who observe  
 my Sabbaths and choose to do my good pleasure and  
 cling to my covenant,  
<sup>5</sup> I shall give them in my house and within my walls  
 a monument and a name better than sons and  
 daughters; I shall give them an everlasting name that  
 will never be effaced.  
<sup>6</sup> As for foreigners who adhere to Yahweh to serve  
 him, to love Yahweh's name and become his  
 servants, all who observe the Sabbath, not profaning  
 it, and cling to my covenant:  
<sup>7</sup> these I shall lead to my holy mountain and make  
 them joyful in my house of prayer. Their burnt  
 offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar,  
 for my house will be called a house of prayer for all  
 peoples.  
<sup>8</sup> Lord Yahweh who gathers the exiles of Israel  
 declares: There are others I shall gather besides those  
 already gathered.  
<sup>9</sup> Come and gorge, all you wild beasts, all you beasts  
 of the forest!  
<sup>10</sup> Its watchmen are all blind, they know nothing.  
 Dumb watchdogs all, unable to bark, they dream, lie  
 down, and love to sleep.  
<sup>11</sup> Greedy dogs, never satisfied, such are the  
 shepherds, who understand nothing; they all go their  
 own way, each to the last man after his own interest.  
<sup>12</sup> 'Come, let me fetch wine; we will get drunk on  
 strong drink, tomorrow will be just as wonderful as  
 today and even more so!'

Mark is exposing to us an Old Testament linkage which illuminates the sandwich and the dimensions of the Temple incident. If Jesus really did quote Is 56:7, he is clearly impugning the priestly caste (here, the *watchmen*) of his day for idleness, insensitivity, and active self-interest. This would more than adequately explain the adverse reaction he provokes. We know from independent sources that the first-century ruling priests were widely regarded as corrupt and venal, and we can both accept that the historical Jesus shared this critical attitude, and absolve the Gospel of Mark from any *parti-pris* Christian bias in reporting it.

In Isaiah's mention of *the eunuch* we find our link with the story of the dried-up fig-tree. There is no need to exclude the story from the authentic words of Jesus on this account, though its present location in the Gospel may be fictive. The strange theme of Jesus' curse on a fig tree for not having fruit *out of season* may be explained as part of the apocalyptic voicing of the Gospel as it nears its close. When the day of the Lord comes it will not obey any earthly time or season. Jesus is symbolically entering the Holy City *looking for fruit*. He will only find corruption and exploitation, and his response will be a purification so fierce as to be felt as a curse by those who can show no harvest. It is in this frame that Mark sets his story of the cleansing of the Temple.

We may find the second citation from Jeremiah about the den of thieves a further direct condemnation of the clergy: there is a large body of commentary suggesting that the Lord's attitude to the widow's mite is actually part of a whole programme of condemnation of the priests' exploitation of widows and of the poor. However, there is a third implied frame for the happenings described here which is not precisely cited in the narrative; and that is the theme of the coming of God to the Temple as refiner and purifier: a theme finding its fullest expression in the prophet Malachi.

- <sup>NJB</sup> **Malachi 3:1** 'Look, I shall send my messenger to clear a way before me. And suddenly the Lord whom you seek will come to his Temple; yes, the angel of the covenant, for whom you long, is on his way, says Yahweh Sabaoth.
- <sup>2</sup> Who will be able to resist the day of his coming? Who will remain standing when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire, like fullers' alkali.
- <sup>3</sup> He will take his seat as refiner and purifier; he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, so that they can make the offering to Yahweh with uprightness.
- <sup>4</sup> The offering of Judah and Jerusalem will then be acceptable to Yahweh as in former days, as in the years of old.
- <sup>5</sup> I am coming to put you on trial and I shall be a ready witness against sorcerers, adulterers, perjurers, and against those who oppress the wage-earner, the widow and the orphan, and who rob the foreigner of his rights and do not respect me, says Yahweh Sabaoth.

The point is that we should not limit ourselves, when considering the sources and the frame for deeds or words of Jesus, to the ones directly cited by the *evangelists*. Jesus himself is ardently attentive to Scripture, and is fully capable of embodying his response to it in deeds and words which depend on Scripture for their understanding. Some have questioned, for instance, the allusion to Jer 7:11 (*Do you look on this Temple that bears my name as a den of bandits?*), asking whether Jesus would have accused the ruling priests of violent robbery - as opposed, say, to swindling, corruption, or questionable policies in the running of the Temple. In fact, not only do we know of violent treatment meted out in the name of the first-century ruling priests (it forms part of the Passion account itself); but Jesus is using the kind of prophetic hyperbole which his brother prophets always used where the sanctity of the Temple or the Name of God was at stake.

## ii The Church Before the Gospels

In the second phase of the Gospel tradition, the first *kerygma*, we can imagine the scouring of the Old Testament by the first preachers which has produced great and rich reference to the whole range of the Bible. You are already acquainted with an observed account of this in reading the first sermons in the *Acts of the Apostles*, and you will notice similar toccatas within the letters of Paul which very clearly echo in Christian mode the methods of the Rabbis in evoking Scriptural testimony and guidance. As I suggested in a previous lecture, the account of the journey to Emmaus, with its theme of *revisiting* the whole content

of the Law and the Prophets in search of *those things which spoke of him* is an ongoing agenda for the post-paschal Church; perhaps we could say the most specific activity of the Church, alongside the prayers and the breaking of the bread. Of course, the sensitivity of the early Church to the pre-Christian Scripture would be governed by the experience, in different parts of the Empire and under new conditions, of the first apostles and preachers; but once more we have to avoid the assumption that it was their way of understanding the mystery of Christ which dictated the whole form of the Gospel. Behind the perceptions of the early Church there always lies the presiding “mind of Christ” which Paul claims to share. That the first apostles were aware of this priority is often made clear (eg Gal 1:8, “But even *if we ourselves* or an angel from heaven preaches to you a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let God’s curse be on him”).

I haven’t the time in this lecture to go into the specific contribution made by the various parts of the preaching Church, but we might recall the adaptation of the parables as a good instance of traditions which grow up beside and around the dominical tradition itself; and I am sure that the shorthand of Mark, who frequently describes private conversations between Jesus and the Twelve “later on, when they were alone” or “inside the house”, is telling us of pieces of teaching which had come to be an unquestioned part of the Christian package, as it were, but were also known to have been developed or extrapolated within the household of faith rather than being explicit in the words of Jesus. An example would be the prohibition of a woman divorcing her husband (Mk 10:10ff):

- <sup>10</sup> Back in the house the disciples questioned him again about this,  
<sup>11</sup> and he said to them, 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another is guilty of adultery against her.  
<sup>12</sup> And if a woman divorces her husband and marries another she is guilty of adultery too.'

The point is that divorce was restricted to men in Palestine, but permitted to women in Rome. The gospel has been amplified to cater for this new situation, and the expression is laid on the lips of the Lord. We may be sure that sometimes the Gospel is tied to Old Testament allusions which occurred to the preachers and perhaps were not specifically in the mind of Jesus.

### **iii The Written Gospel**

In the third phase of Gospel-making, the actual writing of the four Gospels and their subsequent editing, the process can be seen to undergo further elucidation in contact with the Jewish scriptural tradition. We have already seen Matthew and Luke citing the Bible in their birth narratives, which (as can be told by their differences) are not obedient to any actual historical account of the birth of the Lord - such being unavailable to them - but obey instead each evangelist’s theology, and particularly his grasp of the Old Testament. When it comes to the citing of Scripture, Matthew is industrious: but hardly more so than Luke. The counting of OT references in Gospels is a perilous business: I hope you have already sensed in the passages we have examined in detail the truth that the Gospel is so completely permeated by the Bible of the Jews that it is impossible to be precise about this dependence. But there is one point which deserves to be made emphatically.

In your essays some of you have appointed Matthew as “evangelist to Jews” - which is entirely natural, since he is clearly speaking like a rabbi to an audience which is looking for a Hebraic presentation of Jesus. The modelling of Jesus on

Moses is very clear, and the facility of the citations from Scripture bespeak not only an author, but a redactor, who thinks in Jewish ways. But it is quite wrong to imagine that the Gentile, Luke, would in some way be able to scrub round this cardinal point in his writing. We belong to a church that has been starved of its understanding of Judaism, because it has shared in that hopefully unconscious anti-Semitism which is able to make Jesus into a Western European who has unaccountably become entangled with some rather nasty Asiatic unbelievers, and paid the price with his life.

You can see (when I put it like that) how easily the meaning of the Cross can be traduced and lost in this way. If Matthew sometimes seems to be labouring a little in the hardship of transmitting Jesus as Messiah to lifelong Jews, we must see that Luke was working just as hard to transmit the Jewish context of Jesus to lifelong Gentiles. There is no *Gentile* way of understanding Jesus which gives us special insight, as if inside the man born in Bethlehem there was a hidden Gentile trying to get out. Unless we understand Judaism for ourselves, and enter into the experience of Israel, we shall never be part of the People of God. We must see ourselves in the Hebrew slaves, in the faithless Jerusalem of most of the Kings, in the defeated exiles in Babylon, in the crowds gathered to hear Jesus' preaching on the mountain, in the mob who cry for his crucifixion. For this, there is a journey for us to make which Matthew's first readers had already made. Unless we tread that path, we will never understand Jesus, and never therefore be able to be Christians.

The influence of their writers and editors on the actual text of the Gospel is a source of endless speculation. It might be thought that there would be certain points at which all would agree; they are often the very places where the evangelists deliver variation. Last lecture we spent a good deal of time looking at the reports of the Baptism of Jesus at the Jordan. It is of signal importance; but the four accounts are markedly affected by what we are beginning to recognise as the individual *theological* agenda of the evangelist who is writing. Our Western approach to history and narrative would have expected large convergence in the birth narrative. In our partial study we have already seen vast divergence between Matthew and Luke, but vast obedience in the two accounts to the overall theological plan of that particular Gospel.

The first text ever known to be written about Jesus is the superscription which all four Gospels agree was set over his head on the Cross. This is not, so far as we know, a practice generally applied at crucifixions: in this case there are particular reasons why it is credible that the Prefect might have ordered the *titulus* on account of his dispute with the Jewish leaders. John actually says he wrote it himself - in Hebrew, Latin and Greek. As to the text, one would truly expect this to be agreed. Mark says *The King of the Jews*. Matthew *This is Jesus, the King of the Jews*. Luke *This One is the King of the Jews*, John *Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews*. Whatever these differences imply, they make it quite clear that we have to reckon with literary composition at work. In the same way, there is nothing of greater importance, in the life of the Christian Church, than the Eucharist. Yet the Synoptics and 1 Corinthians give us four different texts for a formula whose repetition from the earliest days of the Church has been the touchstone of its unity. The last words of Jesus as he hangs on the Cross might have been expected to cohere across the tradition. Citation of the Psalms unites three of them; but there are two citations to choose from, the Lukan one exactly matching the quite different tonality he has chosen for his description of the Passion; and the Johannine last words, *consummatum est*, follows on from the

phrase *I am thirsty*, which evokes two different statements in Pss 22 and 69 but is not itself actually a true textual citation.

The result of this exploration, therefore, is not a tidy set of guidelines about the presence of the Old Testament in the Gospel. The most I can hope for on your behalf is that you have an ever-open ear for the echoes of the past whenever you come to read the story of Jesus. To that end, I implore you not to neglect the task Luke took on for his Church, of finding your way into the first, and greater, part of the Bible with the same devotion you give to the Gospel, and to undergo, with Paul the Rabbi, the agony of trying to reconcile the voice of the God of Israel which had spoken in the Scriptures, with the death of a crucified convict whom the High Priest solemnly condemned to hell.