UNDERSTANDING THE JESUS MOVEMENT IN THE GOSPEL TRADITIONS
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Menjiwapong Jamir
FOREWORD

For many years theological education has been done within the well-protected campus with the primary objective of training pastors. Theological Education by Extension (TEE) is an attempt to do theology beyond campus. The vision of TEE is not confined to ministerial training programme of the churches alone; rather is involves equipping the whole people of God; it is for the *Laos* - the whole people of God. It seeks to empower the whole people of God for formation and transformation of the whole community and search to build a just and inclusive community in the context of the people of other faiths and to all people. Thus, the theological education by extension programme is meant to strengthen building an inclusive community. Those who go through the process of such education will be able to work not only “for” the people, but also “together with the people”.

To aid external candidates in their studies, the production of study materials was under consideration for a long time. We are happy that the resource materials are ready and I am sure this will greatly benefit the BD/BCS/MCS candidates especially those who do not have access to library facility. We record our appreciation to Mr. Menjiwapong Jamir, Lecturer, Allahabad Bible Seminary, Allahabad for writing the Text book on *Understanding the Jesus Movement in the Gospel Traditions*. We thank EMW, Germany, for journeying with us in strengthening theological education and making the resources available for the production of study materials.

Wati Longchar
Dean
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PART - I

SOURCES OF UNDERSTANDING
THE JESUS MOVEMENT
“Gospel” (Greek “euangelion”; also plural “euangelia”) in Greek means “reward for bringing good news” and also the “good news” itself. In secular literature this term was used as a technical term for the good news of political victory as well as private messages that brought joy to someone. “Euangelion” gained religious significance in the imperial cult, above all, the appearance of the divine world ruler, the inauguration of his reign, and his decrees are news of joy (“euangelion”). Concerning the birthday of the Roman Emperor Augustus one reads in a calendar inscription (dated c. 9 B.C.) from Priene in Asia Minor, “The birthday of the god was for the world the beginning of glad tidings, which have gone forth for his sake.”

In the NT, “gospel” has the special meaning “news or message of salvation”. It is based on the Greek verb “euangelizesthai” (in Hebrew “bissar”) which means “to proclaim the news of salvation”. This act of proclaiming the news of salvation was firmly connected with the messenger of God who proclaims the eschatological message regarding the in-breaking of God’s sovereign rule. In Jesus’ word (Matt 11:5), which is directly connected with Third Isaiah, “gospel” is the news of salvation which He himself brings. In Paul, “gospel” means the proclamation about Christ and the salvation which Christ brings (Rom 1:1ff.; 1 Cor 15:1ff., etc).

The first three Gospels are grouped under the name “Synoptic” (from Greek word “sunopsis”) which means “common perspective” or “seeing things together”. J. J. Griesbach was the one who introduced this term to these three Gospels in 1776 in his Synopse, where the parallel texts of the first three Gospels were printed side by side for comparison. In fact, this three-fold tradition requires a common perspective in order to be understood and evaluated in its unity and diversity.

The Gospels were not written until between 35-70 years after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. At first, teachings concerning the
death and resurrection of Jesus Christ were circulated in oral form. When Jesus gathered His disciples He communicated to them orally. They simply had to retain His message by applying it to their daily life, retelling it and memorizing it. But as time went by the earliest Christians felt the need to have an authoritative written document about the life, teaching and ministry of Jesus Christ.

Factors That Led to the Writings of the Gospels

Before the writing of the NT books the teachings concerning the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ were circulated in oral form. When Jesus gathered his disciples He communicated to them orally. They simply had to retain His message by applying it to their life, retelling it and memorizing it. The earliest Christian’s faith and preaching (kerygma) was in oral form. Therefore, what served as the impetus for the writing down of these oral traditions is an area of great importance. The following points may be given as the most important factors that led to the writing of the Gospels.

(i) The Expansion of the Church

As Christianity spread out into the Greco-Roman world through its missionary activity Christianity came into direct contact with the literary culture of these lands. In such a context, the custom of oral instruction so vital to the Jews would not have appealed to the Gentile converts. This encounter with the literary world of the Greco-Romans had a great impact on the Christians who began to see immense value of the written word (William Barclay). Hence, the expansion of the Church gave them a felt-need to have a written scripture.

(ii) The Passing Away of the Eyewitnesses

After the middle of the 1st century, many of the original witnesses to the teaching and ministry of Jesus were dying off. The early Church could live on its memory only as long as believers could appeal to these witnesses when there were important questions to be answered. Therefore, to have a written account of the original teachings of Jesus was a very important need for its existence for which they had to avail the services of the eye witnesses of Jesus (John 21:24 “This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true”).

(iii) The Response to New Challenges

The infant Church had to counter constant attack both from within and without. The external threat to the Church arose out of its interaction with outside world. As Christianity spread, it became increasingly necessary to defend its doctrine from other religious and philosophical systems. Similarly, there were threats within the emerging Church in the form of false teachings (heresy). The church needed an authoritative and unified standard of teaching regarding the person of Jesus to confront false Christologies and other heresies (cf. Gospel of John and Gnosticism). Finally, there were apologetic and pastoral needs within the Christian community itself. A written document about the suffering of Jesus and His teachings about the impending persecution of His followers would have comforted and guided the Christians during the times of persecution and martyrdom (e.g. Matt. 5:11-12, 44; 13:20-21 and parallels).

(iv) The Need for Standard Instruction

As the Church grew it became necessary to instruct and strengthen the believers. The stories and sayings of Jesus were treasured by the believers as tools for evangelism and instruction in the faith. New converts needed instruction in Christian doctrine and practice to understand the changes that had taken place in their life so that they could accept the privileges and responsibilities of belonging to the body of Christ.

The writing down of the Gospels do not necessarily mean that oral traditions about Jesus came to an abrupt end because oral traditions continued throughout the Mediterranean world even after the first Gospel was written by Mark. Thus, there are many other sayings and teachings of Jesus which are not recorded in the Gospels (“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book” –John 20:30; 21:25; “But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written”).

“Jesus of History” and the “Christ of Faith”

Moreover, the synoptics seem to suggest that Jesus was very reluctant to make claims about himself. The evangelists, on the other hand, are all clearly convinced that Jesus was the Messiah and the Son of God and they either assumed or intended that their readers should share their conviction.

For these various reasons there is a supposed gap between Jesus who lived and taught in Galilee and the Jesus that is portrayed by the evangelists in their Gospels, a gap popularly referred to as the difference between “the Jesus of History” and the “Christ of Faith.”

“Jesus of History” and the “Christ of Faith” are placed as antithetical to each other. The research on “Jesus of History” tries to counter the Gospels’ presentation of Jesus. Are the virgin birth of Jesus, His
incarnation, crucifixion and bodily resurrection to be regarded as actual historical, space-time events? Or are they somehow mythological or metaphorical in the sense that they express some profound, superhistorical truths? Philosopher of religion, John Hick in his book “Metaphor of God Incarnate” recommends the second approach. This apparent dichotomy captures the major concern of the scholarly research on historical Jesus.\(^1\)

**Ends Notes**

\(^1\) A fuller discussion on this matter will be found under “Historical Jesus in Modern Scholarship” below.

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**The Formation of the Gospels**

Though the Gospels appear first in the NT they belong only to a later stage. Paradoxically, the Pauline letters constitute the earliest NT documents, only then the Gospels come. Again, Gospels were written backwards, i.e., what they attempted to write (the Christ-event) had taken place more than three decades earlier.

Scholars propose at least three stages of Gospel formation. They are:

(i) **The Public Ministry of Jesus (up to AD 30-33):**

Jesus preached orally, did many signs and wonders and interacted with others. He had companions who saw and heard what He did and said. These memories supplied the raw Jesus material for the writers.\(^1\) These memories were already selective since they concentrated on what pertained to Jesus’ message about God, not the ordinary details of His words and deeds. All the sayings and miracles of Jesus attracted both positive as well as negative response from the people.

(ii) **The Apostolic Preaching about Jesus (up to AD 60s):**

Even if some scholars talk about the unprovable claim about diaries in which His disciples collected sayings and deeds of Jesus, on the whole, the actual proclamation of Jesus was on an oral level. The post-resurrectional appearances of Jesus confirmed their faith in Jesus. Jesus’ messages were proclaimed orally and His followers heard and kept them in their hearts. Thus the traditions about Jesus up till the time of writing of the Gospels circulated in oral form. The apostles transmitted them orally in and through their preaching (kerygmatic proclamation) and teachings (Didache) intended to bring other to the new faith in Jesus. During this time, necessary adaptation of the preaching to a new audience was made who were acquainted with a different philosophical and religious orientations. The Gospel “of” Jesus took new shape and colour as it was...
presented to these new audiences. Scholars also opine that it was during this period that the oral traditions about Jesus were used and interpreted with a new consciousness – the easter consciousness.

(iii) The Period of the Writing of the Gospels (late 60s to 100)
Some of the oral traditions, according to scholars, which were in use within the new faith community with new flavour might have been collected in written form (now lost). During the time between Jesus’ public ministry and the writing of the Gospels lots of embellishments to the story of Jesus (oral traditions) were made. Therefore, many scholars argued that the Gospels Jesus (Jesus of Faith) is completely different from the real Jesus (Historical Jesus). In the same line of approach they argue that the Evangelists (Gospel writers) were not eye-witnesses of Jesus. Therefore, they had to depend on oral traditions about Jesus when they wrote the Gospels. The way they wrote or arranged the materials were prompted by the spiritual needs of the community to which each one of them wrote. That is why there are lots of differences among them. Raymond Brown suggests that the Gospels are not literal records of the ministry of Jesus and not true accounts of Jesus.

1. Source Criticism of the Gospels
1.1. The Synoptic Problem
Mark Goodacre defines Synoptic problem as “the study of the similarities and differences of the Synoptic Gospels in an attempt to explain their literary relationship.” The basic assumption of the Synoptic Problem is that the first three Gospels share some kind of literary relationship. In other words, there is some amount of dependence in some direction at a literary level. Occasionally some disagreement arises, but, on the whole, this is a firm consensus in scholarship. This consensus is based on the fact that there is considerable agreement between Matt, Mark and Luke on matters of language and order.

1.2. Solutions Proposed
1.2.1. Protogospels
In 1771, G. E. Lessing, a German writer and literary critics, suggested that all the three synoptic Gospels are dependent on an Aramaic Gospel, the Gospel of the Nazarene. Based on this assumption M. Schleiermacher opined that the disciples of Jesus had already noted down isolated sayings and deeds of Jesus. As first generation began to die off there was a strong felt-need to collect such records and as such one collected miracle stories, another collected speeches, and still another collected the passion and resurrection accounts. From these collections, according to Schleiermacher, developed our Gospels. M. Smith claimed Secret Mark, a conflated form of Mark known to Clement of Alexandria, which many believed to have been written in the 2nd century A.D., as representing more closely than the canonical Gospels the oldest detectable Christian gospel source and which, according to H. Koester, was in fact written before canonical Mark. Again J. D. Crossan put forward the priority of a shorter form of the Gospel of Peter from which the four canonical Gospels have drawn their passion narrative. But the majority opinion on these two sources is that both Secret Mark and the Gospel of Peter are dependent on the canonical Gospels.

Some suggest that there were oral sources alongside the written sources. M.-E. Boismard and A. Lamouille detected four source documents in a three-volume French Synopsis which was produced in the 1970s. They suggested that the Synoptic Gospels did not draw directly from them but through a pre-Gospel level: Document A of Palestinian and Jewish Christian origin c. AD 50; Document B, which is a reinterpretation of Document A for Gentile Christians written before AD 58; Document C, an independent Palestinian tradition in Aramaic; Document Q containing material common to both Matt and Luke. However, majority of the scholars like to draw from a relationship among the existing Gospels, rather than positing no-longer-extant protogospels.

1.2.2. Ur-Markus
B. H. Streeter detected some minor agreements between Matt and Luke against Mark in wording. This led some German scholars to suggest an Ur-Markus, a primitive/earlier form of Mark used by both Matt and Luke, now lost. In this theory our canonical Mark is a later revision of Ur-Markus. Streeter examined these minor agreements of Matt and Luke against Mark and concluded that in every case they are the result of adaptation of Luke to Matt in the course of textual transmission. Even when these minor agreements are removed, there are still two major agreements of omission: two miracle stories found in Mark 7:32ff. (dead & mute) and 8:22ff. (the blind man of Bethsaida). The advocates of the Ur-Markus theory hold that the original Mark (not our canonical Mark) did not contain these stories. This is doubtful because the stories in question play an integral part in Markan theology. The agreement in omission of these stories seems to be coincidence in intention.

1.2.3. Matthean Priority
In 1789 J. J. Griesbach proposed a theory in which the order was Matt,
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(iii) Both Matt and Luke generally support the sequence of Mark, where either of them deserts Mark, the other usually supports Mark.

(iv) The primitive character of Mark.

(v) The way in which Matt and Luke distribute the Markan and non-Markan material looks as if they have before them the Markan material in a single document.18

Thus, Mark is seen as the middle term and the provider of the Triple Tradition in both Matt and Luke.

1.2.4.2. “Q” Source

Based on Lachmann’s conclusion, C. G. Wilke and H Weisse, independently at the same time, proved that Mark represents the common source to both Matt and Luke, while Weisse expanded this theory by suggesting that there was a common source containing the sayings of Jesus, apart from Mark, available to both Matt and Luke. This collection of the sayings of Jesus was used by both Matt and Luke together with Mark to write their Gospels, which is called the “Q” (signifying the German word Quelle = Source).

This is the Two-Source Theory for the solution of the Synoptic problem of which H. J. Holtzmann was the strongest advocate. This theory is drawn from the observation that Matt and Luke have extensive common materials, which are not found in Mark, but that Luke could not have drawn directly from Matt or Matt from Luke.19 Therefore, Q is believed to be the source for the Double Tradition in Matt and Luke. The Q contains mostly the sayings of Jesus. T. W. Manson in his book The Sayings of Jesus attempted to trace the Q materials upon which Adolf von Harnack, Streeter and Bussmann also agree.20

1.2.4.3. Modified Two-Source Theory

Papias (in Eusebius, Historia ecclesiastica 3.39.16) claimed that Matt collected the logia (sayings) of Jesus in the Hebrew language and everyone translated them, as one was able. Based on this claim it is assumed that there must have been an Aramaic gospel of apostolic origin, and it has been acknowledged that the agreements between Matt and Luke in the Markan material point to a common source for all the three Synoptics. Thus, P. Benoit and L. Vaganay have said that all the three evangelists used a Greek translation of Matt, with Matt and Luke accessing a special source. Matt is believed to be closer to the Aramaic Matt while Mark shortened the Aramaic Matt with some expansion with the help of a source of preaching of Peter in Rome.21

1.2.4. Two-Source Theory

The Two-Source Theory holds that Matt and Luke used independently of Mark and “Q”, a lost collection of the sayings of Jesus while compiling their own gospels. This hypothesis is briefly surveyed below.

1.2.4.1. Markan Priority

C. Lachmann suggested that Matt and Luke agree only when they follow the order of Mark and thus concluded that Mark represents the tradition in its earliest form.16 There are five reasons for Markan priority.

(i) Common Subject Matter: Out of 661 verses in Mark, a total of 601 verses are found in Matt and Luke. Matt reproduces 90% of Mark while Luke reproduces more than 50% of Mark.17

(ii) There is verbal agreement among the three synoptists, but Matt and Luke never agree against Mark’s wording.

(iii) Both Matt and Luke generally support the sequence of Mark, where either of them deserts Mark, the other usually supports Mark.

(iv) The primitive character of Mark.

(v) The way in which Matt and Luke distribute the Markan and non-Markan material looks as if they have before them the Markan material in a single document.18

Thus, Mark is seen as the middle term and the provider of the Triple Tradition in both Matt and Luke.


1.2.4.5. Limitations of Two-Source Theory

(i) Even if the independent character of Matt from Luke and vice versa is assumed, there are numerous minor agreements between Matt and Luke. It is also assumed that their agreements in order and in wording in the Triple Tradition are derived from Mark and their agreement in wording alone in the Double Tradition is mediated through Q. But there are numerous minor agreements between Matt and Luke against Mark in the Triple Tradition. For example, in the passage about the healing of the paralytic in Mark 2:1-12; Matt 9:1-8 and Luke 5:17-26, Matt and Luke use some common words against Mark like behold, on a bed, bed [little bed], went away into his house, etc., and there are some agreements in omission of Mark’s words like carried by four, in his spirit, to the paralytic, take up your pallet, immediately, etc., in both Matt and Luke. This posits a problem with regard to the two-source theory: If both Matt and Luke were independent of each other why are there agreements between Matt and Luke in the Triple Tradition against Mark? Many scholars who hold on to the Two-Source hypothesis argue that the minor agreements are the result of coincidence, accident, or textual corruption. However, their argument does not solve the problem definitively. 22

(ii) Streeter proposed five principal instances of Mark-Q overlap: John the Baptist’s Preaching; the Baptism and Temptation; the Beelzebub controversy; the parables of the Mustard Seed and Leaven; and the Mission Charge. 23 If Mark and Q are two independent sources, it appears that there is verbatim agreement in Greek between them. For example, in the pericopae on the Temptation of Jesus, Matt and Luke have a large section not found in Mark at all: all the account of the three temptations. But all the three Synoptists have a common basic statement that Jesus went into the desert and was tempted, which is an overlap. And according to the Two-Source Theory Matt and Luke copied Q therefore agree each other against Mark. Mark and Q overlap since there are triple agreements. But we see here that the overlap creates verbatim agreement in Greek between Mark and Q. How can there be considerable verbatim agreement in Greek between two independent sources? This leads us to posit an original material in Greek from which both Mark and Q drew or that Mark and Q are dependent on each other. 24

W.G. Kümmel does not deny “some sort of traditional connection” between Mark and Q “but that does not lead to the assumption that this connection – which concerns only an extremely small part of the material in Q and Mark – is to be explained on the basis of a literary link between the two.” 25 He takes the oral tradition in a very loose way to see the connection between the writers. Therefore, contacts among the traditional material cannot be explained only in terms of this literary relationship, and since there is no point of finding a literary dependence between Mark and Q, the time of the date of writing Q cannot be established on this way, so he proposes a date before c. 50-70 A.D. 26

1.2.5. Four-Source Hypothesis

Streeter posits 27 the existence of two other sources apart from Mark and Q – “M”, a special material of Matt and “L”, a special material of Luke, which he called “Proto-Luke”. From their respective special sources both Matt and Luke drew materials, which are not found either in Mark or Q.

1.2.5.1. The Special Matthean Material

According to Streeter, the special material to Matt, M is:

- Characterized by a conspicuously Jewish atmosphere; and, though rich in anti-Pharisaic polemic, it asserts the obligation of obeying not only the Law but “the tradition of the scribes,” and it has a distinctly anti-Gentile bias. It reflects the spirit and outlook with which in the New Testament the name of James is associated. 28
- The source M will naturally be connected with Jerusalem, the headquarters of the James party. 29

To this source is assigned the following passages: Matt chaps 1-2, 3:14f; 17:24-27; 27:3-10, 19, 24, 52f; chap 28; OT quotations and teaching material. However, it is very difficult to judge when material is from Q but not used by Luke, or when material is an editorial addition of Matt. But it is clear that we have here a body of material comparable in its forms to that of Q. Manson believed that it came from a single document arranged in a topical order and corresponding closely to the arrangement of Q by Luke. However we cannot be sure of it because of Matt’s habit of conflation for Matt might have combined Q with his special material wherever it appeared suitable. But at least we can say that the special material of Matt is remarkably similar to that of Q in its content. 29

1.2.5.2. Special Lukan Material

Streeter also writes this about his presuppositions of the origin of “L” which eventually led Luke to write the canonical Gospel:

I suggest that the author of Proto-Luke – the person, I mean, who combined together in one document Q and the bulk of the material peculiar to the Third Gospel - was no other than Luke the companion of Paul. And I suggest that this same Luke some years afterwards expanded his own early work by prefixing the stories of the Infancy and by inserting extracts from Mark – no doubt at the same time making certain minor alterations and
additions...I hold that the author of the Third Gospel and the Acts was Luke the companion of Paul, who kept the diary which forms the basis of the so-called “we sections” or “travel document” in the latter part of Acts. Luke during the two years he was at Caesarea in the company of Paul made good use of his opportunities of collecting information and made copious notes. Later on, probably not till after the death of Paul, a copy of Q came his way, and on the basis of this and his own notes he composed Proto-Luke as a Gospel for the use of the Church in the place where he was then living. Still later a copy of Mark came his way, and he then produced the second and enlarged edition of his Gospel that has come down to us.30

He assigns these following passages to the Proto-Luke: Luke 3: 1-4:30; 5:1-11; 6:14-16; 6:20-8:3; 9:51-18:14; 19:1-27; 37-44; 21:18, 34-36; 22:14 to the end of the Gospel, except for the verses derived from Mark the identification of which is very problematical.31 As a concluding remark he writes, “Thus a Four Document Hypothesis not only offers an extremely simple explanation of all the difficulties which the Two Document Hypothesis cannot satisfactorily meet, but also reflects far better the historical situation in the primitive Church.”32 But Manson contests that there is no indication of topical arrangement in the special Lukan material and concludes that it “was not a written document, but oral tradition.”33

Thus, in this Four-Source Theory both Matt and Luke rely on two common sources, viz., Mark and Q, which provide the point of agreement in the Triple and Double Traditions. And apart from these two common sources both of them have a unique source of their own, viz., Matt has “M” and Luke has “L” from which each of them derive their own special materials that are not found in the other two Gospels, as the point of departure.

The Proto-Luke theory does not garner much support. V. Taylor and Manson in England, B.S. Easton, A.M. Perry and J.M. Robinson in USA and J. Jeremias in Germany followed it. Whereas others like J.M. Creed outrightly rejected it and the argument against this theory is that it is too fragmentary to be a gospel.34

1.2.6 Boismard’s Hypothesis35

Boismard offered a different hypothesis which sees multiple documents and also multiple editions of each gospel. He proposes three extra sources: “A”, a Palestinian proto-gospel; “B”, a Gentile-Christian revision of “A”, which is also the primary source of Intermediate Mark; “C”, an independent and old Palestinian origin. In this hypothesis, Intermediate Mark and Q play the same role as is assumed in Two-Source Theory: Intermediate Mark supplies the narrative framework for the synoptics and “Q” supplies the sayings material common to both Matt and Luke. The final Mark, final Matt and final Luke are the Gospels as we have now and they are the revised versions of Intermediate Mark, Intermediate Matt and Proto-Luke respectively. Intermediate Mark is dependent on “A”, “B”, and “C”; Intermediate Matt depended on “Q” and “A”, and Proto-Luke depended on “B”, “C”, Intermediate Matt and “Q”. The Final Matt depended on Intermediate Matt and Intermediate Mark; Final Mark depended on Intermediate Matt, Intermediate Mark and Proto-Luke, and finally, Final Luke depended on Intermediate Matt, Intermediate Mark and Proto-Luke. Thus, according to this hypothesis, the final form of each gospel was dependent on the earlier version of at least two of the gospels.

It has certain advantages:

(i) It deals satisfactorily with the interdependence of the Gospels that Luke knew Matt, since Intermediate Matt was used by Proto-Luke.

(ii) It allows for ‘Matthaeanisms’ in Mark, ‘Markanisms’ in Matt, and vice versa among the three Gospels.

(iii) Since it projects Final Mark as dependent on both Intermediate Matt and Proto-Luke, which had used Q, it explains the verbatim agreement when Mark and Q overlaps.

E.P. Sanders and Margaret Davies support this hypothesis.36 However, it combines complication, precision and hypothetical documents in a way that resists evidence and the relationships are complicated.

1.2.7 Evaluation and Conclusion

As a matter of fact, no hypothesis put forward for the solution of the Synoptic problem solves all difficulties and problems. There are some scholars who even say that the three Synoptic Gospels existed independently in three different environments. Therefore, the literary dependence among the Synoptic evangelists, which is the core of the Synoptic problem, is ruled out as Eta Linnemann puts it: “If there is no proof for literary dependence then it makes no sense to offer theories to tell who was dependent on whom.”37 And,

It is fair to conclude, then, that accounts from ancient Christian sources point to the rise of the three Synoptic Gospels during a span of three or four years, in three different locales separated from each other by hundreds of kilometers. This rules out a literary dependence. Nothing is to be found in the Gospels themselves that contradicts what these ancient sources affirm.38

Thus, in our final analysis, there are numerous “hypotheses” for the solution of Synoptic problem and no hypothesis offers an all-
encompassing solution. But for now, to accept Markan priority seems best for it solves more problems than the Matthean priority. Again, Two-Source Theory, without much of its complications, seems to offer better solution. For each Gospel writer might have availed different versions of oral traditions to which they might have employed their own selections and interpretations according to their own purpose of writing. It is highly improbable that they had their diaries full with notes about Jesus’ words and works. As disciples of Jesus (Matt and John?) and as disciples/companions (Mark and Luke) of the eyewitnesses of the works and teachings of Jesus they might have witnessed an event together and while writing down they remembered the original words of Jesus and hence ended with same words and settings. This will account for similarities among the three gospels. Similarly, to another event they could have recollected differently. Moreover, to regard the Evangelists as mere collectors of the traditions do not do justice to their literary creativity because they are interpreters and theologians at their own right. As they began to write their own accounts they could have relied more on their own memory or testimony which made them to agree and disagree on certain points. As such differences in their account about the same event are possible because they made interpretations of the material from different perspectives. All these are possible through which sometimes one account is presented similarly and another differently.

2. Aims of Form Criticism

(i) To analyze the smaller units of traditional materials according to their forms and shape they are assumed during their oral, pre-literary period.

(ii) To study the history of the oral traditions behind the Gospels.

(iii) To discover their Sitz im Leben, i.e., the actual, concrete occasion for which the young Church(es) formed and used the tradition(s).

(iv) To know Jesus as he really was in the minds and thoughts of those who knew Him in the flesh that we shall know the “Jesus of History” as He was before the Gospels were written, i.e. during the formative period. This we may be able to do by learning how material was understood before it was included after editing in the Gospel(s).

(v) To discover the forms and styles of the traditional material of the Gospels that is not to be confused with ahistorical (non-historical) valuation which determines whether the events narrated were true or not.

2.2. The Axioms of Form Criticism

According to the Form critics the Evangelists were not authors but collectors of traditions and editors. Their task consisted of collecting, choosing/sifting, grouping, reshaping and handing down the tradition. They would argue that the Gospels are popular or folk literature. They are not primarily the work of one person or one mind but collective effort of a community is involved. Therefore they belong to the community. The stories passed on through the communities where their shape was determined.
2.4. Some Form Critics on the Gospels

2.4.1. K.L. Schmidt

The form-critical era began in 1919 with the publication of Schmidt’s *The Framework of the History of Jesus*. His contention was that the SG were mosaic-like collections of short episodes from the life of Jesus, which had circulated as independent units in the periods of oral transmission and few of which had any indication of time or place of origin. Mark supplied a framework of connecting links and “bridge passages” (Sammelberichte, generalizing summaries like 1:14-15, 21-22; 2:13, etc.) for these separate, self-contained units. This framework, according to Schmidt, is a product of Markan theological concerns rather than a picture of the life of Jesus. In form-critical terminology Mark reflects not the original situation, i.e. *Sitz im Leben Jesu*, but more of the *Sitz im Leben der Kirke* and *Sitz im Leben Evangelium*. The early Christian community for which and in which Mark wrote his Gospel, argues Schmidt, preserved and adapted stories relevant for its life, its worship, its pastoral and missionary concerns.

2.4.2. Martin Dibelius

Dibelius was the first to apply Form Criticism to the Synoptic tradition. Indeed the term form criticism came to be used in biblical studies after the title of his volume *Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums*. He wrote that the SG were not literary works in the strict sense of the word but literature designed for popular consumption. The Synoptic Evangelists were not true authors but rather compilers of pre-existing materials. His purpose was to explain by reconstruction and analyzes “the origin of the tradition about Jesus and thus to penetrate into a period previous to that in which our Gospels and their written sources were recorded and to make clear the intention and real interest of the earliest tradition.”

2.4.3. Rudolf Bultmann

In the *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (1921) Bultmann established himself as a pioneer form critic of the NT. Following the work of William Wrede and J. Welhausen, he assumed that Mark’s Gospel did not furnish us with an outline of the progress of Jesus’ ministry. Mark himself had used a source comprised of a series of disconnected units (pericopae) that recounted incidents or sayings in the life of Jesus. According to him the actual Jesus (“Jesus of History) and His words or sayings are hidden under layers of myths and traditions which hinder a modern reader of the Gospels from knowing the real Jesus. To know the actual Jesus one must peel off the layers that cover Him. In order to get rid of these layers of traditions he propounded a theory called demythologization.

by the shared needs of the group. Hence, determining the *Gospel Communities* is an important task.

During this oral period the traditions about Jesus circulated as independent units or *pericopae*. These traditions, however, were not prize in end for themselves; they were valued for the help and guidance they gave on the needs and problems of the young churches as they met for worship, engaged in missionary preaching, instructed converts, argued with Jews and so on.

During the oral stage these *units of traditions* assumed particular form according to the function which they performed in the Christian community. Form critics recognized certain forms or categories in the Gospel tradition.

2.3. Various Forms of the Gospel Traditions

(i) *Paradigm* (Martin Dibelius); *Apologetms* (Bultmann) or *Pronouncement Stories* (Vincent Taylor) are brief accounts, told with a minimum extraneous detail and design to lead up to a single saying of Jesus, “the pronouncement”, which forms the climax of the story.

(ii) *Tales or Novellen* (Dibelius); *Miracle Stories* (Bultmann and Taylor) are larger stories which contain far more detail materials than the paradigms.

(iii) *Legends* (Dibelius and Bultmann) are understood to be religious narrative of a single person whose work and fate interest is taken.

(iv) *Myths* (Dibelius) are many sided interactions between mythological, but not human person.

(v) *Saying of Jesus* which include Jesus’ proverbial sayings, prophetic and apocalyptic sayings, legal sayings, “I Am” and parabolic sayings.

Form critics insist that these distinctive forms are not creation by accident or free invention but are determined by the setting in which they arose and the purpose for which they are used.

The NT form critics distinguish three levels of *Sitz im Leben*:

(i) *Sitz im Leben Jesu* (situation in the life of Jesus), i.e., the actual context in which a form of a material originated with Jesus.

(ii) *Sitz im Leben der Kirke* (situation in the life of the early Church) during which the original form of a tradition/material underwent changes with the additions of materials by the Church.

(iii) *Sitz im Leben Evangelium* (situation in the Gospels), i.e. the context in which Jesus’ sayings or His story is used in the Gospel itself.
Bultmann classified the different forms into four categories:

(i) **Apophthegms**: They present an incident or saying of Jesus in order to show its character as significant for the early Christian community. Its *Sitz im Leben* is that of the early Church rather than the Christian community.

(ii) **Dominical Sayings**: He divided the dominical sayings into wisdom utterances, legal sayings and apocalyptic and eschatological utterances. Wisdom utterances have a direct link to Rabbinic literature and are put into Jesus’ mouth by a Christian scribe. Many of legal sayings are Jesus’ genuine sayings. The apocalyptic and eschatological sayings reflect the concerns of the early Church, like the delayed parousia.

(iii) **Miracle Stories**: They probably grew up around the memory of Jesus in a way similar to tales of heroes and leaders in the ancient world.

(iv) **Legends**: Legends or historical stories are narratives whose main intention is religious rather than historical. The baptism of Jesus, Peter’s confession of Jesus at Caesarea Philippi, entry into Jerusalem, the Last Supper and the resurrection narratives are legendary in character.

2.5. The Contribution of Form Criticism

FC helps us to penetrate into a period between 30-50 A.D., before any of our NT documents were written down, i.e. the pre-literary stage of the oral tradition. It has given us clues about methods of preaching and teaching among the earliest Christians and about their conflicts with the Jewish opponents. It stimulated the study of the Gospel origin and its method of research has a wider scope in future.

It also helps us to know the background and setting of the NT documents which we would not know otherwise. Another significant contribution of historical critical method in general and FC in particular is the accepted dictum that a proper understanding of the historical background of the texts is pre-requisite to any genuine biblical interpretation.

FC, by its search for the *Sitz im Leben*, also enables us to discover why and how a particular story was used in the early Church. FC depicts the Church as a living organism and strengthens the argument of literary criticism that Gospel took shape under the protection of the living Church.

2.6. Drawbacks of Form Criticism

(i) By its emphasis on *formor style* FC tends to neglect the literary unity of the biblical narratives or texts.

(ii) It also de-emphasizes the literary credibility of the authors by projecting their over-reliance on the existing materials.

(iii) Above all, many of the conclusions which it has drawn remain in the realm of probability, hypothesis, and speculation, and at many times, even contradictory.

3. Redaction Criticism (*Redaktionsgeschichte*)

Redaction Criticism (RC) is primarily concerned with the investigation of how the authors used their sources. The SG have attracted special attention among the scholars in working and applying RC into the study of the NT. The term “redaction criticism” (from German *redaktionsgeschichte*) was coined by German scholar Willi Marxsen.

By the middle of the 20th century, the Synoptic studies began to see the Evangelists as far more than just “editors” putting their materials together in a rather mechanical way by means of “cut and paste”. RC sees the Evangelists as far more creative and theologically active in what they had done. This work of adapting the traditions that were available to the Evangelists had come to be known as “redaction,” and the whole process of analyzing the way in which they have creatively used the tradition is known as “redaction criticism”. In other words, according to Norman Perrin, a redaction critic, RC “refers to the whole range of creative activities which are detect in the evangelist, an author, a transmitter of tradition, and in which and by means of which we learn something of the author’s, transmitter’s theology.” Thus the focus of RC is to discover information about the author’s intention from the way in which the story is told.

RC consolidated its place in the field of biblical criticism beginning with the publication of a short article by Günther Bornkamm in 1948 and later on pursued by others like Hans Conzelmann and Willi Marxsen.

3.1. Difference between RC and Form and Source Criticisms

In the FC the text is dissected into various literary forms which are said to have floated orally during the pre-literary stage and the writers were simply seen as “compilers” or “collectors” who randomly made a “scissor-and-paste” operation and nothing else beyond that. As such, the creative activities as well as the motives of the writers were completely overlooked by FC and no logic was seen in the arrangements made by the Evangelists. It is against this failure of FC the RC emerged to rectify and act as a methodical correlative of FC.

Similarly, the SC failed to see the theological handiwork and artistry of the writers because it is said that since no author lives in a total vacuum so the Evangelists must have used existing sources to compile their
writings. Thus SC analyzes the texts into their components and in the process situates them to particular historical setting with respect to time and place. Hence no importance is attributed to the writers’ intention or theological perspective in incorporating such materials. What has been implied in the SC is the role of the authors as creative artists once the sources were delineated. But this aspect was neglected and hence RC tries to focus on it and so RC is said to be a side effect of SC.44

3.2. Redaction Criticism in the Synoptic Gospels

Based on the priority of Mark and the existence of “Q”, redaction critics worked on the SG. The theological interests of Matt and Luke may be detected from a careful comparison of the additions, modifications and omissions of their Markan source. In the study of the SG, RC tries to expose the interpolations, extrapolations and alterations of words and phrases.45 It tries to discover why certain materials or pericopae are clubbed together or separated46 and places the *Sitz im Leben* in the life of the evangelists.47 As such, RC looks at the evangelists as the “oldest exegetes” or interpreters of Christian tradition and not merely as lethargic editors.48 By doing so RC seeks to expose the theological perspectives and motives of the evangelists in their individuality and at the same time, unlike FC and SC, it looks upon the gospels as complete documents. Thus RC works with the following points in mind: (i) studying the seams; (ii) noting the summaries; (iii) analyzing the editorial asides and insertions, (iv) studying the repeated or favourite words/phrases.49

3.2.1. Redaction Criticism on Mark

Marxsen suggests two procedures for applying RC on Mark: (i) a separation of tradition from redaction so that the composition of Mark may be illuminated, (ii) attention to the altered points of view of Matt and Luke in order to get a clearer grasp of what is typically Markan. This procedure is used in studies of JBap, the geographical outline of Mark, the concept of the “gospel,” and Mark 13.50 The best areas for detecting Markan redactional emphasis are the “seams” (“the cement” Mark uses to join together different traditions); the explanatory and theological insertions found at various places in the texts; the summaries he constructed using various traditional materials; the selection of materials included; the arrangement of materials; the introduction and typical vocabulary of Mark.

Application of RC on Mark shows that the focus of his theology is the Kingdom of God51 and a particular feature of Mark’s Christology is the “Messianic Secret” which is seen as Mark’s own redactional activity and reveal his own ideas as well as the authority of Jesus. R.H. Stein52 observes that Mark 8:31-10:45 reflects the author’s redactional activity where we find the threefold recurring pattern: (i) prediction about the Parousia of Jesus, (ii) disciples misunderstanding, and (iii) collection of teachings on the meaning of discipleship.

3.2.2. Redaction Criticism on Matthew

The application of RC on Matt shows that he has edited his main source-Mark, enlarged by the insertion of materials from other sources (Q and M) and revised so as to provide a teaching manual for the Church of his own day. RC has also shown that Matt has neatly arranged the materials particularly under five long discourses (5-7; 10; 13; 18; 23-25). By comparing Matt 8:23-27 with Mark 4:35-41 Bornkamm demonstrated that Matt not only changed but re-interpreted the stilling of the storm scene in the direction of discipleship.53 He also uncovered the law as the link between the church and end-expectation in Matt, a point later more comprehensively taken up by Gerhard Barth and H.J. Held; a union of end-expectation and conception of the church that is peculiar to Matt in discourses of John the Baptist.

3.2.3. Redaction Criticism on Luke-Acts

The study of Luke-Acts reveals that in his redactional activity Luke demonstrates that God through Jesus was faithful to promise to Israel, but in an unexpected way include Gentiles, the unclean, the poor, women, Samaritans and assorted other outcasts as well as the “elect” people who repented and, as Robert J. Karris observes,54 in this “reconstituted Israel” is found the continuity with the old. Working on Lukan redactional style, Conzelmann argues that in his two volume work Luke tries to solve the problem of delayed Parousia. Thus he describes God’s plan of salvation as consisting of three distinct periods or epochs: the period of the prophets which promised salvation (ending with JBap); the period of Jesus who fulfilled the prophetic promise; and the period of the Church – the age of the Spirit which looks forward to the Parousia of Christ. Thus, the contribution of the evangelists is shown by RC not only by the small details where they change the wording of their sources but “by the way in which the whole story is arranged.”55

3.3. Some Limitations of Redaction Criticism

(i) *Dependence on the Four Document Hypothesis*: One of the fallacies of RC is that it takes for granted the four document hypothesis propounded by B. H. Streeter56 as the final solution for the Synoptic Problem.
(ii) **Problem of Fragmentation:** Another problem associated with RC is the tendency toward fragmentation because it concentrates only on the additions to the tradition. This “disintegration” process is called the “problem of interpretative priority” by Scot McKnight.57

(iii) **Overstatement.** Many proponents of RC assume that every jot and tittle of the author’s changes carries theological weight. They seem to forget that many changes are stylistic rather than theological overlooking quite often that the evangelists were paraphrasing rather than quoting their sources verbatim.

(iv) **Subjectivism.** While redaction critics study and analyze the same material employing RC they produce different results which others charge as subjective reading of the texts.58

**Ends Notes**

3 Fuller discussion on this will be discussed under “Historical Jesus in Modern Scholarship”.
20 Kümmel, *Introduction*, 63-64.
21 It begins with the eschatological proclamation of John the Baptist, temptation of Jesus, the Great Sermon, the healing of the centurion’s son, Jesus’ sending of the disciples, sayings about the John the Baptist, and anti-Pharisaic sayings, and concludes with the eschatological sayings about the Parousia. See Fuller, *Critical Introduction*, 73-73.
24 E. P. Sanders and Margaret Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels*, 78-83.
28 Streeter, *The Four Gospels*, 76.
30 The Four Gospels, 222.
31 The Four Gospels, 269.
32 Cited by Fuller, *Critical Introduction*, 77.
33 Fuller, *Critical Introduction*, 79.
34 See E. P. Sanders and Margaret Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels*, 105-106.
35 *Studying the Synoptic Gospels*, 113, 117.
45 Christopher Tuckett, *Reading the New Testament*, 120.
47 G. Bornkamm, “The Stilling of the Storm in Matthew,” Günther Bornkamm, G.


“Redaction Criticism (NT),” 649.


Interpreting the Synoptic Gospels, Eighth Printing (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker, 2002), 90.

D.A. Carson opines in this regard: “…the tools are incapable of providing an entirely neutral and agreed judgment as to what is authentic.” See D.A. Carson, “Redaction Criticism: On the Legitimacy and Illegitimacy of a Literary Tool,” *Scripture and Truth*, Eds., D.A. Carson & John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan, 1983), 126.

3

**The Gospel Genre**

The word “genre” is derived from the French word for “kind,” “species” or “gender,” hence it refers to a specific category or type of literature, such as biography or novel. Every writing follows a specific genre. To determine a writing’s genre the following factors are to be considered: formal features (e.g., structure, style, motifs, devices), author’s intention, compositional process, setting of author, setting of intended use and contents.

Scholars are unanimous in referring to the Gospels as a literary genre. How did the idea of writing the Gospels come about? Did it have its origin in the OT? Was it an imitation of a Greco-Roman genre? Was it a unique creative insight of the Evangelists? Or was it rather a natural development from early Christian preaching? Are the Gospels history or biographies? In short, how do we assess the genre or literary form of an entire “gospel”?

By the end of the 19th century scholars argued that the Gospels share close affinities to Greco-Roman biographies. But in modern era this identification has been widely rejected. Gospels differ from biographies, especially modern ones, in a large scale. There is no record about the birth, childhood and adulthood of Jesus in Mark and John. While Matthew and Luke add the genealogies of Jesus and the events surrounding Jesus’ birth, they differ significantly in great detail. Modern scholarship on the Gospels not only looks for ancient biographies and history but even beyond that to characterize the genre of the Gospels.

1. **Antecendent in the Old Testament**

W. M. Swartley contends that the structure of the Synoptic Gospels (SG) was dictated by the OT story of God’s dealing with Israel. In the Book of Jeremiah we have the prophet’s background and dating (1:1-3), report of his call (1:4-10), an account of his words and prophetic actions (chap. 7), warnings of impending doom for Jerusalem, and a type of passion narrative (chaps. 26, 37-38). Similarly, some see that like Jeremiah, the Gospels also join together many elements. By 1st century AD we find a
Jewish work, the *Lives of the Prophets*, which recounts a few or many details about the various prophets: e.g. birth, signs, dramatic deeds, death, and burial place. Thus some see certain kinds of similarities between these writings and the Gospels and conclude that the Gospel writers imitated these writings while they wrote the Gospels.

2. Gospels as Biographies

Greco-Roman literature during the New Testament milieu abounded in various types of biographies and scholars propose that the Evangelists imitated them in writing about Jesus. These are some important ones:

2.1. Gospels as Aretalogies

Aretalogies are accounts of episodes from the life of a “divine man” (*theios aner*) with supernatural abilities to do wonders. “*Theios aner*” designates an alleged type of religio-philosophical hero, legendary or historical, characterized by moral virtue, wisdom and/or supernatural power so that they were held to be divine. J.M. Robinson and H. Koester saw Hellenistic aretalogies lying behind the biblical Gospels. The history-of-religions school attempted to define the Jesus of the Gospels as a Hellenistic “*theios aner*.” They argued that most of the Gospels’ miracle stories were formulated, if not created outright, by Gentile Christians in order to magnify and win converts for Jesus, the superior “*theios aner*”. For this, they took the Christological title “son of God” as equivalent to “*theios aner*”. However, T.J. Weeden argued that the purpose of writing Mark was to combat a Christology that pictures Jesus as a “divine man” trying to correct that triumphalist view by putting primary stress on the necessity of Jesus’ suffering.

The possible similarities between aretalogies and the Gospels’ presentation of Jesus may be found in the birth narrative of Jesus where Jesus is said to have been conceived by Mary through the activity of the Holy Spirit and without any physical role of Joseph. Hence Jesus is born out of a connection between human Mary and divine Holy Spirit, making Jesus the “divine-man”. Not only that, but His ability to do wonders also points towards a possible connection between aretalogies and the canonical Gospels.

2.2. Gospels as Laudatory Biography

The primary concern of such biographies was to show the greatness of the figure. Laudatory biographies did not attempt to give a full description or record of the subject’s life or his achievements but only certain aspects from his life in order to show how great a man he was. When we compare such laudatory biographies with the Gospels’ portraits of Jesus then we find that the Gospels also do not give a full account of Jesus’ life and works. Rather they give only some selected parts of Jesus’ works so as to show His greatness. However that was not the sole aim of the Evangelists when they made the selections of Jesus’ works.

2.3. Gospels as Comedies

Comedies are such writings in which stories end with a triumphant ending. The protagonist faces opposition and hardships but, in spite of all the hindrances and hostilities, he emerges victorious at the end. Similarly, Jesus faces lots of resistance and adversities from different quarters. Sometimes He seems to be losing the battle in the struggle and with His crucifixion and death He seems to have utterly lost the fight. But at the end He emerges victorious when He is raised from the dead.

2.4. Gospels as Tragedies

Tragedies are stories in which the protagonist is defeated, despite having shown signs of greatness. Those portions of the Gospels which show Jesus in conflict with the religious and political opponents and throughout the narrative He seems to defeat His adversaries. When faced with difficult accusations He counter attacks His opponents and silences them. But at the end He meets a tragic end at their hands when He is condemned and put to death by his opponents.

2.5. Gospels as Stories about Immortals and Eternals

Others consider the portrayal of *immortals* and of *eternals* in which humans (sometimes begotten by gods) could become immortals at death, whereas eternals were divine beings who descended to earth, lived as humans, and then ascended to heaven again. For C.H. Talbert, the SG portray Jesus as an immortal while John presents him as eternal, but this conclusion, in the opinion of R.E. Brown, “needs serious qualifications.”

3. Gospels as History

Perhaps, one of the earliest views about the genre of the Gospels is that they are regarded as “histories”. Most of the events recorded in the Gospels are historical and true to fact. They happened in concrete history even though there are considerable differences in details. The events that have occurred or made to happen by Jesus are historical. Therefore, there is no denying about the historicity of the main story recorded in the Gospels. The characters like Jesus, Augustus, King Herod, Pilate, are all historical figures. Mention of places like Jerusalem, Sea of Galilee, Nazareth and the descriptions about them match with the geography of Palestine. Similarly, healings of sick people, crucifixion of Jesus, etc., are all historical.
However, Gospels are not pure history. Everything that is recorded are not actual accounts of the facts. For example, the story about the “flight to Egypt” in Matt 2 seems to be unhistorical. Likewise, the historical factness of many stories narrated in the Gospels are doubtful just like in the case of the “census” in Luke 2. That is why, the Gospels are historical but lacks historicity.12

Take Luke for instance. Until recently Luke-Acts was read as a “history” of Christian origins. The two-volume work was considered a vast storehouse of information for reconstructing what happened in the lives of Jesus and his earliest followers. However modern times have brought a new consciousness in reading Luke-Acts thereby making the historical approach to fall on hard times. When the approach on Luke as a historian was waning away I. Howard Marshall in his book Luke: Historian and Theologian argues that we need to revive this approach and rehabilitate Luke as a serious historian. But there are several instances by which Luke’s competence as a historian is called into serious question. For example, there are several discrepancies between his account about the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 and the account given by Paul who was actually there in Gal 2 or Luke’s geographical knowledge about Palestine seems so inadequate. Furthermore, it is doubtful whether Luke intended to write history or something else. Luke wrote to proclaim, to persuade, and to interpret; he did not write to preserve accurate records for posterity. Such an awareness has been the final nail in Luke the historian’s coffin.

But against this Marshall argues that it is Luke’s view of theology that leads him to write history. He says that for Luke faith must be rooted in history, even though it involves more than mere acceptance of historical facts.

All these are possible because in the prologue Luke emphasizes the accuracy with which he writes giving his own credentials as one who has “followed everything closely” (1:3), stressing the reliability of his sources, some of whom are “eyewitnesses” (1:2), and stating his intent to present things “accurately” and “in order” (1:3-4). All this indicates that Luke does intent to be taken seriously as a historian.

4. Gospels are Narratives/Stories

Gospels contain narrative features. They are a piece of writing or literature which were written in a particular style with a particular intention. They are intended to convey a message through a combination of many factors like language, persons or characters and the roles they play, a plot or organization of the story, tone in which something is expressed, etc. All these combine together to form how the story is narrated by the narrator.

Take the Gospel according to Luke as a case study on Gospels as narrative. Luke, the narrator is an artist – his literary art, his skill in composing a narrative. No doubt, there is, in recent times, an increasing interest in the Gospels as narrative.13 Robert J. Karris, a veteran Lukan scholar, in his book Luke: Artist and Theologian: Luke’s Passion Account as Literature has incorporated this approach to Luke. Karris views Luke’s Gospel as a “kerygmatic story”, i.e. as a story that intents to proclaim the good news about Jesus and the rule of God. He finds the work replete with “themes” that the author artistically develops throughout the narrative. For example, the themes of “faithfulness”, “justice” and “food”.

Another milestone in this approach in Lukan study is Robert C. Tanehill’s The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation.14 Tanehill reads Luke’s story as more than a string of episodes but argues that Luke’s Gospel has a unified plot, as can be seen by its internal connections, developed character roles, and unifying purpose. As such he would show that the internal connections consist of literary “echoes and reminders” that relate various parts of the narrative to each other. Luke’s story is replete with touches like this that serve as “an internal commentary on the story, clarifying meanings and suggesting additional nuances.”

In addition, the Gospel is characterized by an abundance of “previews and reviews”, statements that direct the readers ahead to what is going to happen (e.g. 9:22; 44; 18:31-33; 22:21) or back to reconsider what has already happened (e.g. 24:7, 25-26, 44, 46). He also finds Luke presenting and developing his characters with consistency and purpose (e.g. Jesus, the hero; his opponents – the religious authorities, disciples). More than anything else, Tanehill points out that it is Luke’s concept of divine purpose that makes his two-volume work a “narrative unity”. As such, God’s purpose is announced by angels (1:23-17, 3-37; 2:10-14), prophetic predictions (1:46-55, 66-74; 2:29-35, 38) and quotations from scriptures (3:4-6; 4:18-19) all point to the same thing: universal salvation. If the Gospel ends like a tragedy with promises unfulfilled Acts carries on the story that the rejection of Jesus by the Jews opens up the gate for the Gentiles to come to the kingdom thereby fulfilling the promise of the universal salvation.

5. Gospels as Theologies

Though Gospels are based in history they are theological books written by faith/believing community for faith. What happened in past is “interpreted” by the Evangelists for the sake of theology. They look back at history and historical persons and events from the perspective of faith. Gospels are post-Easter community products and as such they viewed,
interpreted Jesus from the point of view of His resurrection.

As theologies, the Gospels are interested not mainly in the exactness of "what" happened but in the "sense" or "meaning" of what has happened. They use historical events to derive their theological significance.


(i) the time of Israel (up to John the Baptist)
(ii) the time of incarnated Jesus
(iii) the time of the Church

As simple as this scheme appears, it has far reaching theological implications. For one thing, it assumes a significant interim between the time of Jesus’ earthly ministry and the end of the world. Over against the imminent expectation of the Lord’s return by the earliest Christian community Luke shows a delayed arrival of the Parousia. In addition Conzelmann claims that Luke has “historicized” the message and ministry of Jesus. Since Luke and his community lived during “the time of the Church”, they are able to look back on the events of Jesus’ life as belonging to a past epoch, different from their own. In short, Luke shifts the emphasis in Christian faith from the future to the past. By his description of the past events, however, Luke intends to instruct the Church of his own day. He is interested in the Church as an institution within world history, a matter that did not concern Jesus or his earliest followers. This is why he plays down the role of the Roman empire in his account of Jesus’ death (23:4, 14, 20-23) and attempts to show that Jesus was politically harmless (20:21-25). He believes that if the Church is to endure, it must make peace with the world and learn to co-exist with society.

Conzelmann also highlighted that Luke emphasized the idea of promise and fulfillment and that he established Jesus’ relationship to the time of Israel before him thereby bringing out continuity within history. The last stage of the “salvation history” belongs to the Church with direct relationship with Jesus. The gift of the Holy Spirit, according to Conzelmann, is reinterpreted by Luke to become, not a sign that the kingdom has come, but a “guarantee” (“arrabon”) that it will come and a “provisional substitute” to the Parousia that makes it possible to live in the interim.

6. Gospels as Theological Biographies

Whatever similarities we may infer from such comparisons between secular biographies and the Gospels, such comparisons do not yield any concrete solution to the literary genre of the Gospels. Despite the meagre similarities, differences between biographies and the Gospels abound thereby often making such comparisons futile. Certain dimensions of the Gospels are pictured in the secular biographical genres, but none of them accounts for a majority of their features. That is why, while we acknowledge that the ancient biographies differ much from modern biographies and say that the Gospels have certain traits of one of these Greco-Roman writings the most common view of modern scholarship is that the Evangelists in essence created a new genre when they composed their Gospels. This view suggests that the Evangelists created something “out of nothing” (de novo, or sui generis) without any literary parallels.15

It should be noted that the setting that led to the writing of the Gospels was not the Greco-Roman literary world but the early Christian community.16 They were written to address certain needs and answer specific questions of the early believers. Therefore, as Hurtado observes, their focus was on Jesus “as the personal vehicle of revelation and redemption” and not his life or inner personality. As such, we should, he concludes, “see them as church documents with a certain biographical character rather than as biographies with a religious tone.”17

We can conclude, therefore, that the Evangelists were influenced by the literary conventions of their day or that certain features of ancient literature helps us to understand the nature of the Gospels more clearly. But the important differences between the Gospels and the ancient literature, especially the Greco-Roman biographies, lead us to characterize the Gospels as subgenre, subtype or subgroup of ancient literary forms. As such they constitute a distinctive, but not unique, genre among ancient writings. Hence, the Gospels could be called theological handbooks18 or theological biographies.19

End Notes

3 William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg & Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., Introduction to
New Literary Critical Readings of the Gospels

New literary criticism encompasses a broad spectrum of approaches/criticisms. There are common emphases among them but to get a better grasp on how each of them functions as a separate approach students should be able to see how and where they differ from each other. They offer a variety of perspectives for the study of the Gospels.

The new literary criticism focuses on the finished form of the text as it now exist, ignores the compositional history of the text, and tries to interpret the text in its final form. Thus the new literary criticism assumes that the text is not for historical or theological reconstruction, but has its own life apart from its original setting and is therefore, the sole object of investigation. It also emphasizes the unity of the text as a whole. For instance, the Gospels are viewed as coherent narratives, and individual passages are interpreted in terms of their contribution to the story as a whole, and they in turn derive meaning from the sense of the whole. As it views the text as an end in itself, whatever insight the reader obtain will be found in his/her encounter with the text itself which functions as a "mirror," not as a "window" which reveals something outside. The new literary criticism is based heavily on communication model of "speech-act theory" proposed by Roman Jakobson that every act of communication involves a sender, a message, and a receiver which may stand for author, text and reader respectively in literary field. The new literary critics, like other historical critics, believe that the Bible is to be analysed and understood by the same methods which are used for other literature.

Some of the major new literary criticisms that are applied to the study of the Gospels are briefly discussed below.

1. Narrative Criticism

Narrative criticism emphasizes on the narrative style of a text and the impact it can make on the reader. The term "narrative criticism" was first used by David Rhoads in an article "Narrative Criticism and the Gospel of
1.2.1. Events

“Events” are incidents or happenings that occur within a story. Events may not be only physical actions but may include even speech, thought, happenings or even feelings and perceptions. One way to approach events in a story is to focus on the conflicts — to understand their origin, causes of escalation or diffusion, climax, resolution or lack of resolution.

1.2.1.2. Characters

Characters refer to persons whom the author introduces in the narrative by telling about them and by showing them through what they say or do. It also includes how other characters in the narrative perceive them or react to them. Characters are important in order to understand the meaning of the text.

1.2.1.3. Settings

The element in a narrative that provides contexts for conflicts and actions of the characters are called “settings”. It is the background against which the narrative action takes place. Important functions of settings are generating atmosphere, determining conflict, etc.

1.2.1.4. Plots

“Plots” are events of the story. It is the designing principle that contributes to the understanding of the meaning of the narrative. It is the sequence of events or incidents that make up a narrative.

1.2.2. Discourse

“Discourse” in narrative criticism refers to the rhetoric, that is, how the story is told to create certain effects on the readers. Discourse is also called “point of view”. It signifies the way the story is told. In understanding narrative point of view, the reader discovers the “norms”, “values”, “beliefs”, and “general worldview” that the narrator of the story wants the reader to adopt or reject. The implied author also uses a “narrator” to act as the voice through which the reader is guided.

1.3. Narrative Criticism and NT Interpretation

In the NT, narrative criticism is more vigorously applied in the study of the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles. The “plots” and “characters” studies on the Gospels and Acts are some of the major application of narrative criticism in the NT. Among the Gospels narrative criticism was first applied on Mark.
Matthew’s Gospel concerns the divine plan by which God’s people will be saved from sin. This plan is introduced in the first part of the Gospel, where Jesus is presented as the Son of God, the one through whom God intends to save his people from their sin (1:21), God is with us (1:23), and God is pleased with Jesus (3:17). But through his temptation of Jesus, Satan tries to thwart God’s purpose of redemption (4:1-11). In the second part, Matthew’s Gospel shifts to a conflict between human characters—especially Jesus and the religious leaders (9:4; 12:34, 39, 45; 16:4; cf.13:19, 38). Then with Jesus’ first passion prediction (16:21-23), the main plot of Matthew’s Gospel concerns with the religious leader’s rejection and eventual crucifixion of Jesus in keeping God’s plan through which God’s people will be saved from their sin (20:28).

Again, Powell analyzes one of the characters, namely, the religious leaders in the Synoptic Gospels. He concedes that in Mark’s Gospel, the leaders serve as “foils” for illustrating dramatically what it means to think the things of the people in opposition to the things of God. Also Matthew certainly does not want the reader to feel sympathy for the religious leaders. But in Luke’s story, the implied reader is persuaded to feel sympathy for the religious leaders.

Rhoads and Michie, in their narrative analyses of Mark’s Gospel, argue that the direction of the whole story (the arrangement of the settings) in Mark puts great stress on the ending, the climax in Jerusalem; and that all those characters in conflict with the main character (Jesus), such as, the demonic forces, the authorities and sometimes the people, share similar traits – oppose Jesus, put him to the test, are afraid, and are preoccupied with saving themselves; and that in Mark’s story the implied reader alone is faithful to the last who is expected to challenge the readers of the first centuries as well as readers of today.

Powell, working on the same Markan narrative, argues that the secrecy theme (“Messianic Secret”) in Mark is a literary device to make a theological point. By means of this device the author expects the reader to realize that Jesus’ identity as Son of God cannot be truly understood apart from his death on the cross. Powell also argues that Mark presents the disciples of Jesus in a negative way to teach the reader that true discipleship depends on the adequacy of Christ rather than on the adequacy of the disciples themselves. Further, Powell sees that the abrupt ending of Mark (Mk. 16:8) is a classic example of unresolved conflict in literature.

1.4. Evaluation of Narrative Criticism

1.4.1. Merits of Narrative Criticism

(a) Narrative criticism focuses on the texts of the NT itself.
(b) Narrative criticism provides some insights into NT texts for which historical background is uncertain.
(c) Narrative criticism provides for checks and balances on traditional material.
(d) Narrative criticism tends to bring scholars and non-professional Bible readers close together.
(e) Narrative criticism stands in a close relationship to the believing community.
(f) Narrative criticism offers potentials for bringing believing communities together.
(g) Narrative criticism offers fresh interpretations of the NT materials.
(h) Narratives criticism unleashes the power of NT stories for personal and social transformation.

1.4.2. Demerits of Narrative Criticism

(a) Narrative criticism treats the Gospels as coherent narratives when they are actually collections of disparate material.
(b) Narrative criticism imposes on ancient literature concepts drawn from the study of modern literature.
(c) Narrative criticism seeks to interpret the Gospels through methods that were devised for study of fiction.
(d) Narrative criticism lacks objective criteria for analysis of texts.
(e) Narrative criticism lacks objective criteria for analysis of texts.

2. Rhetorical Criticism

Rhetoric is the art of composing discourses aimed at persuasion. In recent biblical studies considerable attention has been devoted to the presence of rhetorical features in the Bible. It is a text-centred criticism, that is to say, it does not go beyond the text (the Bible) to discover its meaning (like authorship). It has three approaches in itself: (i) Classical Greco-Roman rhetoric; (ii) Semitic methods of composition; (iii) New Rhetoric. According to rhetoricians, every situation of discourse involves the presence of three elements: (i) the speaker (the author); (ii) the discourse (the text; the Bible), and (iii) the audience (the addressees). It focusses on the communication between the speaker and the audience by analysing the strategies the speaker adopts to influence the audience. Rhetorical criticism stands on two assumptions: (i) language, in spite of its limitations, is adequate to communicate human intentions; (ii) a
communicative act includes an intentional use of language, a response, and a rhetorical situation.\textsuperscript{25}

\textbf{2.1. Classical Rhetoric}

The classical rhetoric based on the Greco-Roman rhetorical procedures distinguishes three factors which contribute to the quality of a discourse as a medium of persuasion. They are:
- (i) the authority of the speaker
- (ii) the force of the argument
- (iii) the feelings aroused in the audience

It takes into proper account the reality that the diversity of the situation and the diversity of the audience, to a large extent, determines the mode of speaking (language, tone, style, etc.) adopted by the speaker/narrator. Classical rhetoric from the time of Aristotle distinguishes three modes of public speaking, viz. the judicial mode (adopted in courts), the deliberative mode (adopted for political assembly), and the demonstrative mode (for celebratory occasions).

\textbf{2.2. Semitic Method of Rhetoric}

Analysis of symmetrical compositions, through which one can find relationships between different elements in the text is the preferred element by this method. The study of multiple forms of parallelism and other methods characteristic of the Semitic mode of composition allows for a better understanding of the literary structure of the text.

\textbf{2.3. New Rhetoric}

It adopts a more general point of view. It tries to investigate what makes a particular use of language effective and successful in the communication of conviction. It takes due account of the actual situation of debate or discussion. It studies style and composition as means of acting upon an audience. It seeks to discover how language capacitates persuasion and to convince.\textsuperscript{26}

Rhetorical criticism, thus, tries to analyse the power of language and the mode in which a message is conveyed to an audience. It draws the attention of the readers that the Bible is written in such a way carrying a message within itself and that message is communicated through certain way of argument and a rhetorical strategy. Hans Dieter Betz applied classical rhetoric in his commentary on Galatians and concluded that Galatians is an “apologetic letter”\textsuperscript{27} and George Kennedy likens Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7) to deliberative rhetoric and Jesus’ speech in John 13-17 as epideictic rhetoric.

The application of rhetorical criticism for NT interpretation has yielded many new insights into our understanding of the NT documents. Wuellner says, “...rhetorical criticism leads us away from a traditional message- or content-oriented reading of Scripture to a reading which generates and strengthens ever-deepening personal, social, and cultural values.”\textsuperscript{28} Since all the Biblical texts are in some way persuasive in character rhetorical criticism has become an indispensable tool for NT interpretation. As an interdisciplinary and synchronic approach, rhetorical criticism remains simply at the level of description, coupled with conflicting results, it will fail to produce much fruit. And a question will be always asked whether it is justifiable to analyses Biblical texts on the basis of sophisticated rhetorical categories which were developed for the study of high classical secular literature.

\textbf{3. Reader-Response Criticism}

Reader-response criticism, as the term suggests, is a reader-centred reading of the Bible. Here the reader creates and determines the meaning of the text.\textsuperscript{29} The primary focus of the reader-response method is on how the reader responds to the text. The way the reader receives and perceives the text is more important than how the text has been written/originated or how it is arranged. According to Mark Alan Powell, reader-response criticism seeks to study the dynamics of the reading process so as to discover how the reader perceives literature and on what basis s/he produce or create meaning for/from the text.\textsuperscript{30}

Reader-response criticism tries to understand the meaning of a text independently of the author. Similarly, it does not view the text as an autonomous object. It works within the larger contours of postmodern theory which says that the meaning of a text lies not on the author’s intent but on the reader’s construction of the meaning. Once the text is given to the readers, the author dies, keeping the meaning of the text at the domain of the readers.\textsuperscript{31} The text has life only when the reader encounters it and gives meaning to it.

Reader-response critics, says Randolph Tate, view literary meaning as bipolar. Meaning is produced through the interaction between a text and a reader. Until a reader picks up a text and begins reading it, a literary work does not exist.\textsuperscript{32}

The readers come to the text with different life experiences and with different questions. As readers encounter the text they derive different meanings from the text which reader-response critics argue are valid meanings of the text. Applied to biblical studies, it means that a Bible passage can have multiple meanings. The Bible does not determine its
own meaning but the readers decide its meaning. It also brings the text
and readers to the forefront subsuming the author to the backseat.
Reading the Gospels (the texts) by the present day readers through the
intended meaning of the author often obscures the meaning to them.

3.1. Reader Response Criticism and the NT Interpretation

Resssegue, employing Iser’s model of phenomenological criticism,
underlines the role of the reader’s involvement and the reader’s part in
filling “gaps” in the text in his/her own way. Resssegue explores the
narrative of “the Rich Man” who come eagerly to Jesus but after hearing
the words “went away sorrowful, for he had great possession” (Mark
10:22; cf. 10:17-22). Here, emphasizing the role of the reader, Resssegue
calls attention to the part played by wealth for the reader and by his or her
own axioms about wealth to establish the meaning of the text.33

Fowler distinguishes between reader-effects which would belong to
the process or activity of reading the Markan text temporarily for the first
time, and the effects of second and subsequent readings.34 He pays
particular attention to the feeding miracles and the references to ‘bread’
in the Markan text (Mark 6:30-44; 8:1-10; 14:22).

R.A. Culpepper, working on John’s Gospel, expounds John’s narrative
role of dramatic irony, of symbolism, and of misunderstanding for
stimulating the reader into making his or her own response. Then,
Culpepper concludes his analysis with the proposition that the modern
reader must enter imaginatively, if needed even by ‘pretense’ also, into
what the Evangelist assured his First Century readers knew or thought.35

One of the drawbacks of reader-response criticism of the Gospels is
that it is purely subjective. Since the reader determines what the text
means without any relation to the author or the original life setting of
the biblical books. What word is by the author in which life situation of the
readers and what was the intended message the author wanted to convey
to his original readers are not taken into account. Hence, reader-response
criticism should be applied to the reading of the Gospels only when one
is fully aware of such limitations.

4. Postcolonial Criticism

In literary terms, postcolonial has to be differentiated from post-colonial.
While “postcolonial” refers to a literary theory of analysis, “post-colonial”
refers to the historical parameter to denote “after colonialism”. As the term
implies, postcolonial criticism has its starting point in colonialism and
hegemonic imperialism of the colonizers.

Postcolonialism is a dialectical concept that deals with both
decolonization and the resolute achievement of sovereignty and also the
realities of nations and peoples emerging into a new imperialistic context
of economic and often political hegemony. It also puts emphasis on the
economic, material and cultural conditions that define the global system,
which is heavily prejudiced towards the developed nations like the G7, in
which the postcolonial nation is required to operate. Postcolonialism is
both contestatory and committed towards political ideals of a transnational
social justice. It attacks the status quo of hegemonic economic imperialism,
and the history of colonialism and imperialism. Postcolonialism designates
the perspectives of postcolonial theories which analyse the material and
epistemological condition of postcoloniality and seek to combat the
continuing, sometimes hidden, operation of an imperialist system of
economic, political and cultural domination. The global situation of social
injustice demands postcolonial critique – from the position of its victims,
not its perpetrators.36

Postcolonial biblical criticism began towards the end of the 20th century
in North America.37 However, postcolonialist thought existed even before.
One of the founders of postcolonialist thought was Edward Said who, in his
book Orientalism,38 wrestled with the Western images of the Orient, both in
the academic arena as well as in popular movies, literature, etc. He argued
that the perception and representation of the Oriental “other” are projections
of the West, which is far from reality. Such constructions foster biases and
justify Western domination of the third-world cultures.39

Postcolonialism focusses on the relationship between literature,
literary canon and imperialism. A basic assumption of postcolonial criticism
is that the dominating culture wrote the literature and decided what
literature was canonized. This literature, even the very language that was
used, affected society by propagating the differentiation and ensuing
oppression of the colonized.40 Postcolonialism adopts multiple methods
ranging from historical critical methods like form, source and redaction
criticisms to contemporary literary methods like narrative, rhetorical and
reader-response criticisms.

According to R.S. Sugirtharajah, “postcoloniality begins when
subjects find themselves thinking and acting in certain ways. What is
distinctive about the current enterprise (postcolonial criticism), however,
is that it is not locked into a colonial paradigm where the colonialists set
the ground rules, but, more importantly, it concedes the complexity of
contact between the invader and the invaded. It goes beyond the binary
notions of colonized and colonizer and lays weighty emphasis on critical
exchanges and mutual transformation between the two.”41
Postcolonial theory seeks to provide a space for the once-colonized people. It means a resurrection of the marginal, the indigene and the subaltern. It also means engaging with the mass of knowledge that is produced on their behalf and that is in the domain of Euro-American interpretation. It is an act of reclamation, redemption and reaffirmation against the past colonial and current neo-colonizing tendencies that continue to exert influence even after territorial and political independence. Postcolonialism is both a tactic and a practice. It means finding ways of operating under a set of demanding and difficult conditions that jeopardize and dehumanize people.  

R.S. Sugirtharajah sets out the following as aims of postcolonial biblical criticism:

(i) It considers the biblical narratives as originating from colonial contacts. It evaluates the colonial ideology, stigmatization and negative portrayals embedded in the content, plot and characterization. It scour the biblical pages for how colonial intentions and assumptions informed and influenced its production. It attempts to resurrect lost voices and causes which are distorted or silenced in the canonized text.

(ii) It engages in a reconstructive reading that will reread biblical texts from the perspective of postcolonial concerns and it will be sensitive to subalterns and feminine elements entrenched in the texts. It also interacts with and reflects on postcolonial circumstances such as hybridity, fragmentation, deterritorialization, double or multiple identities.

(iii) It questions both colonial and metropolitan interpretations to draw attention to the inescapable effects of colonization and colonial ideals on interpretative works such as Bible commentaries and historical and administrative records that helped in a wrongful picturization of “uncivilized” and stagnated Orient pitched against a progressive and rational West.

(iv) It also investigates interpretations that contested colonial interests and concerns. It tries to bring to the fore how the invaded transcended these images and wrested interpretation from the invaders, starting a process of self-discovery, appropriation and subversion.  

End Notes

Understanding the Jesus Movement in the Gospel Traditions

46 Sources of Understanding the Jesus Movement

46

5

32 W. Randolph Tate, Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach, 229.
33 Anthony C. Thiselton, New Horizons in Hermeneutics (Grand Rapids, 1992), 519.
34 Anthony C. Thiselton, New Horizons in Hermeneutics, 519.
35 Anthony C. Thiselton, New Horizons in Hermeneutics, 521.
39 W. Randolph Tate, Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach, 313.
40 W. Randolph Tate, Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach, 312.

5

Literary Features of the Synoptic Gospels

All the synoptic Gospels are written in similar style and features in their accounts about Jesus. All of them follow the same narrative pattern having almost the same content and same geographical progression of Jesus’ ministry. Jesus in the synoptic Gospels teaches mostly in/through parables and some extended “sermons” and miracles form an important part of His ministry. On the whole we find similar narrative pattern having the narratio (statement of the facts), the argumentatio (the central content of the story), and the probatio (proving of the statement of the facts).1

1. Similarities

Since the first three Gospels view Jesus from the same angle or perspective (Greek sun+opsis), there are lots of similarities among them.

1.1. Triple Tradition

The materials/pericopae found in all three synoptic Gospels are called “Triple Tradition” (triple=three) or sometimes as “Narrative tradition.” Out of Mark’s 678 verses, about 350-370 verses are reproduced in Matt and Luke and these verses form the Synoptic Triple Tradition. For example, ministry of John the Baptist (Mark 1:2-8; Matt 3:1-12; Luke 3:1-20); baptism of Jesus (Mark 1:9-11; Matt 3:13-17; Luke 3:21-22); temptation of Jesus (Mark 1:12-13; Matt 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13); Jesus cleansing a leper (Mark 1:40-45; Matt 8:1-4; Luke 5:12-16); parable of the sower (Mark 4:1-20; Matt 13:1-23; Luke 8:4-15); feeding of the 5000 (Mark 6:30-44; Matt 14:13-21; Luke 9:10-17); Transfiguration of Jesus (Mark9:2-8; Matt 17:1-8; Luke 9:28-36).4 In the Triple Tradition, the content, wording, and main units are arranged in the same order.

1.2. Sequential Arrangement of the Units

Following Markan priority which provides the main outline of the order of the units, we see that both Matt and Luke follow the order of Mark in general. Thus the outline of Mark can be traced in both Matt and Luke.
1.3. Double Tradition

The materials / pericopae found only in two Gospels are called “Double Tradition”. Even if Mark is believed to be the provider of the bulk of the synoptic materials, sometimes either Matt or Luke departs from Mark and sometimes Matt and Luke together depart from Mark. In both the cases, a certain material is found in two Gospels only (Mark and Matt; Mark and Luke; and generally Matt and Luke). Examples of double tradition are: (i) materials found in Matt and Luke – genealogy of Jesus (Matt 1:1-17; Luke 3:23-38); the birth of Jesus (Matt 1:18-25; Luke 2:1-7); (ii) materials found in Mark and Matt – tradition of the elders (Mark 7:1-13; Matt 15:1-9); Canaanite woman’s faith (Mark 7:24-30; Matt 15:21-28); (iii) materials found in Mark and Luke – man with an unclean spirit (Mark 1:21-28; Luke 4:31-37); the widow’s offering (Mark 12:41-44; Luke 21:1-4).

2. Differences

2.1. Single Tradition

Even when the three synoptists share common content, order and words, there are certain materials which are found only in one Gospel. Such materials are called “single tradition”. While there are only few single tradition in Mark, both Matt and Luke have a good number of single traditions. Examples of single tradition are: (i) material found only in Matt – the visit of the Magi, flight to Egypt and Herod’s massacre of the infants (Matt 2:1-18), concerning adultery (Matt 5:27-30), healing of blind men and a mute person (Matt 9:27-34), Jesus and the Temple tax (Matt 17:24-27), etc.; (ii) material found only in Mark – parable of the growing seed (Mark 4:26-29); (iii) material found only in Luke – annunciation and birth of John the Baptist and of Jesus (Luke chap 1), boy Jesus in the Temple (2:41-52), a sinful woman forgiven (7:36-50), parables of the lost coin and the prodigal son (15:8-32), rich man and Lazarus (15:19-31), Jesus and Zacchaeus (19:1-10), etc.

2.2. Differences within the Triple or Double Traditions

Apart from the single tradition, there are significant differences even within the triple or double traditions. For example, in the baptism of Jesus which is a triple tradition, all three of them agree that Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River and as He was baptized, the heavens opened and a voice from heaven came. But there are other details in which they differ or one of them go away from the other two in details. Thus, Matthew adds John’s objections to baptize Jesus and Jesus responds to him to do so “to fulfill all righteousness” which is absent in both Mark and Luke. Also Matthew changes the word of the voice from heaven as “This is my Son, the Beloved” while Mark and Luke say “You are my son, the Beloved…” Similarly, Luke departs on two points from Matt and Mark when he shows Jesus “praying” after his baptism and it is when He is praying that the Spirit descends on Jesus “in bodily form” as a dove. It is also evident in the temptation of Jesus account, a triple tradition, where Mark only states that Jesus was tempted for forty days, Matt and Luke show that He was tempted three times. It is also significant to observe how there is inversion of the order of the last two temptations in Matt and Luke (Matt’s second is Luke’s last and Matt’s last is Luke’s second temptation). Likewise, at the end of the temptation account Luke adds that the devil departed from Him “until an opportune time” which is not found in either Mark or Matt.

Similarly, in the genealogy of Jesus in Matt and Luke, which is a double tradition, a cursory look itself will show that there are significant differences between them. In the same way, there are substantial differences between Matt’s Sermon on the Mount and Luke’s Sermon on the Plain (Matt 5-7; Luke 6:20-49). Scholars generally agree that Sermon on the Mount and Sermon on the Plain are not two different sermons of Jesus but one, making it a double tradition. It is significant to observe that Matt inserts a number of single traditions in it making his version of the sermon longer than Luke’s. Likewise, inversion of some materials can also be detected within it, for example, for Matt the Lord’s Prayer is a part within the Sermon on the Mount while for Luke it comes in Jesus’ teaching on prayer (11:1-4).

There are still other small yet important differences within these traditions like in wording. For example, in the triple tradition of the healing of a paralytic in Mark 2:1-12; Matt 9:2-8 and Luke 5:17-26, Mark says that “four” people brought the man lying on a “mat” and having gone up they removed the “roof” and let him down. But Matt’s report does not specify the number of people, and says that they brought the man lying on a “bed” but he does not say anything about them opening the “roof”. In Luke’s account of it, he agrees generally with Matt by not specifying the number of people (“some men”) and the use of the word “bed” but he changes Mark’s “roof” with “tiles”.

3. Solutions Proposed for Similarities and Differences Among the Synoptists

Having examined the similarities and differences among the synoptic Gospels briefly, it is pertinent to us to consider how and why these similarities and differences exist. Scholars proposed two factors for it.

3.1. The Oral Traditions

According to this, the similarities in their accounts about Jesus come
because they shared the same oral traditions when they wrote. Since they accessed, depended on and used same oral traditions similarities among them exist. But differences are due to the adaptations they made according to their audience perception, cultural and philosophical orientations. Similarly, they did not try to transmit the *ipsissima verba Jesu* (the very own words of Jesus) but the message of Jesus. Therefore, they did not care for the accuracy of the words used by Jesus, nor care was taken for minute details of the stories narrated. Their main concern was the “message” of Jesus.

3.2. Literary Interdependence
(Refer Synoptic Problem)

4. Literary Features of Individual Gospels

4.1. Literary Features of Mark

Some scholars say that Mark’s Gospel began as a *mimesis* composition. In ancient Greek times, students of Greek learnt to take one of the great literary works, especially those of Homer, and develop a new and original work, using material from the original. It appears that the author of Mark’s Gospel was skilled at *mimesis*. Throughout the Gospel can be found words or passages that some scholars say can be interpreted as *mimesis* flags. Even his use of clumsy and ungrammatical Greek was used to disguise his background and intentions.

4.1.1. Intercalations

Intercalations are enclosing or “sandwiching” one story in the middle of a different story (forming an A1, B, A2 pattern), so that each affects the interpretation of the other. In intercalation a story is inserted within another story in order to draw attention to a certain aspect or even to manipulate the interpretation of the original story. An example of this is the death of John the Baptist under King Herod, which is inserted into the story of Jesus sending His apostles on a mission against unclean spirits (6:7-31). Although the two stories seem completely unrelated, the gruesome events of King Herod unjustly ordering the death of the beloved John the Baptist overshadows the story of the apostle’s mission and reminds the reader of the risk of danger the missionaries could face.

4.1.2. Inclusio

Inclusio is a technique of bracketing or “enclosing” a story or section by using the same or similar words, phrases, or themes at the beginning and the end. The entire Gospel according to Mark is put within an inclusio of “coming” of Jesus and “departure” of Jesus announced respectively by two individuals. Jesus’ “arrival” is announced by John the Baptist (1:1-8) likewise His “departure” is announced by the “young man” (16:1-8).

4.1.3. Repetitions

Repetitions are often used in the gospel of Mark to highlight features that are considered significant by the author. Throughout the gospel we see repetition of key words and phrases such as, “Gospel/good news”, “authority,” and “believe/faith.” Repetition is also used to drive home important messages. In 10:23-25, Jesus uses the same phrase three times, varying only slightly in word choice: “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!”

4.1.4. Patterns

Like repetition, patterns are used in Mark to highlight special themes and features. Perhaps the most common type, in this gospel, is the three-fold pattern. In Mark there is, “a fondness for a threefold pattern with progressive heightening, e.g., three calls of commissionings of the disciples (1:16-20; 3:13-19; 6:7-13); three Passion predictions (8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34); Jesus comes three times to his disciples in Gethsemane (14:32-42); and the three denials by Peter (14:66-72).”

4.1.5. Paratactic Style

Parataxis means stringing together (lit. “placing next to”) short loosely connected episodes, like pearls on a string. In correlation with the summary-like method of storytelling used in Mark, one of the most distinguishing features of the gospel is its paratactic style.

Mark consists mainly of short, simple sentences and coordinating conjunctions which create a sense of action and immediacy. Words and phrases such as, “immediately,” “now,” and “as soon as,” are used to emphasize action. In fact, the Greek word *euthys* (meaning “immediately”) is used 42 times in the original version of Mark’s gospel (Just). There could be a number of benefits to this writing style such as to create a sense of urgency, which can in turn relay a sense of importance, and to maintain reader interest.

4.1.6. Foreshadowing

Foreshadowing is another method used in Mark to heighten reader interest. By foretelling some of the events that will occur later in the text, readers are able to actively speculate about the story and when they get to that foretold event, the event itself becomes more meaningful to the reader.
4.2. Literary Features of Matthew

4.2.1. Chiastic Structures or Inverted Parallelism

Chiastic structure symbolizes the inverted sequence or cross-over of parallel words or ideas in a bicolon, sentence, or larger literary unit. Matt begins with a reference to "Emmanuel" in 1:23 and ends with the same formula, "I am with you always" (28:20) placing the whole Gospel under a chiastic design. Similarly, Matt's Infancy Narrative corresponds to the Passion Narrative making the Infancy Narrative as a "proleptic passion" because Jesus "the King of the Jews" (2-2) is rejected by the Jews (Herod and "whole of Jerusalem") and seek to kill Him which corresponds to the crucifixion of the "King of the Jews" by the Jews.

4.2.2. Use of Numbers

Matt has a special interest in numbers, especially "seven". These are: (i) seven petitions in the Lord's Prayer (6:19-130); (ii) seven parables in the parable chapter (13); (iii) seven woes (23); double sevenths in the genealogy of Jesus (1:1-17).

Matt also prefers number "three" and often "four". They are: (i) three divisions of the genealogy; (ii) three temptations (4:1-11); (iii) three kinds of piety (6:1-18); (iv) 3+3+4 miracles (8:1-9:34); (v) three thesis + three antithesis (5:21-48).

He also prefers the "testimony of two witnesses": (i) 2 demoniacs while Mark has only "one" (8:28-34); (ii) two blind men (20:29-34); (iii) doublets of teachings on divorce (5:32; 19:1-9); (iv) doublet of 20:29-34 and in 9:27-31.

4.2.3. Formula Quotations

Matt has a unique way of introducing the quotations of the OT in his Gospel, generally with "all this took place to fulfil..." Eleven quotations of the OT out of a total of 40-60 OT quotations in Matt are introduced with this formula. Through the formula quotations Matt employs "promise-fulfilment" concept in his use of the OT.

4.2.4. Geographical Names

Geographical names are used with theological perspectives. Therefore, Egypt, Nazareth, mountain, etc., are not used merely from historical point of view but they contain theological motifs in Matt.

4.3. Literary Features of Luke

4.3.1. Artistic Brilliance

Luke is a master storyteller. He knows how to weave a narrative that haunts the mind of the reader. His narrative is filled with short, sharply defined, vignettes or skits. Each story is a tableau. Luke as an artist is not an exaggeration.11

4.3.2. Writing in Style

Luke employs "prosopopoeia" which means "writing in character". It is a way of "writing in a style appropriate to character and circumstance." Thus, Luke describes Hebrew society in Hebraistic way (e.g., 1-2) and he is a Greek while describing Greek society (last part of Acts).12

4.3.3. Redactional Quality

Luke is a conscious redactor. He is aware of his audience's sensibilities. Therefore, while working on the materials he took from Mark or Q he carefully edits them. Hence, he avoids the awkwardness of Mark and changes harsh words or irrelevant details.

4.3.4. Biblical Imitation

Luke imitates ("Mimesis") the classical models and stylistic affectation of the atmosphere of the venerable past.13 Many scholars opine that Luke composed his Prologue (1:1-4) in the imitation of classical Greek writers. Likewise, Luke imitated the stories of the OT in his narrative content and so Luke is saturated with the OT.

End Notes

1 For details, see Jose Maniparampil, *Synoptic Gospels* (Bangalore: Claretian Publications, 2004), 104-111.
2 Refer "Markan Priority" under Synoptic Problem to get a better view about their similarities.
4 It is advisable that students refer a *Gospel Parallel* to identify all the Triple Traditions from the synoptic Gospels.
5 Since most of things related here have been already discussed above under "Synoptic Problem", we will only highlight the main idea.
Socio-Cultural Contexts of the Synoptic Gospels

In the time of Jesus, the masses of the people in Palestine were under the two-fold cultural domination. In Palestine, only half of the population was Jewish. The remaining were Greek, Egyptians, Arabs, Persians and Babylonians. The Romans were not only found in the urban areas of Galilee, Samaria, Judea and Idumea but also in rural section of Galilee, Persia and Judea or in the Holy City of Jerusalem. Others lived in the prosperous new cities located along the coast and the main routes of travel.¹

1. Jewish Population

It had been estimated that more than 4,000,000 Jews lived in the Roman Empire during the New Testament times, perhaps comprising 7% of the total population of the Roman world. Nevertheless, scarcely 700,000 of these Jews lived in Palestine. There were more Jews in Alexandria, Egypt, than in Jerusalem, more in Syria than in Palestine. Even in parts of Palestine (Galilee, where Jesus grew up, and Decapolis) Gentile outnumbered Jews.²

2. Transportation and Communication

Romans had by far the best system of travel and communication in the ancient world. Main roads linked all major towns. Roman highways were paved with cobblestone and were wide enough for a pair of two horse chariots to pass each other. The main roads were relatively safe, but the less well-travelled ones in desolate regions were favourite hideouts for thieves (cf. Luke 10:29-37). Sea travel was popular, especially for trade. Boats also carried mail, as did over land couriers, but the most reliable form of delivery was through a personal associate. Public news often posted on notice boards in town squares or announced aloud by “heralds” at the market place or other public centres of activity.³ Most Christian communities mentioned in the NT were in cities. That is not surprising on several grounds. The Roman system of roads, originally built for military purposes, often facilitated the travels of Jewish Christian preachers, bringing them to the cities on the routes.⁴

3. Language

Latin was the legal language of the Roman Empire, but mainly in West. In the East, the “Lingua Franca” (common language) was Greek. Besides Greek, Palestinians spoke Aramaic and Hebrew.⁵ Jesus lived in a country in which four different languages could be found: Hebrew, Greek, Latin and Aramaic were the common language of the people. But after the conquest of West Asia and Egypt by Alexander the Great in the second half of the 4th century BC, Greek became the dominant official language of government and commerce. In 63 BC, the Roman military brought Latin along, as is official language.⁶ Most of the boys learned the ancient Hebrew language in the synagogue classrooms because at home and among them most of them spoke Aramaic, a language related to Hebrew that had come into use since the Exile.

This kind of plurality of languages used in Palestine is found reflected in the Gospels. Mark retains Jesus’ words in Aramaic which he translates for his Greek readers: “talitha cumi” and “ephphatha”. More strikingly, it is John from whom we learn about the languages used in Palestine during the time of Jesus when he says that the placard that was displayed over the head of Jesus with the inscription, “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews” was written in Latin, Greek and Hebrew. As mentioned above, Latin was the official language of the Roman Empire, Greek was the common language and Hebrew was the local language of the Jews. Thus, the placard was displayed in order to make Jesus a spectacle for everyone as possible because anyone in Palestine could understand at least one of these languages.

4. Family and Marriage

The basic societal unit was the family. The typical Greco-Roman family had a low birth rate. To encourage larger families, the government offered special concession to parents of three or more children. Bachelors were probably taxed. In Palestine large families were common. Since the Jewish society was strictly patriarchal, there was the joy at the birth of a boy, sorrow at the birth of a girl.⁷ Women were considered as husbands’ properties. That is why, Jewish women lived only under a man throughout their life. Before marriage they lived under their fathers and brothers and after marriage, under their husbands. They were used only as sex symbols and for household chores. Their role was confined within the four walls of their homes, albeit with limited voice. Therefore, the Jewish women’s role was mainly subsided to bearing and rearing children.
Children were considered as blessings from God and banenness a curse (cf. Sarah, Hannah, Elizabeth, etc.). Upon the birth of male child, On the eight day, the boy was circumcised and named on the eighth day in accordance with the Mosaic Law. Naming of the girl could wait for a month. Children had no voice in the larger social world of the Jews. Even boys till they attained adulthood were not considered as members of their society and their testimonies were regarded invalid. Such kind of treatment of women and children, including male children, is reflected in the Gospels where they record Jesus’ feeding of the 5000 which did not include women and children. Men were the “breadwinners”, women worked hard in the domestic realm. Their women came daily to shop in the open-air market and to draw water from the common well. Throughout the empire, arranged marriages were practiced; but, particularly Roman influence, young men increasingly chose their own brides. Jewish men usually got married by eighteen, while for the Romans by twenty five, but Greeks often not until thirty. Girls of all three cultures, however, were usually wed soon after puberty, in their early to mid-teens. The Jewish groom took his bride back to his father’s house to live with the extended family, often in an additional room built on.

5. Architecture and Housing

Houses in the Western part of the Roman Empire were built of brick or concrete, at least in the cities. The poor sections and the rural areas had frame house or huts. In the Eastern part of the Empire, houses usually consisted of stucco and sun-dried brick. Palestinian towns and home were somewhat different from their Greco-Roman counterparts and were comparatively backward. The typical low-class Palestinian had an apartment in a building which contained many apartinent, all on the ground level. This kind of architectural style among the Palestinians is reflected in Jesus’ parable of the “persistent friend” in Luke 18. The well-to-do, particularly in and around Rome, might own large multi-storey, free standing brick villas with inner atria where up to fifty people might gather. A large dozen-room house with tree courts has been excavated in Capernaum, which some think may have been Peter’s house. Roofs of buildings in the cities were made of tiles while in Palestine they were primarily made up of thatch or mud. Such kind of materials used as well as the style in which they were constructed can be found in the miracle of Jesus where a paralyzed man is brought by four people, and finding no place, they went up to the roof and having removed “the roof” (Mark and Matt) or “tiles” (Luke), they let down the paralyzed man to Jesus. In Palestine, home roofs were flat, and people socialized there and slept on them to cool of a little during hot weather. Archaeologists have unearthed a wide variety of pottery, kitchen utensils, glassware and other household tools. Lighting was by olive-oil lamps and torches.

6. Morals

Sexual immorality was one of the major moral issues in Palestine among the Jews during Jesus’ time. Prostitution by both men and women was a well-recognized institution. Adultery, though condemned strongly, was quite common (the best example is John 8). Slave girls were often the victims of this debauchery. Corruption that prevailed among the oppressed classes spread to their overlords. Divorce was easy, frequent, and had become acceptable.

7. Meals and Daily Schedules

Farmers worked from sunrise until sunset; craftsmen and artisans almost as long as farmers. The well-to-do merchants worked much shorter hours. Wealthier Romans enjoyed four meals a day and regularly ate meat and dairy products. It is said that often the gluttonous Romans ate as much as they could and then vomited out and resumed eating! Less well-to-do Jews were often limited to two meals. Bread formed the stable of their diet, supplemented by various fruits, nuts, and vegetables, fish, etc. Olive oil was a primary ingredient in cooking, and honey was used as the main sweetener.

After dinner, the men were expected to gather in the village synagogue for evening services. Following prayers, the local rabbi (Hebrew for “teacher”) or another member of the congregation would read a passage from the scriptures (holy writings) and comment on it, inviting discussion.

8. Clothing and Lifestyles

Jewish men wore tunics, which were shirt-like garments extending from the shoulder to the knees. A belt or sash, called a “girdle” in the New Testament time, was worn around the waist, coarse shoes and sandals on the feet, and a hat on the head. Their women wore a short tunic as an under garment and sometimes brightly colored outer tunic which extended to the feet. The more fashionable ones used cosmetics lavishly, including lipstick, eye shadow and eyebrow paint and for jewelry women wore earrings and rings. Women hair styles changed constantly, although Palestinian women wore veils covering the head (not the face).

9. Agriculture, Work and Trade

In the fertile coastal plain, fruits and vegetables grew in abundance. In the central hill country had shepherds and flocks, vineyards especially grapes, fig and olives. The valley of Jezreel in Southern Galilee and the
entire Jordan River Valley formed the country’s bread basket where many grains, especially wheat, were grown, along with other crops. In Southern Judea and Idumea, the great desert area was used for little more than nomads and their various herds or sheep, goats and camels.16

Every morning the men of the village went out to the fields to till, sow, prune or harvest the crops on which their existence depended. The plows, sickles and other tools they used were generally making shift devices, little better than the patriarchs used. Most of the families also kept a few sheep and goats for food, leather and wool. At sunrise, the shepherd took the flocks to nearby hillsides for pasturage.17 Each town had a handful of local craftsmen, usually including a carpenter, potter, weaver, blacksmith and shoemaker. Most of these craftsmen worked with the help of an assistant or young apprentice, generally their own sons, to whom they taught their trade. We learn from the Gospels and other sources that Jesus’ earthly “father”, Joseph, was a carpenter and hence Jesus is referred to as the “carpenter” because His father must have told Him the art of carpentry as a young boy.

10. Social Classes
Their society was made up of different social classes. The aristocratic, landowners, government contractors, and others lived in luxury. The luxury people and the religious leaders had more than half of the total wealth of all its subjects in the top 1% - 2% of its populace. A small “middle class” people who earned enough to have modest savings and not live a merely day-to-day existence comprised at most another 10 percent and included many priests and Pharishees in addition to the more fortunate merchants and traders, artisans and craftsmen, bankers and toll collectors. 70 percent lived in poverty (struggling farmers, fishermen, etc.), a bottom 10 per cent, and sometimes more made up the class of out-casts and expendables.18 These people were at the mercy of the others by begging for living. Chief priest and the leading rabbis formed the upper class. Farmers, artisans, and small business persons comprised most of the population.19

Among the Jews, tax collectors became special objects of class hatred. Other Jews despised these tax collectors, because of their necessary contact with Gentile superiors. The Romans auctioned the job of collecting tolls to the lowest bidder, that is, to the one who bid the lowest rate of commission for a five-year contract. The toll collectors would gather not only the toll and his commission but also whatever he could pocket illegally.20 Bribery of toll collectors by the rich increased the burden of the poor.21 Taxes were levied on the produce of the land, on men, property, and sale of animals and all the transport of goods across boundaries. In addition, Jewish males paid half-shekel for support of the Jerusalem temple.22

Slaves, perhaps, outnumbered freemen in the Roman empire.23 It was common to condemn criminals, debtors, and prisoners of war to slavery. Some slaves bought their freedom or were set free by their masters. Originally, slaves who had turned criminal were the only ones to be executed by crucifixion.24 Most ancient slaves were not the victims of racism but of conquest prisoners of war. Others were born slaves or sold themselves into slavery, to pay debts, for example. A slave in a wealthy household was sometimes more prosperous than most free people and exercised important responsibilities including managing his master’s estate and teaching his children, etc.25

11. Education
Probably there was having many scribal schools in Palestine in the first century AD. In this sense there is major dispute about the nature and extent of the Jewish education in this period. For, some scholars would draw on the picture of schooling given two hundred years later by “Mishna” and posit both Jewish elementary schools for reading the Bible in all the towns and advanced schools for studying the Law. Others are skeptical, and it is probably wiser to imagine that there were not as yet established institutions. For, Josephus interprets Jewish law to other children “to be taught letters concerning the laws and deeds of their fore-fathers.26

12. Religious Teacher
Larger towns and cities were often fortunate enough to have a scribe as a teacher and religious advisor to the community. These influential men had spent most of their lives studying and copying the sacred scriptures. Their primary concerns were preserving and teaching the scriptures and interpreting the laws of the Torah.27

13. Religious Condition
The religious and moral conditions were in a confusion and in low ebb during Jesus’ time. The Romans allowed the subjugated nations and the people to retain their local gods and worship them as long as they did not interfere with the Roman law. All religions were respected, yet they had to pay homage and divine honour to the Roman Emperor. In Palestine, the Jews even though they contributed to the morality in religion, they were lost in the innumerable sacrifices and religious observances. In such
situation, the common people failed to find peace and hope in those observances. Therefore, the people wait for the true God to intervene and establish His righteous rule. Religiously, they were divided into different sect, which made them to wait for God intervention, for instance Pharisees, Qumran community, Essence, etc.28

14. Days of Worshipping and Celebration
From sundown every Friday until sundown on Saturday, all work ceased in Jewish towns and villages throughout Palestine for the observance of Sabbath. According to rabbinical law, 39 kinds of work were forbidden on the Sabbath. These included almost every kind of labor, like saving a person’s life, etc. Besides the weekly Sabbath observances, there were a number of special religious festivals. The most popular of these were the feasts of Passover, weeks, booths (Succoth), etc. On these occasions throngs of pilgrims travelled to Jerusalem from all parts of Palestine and the Roman Empire to take part in elaborate ceremonies.29

15. Culture
The combination of social and religious forces under one political rule produced a unique setting for the birth of Christianity. Although the Gospel is essentially independent of any human origin, the media through which it was expressed and the influences that effected its interpretation can be traced back to the philosophies and theologies of the contemporary period. Three great types of culture prevailed in the empire: Judaism, Hellenism and Roman imperialism.30

16. A Conflict of Cultures
Most Jews, especially the Jewish peasantry, stubbornly refused to accept Roman rule and Hellenization. However, the hundreds of thousands of Jews in the Roman Empire outside Palestine welcomed it. They benefited considerably from Roman improvements in commerce, transportation and technology. Living in large urban centers in Syria, Egypt, Asia Minor, Greece and Italy, they had gradually become accustomed to Hellenistic ways and had adopted many superficial aspects of Greek culture. In Palestine itself, certain Jews found Roman support tolerable and at times advantageous. Those people found that adopting Greek and Roman culture helped them to move up in the social ladder of influence. Among them were members of Jerusalem’s aristocracy. From this small group of wealthy, pedigreed families came the high priest and the lesser priests of the temple. Many of them, found the sophisticated manners and fashions of Greco-Roman culture to their liking and some even took Greek names.31

17. The Religious Cultural Movements
The only religious cultural movement that was close to the people was Zealotism. The Zealots had popular support for their policy of using forces to throw out the Romans.32 The Qumran community (most probably Essence), however, separated themselves from all such things of cultural and political sense.

18. Entertainment
Perhaps the most spectacular form of entertainment was the gladiatorial shows. Gladiators were slaves, captives, criminals, and volunteers. Once a whole arena was flooded and a naval battle staged. As many as ten thousand died in a single performance. Chariot races corresponded to our automobile races. Betting was common. Naturally, the public idolized winning charioteers. Moreover, the Olympic Games had long been a sports attraction. Children amused themselves with toys such as baby rattles, dolls, with movable limbs, etc.33 Such kind of entertainment might have been prevalent even in Palestine because there was a big amphitheatre constructed by the Greeks in Jerusalem long time before the NT times. There were also a number of associations or clubs that existed to maintain gymnasia where body and mind were trained.34

19. Condition of the Women
In the socio-cultural sphere of the Jews, Judaism set high value on men and relegated women to inferior position. Women were considered a source of moral danger, forbidden to move about freely in society, assigned an inferior of places in the temple, and if married, liable to be divorced under any silly pretext. Therefore, Jesus taught that the two-in-one-fleshness of marriage will yield to the all-in-one-fleshness of a new communion of man and woman, Jesus affirmed their fundamental equality.35

End Notes
1 Great People of the Bible and How They Lived, Ed. by. Ernest Wright, Vaughn E. Crawford (New York: The Reader’s Digest, 1974), 308.
4 Raymond E. Brown, An Introduction to the New Testament (Bangalore: TPI, 2007), 64.
Portraits of Jesus in the Synoptics Gospels

As the name “Synoptic” implies there are great similarities among Matthew, Mark, and Luke in their presentation of the ministry of Jesus Christ. These similarities are in term of structure, content and tone.¹

According to R.E. Brown the synoptic Gospels portray three distinct portraits of Jesus: the actual Jesus, the historical Jesus and the Gospel Jesus.² John P. Meier expounds that “the historical Jesus is a modern theoretical reconstruction – a fragmentary, tentative portrait painted by modern scholars – and is not to be identified naively with the full reality of the Jesus who actually lived in the first century A.D., that is the real Jesus.”³

We will not, however, deal with this three-fold portraits of Jesus but will examine how Jesus is portrayed in the entire synoptic gospel in terms of titles identified to him.

1. Messianic Secret

“The Gospel according to Mark” which is believed to be the earliest among the Gospels tells us more details about Jesus’ story than Matthew or Luke. Mark gave great importance to Jesus’ proclamation about the Kingdom of God.⁴ Mark also sometimes presents the story about Jesus as centered on the term “mystery” or “secret of the kingdom of God” (4:11).⁵

The theory of mystery or secret, i.e., “Messianic secret” was a theory proposed by a German scholar William Wrede in 1901. According to this theory, a secret about the Messiah was an important factor in Mark’s Gospel. Jesus, although being a Messiah, He hides His messianic identity and tells His disciples not to reveal His miraculous healings to others.⁶ Even Kingsbury believed that Mark focuses on the meaning of Jesus’ identity as the “Messiah, Son of God” (1:1) which remained a secret throughout the gospel except to Jesus Himself.⁷ In summary to Wrede’s theory, Kingsbury wrote:

Mark is perceived to be a document of the latter part of the first
interpreters would say that “Son of God” is Mark’s particular designation for Jesus. It stands in the opening line of the gospel alongside “Jesus Messiah” (1:1). Guthrie stressed that this view of Christ is not developed in a doctrinal sense, but that it is worked out in his divine activity. As a Son of God, Jesus possesses power over all type of illness and casts out evil spirits with irresistible authority. He could calm the storm with words, showing his power over nature. Mark’s portrayal of Jesus is more than that of a human person.

Mark opens and conclude his narrative by identifying Jesus as the “Messiah, Son of God”, but the designation that occurs most frequently is “Son of man”. Appearing twice in the close proximity in the first half of the Gospel (2:10, 28), the expression appears 14 times from 8:31 through 14:62. Contrary to “Christ” and “Son of God,” “Son of man” is used exclusively by Jesus and always with reference to Himself in Mark’s narrative and never with the accompanying qualification or reticence that mark the use of other designation. The source of this title is found in Dan. 7:13 where there is the mention of the “glorious Son of Man.” In Mark, Jesus as the “Son of Man” has three distinct functions: (i) the “Exalted” Son of Man (i.e. His pre-incarnate state); (ii) the “Suffering” Son of Man (His earthly life that culminates in His suffering and death); (iii) the “Coming” Son of Man (His Parousia in power).

According to Guthrie, Mark also portrays Jesus as the Redeemer. He stressed that Jesus’ claim for his purpose which was ‘to become a ransom for many’ (10:45) was given great importance by Mark by laying great emphasis on the passion narratives. Mark presented a much greater proportion of space to the passion narratives than any other of the gospels. This may be to emphasize his theme on “suffering” based on the “suffering” of Jesus. Mark seems to play with the question, “Is Jesus the Messiah ‘in spite of’ His suffering and death or ‘because of’ His suffering and death?” Mark would affirm the second because for him, suffering of Jesus is not an aberration to Jesus’ Messiahship but very much a part and parcel of it because He is the “suffering Messiah” (cf. 10:45). Jesus is not the kind of Messiah that the Jews expected – all conquering, powerful, and without death. Yes, Jesus fulfills all that expectations but in a different way – He conquers with the power of humility and suffering.

3. Portrait of Jesus in Matthew

Just like Mark, Matthew also shows the understanding of Jesus as Son of David and Son of God distinctively influenced by the reading of Torah and interaction with Pharisaic Judaism.

One of Matthew’s portrayal of Jesus is as ‘son of David.’ Matthew
through the infancy narratives, defined the place of Jesus within traditional Jewish Messianic expectation. Luke Timothy Johnson wrote that it was not enough for the Christians to proclaim that Jesus Christ was resurrected Messiah but the credentials (the qualities that make him suitable) of a Davidic king had to be demonstrated. So, the formula citations in the infancy narratives prove that Jesus meets prophetic expectations, and the genealogy connects him to the royal line of Davidic kings.

Matthew’s emphasis on Jesus as Son of David is found in many references to David (see 9:27; 12:3; 23:15-22; 20:30-31). Jesus’ entry to Jerusalem made it most clear and easy to understand with Matthew’s formula citation from Zech 9:9, where Jesus uses both colt and ass in His procession (21:2, 7). The people also cried out “Hosanna to the Son of David” (21:9, 15).

According to Kingsbury the key christological title in Matthew is “huios tou theou”, “Son of God” and he contended that Matthew regards Son of God as the central and most theologically laden term used for portraying Jesus. Hagner opines that Matthew stresses the sonship of Jesus by having Him refer to God as His father some twenty three times. Matthew also portrays Jesus as teacher and Lord. Jesus was called Teacher mostly by outsiders such as scribes, Pharisees, Jewish tax collectors, Herodians, Sadducees, etc. Jesus is never called teacher by the disciples or those coming to faith in Jesus. The disciples and those coming to faith in Jesus always call him Lord. For Hagner, the title ‘Lord’ “kurios” is analogous to Son of God, and all other titles such as Christ, Son of David, Son of Abraham, the coming one, Teacher (Rabbi), shepherd, and servant all support the title Son of God, although each has its own meaning.

In the words of D.L. Bock, Luke’s portrait of Jesus is “variegated, but it is organized as well.” Luke carefully develops his portraits of Jesus through this feature – Messiah-Servant-Prophet to Lord. From the reading of Luke 1-2, we can see clearly that Jesus is introduced as a regal figure, one who is typical of a king and both the announcement to Mary and the promises of Zechariah make the Davidic connection explicit (1:31-33, 69). The images of Servant and prophet also comes together in Simeon’s remarks (2:30-35), but “the idea of a leader-prophet is a dominant Christological theme in Luke,” claims D.L. Bock.

For Robert J. Karris, the ministry of Jesus the prophet seems wasted as he is rejected by the religious leaders. Luke’s theme of rejected prophet brings out a further nuance of his portrayal of Jesus. The schema of rejected prophet has four components: God’s mercy in sending a prophet; rejection of the prophet; punishment; sending of another prophet. There is a final nuance to Luke’s portrait of Jesus, and this deals with the fidelity of Jesus’ God. Luke begins his Gospel with this theme as he tells how promises have been fulfilled in the birth of Jesus; he ends it with the theme as he tells how God has fulfilled promises in raising Jesus from the dead.

Even Johnson believes that portrayal of Jesus in Luke is also that of a prophetic figure and this portrayal of Jesus as a prophetic messiah is shown clearly in the story of his rejection in Nazareth (Luke 4:16-30). Luke also makes clear that Jesus is also a Davidic Messiah, which he said, is forged securely by the direct application of the oracle of 2 Sam 7:12-16 by Gabriel: Jesus will be given “the throne of his father David” (Luke 1:32-33), The Davidic link is forged by 2:4 (city of David… lineage of David) and 2:11 (“born this day in the city of David”).

Thus, in the synoptic gospels, we can see that the main portrait of Jesus is as “Messiah who is the Son of God.” Various titles and identities are given to Jesus such as Teacher, Prophet, Son of Man, Redeemer etc. Like mentioned earlier, all these titles and portrayals are in support of the portrait of Jesus as the Messiah, son of God whom God had sent into this world to redeem his people. Being the Son of God, Jesus possessed power and authority over demons, sickness, nature and all creations. This portrait of Jesus as Son of God has been the main emphasis in the entire synoptic gospel.

End Notes
10. Schweitzer’s book was translated into English in 1910 under the title The Quest of the Historical Jesus.
of Jesus because he concluded that Jesus died a desperate person when He saw that God was not about to bring the Kingdom of God to fulfillment in and through Him.

14 Jose Maniparampil, Synoptic Gospels, 141.
16 Jose Maniparampil, Synoptic Gospels, 141.
17 Guthrie, New Testament Introduction, 64.
18 For a fuller discussion on it, see “Infancy Narrative in Matthew” below.
23 Hagner, Matthew, lxi.
25 Hagner, Matthew, lxi.

Literary Features of the Fourth Gospel

John employed a variety of literary techniques which are of utmost importance in order to understand the Fourth Gospel. When we compare this Gospel with the other three synoptic Gospels we find that the Gospel according to John is completely different. The narrative style, content, outline, vocabularies and theology of John are distinctly different from the synoptic Gospels. Therefore, a proper understanding of the literary features that John used when composing his Gospel is extremely important.

1. Irony

It is a literary device that the author of the Fourth Gospel uses to a great extent. An irony is a word which has two meanings: literal, ordinary or general meaning and the deeper or spiritual meaning. Through an irony, something is stated and the ordinary hearer understands it in the literal sense but what the speaker actually intends to mean is the spiritual sense. In other words, an irony is a word apparently meaning one thing at its face value, but actually/really it means the opposite. We must recognize that in an irony there are two-layered meaning in the text. In short, an irony is a word/phrase through which something is expressed but what is really meant is something else.

Examples of irony in the Fourth Gospels are: Nicodemus coming to Jesus “by night” (3:2) or after having taken the piece of bread, Judas went out, “and it was night” (13:30). In both these passages, the word “night” is an irony because John does not intent to mean “time at which” both Nicodemus or Judas do something but his intention is to show the spiritual and theological meaning of “darkness”. Nicodemus comes “from darkness” to Jesus while Judas is departing from light “into darkness”. We will see this kind of meaning when we observe the role that Nicodemus plays throughout John’s Gospel because he will appear again in his narrative displaying his belief in Jesus. Similarly, Judas had been with Jesus, “the Light of the world,” but he has agreed to betray Him so that
“the light” will be put off. So when he departs from Jesus after taking the bread from Him, darkness will befall upon the world because in his going away darkness seeps in. Again, in 4:12, the Samaritan woman asks Jesus, “Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob...?” and what John means is “yes, in fact He is greater than Jacob”. Or the mockery of Jesus by the soldiers saying, “Hail, King of the Jews” (19:1-4), and the intended meaning of John is “in fact, Jesus is the King of the Jews”. Such passages having this technique abound in John.

2. Discourses

One striking feature of the Fourth Gospel is the absence of parables or “sermons” that we find in the synoptics. On the contrary, we find in John, but absent in the synoptics, “discourses” of Jesus. If Jesus in the synoptics teaches in parables and through “sermons”, we see Jesus teaching in and through discourses, both long and short.

“Discourses are shaped by repetition of words, formulation of antithesis, inclusio, structuring of verses within a unit in a chiastic pattern.” Some scholars propose that there are seven discourses in John, though other scholars consider that proposition as oversimplification because they opine that there are many more discourses than these seven. The seven major discourses of Jesus in John are:

(a) Jesus and Nicodemus (chap 3)  
(b) Jesus and the Samaritan woman (chap 4)  
(c) Jesus’ discourse on His role as the Judge of both the living and the dead (chap 5)  
(d) Discourse of Jesus on the bread of life (chap 6)  
(e) Discourse on the theme of Jesus as the light of the world (chaps 7-9)  
(f) Discourse about Jesus as the good shepherd (chap 10)  
(g) The Farewell Discourse (chaps 13-17)

3. Technique of Deliberate Misunderstanding

It is a literary style in which a word has a different meaning for the speaker and another meaning for the hearer. This technique is achieved by employing double-meaning words or symbolic language (but it should not be confused with “irony”). While the speaker uses a word or symbol in a figurative or spiritual sense, the hearers understand it in the natural sense of the word. In John, this technique can be identified in such passages where Jesus “states” something which readers invariably “misunderstand” which makes Jesus to speak “clarifying” words.

Examples of deliberate misunderstanding in John are: At the wedding at Cana of Galilee (2:1-11), the mother of Jesus comes to Him and reports that “they have no wine”. But Jesus responds her by saying that since His hour has not yet come He can not do anything. What follows is a strange thing because the mother of Jesus turns to the stewards and tells them that Jesus is going to do something so they must listen to Him. This is “deliberate misunderstanding”. Similarly, Nicodemus “misunderstands” when Jesus speaks about the necessity of being “born again” or “born from above” (3:3-4) so he, in turn, asks Jesus how is it possible for an old man like him to enter his mother womb and be born again? This “deliberate misunderstanding” on the part of Nicodemus leads Jesus to speak in a discourse. Again, when Jesus talks about “the living water” to the Samaritan woman, she “misunderstands” what Jesus means by “living water” (4:10-11) and states something contrary to what Jesus means: You do not have anything (vessels or jars) to draw water so how can you give me that living water? This in turn leads Jesus to make the clarifying statements that follow.

4. Technique of Inclusio

Inclusio is a technique in which same word, phrase or concept appear in two separate places making what comes in-between the two occurrences of the word, phrase or concept a unit. Thus, the entire unit or section of the Gospel which comes between the first occurrence and the last occurrence of the word, phrase or concept forms an inclusio. “Technique of inclusio” is also called the “technique of bracketing.”

Examples of “inclusio” in John can be found in 1:1 and 20:28 where the divinity of Jesus is affirmed in both the passages so as to show that John has an interest in presenting Jesus’ divinity throughout his Gospel. Thus, the entire Gospel of John comes under an inclusio because what is stated in 1:1 (“Word (i.e., Jesus) was God”) is repeated in 20:28 (“My Lord and my God”). Similarly, there is also an inclusio between 2:1-11 and 4:46-54 because both these passages refer to Jesus performing signs in Cana of Galilee. Thus, what happens between the first sign at Cana and the second sign at Cana forms an inclusio.

As noted above, the entire Gospel according to John is placed within an inclusio of 1:1 and 20:28 but what we have to observe is that within that larger inclusio there are smaller inclusios. Therefore, while the larger inclusio functions as the thread in a necklace, the smaller inclusio act as beads of a necklace. That is, each small inclusio forms a complete unit but it is connected to the other small units of inclusio and then to the larger inclusio. Hence, small inclusio are parts of the narrative within the
larger inclusio, i.e., the whole narrative (the Gospel). What is stated or meant within a small unit of inclusio should be understood only within the context of the larger inclusio which is, in turn composed of small bits and pieces of units. Therefore, in order to understand the whole (the message of the Gospel) we must understand the part (small units within that Gospel) and in order to understand the “part” we must understand “the whole”.

5. Asides

Asides are clarifying comments of the author/narrator of the story. It functions like a textnote in which something is clarified by the author for the sake of the readers whom, s/he thinks, may not properly or fully understand what s/he means. In an aside, the author breaks-in into the narrative and speaks in his own words. Through “asides” the author of John’s Gospel explains names (1:38, 42), symbols (2:21; 12:33; 18:9), corrects possible misunderstanding (4:2; 6:6), reminds readers (3:24; 11:2), or re-identifies characters already introduced (7:50; 21:20). In many English translations of the Bible, these asides are mostly placed under brackets.

The function of asides in John’s Gospel is not difficult to detect. The clarification is made when the author/narrator of the Fourth Gospel apprehends that the readers may misunderstand what he is trying to say. Thus, in 4:2, right after he had said that “Jesus was baptizing” he clarifies what he means by saying that it was not Jesus Himself who was baptizing but His disciples who were baptizing. Similarly, in the discourse between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, Jesus asks her a drink and immediately after the Samaritan woman’s counter question to Him regarding a Jew asking a drink from a Samaritan, the author breaks-in into the narrative in the form of an aside (clarification). He explains why the Samaritan woman is saying so by stating that “Jews and the Samaritans do not share their belongings/utensils”.

6. Parallelisms

There are different parallelisms used in the Fourth Gospel. They are:

(a) Synonymous Parallelism: In a synonymous parallelism, the same idea is repeated in different words (e.g. 3:11).

(b) Synthetic Parallelism: In this type of parallelism, an idea is further explained in a synthetic symmetry (e.g. 8:44).

(c) Antithetic Parallelism: In an antithetic parallelism, contrasting statements are used to convey a message (e.g. 3:18).

(d) Staircase Parallelism; It is a kind of spiral staircase, i.e., going upward rounding. In this type, the second sentence begins at the end of the first sentence. In other words, the last word of the first sentence is used to begin the second sentence (e.g. 1:1-2).

(e) Inverted Parallelism: It is also called “chiastic structure”. For example, John 6:35-40, in which vv. 35-36 parallels v. 40; v. 37 parallels v. 39 and v. 38 is placed in the centre.

It is significant to observe that there are poetic styles even within prose section of John’s Gospel.

End Notes

1 Jose Maniparampil, Reading the Fourth Gospel (Bangalore: Claretian Publications, 2004), 77.
2 Jose Maniparampil, Reading the Fourth Gospel, 81.
3 In the opinion of most of the Johannine scholars, the original Gospel of John ends in chap. 20 with chap. 21 being later addition by a redactor.
4 This is called “hermeneutical circle” in biblical hermeneutics. The importance of this circle was given by Rudolf Bultmann, among others. the way inclusio is used and the role they play in a literary work like the Fourth Gospel must be clearly identified in order to get a proper grasp of this Gospel.
Differences and Similarities between the Synoptics and the Fourth Gospel

Just a cursory comparison between the synoptics and John show that John is completely different from the first three Gospels. There are, however, certain similarities among them too.

1. Similarities

There are certain materials which are shared by all the four Gospels but we will notice that there are substantial differences among them on the use of these materials.

(i) John the Baptist Tradition: Both the synoptics and John refer to John the Baptist. In the synoptics, John appears before Jesus and prepares the way for Him assigning to him the role of “Elijah redivivus”. He also baptizes Jesus before Jesus begins His public ministry. Again, they do not show simultaneous ministry of both John and Jesus because it is only after John is arrested and imprisoned by Herod Antipas that Jesus begins His public ministry. In the Fourth Gospel also John plays the forerunner’s role and acts as a witness to Jesus (1:6-9, 29-34). Some of John’s disciples later on become the disciples of Jesus (1.35ff.) thereby showing that John gathered and readied the disciples for Jesus. However, the Fourth Gospel shows a parallel ministry of John and Jesus, going on simultaneously.

(ii) Cleansing of the Temple: Both the synoptics and John make use of this episode but in different places. While the synoptics show Jesus cleansing the Temple towards the end of Jesus’ public ministry John places it in the beginning of His ministry.


(iv) Mary anointing Jesus (Mark 14:3-9; Matt 26:6-13; John 12:1-8).
(v) Plot to Kill Jesus (Mark 14:1-2; Matt 26:1-5; Luke 22:1-2; John 11:45ff.).
(viii) Passion, Death and Resurrection Narratives: Lots of similarities in tradition, form and content between the synoptics and John can be seen but there are also substantial differences in some details and content.

2. Differences

Despite those similarities, differences between the synoptics and John outnumber the similarities. Almost 90% of the materials found in John are unique to this Gospel. Those differences can be categorized under the following headings.

(i) Geographical: While the synoptics depict Jesus as beginning His public ministry in Galilee and progressing through Samaria to Judea, John shows Jesus ministering most in and around Jerusalem. He, no doubt, moves out of Judea and goes to Samaria and Galilee but Judea is where Jesus’ ministry is based.

(ii) Chronological: As noted above, the synoptics narrate Jesus’ ministry being launched only after the arrest and imprisonment of John the Baptist (Mark 1:14 and parallels). But in the Gospel of John Jesus begins His ministry even when John the Baptist is actively ministering. Again, the synoptics show that Jesus died on the day of Passover (Mark 14:12; 15:42 and parallels) but John shows that Jesus died on the day of preparation of the Passover, i.e., one day early than the synoptics (John 18:28; 19:14). Similarly, according to the synoptics, Jesus purged the Temple towards the end of His ministry but John places it at the beginning of Jesus, public ministry (2:13ff.). While the synoptics refer to only one Passover (Mark 14:1) suggesting that Jesus’ ministry extends to only less than a year, the Fourth Gospel refers to at least three Passovers (2:13; 6:4; 11:55; 12:1; 13:1) suggesting that His ministry extends to at least three years.

(iii) Style and Content: The term “kingdom of God” which is the main theme of Jesus’ preaching in the synoptics is almost absent in the Fourth Gospel. This term appears only twice in John, both in chap 3 (vv. 3, 5) and in none of these occurrences Jesus elaborates on it. On the other hand, the main theme of Jesus’ teaching in John is “eternal life” which seems to replace the “kingdom of God” theme as used in the synoptics. “Parables”,
“Sadducees”, “demons”, “scribes”, “tax collectors” which frequently appear in the synoptics are also not found in John. Theological themes or concepts which we hardly find in the synoptics like “life”, “light”, “darkness”, “glory”, “knowledge”, “truth”, “judgment”, “world” abound in John. Likewise John uses some special titles for Jesus like “Lamb of God,” and “Logos”. The “I am” sayings of Jesus is also found only in John.

(iv) Theological Perspective: John never records any exorcism of Jesus nor does he calls the mighty works of Jesus as miracles, a term used for it in the synoptics, rather he uses the more significant term “sign” for it. John also does not record prominent synoptic materials like genealogy of Jesus, birth of Jesus, His baptism or temptation, the sermon on the mount/plain, any of the parables, Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus’ transfiguration, mission of the twelve or seventy, eschatological sayings, woes to Jewish religious leaders, great commission, ascension of Jesus, etc.

But John records other important passages which are absent in the synoptic Gospels like the Logos prologue (1:1-18), the “I am” sayings of Jesus, water being turned into wine (2:1-11), dialogues with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman (chaps 3-4), woman caught in adultery (8:1-12), raising of Lazarus (11:1ff.), Jesus washing of the disciples feet (13:1-20), extended farewell discourse of Jesus and teachings on the Paraclete (chaps 13-16), high priestly prayer of Jesus (chap 17), etc.

3. Proposed Solution

These similarities and differences between the synoptic Gospels and the Fourth Gospel present some problems in Gospels research. Questions like did John know the synoptics? Was there any literary relationship between John and synoptics? are questions with which scholars wrestle for many years without any concrete solution. D. Moody Smith has noted that this particular debate stretches far back into history, “The relationship of John to the synoptic gospels has been a recurring problem, not only for two centuries of modern critical scholarship, but for Christian theology and exegesis over a much longer period."

Until about World War II the dominant view was that John knew and used one or more of the synoptic gospels when writing his account. But he did not follow the synoptic presentation of Jesus because John wanted to either supplement or replace them. P. Gardner-Smith, however, began a trend away from the dependence theory when he brought to light two of its shortcomings. First, the existence of continuing oral tradition at the time when the Gospel was written, which renders the argument for John’s dependence on the synoptics less compelling; second, the concentration of critics on points of agreement between the Fourth Gospel and the synoptics and their overlooking of the significance of the differences.

Since that time many scholars have followed theories that view John as having written independently of the synoptics.

In most recent debates, the arguments concerning John’s relationship to the synoptics have centered around three distinct positions: (1) that John was literarily dependent upon one or more of the synoptics, (2) that John was literarily independent of the synoptics but that similarities between them are due to use of a common synoptic tradition(s), and (3) that John was literarily independent of the synoptics but was aware of them and their tradition(s).

3.1. Literary Dependence

Norman Perrin suggested that one can find traces of Mark’s redactional work on the passion narrative in John’s account. He writes, “For a long time the general opinion of New Testament scholars was that the passion narrative existed as a connected unit before the gospel of Mark was written, and it was easy and natural to think that John had known and used a version of that pre-Markan narrative rather than the gospel of Mark. But today the tendency is to ascribe more and more of the composition of the passion narrative to the evangelist Mark himself and to doubt the very existence of a pre-Markan and non-Markan passion narrative extensive enough to have been the basis for the gospel of John.” Therefore, according to Perrin, the similarities between John and Mark in the passion materials strongly imply that John knew and used Mark.

C.K. Barrett also argued for literary dependence between John and synoptics but for him it is John who depended on the synoptics. He says that John had read Mark and was influenced both positively and negatively by its contents—that is, he reproduced in his own way some Markan substance and language and also emended some of the Markan material—and that a few of John’s statements may be most satisfactorily explained if he was familiar with matter peculiar to Luke.

A more recent dependence argument coming from the European scene is the one offered by M.-E. Boismard and A. Lamouille. This very complex view of John’s dependence on the synoptics requires that John (or his redactors) have several versions or documents.

3.2. Literary Independence

The second theory concerning John’s relationship to the synoptics attempts to take into consideration the similarities and differences noted above. It “contends that John was not dependent on the Synoptics but
that the similarities between the two are due to use of a common tradition.\textsuperscript{13}

A momentous work in this area has been done by Bruno de Solages.\textsuperscript{14} He contends that John only knew the tradition behind the synoptics, or at least behind Mark.\textsuperscript{15} To establish his argument he begins his book with a statistical analysis to identify those verses of John that may reasonably be said to be paralleled in the synoptics. De Solages observes that one cannot fail to be struck by the relative scarcity of such correspondences as compared with those among the synoptics.\textsuperscript{16} Totaling the corresponding verses, de Solages concludes that of the 868 verses in John only 153 (17.6%) have synoptic counterparts, most of which are found in the passion, feeding of the multitude, and Jesus’ walking on the water.\textsuperscript{17}

Following the analysis of corresponding verses, de Solages compares their order, particularly in the passion narrative.\textsuperscript{18} In a table\textsuperscript{19} he demonstrates how Mark and John have the same sequence in the passion where they correspond, but this sequence is sometimes broken or interrupted by omissions or dislocations on one side or the other.\textsuperscript{20}

Perhaps most importantly, de Solages attempts to set a percentage value on the verbal agreements between John and the synoptics in the passion, John 6, and certain common logia.\textsuperscript{21} To do this, he uses three categories of agreement: (1) verbatim agreement, (2) equivalent words (i.e. words from the same root but with different inflection), and (3) synonyms. In the passion narrative he finds a total (i.e. total of verbatim, equivalent and synonymous wording) agreement of about 15.5 percent.\textsuperscript{22} For the John 6:1–21 correspondences\textsuperscript{23} he finds about a 27.2 percent total agreement, and for the logia correspondences\textsuperscript{24} he finds very similar results. From these statistical data, de Solages rather confidently states that John does not use the synoptics as sources but must have been aware of and used their tradition by confirming, clarifying and correcting it.\textsuperscript{25}

De Solages bases his view that John and the synoptists had a common tradition on the fact that John the son of Zebedee was the author of the fourth gospel and was an eyewitness to the historical Jesus.\textsuperscript{26} Much of his foundation for Johannine authorship is based on the study of B. F. Westcott,\textsuperscript{27} which is still very crucial in the study of Johannine authorship in modern scholarly circles. From internal evidence Westcott (and hence de Solages) has determined the following about the author of the gospel: (1) He was a Jew, (2) he was a Palestinian Jew, (3) he was an eyewitness, (4) he was one of the twelve apostles, and (5) he was the apostle John.\textsuperscript{28} According to de Solages, if the apostle John is the author then several characteristics of the fourth gospel are explained: (1) the precision of the facts that are reported, (2) the independence toward the synoptics (which he sometimes neglects and sometimes corrects), and (3) the relative scarcity of traces of Matthew and Luke, who were not eyewitnesses.\textsuperscript{29}

De Solages’ view that John knows the synoptics (or at least Mark) but does not use them as sources makes very good sense in light of his statistical research. But some could (and would) take issue with de Solages on a possible weakness in his reasoning, as D. M. Smith observes:

The explanation that this state of affairs results from the author’s having been not only eye-witness to the events he describes, but one of the Twelve, has a wondrous simplicity and attractiveness. But Solages hardly meets the objections that have been mounted against this view. Indeed, his references to scholarly discussions of the problems with which he deals are at best minimal. Moreover, the "supplementation theory" (Windisch) which Solages represents as basically explaining John’s treatment, or omission, of the greater part of the Synoptic material, is more satisfactory as a general theory of their relationship when one does not examine individual cases or pericopes in order to assess how well they may actually be interpreted on this basis.\textsuperscript{30}

Others (e.g. Brown, Peder Borgen) would disagree with de Solages’ view that John had the “same” traditions as the synoptists. Rather, they would argue that John had a tradition similar to that of the synoptists.\textsuperscript{31} The similarities between John and Synoptics, therefore, come from “similarities” of sources at the oral tradition stage.

3.3. A Mediating View

A third position that has been “cautiously hinted at by D. M. Smith”\textsuperscript{32} has been called a “mediating view”\textsuperscript{33} by some scholars. Smith writes: “Possibly the Fourth Gospel can be adequately explained without primary or fundamental reference to the Synoptic gospels, but also without denying the fourth evangelist’s awareness of them.”\textsuperscript{34} Among others who have hinted at this idea are J. N. Sanders and B. A. Mastin.\textsuperscript{35} Upon examining evidence advanced for John’s use of Mark, they remained unconvinced that Mark was a source but felt that John must have known Mark. They added: “But knowing Mark and using it as a source are two different things.”\textsuperscript{36} Consequently, “mediating view” may be understood to mean that John wrote his gospel literarily independent of the synoptics but that he knew them and their tradition(s). This theory seems to best handle the major differences and the minor similarities (as noted above) between the fourth gospel and the synoptics.

Perhaps the best mediating view is that put forward by Morris and later reinforced by D. A. Carson: The Johannine narrative interlocks with that of the synoptists.\textsuperscript{37} By “interlocking tradition” Morris means those places where John and the synoptics “mutually reinforce or explain each
other, without betraying overt literary dependence.”38 Carson explains:

Direct literary dependence should not in any case be the exclusive issue. When we see how free John is when citing or alluding to the Old Testament, we perceive that if he adopted a similar practice when citing or alluding to other written works it would be exceedingly difficult to reconstruct any part of them from the Gospel he has written. My views . . . suggest that John had probably read Mark, and probably Luke. It is not impossible that he read Matthew, but that is harder to prove. But if he had them in front of him as he wrote, he did not consult them, or at least he did not make verbatim use of them. John wrote his own book.39

He goes on to say that the relationship between John and the synoptics should not be evaluated exclusively in terms of dependence one may have on the other, nor in terms of their divergence, but in terms of their interlocking connections. These interlocking connections explain the parallels with the synoptics and the “subtle touches” or similarities with them as well.40

Carson goes on to list seven different examples41 of this type of connection, two of which are quoted here. The first is an example where John reinforces the synoptics:

At several points, John provides explicit theological justification for actions or motifs common in the Synoptics, but relatively unexplained. Consider, for instance, the commonly noted fact that the Synoptics report many exorcisms while John records none. It is true that the Synoptics provide some theological reflection on what Jesus is doing when he eliminates demons from human personalities (e.g., Mt. 12:25–28; Lk. 11:14–26); but it is the Fourth Gospel that provides “a theology of the devil.” Jesus’ opponents in John’s Gospel trace their paternity to the devil himself (8:44). The betrayer is moved and inspired by the devil (6:70; 13:2); . . . In short John, as usual, is profoundly interested in the undergirding theology.42

Next is an example where the synoptics reinforce John:

This interlocking cuts the other way. . . . In other words, if John often usefully explains something in the Synoptic Gospels, the Synoptists frequently provide information that enables us to make better sense of something in the Fourth Gospel. . . . Although John’s prologue pronounces that Jesus is the Word that was with God and was God, and that has now become fresh, and although his Gospel happily refers to Jesus’ mother and even to his “father and mother,” nothing begins to even remotely explain by what means the one who shared the glory with the Father before the world began somehow became the son of Mary. For that, the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke are far more helpful.43

3.4. Conclusion

It is now beneficial to summarize the three basic positions scholars are taking on the subject of John’s relationship to the synoptic gospels. The first position claims to find evidence for a literary dependence of the fourth evangelist on one or more of the synoptics.46 The second position contends that John was not dependent on the synoptics but that the similarities between the two are due to use of a common tradition.47 The third view, called a mediating view, proposes that John wrote his gospel literally independent of the synoptics but that he knew them and their tradition(s).48 Many complex arguments have been made for each of these views, a few of which have been outlined above. It seems best, however, to view John’s relationship to the synoptics as mediating. This argument seems to make the most sense theologically and historically. It proposes that John perhaps read Mark and Luke (and maybe Matthew) but wrote his own gospel, not consulting or making verbatim use of any of the synoptic gospels. The main idea behind this view is that John and the synoptics have an interlocking tradition—that is, they mutually reinforce and explain each other. Because of this, the alleged contradictions between John and the synoptics are explained and dispelled, thus making all of the gospels theologically and historically reliable.

Blomberg makes the following observation about John’s gospel in light of the synoptics:

A careful comparison of the first three gospels demonstrates that the similarities between them far outweigh the differences. When one turns to the Fourth Gospel, however, one seems to be in a different world altogether. The person who reads the four gospels straight through from start to finish notices this most clearly; after having read many of the same stories three times over, he or she is amazed how different John is.49
End Notes

1 Jose Maniparampil, *Reading the Fourth Gospel*, 38.


10 The “materials” of which Perrin and Duling speak are the trial scene set in the context of Peter’s denial.


17 Smith, “John,” 103.


23 Smith reminds his readers that this passage corresponds to the synoptics throughout. The percentage of identical agreement is only 13.9 percent.


44 Morris, *Studies*, 43–44.


Sources of Understanding the Jesus Movement

Socio-Cultural Context of the Fourth Gospel

Although the gospel of John was written much after the Synoptic Gospels, it is one of the key documents that give us a lot of information regarding early Christian thought especially during the latter part of the first century and the early second century AD. Scholars like B.W. Bacon (1933) William Temple and Westcott in the 20th century have pointed out that John was under the influence of Hellenism and Judaism when he wrote his Gospel. The socio-cultural context of the fourth gospel was the combination of Greco-Roman context.

1. John’s Gospel: Jewish? Greek? Or Both?

It was commonly held that John’s presentation of Jesus changed by its contact with Greek thought; and scholars set out to prove that John’s thinking was like that of Philo of Alexandria (20 B.C.-A.D. 50) or resembled the Greek Hermetic literature, i.e. mystical writings, purporting to give knowledge of God, produced in Egypt between A.D. 100 and 200. Some scholars held the idea that John was once a Hellenistic Gospel, full of non-Jewish ideas. Now, however, scholars have come to recognize that it arose among a community of Jewish Christians. The change in perspective came about for two primary reasons.

(a) The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls has demonstrated the Jewish character of John. Some of the ideas once thought to be non-Jewish have now been found in the Scrolls, writing from a Palestinian Jewish sect. For instance, both John and the scrolls emphasize an ethical dualism, expressed as a contrast between light and darkness or truth and falsehood.2

(b) Second, passages in the Gospel indicate that it arose among Jewish Christians who were being expelled from the synagogue.3

So we can say that John’s Gospel is a Jewish document written with certain Hellenistic flavour. But its important themes or concepts like logos, truth, knowledge, etc., can be better understood when read against its Jewish background.

2. The Johannine Community

When dealing with the Fourth Gospel, especially the locale in which it originated, scholars like Raymond Brown postulated “the Johannine Community”. According to them, this community was formed in or near Palestine sometime in the A.D. 70s or 80s, moving on later to preach to those of a Greek cultural background in the areas around the city of Ephesus. The community was made up of Jews, including some followers of John the Baptist, and Gentiles, who accepted Jesus as the Messiah. Some Jews, opposed to the Temple authorities, also joined the community, and this group made converts from among the people of Samaria. The community among which this Gospel arose consisted initially of Jewish Christians who worshipped in the same synagogues as other Jews. They were expelled from the synagogues because they adopted certain beliefs that were diametrically opposed to those of traditional Judaism (9:22; 34; 12:42; 16:2). They found “grace and truth” (i.e. true salvation) in Jesus rather than in the Law of Moses (1:17). They saw sacrifice at the temple as unnecessary; since they viewed Jesus as “the lamb of God” whose death atoned for sins (1:29).5

3. The Religious and Historical Context

3.1. Excommunication from the Synagogue

After the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in A.D. 70, the Christian community in Palestine was under constant threat of excommunication and death because of their confession that Jesus is the Christ (9:22; 12:42; 16:2). About A.D. 85 the Jews promulgated “The Eighteen Benedictions” and was made a compulsory feature of their synagogue worship which was to provide a basis for excluding heretics from the synagogue. One clause was designed to exclude Jewish Christians. In the NT only John used the technical description for excommunication from the synagogue (9:22; 34; 12:42; 16:2). The confession that Jesus is the Christ (Messiah) was the reason for excommunication (9:22; 12:42). Jesus experienced conflict with Jewish authorities by the threat that was designed to discourage converts and seems to have achieved its aim reasonably well (9:22; 12:42). The threat of excommunication encouraged Jewish believers to keep their faith secret in order to stay within the fold of Judaism.6

John sets out to show that the revelation in Jesus justifies facing persecution. He presents this revelation as the fulfilment and abolition of
needed to address a situation in which hope in one true God and in his eschatological plan was fading. The first century historical context also shows a sincere longing for the people to see God and to have communion with him even by ascending to heaven.\textsuperscript{11}

3.2. The Problem of Heresies

There were different heretical teachings (wrong or false teachings) that confronted the Johannine community.

3.2.1. Gnosticism

According to R. Bultmann, Gnosticism began sometime in the 2\textsuperscript{nd} century BC. Gnosticism was a general religious phenomenon of the Hellenistic world and was the product of the fusion of Greek culture and oriental religions. It included Jewish monotheism, Babylonian astrology and Iranian dualism. Through the manipulation of words and the twisting of scriptural meanings, the Gnostics of John’s time were perceived as leaders who led Christians astray.\textsuperscript{12} In one way or another, almost all heretical groups show a gnostic tendency. Gnosticism claimed that people became ignorant by the influence of evil forces and that God sent his messenger to cast away the ignorance and give them the knowledge (Greek \textit{gnosis}) that they belong to the other world. However, the Gnostics believed that salvation is possible only at the release of the human soul from the body, for this, material world, including the flesh, is evil. Whereas the heavenly things are good.\textsuperscript{13} This dualistic thought eventually led the Gnostics to reject the humanity of Jesus who came in the “flesh” believing that a holy God cannot take up sinful flesh to become human.

3.2.2. Doceticism

A particular thought of Gnosticism, which John seems to be combating, is called “Doceticism” (from Greek \textit{dokeo} meaning “seem” or “think”). The Docetics, following the Gnostic philosophy, believed that the incarnate Christ was divine and heavenly and did not become a human being of flesh and blood. The Docetists held that Jesus Christ was only “seemingly human” not real human person. He did not truly come in the flesh, for His flesh was only an appearance; Christ only seemed to be a man. John challenged this by describing the humanity of Jesus, depicting Jesus’ human traits and claiming that “the word became flesh and dwelt among us” (1:14) and at His death Jesus died a real human because “blood and water” came out from His body (19:34). John used many Gnostic terms and language to fight the menace of Gnosticism during his time. However, it is interesting to note that the Fourth Gospel became one of the favourite...
documents of the Gnostics and the first commentary on John was written by a Gnostic.

3.2.3. Cerinthians
A group in Ephesus was also clamming that John the Baptist was the Messiah (cf. Acts 19:1-7). Cerinthus and his followers treated Jesus and Christ as two figures by saying that Jesus is the son of Joseph, while Christ is a celestial aeon who descended on Jesus at the time of His baptism and left Him before His death. Thus the Cerinthians questioned the divinity of Jesus. They also held that the world was created by demiurge rather than by God (1:3).14

4. Political Conditions in Palestine in the Early Church Era
The post-70 AD political situation in Palestine was one of turmoil, aggression and suspicion. There had been frequent Jewish uprisings against the Roman political masters. One such revolt resulted in the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the Romans in AD 70. No doubt, still the external condition of Palestine is determined by the relationship with Rome. The subject Kings (tetrarchs) enjoyed a certain freedom of movement; even in the province of Judea there was a certain Jewish self-government. The Palestinian Jews were benefiting from the empire wide recognition of the Jews as a special nation. The privileges granted the Jews were neither obligated to participate in the cult of the ruler, nor were they to be forced to participate in the cult.

At the helm of the Jewish self-government in Judea was the high priest, who represented the people before the Roman procurator on the one hand and supervised the cult in Jerusalem on the other. Furthermore, he presided over the Sanhedrin, comprised of 70 members. Moreover, the Sanhedrin was comprised of representatives of the aristocracies both of the priests and of the laity, plus the group of the scribes.

Within Palestinian Judaism there were several groups, sometimes labelled as “parties,” with divergent religious conceptions and, in part, with contrasting political ideals. The group of the Pharisees was a closed society; while its leadership was in the hands of the scribes; its composition was essentially from the laity. Until the Jewish war, the order of the Sadducees—the party of the priestly aristocracy—was politically influential. The Zealots are distinguished sharply from the two groups mentioned thus far. They were more closely aligned with the Pharisees and also sought to distinguish themselves through adherence to the law. But for them this adherence was connected with a revolutionary program. The Essence constituted a fourth group. The primary contrast of this group from the three other groups was that they retreated into the desert and thus separated from the world as well as from Judaism in general.15

5. Economic Conditions in Palestine
Agricultural home production constituted the basis of the economic and living conditions. Yet, there were also larger agricultural units in Judea; likewise, in the fertile areas of Galilee as well as in the lowlands of the Jordan, large estates are known to have existed. The latter was usually in the possession of the royal and high priestly families, yet to a large extent also in the hands of (imperial) foreigners. The great landowners enjoyed considerable economic and political influence on account of the volume of the crops, especially vine, oil, and wheat and because they employed a sizeable workforce. Real estate was often leased out, which, in many cases, led to the impoverishment of the tenant due to high lease payments. In contrast to the towns, craftsmanship was virtually undeveloped in the rural areas.16

Skilled labor was centralized in Jerusalem. Taxes and dues were a constant source of tension and unrest. In all of the provinces there were two kinds of direct taxes: a tax based on the agricultural yield and a poll-tax.17

6. Religions of the Greco-Roman World
The first century was a period of intense spiritual yearning, combined with widespread popular superstition.18 Along with these more or less rational concepts went a growing belief in destiny, and in astrology. People, living under the circle of the stars, was directed by them and enslaved to the divinities or demons which inhabited them, or were represented them. If anyone was to escape from the circle of fate s/he must find some means by which, leaving behind her/his bodily nature, s/he might mount to the heavenly sphere beyond the stars and live immortal communion with God. Clearly this process could be complete only at death: but already in life one must seek and find, if one could, both assurance regarding one’s ultimate fate and some foretaste of it. Merely rational knowledge was not sufficient to gain such an end. They were lost without a saviour or revealer. Saviours and revealers, religions and philosophies, there were in considerable number in the Hellenistic world, and John, setting forth, in that world, and with the intention of being understood by it, the true saviour and the true revelation, seems to have made use of the ideas which were in circulation in it.19 John’s insistence and emphasis on Jesus as the only Saviour and revealers, religions and philosophies, there were in considerable number in the Hellenistic world, and John, setting forth, in that world, and with the intention of being understood by it, the true saviour and the true revelation, seems to have made use of the ideas which were in circulation in it.19 John’s insistence and emphasis on Jesus as the only...
Sources of Understanding the Jesus Movement

Understanding the Jesus Movement in the Gospel Traditions

We may surmise some possible connections between Platonism and the Fourth Gospel. The teaching of Jesus in John also reveal some similarities. When Jesus said that He is not of this world but His opponents belong to this lower world (John 8:22; 18:36) —reflect this platonic concept of the world, that this world is inferior to the real invisible and true world which is "ek ton ano" (from above). There are other similar contrasts between ‘Spirit and Flesh’ (3:6; 6:63); between ‘Eternal life and natural existence’ (11:25, 26); between the real bread from heaven (6:32) and natural bread; between the water of eternal life (4:14) and natural water. But this does not meant that John’s literature was Hellenistic. His narration only had a Hellenistic flavour which was in accordance with Palestinian tradition.

7. Greek Philosophy Prevalent During the Latter Part of First Century AD

7.1. Platonism

Platonism was still very much a force to reckon with as a philosophical school during the latter part of the 1st century AD. Plato was regarded as a great philosophic teacher in the first century AD and his philosophy was made into a philosophical system. He was considered an authority for his definite expression of an invisible and eternal world that was the real world over and against our visible, transient and imperfect world. From this was born the idea that the mind is superior to the flesh. Plato’s idea about the conflict between soul and body, or spirit and flesh, greatly influenced Judaism and Christianity. This and his ideas about the Demiurge, the pre-existence of the soul, and the return of the soul to heaven influenced a branch of early Christianity known as “Gnostic” Christianity.

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7.2. Stoicism

Besides Platonism, there was another popular philosophical school during John’s time known as Stoicism. Although there is no proof of any direct contact between John and Stoic philosophy, some indirect contact between John and Stoics with regard to Logos cannot be ruled out. To cite an example — John writes that Logos (Word) is the light which illuminates every one (1:9) and Stoics believed that there is a friction or spark (of light) of the universal Logos in every human being. It is also assumed that the expressions “His own” (1:11), “His voice” (10:3ff; 18:37) have some Stoic reflections.

All the above mentioned points tell us that the socio-cultural context of the Fourth Gospel was a complex one. It will be important for us to bear in mind the conglomeration of these factors while we approach the Fourth Gospel and study it within this milieu.

End Notes

4 Raymond E. Brown, the Community of the Board Disciple (New York: Paulist Press, 1979).
The Portrait of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel

In some respects, John’s portrait of Jesus corresponds to that of the synoptics but John differs in some crucial aspects. John uses the familiar titles “Christ,” “Son of God,” and “Son of man.” Jesus is crucified, buried, and resurrected. But in three primary respects John’s portrait of Jesus differs significantly from that of the synoptics.¹

Only John depicts Jesus as a pre-existent being (1:1-3). The synoptics never suggest that Jesus in any sense existed before His birth, but John explicitly states this in the first verse of his Gospel. For John, Jesus existed in some form “in the beginning” before He appeared on earth as a human being. In terms of Greco-Roman ideas about “divine men”² John’s Jesus is an incarnation of god. While Matthew and Luke seems to present Jesus as a Jewish demigod, who comes into existence in His birth, John presents Him as an incarnation, an already existing spirit that takes on a human body. Through the “enfleshment” of the pre-existent Logos, Jesus becomes a human being in “flesh”, yet endowed with the “glory” that is relevant only to Him (1:14) because He is the “only” Son of God the Father (3:16) with whom He is “one” (10:30).

None of the synoptics ever refer to Jesus as God. However, John explicitly states this in the first verse of his Gospel. For John, Jesus existed in some form “in the beginning” before He appeared on earth as a human being. In terms of Greco-Roman ideas about “divine men”² John’s Jesus is an incarnation of god. While Matthew and Luke seems to present Jesus as a Jewish demigod, who comes into existence in His birth, John presents Him as an incarnation, an already existing spirit that takes on a human body. Through the “enfleshment” of the pre-existent Logos, Jesus becomes a human being in “flesh”, yet endowed with the “glory” that is relevant only to Him (1:14) because He is the “only” Son of God the Father (3:16) with whom He is “one” (10:30).

The pre-existence of Jesus gives rise to a difference in the “vertical” dimension of John’s Christology. In the synoptics, Jesus originates on earth, ascends to heaven to be enthroned beside God, then descend back on earth at the parousia. In John, this order is reversed. Jesus originates in Heaven, descends to earth to become a human being, then ascends back to heaven at the crucifixion. Jesus is “from above” and returns there when His work on earth is done.

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None of the synoptics ever refer to Jesus as God. However, John says that He is “God,” incarnated as human being (John 1:1, 14). From the very opening words of John (1:1c) till the end of his Gospel John affirms this fact (cf. 20:28). Thus, Jesus is not only pre-existent, but God. That is why, we find something unique in John’s portrait of Jesus, which the synoptics seem not to reveal,³ is that from the very beginning Jesus is

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¹ John Painter, John, 14.
³ A. Behera, From Law to Grace, 138.
"proclaimed" as the Messiah, the Anointed One, through many people’s confessions (like Andrew, John the Baptist) and through Jesus’ own revelation to the Samaritan woman.

These differences are reflected in special sense in which John uses traditional titles of Jesus: Son of God and Son of Man. In John as in the synoptics, Jesus is the Son of God and Son of Man. In John, however, these titles refer to pre-existent being. God “sends” his Son from heaven to earth in order to save the world (John 3:16-17). Likewise, the Son of Man descends from heaven and then ascends back to heaven (John 3:13; 6:62).

In addition to giving traditional titles a new sense, John introduces other distinctive ideas about Jesus: Jesus as the Logos, Jesus as God, Jesus’ use of the phrase “I am,” and Jesus’ glory.

1. Jesus as the Logos (Word)

The prologue of the Fourth Gospel (1:1-18) identifies Jesus as “the Logos” (“Word or Reason”), who existed alongside God in the beginning and through whom God created the world. The Logos subsequently came to earth and became incarnate (took on human flesh) as Jesus (1:14). He is God become human. Scholars have proposed several different backgrounds as the source for John’s concept of the Logos.

In Greek philosophy, the term “Logos” was, among their philosophers, particularly Heraclitus, the Stoics, and the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria an important principle. In the Stoic conception, the Logos was the life and mind of the universe. It resided in all matter, especially in human soul, imparting life and thought. John may have this conception in view when he says that Logos was “the true light that enlightens every person coming into the world” (John 1:9).

Wisdom in Jewish tradition can also shed some light to understand the way how John calls Jesus “the Logos”. Many scholars see personified wisdom of the Jewish tradition behind John’s Logos. As “she” (i.e., wisdom) appears in Proverbs 8:22-36, and other Jewish wisdom literature, Wisdom existed in the beginning before the creation of the earth. Like John’s Logos, she is compared to light, and like Jesus in John, she speaks in long discourses.

The “Word of Yahweh” is also taken to be one of the best possible background for John’s use of Logos for Jesus. Logos, as John uses it, indicates that he had in mind “the word of Yahweh,” God’s spoken word, mentioned in Hebrew Scriptures. In certain passages, the word of Yahweh seems to function almost as an independent agent alongside God. John’s description of “the Word” recalls this words of Yahweh. For example, in Psalm 33:6, Yahweh word is the agent of creation: “By the word of Yahweh the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth, all their host.” Similarly, John says of the Word, “All things came into being through him” (John 1:3).

Even more important for John’s picture of Jesus is the word of Yahweh in Isaiah 55:10-11, “For just as the rain descends, and the snow, from heaven, and does not return there until it has watered the earth, causing it to bear and put forth and giving seed to sow bread to eat, so is my word which goes forth from my mouth; it does not return to me empty-handed, without doing what I willed and accomplishing that for which I sent it.” This passage, like the word of Yahweh to rain or snow, portraying it as the agent sent to carry out God’s purposes in the earth. Especially significant are the following characteristics of the word in Isaiah’s description: the word (i) goes forth from God’s mouth, (ii) is sent by God to the earth, (iii) descend from heaven, (iv) does the will of God, (v) accomplished that for which God sent it, (vi) waters the earth, (vii) gives bread to eat, and (viii) returns to God.

These parallels suggest that the Fourth Gospel portrays Jesus as the Word of Yahweh in many places, even when the term “word” does not
appear.

2. Jesus as God

The prologue of John asserts that the Word was not only “with” God in the beginning, but also “was” God (1:1). No other Gospel makes this claim for Jesus. In some sense not explained, John describes the Word as both one with God and distinct from God. This paradox served as the basis for the Church’s doctrine of the “Trinity” carried on in the third and fourth centuries. The idea that Jesus is in some sense “God” as a central theme in the Fourth Gospel, is expressed in several ways.

(i) Jesus is called “God” in John 1:1, in 20:28, and according to some important manuscripts, in 1:18.

(ii) On several occasions, the Jews become angry with Jesus, because they understand that He is making himself God or equal to God (5:18; 8:58,59; 10:33).

(iii) Jesus explains His relation to God with the statement, “I and the Father are one” (10:30). This sentence seems to be modelled on Deut 6:4 where we find the “Shema”, the Jewish confession of faith in the oneness of God, “Yahweh, our God Yahweh, is one.”

(iv) In several passages, Jesus defines His oneness with the Father in terms of “mutual indwelling”: “I am in the Father and the Father is in me” (14:10,11; cf. 10:38).

(v) The claim is made that whoever has seen the Son has seen the Father (12:44, 45; cf. 1:18; 14:9). When the scripture speaks of Isaiah seeing God (Isa 6:1), the Fourth Evangelist understands this to mean that Isaiah saw the pre-existent Son of God (John 12:41).

3. The “I Am” Sayings

In John’s portrait of Jesus, Jesus frequently uses the phrase “I am,” either by itself or with a predicate indicating what He is.

In several passages, Jesus makes the claim “I am” (4:26; 6:20; 8:24; 28:58; 13:19; 18:5, 6, 8). This is the same claim that God makes in several passages of the Hebrew Scriptures (Deut 32:39; Isa 41:4; 43:10,13; 46:4; 48:12; 52:6; cf. 43:25; 51:12). The phrase ultimately refers back to Exodus 3:13-14, where God tells Moses that his name is “I Am who I Am” or simply “I Am.” The Fourth Gospel’s use of this phrase is thus part of its portrayal of Jesus as God.

In addition to absolute “I Am” sayings, Jesus also uses “I Am...” with a predicate. There are seven such “I am” sayings in John: “I am the bread of life” or “living bread” (6:35,51); “I am the light of the world” (8:12; 9:5); "I am the door" (10:7,9); “I am the good Shepherd” (10:11,14); “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25); “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (14:6); “I am the true vine” (15:1,5);

These sayings provide a metaphorical description of Jesus, role, function, or work. Three of the sayings are illustrated by signs which Jesus performs: “I am the bread of life or living bread” (6:35,51) is preceded by the sign of Jesus feeding the 5,000 with a few loaves of bread (6:1-14); “I am the light of the world” (8:12; 9:5) is followed by the sign of Jesus enlightening a man born blind (chap. 9); “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25) comes in the context of the death of Lazarus and his raising from the dead by Jesus (11:1-44).

4. Jesus’ Glory

In the synoptics, Jesus shares God’s glory only after His death and resurrection. He is exalted to sit at the right hand of God and returns with the glory of God (Mark 8:38; 10:37; 13:26). In John too, Jesus is “glorified” at His death (John 12:23, 27-28; 13:31-32; 17:1, 4-5). But in John, Jesus shares God’s glory already in His earthly ministry (1:14; 2:11; 11:4, 40). And even before the creation of the world (17:5, 24).

This comparison of Jesus’ glory in John and Synoptic may help to explain how John’s unique Christology arose. John’s portrait of Jesus as a glorious heavenly being may have developed from the earlier conception in which Jesus was exalted to heaven and glorified after His resurrection. In this state of exaltation, He was “Lord,” a name previously reserved for God. As such He shared the authority, attributes, and glory of God. It was this exalted Lord that the Church worshipped. Most likely, as the Church focused on this glorified Jesus in their present, they began to think of Jesus in the past in the same way. They retrojected the glory of exalted Lord into Jesus’ ministry and even further into the past in the same way. The Johannine community represents a type of Christianity in which this process had come to completion.

End Notes

1 What follows below is a summary from Delbert Burkett, An Introduction to the New Testament and the Origins of Christianity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 219-224

2 See “theios aner” concept under “The Gospels Genre”.

3 The so-called “Messianic Secret” particularly in Mark, which, according to William Wrede, is Mark’s way of “revealing” and “concealing” Jesus’ Messiahship.

4 Those manuscripts have “God” not “Son” in this verse.

5 The Greek word “doxa” means “honour” or “splendour”.

Sources of Understanding the Jesus Movement
Extra-Biblical Sources for Understanding the Jesus Movement

The biblical Gospels are not the only sources that record about Jesus and the movement He began. The extra-biblical sources about Jesus and His movement are important for us because they offer objective and non-Christian perspective that either confirm or contradict the biblical accounts about Jesus and His movement.

1. Jewish Sources

1.1. Josephus

Josephus was a Jewish historian of high calibre who lived between c. A.D. 37-110. He was the son of a priest named Matthias, of the order of Jehoiarib (1 Chro 24:7). Hence, he was both of priestly class and of royal blood (since his mother was a Hasmonean), who later gave his adherence to the Pharisees. He is the principal source for Jewish history in the first century and hence exceedingly important for New Testament backgrounds.¹

He wrote several books like Jewish War, Jewish Antiquities and Against Apion. Four books by Josephus survive, preserved and much read by Christians. He originally wrote The Jewish War (Bellum Judaicum) in Aramaic and then rewrote it in Greek with the assistance of collaborators; it was published between 75 and 82. The twenty-volume Jewish Antiquities (Antiquitates Judaicae) was published in 93 or 94. It covers the history of the Jews from creation to A.D. 66. The Life (Vita) is not an account of his whole career, but defends his activities as commanding officer in Galilee in 66-67 against criticisms by Justus of Tiberius about his conduct of the war. Against Apion (Contra Apionem), the latest of Josephus’s works, is a type book apology for Judaism.² He refers twice to Jesus in his Jewish Antiquities:

And so he [Ananus the High Priest, son of Annas] convened the judges of the Sanhedrin and brought before them a man called James, the brother of Jesus who was called the Christ, and certain others. He accused them of having transgressed the law and delivered them up to be stoned.

This reference corroborates that James was the brother of Jesus who was considered to be the Messiah by some people.

Again he said this about Jesus:

At about this time lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one might call him a man. For he was one accomplished surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth with pleasure. He won many Jews and many of the Greeks. He was the Messiah. (Ant. 18. 3. 3 [63-64]).³

And when by the envy of our principal men. Pilate had condemned him to the cross, yet notwithstanding, those who had loved him at first persevered, for he appeared to them alive on the third day as the oracles of the prophets had foretold many of these and other wonderful things concerning him: and the sect of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day.⁴

The request by the Jews at the trial of Jesus for the release of Barabbas, a revolutionary. The word for the “robbers” crucified with Jesus is often used by Josephus in reference to “revolutionaries”.⁵

1.2. Philo

In every way the opposite of the current Jewish apocalyptic thinking was Philo, who lived between approximately BC 30 and 50 AD. Philo had received a thorough Greek education. He advocated a system of education similar to that of the Hellenistic schools of Alexandria for his fellow Jews and was able to integrate his appropriation of such an education into his Jewish religion and life (On the Preliminary Studies). From his works he emerges first of all as a biblical commentator, next as an apologist for Judaism, and only third as a philosopher.⁶ He mingled Greek philosophy with Jewish concepts in his studies of the Jewish scriptures.

1.2.1. Philo, Logos and Jesus

Philo’s understanding of “Logos” is similar to that of Greek philosophers. He said, “[God] created the world through the Word.”⁷ Again he said, “let him press to take his place under God’s First-Born, the Word, who holds eldership among the angels, their ruler as it were. And many names are his, for he is called, ‘the Beginning,’ ‘Name of God,’ ‘Word,’ and ‘Man after His Image.’”⁸ Similarly, when commenting on Gen 9:6, Philo said, “Nothing mortal; can be made in the likeness of the most High One and Father of the universe but (only) in that of the second God, who is his Word.”⁹ “Scripture gives the title of ‘God’ to His Chief Word.”¹⁰ Though not explicit reference to Jesus we see that his ideas become extremely important for understanding
Philo has an elaborate Logos speculation, and this has attracted students of the New Testament and Christology to his writings. According to Philo the Logos was the mind or reason of God. The Logos was God in his rational aspect, but the Logos also functioned as the head of the hierarchy of intermediaries between the world and God. An aspect of God himself, the Logos was not hypostatized as a person as in Christianity and certainly never became incarnate. What Philo said only hypothetically, “God would sooner change into a man than man into a god” (Embassy to Gaius 16.118). Regarding Christology, Philo’s picture of Moses corresponds to function of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel.11

1.3. Babylonian Talmud

Babylonian Talmud contains at least half a dozen references to Jesus. It contains the following information about the founder of Christianity:12

(i) Jesus, under the name of Ben Pandera (son of Pandera) is said to have been born out of wedlock whose mother was seduced and impregnated by Pandera.
(ii) He is said to have been in Egypt where he learnt magic with which he performed miracles.
(iii) He called himself God
(iv) He was condemned by the Sanhedrin as a deceiver and a teacher of apostasy.
(v) He was executed a day before Passover, either by crucifixion or by stoning followed by hanging.
(vi) He had five disciples, viz. Matthai, Neqai, Netzer, Buni, Thodah.

There is nothing worthwhile “history” in all this. The only worth or value that it gives is that “Jesus was a historical person”.

2. Greco-Roman Authors on Jesus and Early Christianity

Some of the Greco-Roman writers also referred to Jesus in their writings. We will see that they were somewhat confused with the spelling of “Christ” but many consider that these are references to Jesus and so they do present helpful extra-canonical witnesses to Jesus.

2.1. Pliny the Younger

Though he does not give any extensive information concerning Jesus, Pliny’s report about the movement of Jesus becomes important because he is the earliest known source to have referred to “Christians”. Pliny the Younger was born about AD 62 and lived up to about AD 113. While he was the governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor, he corresponded with the Roman Emperor Trajan on matters relating to how to deal with the Christians. In this correspondence, there is a mention about “Christ”. He had written to Emperor Trajan that the Christians used to gather together regularly on a certain day, and “to sing responsively a hymn to Christ as if to a god.”

2.2. Suetonius

In his “Divus Claudius” (Life of Emperor Claudius) (25.4), Suetonius (110-120) states that “Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome who, instigated by Chrestus, never ceased to cause unrest.” By “Jews” Suetonius means Christians because Christianity, still at that time in its infancy, was probably predominantly Jewish and had not broken away from Judaism. “Chrestus” is an erroneous reference to “Christ”, probably from confusing the word “chrestus” (sometimes used as a personal name, especially for slaves) with the Jewish title “Christus,” a title with which a Roman might not be familiar.

2.3. Celcius

According to Origen, Celcius claimed that Jesus performed His miracles by the power of magic (Cels. 1. 6), a power that He had acquired while living in Egypt (1.38). When he returned to Palestine he dazzled people and called Himself God (1.38). The charges of Celcius are similar to those found in the rabbinic writings.15 His writings became one of the chief means for the Jews who began to accuse Jesus of witchcraft and misleading the Jews.

2.4. Tacitus

In his “Annals” (15.44) Tacitus (110-120 AD) states: “This name” [i.e. ‘Christian’] originates from “Christus” who was sentenced to death by the procurator, Pontius Pilate, during the reign of Tiberius. This detestable superstition, which had been suppressed for a while, spread a new not only in Judea where the evil had started, but also in Rome, where everything that is horrid and wicked in the world gathers and finds numerous followers.16

Tacitus described the new religious sect and traced it back to its founder, Jesus Christ. These early writers, though, made only brief, general allusions to Christ’s teachings, trial, death, and influence upon His followers.17 In essence, Christianity as ‘religion’, i.e. as a message and a way of salvation, does not mean: some eternal idea (whether of ‘justice’ or ‘love’); some dogma (however solemn); some world-view (even the
However scanty or negative their references to Jesus may be, one important point emerges from what they say about Jesus, i.e., Jesus lived in history and He left behind a group of followers.

3. Non-Canonical Sources: The Gospel of Thomas

The Gospel of Thomas is dated from the middle of the 2nd century AD. It is a collection of 112 to 118 (according to different edition) sayings attributed to Jesus, some of which were already known in Greek from a collection in the Oxyrhynchus Papyri. The Gospel of Thomas is perhaps the earliest of the new texts in the collection and demonstrates the existence of collections of saying of Jesus (a sayings gospel) in the early church. It has a strong encrinites or ascetic tone but otherwise is not so pronouncedly Gnostic, although clearly consistent with Gnostic understandings. Although scholarly opinion seems to incline toward emphasizing the extent of the independence of the Gospel of Thomas from the Synoptic Gospel, the age and originality of its individual sayings in relation to the canonical Gospels are much debated.19

Some of the sayings contained in this Gospel are similar to our canonical Gospels but others are completely different. For example, the logion 100 reads, “He said to them, Give the things of Caesar to Caesar, give the things of God to God, and give me what is mine” (Italics added; cf. Matt 22:21). The version in Gospel of Thomas 14:4 is about as brief as possible, and it is probably there not so much for itself as for what follows and interprets it in 14:5. That makes it, however, all the more significant. It is only there residually, as it were, hanging on by its fingertips. It must, therefore, be easier tradition. Jesus said to them: “If you fast, you will bring sin upon yourselves, and if you pray, you will be condemned, and if you give alms, you will harm your spirits. When you go any country and walk from place to place, when the people receive you, eat what they serve you and heal the sick among them. For what goes into your mouth will not defile you; rather, it is what come out of your mouth that will defile you” (Gospel of Thomas 14:1-5).20

His disciples were asking Jesus, “Is circumcision useful or not?” He said to them, “If it were useful, their father would produce children already circumcised from their mother. Rather, the true circumcision in spirit has become profitable in every respect” (Gospel of Thomas 53:1-3).21 Although not in it a version of Q, the Gospel of Thomas is certainly an example of the Q genre. Thomas may also make a second important contribution to Synoptic studies. Some think this gospel may contain authentic saying of Jesus not already found in the New Testament Gospels and that it may also contain more primitive forms of sayings than are found in the NT Gospels. This is, however, certainly debatable.22

Christianity has its beginnings, from the subjective human side, in temporal history. Because the values are linked with the person, life, and death of Jesus Christ, some consideration must be given to the evidence for the historical existence of Jesus Christ. Many have denied the fact that Jesus was manifested in human history (John 1:14). It is fortunate that there are extra biblical sources and extra canonical early Christian sources which proved the historical evidence for the existence of Jesus.

End Notes
2 Everett Ferguson, Backgrounds of Early Christianity, 485-486.
5 Everett Ferguson, Backgrounds of Early Christianity, 420.
6 Everett Ferguson, Backgrounds of Early Christianity, 478-479.
7 In his book On Flight and Finding, 18 & 95.
8 In Confusion, 28 &146.
9 In his On Dreams 2.39 & 2.30.
11 Everett Ferguson, Backgrounds of Early Christianity, 482.
19 Everett Ferguson, Backgrounds of Early Christianity, 305.
21 Crossan, The Birth of Christianity, 327.
PART - II

SOCIO-POLITICAL AND RELIGIO-CULTURAL LOCATIONS OF THE JESUS MOVEMENT
Political Conditions of the 1st Century Palestine

When we open the Gospels we see a completely new world than where the Old Testament ends. In order to bridge them a background study is important. We should first try to understand what had actually happened between the two Testaments. What political, economic and social changes preceded the world of the NT should be studied first. Then in what kind of socio-politico-economic situation does the NT appear becomes an important area of study in order to really understand the world situation in which Jesus movement was born.

1. Greek Period

A new era began when Macedonia under King Philip II defeated Athens and its allies in 338 BC. After the murder of Philip II in 336 BC, Alexander was made king and within two years he defeated the Persians in the battles of Granicus in 334 BC., Issus in 333 BC., and Arbela (or Gaugamela) in 331 BC. Thus he brought Syria and Phoenicia, Samaria, Jerusalem and Egypt under Greek rule and thereby laid the foundation for the Greek empire. Upon his death in 323 BC, the empire was divided into four parts. Antigonus Monophtalmus, one of Alexander’s older generals, got Phrygia, Pamphylia and Lycia; Lysimachus took Thrace and Emennes of Cardia; another senior officer got Cappadocia, and Egypt went to Ptolomy.1 Of these four, Ptolomaic empire in Egypt and the Seleucid empire centred in Syria became important for the study of the background of New Testament.

From 320-198 BC., Palestine was ruled by Ptolomies centred at Egypt under whom the Jews fared well and during which the Egyptian Jews produced the LXX when Ptolomy Philadelphus (285-246) reigned,3 an important evidence of Hellenization. Ptolomies made no attempt to interfere with their religious affairs but they were governed under their own high priest subject to the king of Egypt.4 But in 198 BC, Seleucids regarded themselves as the apostles of Greek culture and so
they encouraged the use of Greek and adoption of its customs. They established cities which became the most important centres of Hellenization. Moreover, Antiochus Epiphanes persecuted all the pious Jews who stuck to their tradition. He regarded the observance of Sabbath, the rite of circumcision, possession of a copy of Hebrew scripture as crime punishable by death. Metzger points out that the priests of Jerusalem took active part in the spread of Hellenization as they were directly subjected to their overlords. Thus, Hellenization of Palestine increased under the Seleucids.

With the expansion of Greek Empire, Greek became the lingua franca, common language, throughout the Empire. At first the influence of Hellenization was small because the Greeks were kept separate from the others. But a mutual liking between the Greeks and the Orients prevailed in the areas of politics, economics, culture and religion. This is evident mostly in the appearance of Oriental deities in Greek dress as early as 3rd century BC. in Egypt. According to Merrill C. Tenney,

Love letters, bills, receipts, amulets, essays, poetry, biographies, business communications were all written in Greek.

In Egypt the titles of the popular officials were Greek, even into the time of Roman occupation. The rulers sought to unite the Hellenistic culture with the life of the people. Greek names were given to the local deities, and gymnasia and amphitheatres were built in the major cities. The veneer of western civilization was spread over the Near East [West Asia].

Culturally, though Greek language and education dominated, the centres of education were shifted to Alexandria, Pergamum and Rhodes. During the Seleucid period an important aspect of Hellenization was the founding of many Greek cities where the Greeks and the Orients mixed together. Thus, it enabled the syncretism of Greek and Oriental elements.

2. Maccabean Revolt

The beginning of the Maccabean revolt appears to be from a controversy between pro-Egyptian and pro-Syrian parties over the office of the high priest and the control of the financial interests and power of the temple. After the death of Simon, the high priest, his son Onias III succeeded him. Onias supported Egypt and favoured the youngest son of the Tobiad Joseph who had a falling with his older brothers who were pro-Syrian. Taking advantage of his friendship with the new high priest, the younger Tobiad use the banking services of the temple to his own advantage. Taking advantage of the assassination of Syrian king Seleucus IV in 175 BC they expelled Onias and appointed Jason, Onias’ brother, in his place as high priest. Actually, Jason had bought his office from Antiochus IV, the Syrian king. Jason tried to turn Jerusalem into a Greek city to be named Antioch, to organize an assembly of the citizens who were entitled to vote, and to build a gymnasium. But he was also deposed and Menelaus, a brother of a temple officer named Simon, was appointed high priest in 172 BC with the support of the Tobias who had shifted their side from Jason. This was the crisis point because the office of the high priest was abused with impunity in the interest of the leading aristocracy and also having an illegitimate high priest was a threat to the whole nation because he was the guarantor of religious law for all the people. Together with these, Antiochus Epiphanes came to Jerusalem to take away the temple treasury.

These events led to a Jewish revolt in 167 B.C. led by Mattathias, a priest, when he had killed a Hellenistic sympathizer. Upon Mattathias’ death his sons Judas Maccabeus, Jonathan, and Simon continued the revolt for 30 years with the support of Hasideans. Their success came when they cleansed the temple in 164 BC., appointed Jonathan as high priest in 152 BC, and captured Akra, and the expulsion of Seleucid garrison in 142 BC. When John Hyrcanus I, son of Simon Maccabeus, was the high priest Rome recognized Jewish independence. His son Aristobolus succeeded John Hyrcanus and took the title king. After him his sons Hyrcanus II and Aristobolus II fought for the power that allowed Roman intervention. With the hand of Rome, in the person of Pompey, Aristobolus II was imprisoned and the weaker Hyrcanus II was accepted as the high priest by the Roman king. Thus, finally Roman domination of Palestine and Jewish country began and it became a part of Roman province of Syria.

3. Roman Period

The city of Rome was founded on 753 BC, and by the 5th century it had certain solid political organization under a republican form of government. By winning several wars and by making alliances it became prominent by 265 BC. Rome engaged in wars with Carthage whom they finally defeated in 146 BC under general Scipio Aemilianus. It captured Corinth in the same year. The king of Pergamum bequeathed his realm on his death in 133 BC and by 63 BC it had power over Spain, North Africa, Macedonia, Achaia, Pontus and Caucasus, Syria and Judea. From 58-57 BC Julius Caesar made campaigns in Gaul and brought it under Roman dominion. Thus it expanded its empire quite rapidly. After the death of Julius Caesar in 44 BC Octavian, later known as Augustus, appointed proconsuls to look after the foreign territories.

In Palestine, Antipater II, who first served as an advisor to Hyrcanus II and then became a procurator with Julius Caesar’s approval, became
a reckoning force. His son, Herod, shifted his allegiance from Mark Anthony and Cleopatra to Octavian after Caesar’s death. He became undisputed king of Judea by 37 BC that was even approved and enlarged by Octavian in 31/30 BC. He ruled till 4 BC with cleverness and brutality. With his death, Augustus divided Palestine to his three sons. Judea, Samaria, and Idumia were assigned to Archelaus the ethnarch; Galilee and part of Transjordan (Perea) was given to Herod Antipas the tetrarch, and Herod Philip became tetrarch of Iturea, Trachonitis, Gaulanitis, Auranitis, and Batanea. Archelaus invited hatred from his subjects because of his aristocratic rule who complained about him to Augustus and finally led to his removal in AD 6. After Archelaus was deposed Augustus administered this region through a prefect of whom Pontius Pilate was one in Judea.

Philip tetrarch reigned from 4 BC – AD 34 over the territory assigned to him. He carried on the building projects started by his father. He was just and fair in his dealing with the people and it was marked by peace. After his death his tetrarchy was brought under Roman administration until AD 37 when it was given to his nephew, Archelaus I, by the Emperor. Herod Antipas, who is simply called Herod in the Gospels, is the most prominent figure in the Gospels. He was a Jew by religion, and so he resisted the attempt by Pilate to make a pagan shield at Jerusalem. Upon the accusation given by Herod Agrippa I to the Emperor, Herod Antipas was banished to Lyons in Gaul in AD 39 and his domain was given to Agrippa I.

Herod Agrippa I now became the ruler of the regions of his half-uncles Philip and Antipas and in AD 41 Emperor Claudius added Judea and Samaria to his domain. So by AD 41 he became the ruler of all Palestine. When he died in AD 44, his son, Herod Agrippa II, was only 17 years old; therefore, Claudius made Palestine a province of Rome and placed it under governors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Macedonian Rulers</th>
<th>Augustus (Octavian): 31-14 A.D.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Philip: 359-336 B.C.</td>
<td>Tiberius: 14-37 A.D.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alexander the Great: 336-323 B.C.</td>
<td>Caligula: 37-41 A.D.</td>
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<td>Claudius: 41-54 A.D.</td>
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<td>Nero: 54-68 A.D.</td>
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<td>Vespasian: 69-79 A.D.</td>
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<td>Titus: 79-81 A.D.</td>
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<td>Domitian: 81-96 A.D.</td>
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<td>Nerva: 97-98 A.D.</td>
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<td>Trajan: 98-117 A.D.</td>
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<th>Empires after Alexander</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Macedonian</td>
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<td>Cassander: 317-297 B.C.</td>
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<td>Demetrius I: 294-288 B.C.</td>
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<td>Antigonus Gonatas: 283-239 B.C.</td>
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<td>2. Ptolemaic</td>
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<td>Plotomy I: 323-285 B.C.</td>
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<td>Plotomy II: 285-246 B.C.</td>
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<td>Plotomy III: 246-221 B.C.</td>
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<td>Plotomy IV: 221-205 B.C.</td>
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<td>Plotomy V: 203-180 B.C.</td>
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| 3. Seleucid                                          |                                   |
| Seleucus I: 312-281 B.C.                             |                                   |
| Antiochus I: 281-261 B.C.                            |                                   |
| Antiochus II: 261-246 B.C.                           |                                   |
| Seleucus II: 246-226 B.C.                            |                                   |
| Seleucus III: 226-223                                |                                   |
| Antiochus III the Great: 223-187 B.C.               |                                   |
| Seleucus IV Epiphanes: 187-175 B.C.                  |                                   |
| Antiochus IV Epiphanes: 175-164 B.C.                 |                                   |

| 4. Maccabean Rulers & High Priests                   |                                   |
| Mattathias: 176 B.C.                                 |                                   |
| Mattathias’ Sons                                     |                                   |
| Judas Maccabaeus: 166-160 B.C.                       |                                   |
| Jonathan (& High Priest): 160-143 B.C.               |                                   |
| Simon (& High Priest): 143-135 B.C.                  |                                   |

| 5. Hasmonean Rulers & High Priests                   |                                   |
| John Hyrcanus (Simon’s son): 135-104 B.C.           |                                   |
| Aristobulus: 104-103 B.C.                            |                                   |
| Alexander Janneaus: 103-76 B.C.                     |                                   |
| Salome Alexander (ruler only): 76-67 B.C.           |                                   |
| Hyrcanus II (H.P.) & Aristobulus II: 67-63 B.C.     |                                   |

| Roman Rulers                                         |                                   |
| 1. First Triumvirate                                 |                                   |
| Pompey, J. Caesar & Crassus: 60-48 B.C.              |                                   |
| Julius Caesar: 48-44 B.C.                            |                                   |
| 2. Second Triumvirate                                |                                   |
| Octavian, Anthony & Lepidus: 43-31 B.C.              |                                   |

| Palestinian Rulers                                    |                                   |
| Hyrcanus II: 63-40 B.C.                               |                                   |
| Antigonus: 40-37 B.C.                                 |                                   |

| Herod the Great: 37-4 A.D.                            |                                   |
|                                                      |                                   |
| Herod Agrippa I: 41-44 A.D.                          |                                   |
| Herod Agrippa II: 50-75 A.D.                         |                                   |
| Ethnarch of Judea                                    |                                   |
|                                                      |                                   |
| Tetrarch of Galilee                                  |                                   |

| Roman Prefects over Judea                            |                                   |
| Coponius: 6-9 A.D.                                    |                                   |
| Ambibulus: 9-12 A.D.                                  |                                   |
| Annibus Rufus: 12-15 A.D.                            |                                   |
| Valerius Gratus: 15-26 A.D.                           |                                   |
| Pontius Pilate: 26-36 A.D.                           |                                   |

| Roman Procurators of Palestine                       |                                   |
| Cuspius Fadus: 44-46 A.D.                            |                                   |
| Tiberius Alexander: 46-48 A.D.                       |                                   |
| Cumanus: 48-52 A.D.                                  |                                   |
| Felix: 52-60 A.D.                                    |                                   |
| Porcius Festus: 60-62 A.D.                           |                                   |
| Albinus: 62-64 A.D.                                  |                                   |
| Gessius Florus: 64-66 A.D.                           |                                   |
4. Roman Rule Over the Jews Through the Herodians

The Romans exerted their supremacy over Palestine by appointing client kings who were supposed to pay tribute money to the Emperor. King Herod (i.e., Herod the Great) and his family became the client kings over Palestine. In order to pay their tribute they collected taxes from the Jews which ultimately legitimized the Roman rule over Palestine.

Herod the Great was a puppet king over Palestine. Despite his unpopularity with the Jews, Herod was a skilful ruler from 37-4 BC. He was loyal to Rome, was eager to promote Hellenism and also to keep on good terms with the Jews. He engaged in many building projects. He built Caesarea and one of the most important building projects undertaken by him was the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple beginning from 20 BC.

At his death, his territory was divided into three and were given to his three sons. Herod Antipas got Galilee and Perea; Herod Philip got the territory north and east of the Sea of Galilee and Herod Archelaus got Samaria and Judea. Thus, most of Jesus’ activity took place under Herod Antipas and Herod Archelaus’ jurisdiction, with Jesus making only rare visit to Philip’s territory (cf. Matt 16:13ff.).

Archelaus was unable to keep his territory in order and with complaints against him raising, he was removed in AD 6 and was replaced by Roman procurators. In AD 26, Pilate was appointed to this procurator position which he held for ten years and it was during his procuratorship that Jesus was crucified.

Herod Antipas ruled over Galilee from 4 BC to AD 39. He was an able ruler and Galilee enjoyed much prosperity under him. Though he had some difficulty in his marital life which resulted in some wars with Aretas, by the time of Jesus’ ministry there, there was peace in Galilee.

Herod Agrippa was also an able ruler, dissolute and meticulous. Emperor Caligula appointed him to succeed Philip and gave him the territory of Antipas. In AD 41 Claudius gave him Judea and Samaria, thereby making him to rule most of his grandfather, Herod the Great’s territory. He persecuted Jesus’ followers and executed James, the son of Zebedee. He died suddenly in AD 44.

After his death, Palestine was ruled over by the Romans through successive procurators until AD 66 when the Jewish revolt against the Romans broke out which finally led to the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in AD 70.23

End Notes
2. Koester starts it from 283/2.
Socio-Political and Religio-Cultural Locations of the Jesus Movement

1. The Meeting of Hellenism and Judaism

When Alexander the Great crossed from Greece into Asia and launched his conquests that toppled the Persian Empire, he opened a new epoch in the interaction of the Ancient West Asia and Hellenism. Somewhat contradictorily Alexander was committed to a multi-ethnic cosmopolitan culture under-girded by the achievements and perspectives of Greek civilization. To the Jews it was a major shock to be faced with an assertive, and often militant, Gentile universalism. Judaism as a way of life was challenged with the prospect of social and cultural assimilation and religious syncretism or eclipse. The tide of Hellenism unleashed by the Greeks had the eventual effect of confirming Judaism in its main features, but in the process it provoked heated internal Jewish conflict and shaped new developments.

2. Hellenization of Palestine and Its Influence on Judaism

Both in Palestine and in diaspora communities, Jewish and Hellenistic culture came into direct contact. Judaism was faced with the invader-conquerors who brought with them their language, dress, lifestyle, religion, government, taxation systems, etc. The Hellenistic influence was more readily adopted by the Diaspora Jews while the Jews of Palestine were slowly won over. Among the diaspora Jews in Egypt they adopted Greek names, pursuing the classical education of their overlords, and rising to important positions in trade and government. Similarly in Alexandria a strong and prosperous Jewish elite flourished that cultivated a Jewish-Hellenistic tradition and thought culminating in the works of Philo in 1st century AD.3 Specially the Wisdom of Solomon, written in the 1st century BC by an Alexandrain Jew shows that he had been deeply influenced in his thinking by the outlook and philosophy of the Greek world.4

2.1. Hellenism and Jewish Eco-Political Life

When Alexander the Great crossed from Greece into Asia and launched his conquests that toppled the Persian Empire, he opened a new epoch in the interaction of the Ancient West Asia and Hellenism. Somewhat contradictorily Alexander was committed to a multi-ethnic cosmopolitan culture under-girded by the achievements and perspectives of Greek civilization. To the Jews it was a major shock to be faced with an assertive, and often militant, Gentile universalism. Judaism as a way of life was challenged with the prospect of social and cultural assimilation and religious syncretism or eclipse. The tide of Hellenism unleashed by the Greeks had the eventual effect of confirming Judaism in its main features, but in the process it provoked heated internal Jewish conflict and shaped new developments.

The Jews were already in a process of Hellenization well before the advent of the Greeks in the 3rd century BC.1 But the Hellenization of Jews and Judaism was accelerated with the coming of the Greeks beginning from Alexander the Great. So we can talk about Hellenization of Judaism beginning from this period in the strict sense. To what extent Hellenism influenced Judaism and what were its impacts? What was the social situation of the Jews during this period? What can be discerned about the sociology of Palestine during the Greco-Roman period? While trying to answer such questions this paper attempts to highlight the Hellenization of Judaism and its influences in the spheres of language, customs and practices, lifestyles and outlook, etc. drawing out the possible sociological structure of Palestine during the Greco-Roman period and concludes with a brief evaluation.

2.2. Hellenism and Jewish Culture

Both in Palestine and in diaspora communities, Jewish and
had a marketplace and streets laid out in a grid pattern, government buildings and an official chapel, a gymnasium and a theater, all adorned with works of Greek art. At first the population of the Hellenistic cities consisted of an upper class of Macedonians and Greeks along with several lower classes made up of natives, resident aliens and slaves. The resident aliens often included Jews. Thus Greek citizenship and education appeared to be highly prized qualification. Consequently, during the high priesthood of Jason steps were taken to develop Jerusalem after the pattern of a Greek city-state, or "polis," and was renamed Antioch, with its citizens to be known as "Antiochians of Jerusalem." With council, citizen list, gymnasium, and "ephebeia." Toward that end the gymnasium groomed Jewish youth in Greek culture at Jerusalem.

2.3. Hellenism and Jewish Language

The Hellenistic influence upon Judaism was more acutely felt in the sphere of language. The inhabitants of the newly founded cities included mixed population of Greeks and Jews. This intermingling demanded a mutual influence, perhaps the Jews and Judaism being more influenced by the Greeks and their cultures. The intermingling of Greeks and Jews in these "cosmopolitan" cities demanded the adoption of the dominant groups' way of life, culture and customs on the part of the Jews. Therefore, the intercourse in regard to every-day affairs demanded the speaking of the Greek world language. Thus, Greek language became the *lingua franca* and the *koine* Greek became more popular than Aramaic in the West Asian region which continued well into the time of the NT. It may be wrong to say that Greek "replaced" Aramaic as the commonly spoken language in Palestine. Because a complete take over is unlikely because Hebrew was still used in writing religious writings which were translated into Aramaic for use in the synagogue services. Besides Jesus also had certain knowledge of Aramaic (Mark 5: 41; 15:34 par). Therefore it may only be said that majority of the Jews were speaking Greek by 1st century AD.

However, impeccable command of the Greek language was the most important qualification for taking over of Greek culture. It could have been that anyone who could read and write also had a command of Greek. Even the high priest and the financial administrator of the temple will have had impeccable Greek-speaking and Greek-writing secretaries for their correspondence with the royal offices and court. Moreover, the books of Maccabees clearly show that not only the members of the Hellenistic party but also many supporters of Judas and his brothers had a command of Greek.

The importance of Greek language during this time may best be summarized by the words of Martin Hengel when he says, "the young Jew who wanted to rise a stage above the mass of the simple people had to learn it." It may be inferred from this statement that learning of Greek had an edge for it gave them status in the society. The influence of Greek language was so strong that by the 2nd century BC onwards there emerged a Greco-Jewish literature. Especially in Alexandria works with Hellenistic fervour emerged which can be shown by the Deuterocanonical books like II Maccabees and Wisdom which were not only written in Greek but also employed even a Greek philosophical thought. Unlike literary Hebrew, popular Aramaic or Hebrew constantly translated into Aramaic for use in the synagogue services. Besides the works of Hillel, the legal language was shot through with Greek. Parallel to this was the adoption of Greek names by the Jews.

One particular aspect which demands our attention is the translation of the OT into Greek. Among the Jewish communities in dispersion their tongue was increasingly becoming Greek rather than Hebrew or Aramaic. There was a felt need to have their own scriptures translated into their everyday language. Thus, during the reign of Ptolomy II (285-247 BC), the LXX version emerged for the use of Greek speaking Jews in Egypt who "were no longer able to read Hebrew and for whom the translations given in the synagogue services were providing inadequate." This LXX version was commonly used by the NT writers.

This intercourse brought with it assimilation in various directions, which makes Oesterley to comment that "customs and habits of Greek type were adopted, even down to fashions and wearing of ornaments." Thus the stamp of the Greek spirit impressed itself upon the ordinary affairs of Jewish life. But far more important was the influence of Hellenism in the higher spheres; and here too, the Palestinian Jews with its Greek environment was not unaffected. Municipal organization, legislation, the administration of justice, the arrangements for public welfare, etc., were all in one way or another indebted to the higher culture of the Greeks.

2.4. Hellenism and Jewish Religion

The meeting of Hellenism and Judaism was also an encounter between inclusivism and exclusivism; cosmopolitan outlook and exclusive nationalism. The encounter with Hellenism jeopardized their mono-belief and mono-outlook because the Greeks were more open and more accommodative to various racial, ethnic and religious groups. The Greeks brought with them their cosmopolitan and multi-ethnic culture and foreign
cults were imported. Many oriental gods were worshipped under Greek names (e.g. Ashtoreth as Aphrodite in Ascalon) and many Greek gods were introduced by the Greek founders of the cities. This encounter made many Jews to change their narrow outlook.

All these influences had strong impacts on Jewish society. Their social harmony was disrupted as a consequence because there arose differing opinions and attitudes towards Hellenism. It is also observed that Greek fashions and ways which entered Jerusalem posed a threat to Jewish way of life. As mentioned above the higher and ruling classes more readily accepted Hellenism and adopted its way of life for it gave them power and status. They became collaborators with Hellenization, perhaps Hellenizing group, in Jewish society. This can be demonstrated by the attempts to transform Jerusalem after Greek city-state with gymnasium attached to it. Their economic exploitation and social unconcernedness only served to exacerbate the situation of the lower strata of the population. When they wanted to serve their vested interests they shifted their allegiance to different kings. This had great impact on the society at large because heavier taxes were imposed at times and common people had to suffer persecution. It prepared the ground for revolts, which had increasingly strong social elements, right down to the time of Bar Kochba rebellion.

On the other side were those who opposed Hellenism. The Maccabean Revolt is closely associated with the opposition to Hellenism. Thus, the social structure was debilitated because the common people were forced to make choices: either to side with the Hellenizers or those who opposed it. Similarly, the internal social affairs had come to be the conflict between “Jews versus Jews”. Even the milieu of Jesus’ parables with its great landowners, tax-collectors, administrators, money lenders, labourers, with speculation in grain, slavery for debt and the leasing of land, can only be understood on the basis of this socio-economic situation brought about by Hellenism in Palestine.

As a direct upshot of this reaction may be the emergence of different sectarian groups within Judaism during this period. Jewish society was not only divided into Hellenizers and those who opposed them but there were various sectarian groups. It is generally said that over against the misuse of the office of high priesthood the Essenes withdrew to Qumran and settled there as the real upholders of truth. The differences among these groups were brought to the fore owing to their position on Hellenism and this social structure and outlook continued well into the NT times.

3. Jewish Religious Groups

3.1. Pharisees

It is difficult to describe the Pharisees due to scarcity of information about them. Scholars have conceived of them variously as a religious sect, a political party, a group of legal scholars, or an association of laymen who ate together. According to Josephus, there were Pharisees as early as the time of the Hasmonean ruler John Hyrcanus (135-105 BC). They numbered about 6,000. Some Pharisees were priests, though apparently most were not. Some served as members of the Sanhedrin, the highest political and religious body in Judaism. Some were scribes, learned scholars of the Law. Josephus mentions three outstanding features of the Pharisees.

(i) They accepted the oral law in addition to the Torah. According to Josephus, “the Pharisees had passed on the people certain regulations that they had received from the succession of fathers, regulations that were not written in the laws of Moses. For that reason, the Sadducean party rejects them, saying that one must regard the written regulations as binding, but that one need not keep the tradition of fathers.”

Apparently, the scribes of the Pharisees took the general laws of the Torah and made a specific applications. For example, the Law forbade working on the Sabbath; the scribes went a step further and defined what should be considered “work.” Their students passed on these interpretations and judgments by word of mouth. In this way, they developed a complex tradition of oral law that interpreted and explained the written law. In the New Testament, this oral law is called “the tradition of the elders” (cf. Mark 7:3).

We cannot reconstruct the Pharisees’ particular perspectives on the Law but according to the Gospels, they washed their hands before eating and bathed after coming home from the market place, where they might come into contact with unclean persons or objects (Mark 7:1-4). They also avoided contact with the tax collectors and sinners (Mark 2:15-17), either to avoid ritual impurity or as a protest against Roman taxation. In defining what constituted working on the Sabbath, they seem to have been less strict than Essenes, but stricter than the early Jewish Christians.

The interpretations of the Pharisees were apparently well received by the populace. Joshephus states in one place that they were “thought to interpret the laws with accuracy.” In another place he says, “they are very persuasive in the popular assemblies, and all religious rites pertaining to prayers and production of sacred objects are performed according to their interpretation.”
members would assemble again for a midmorning meal and an evening meal. New members had to undergo a three-year period of initiation before they could participate in the communal meals. Josephus mentions their devotion to study of ancient writings and their strict observance of the Sabbath. They were divided into four grades, based on the length of their training, and a senior member could not be touched by a junior member without becoming unclean. They believed in the immortality of the soul, which would receive reward or punishment after death, but not apparently in resurrection of the body.

2.4. Zealots

As the name “Zealots” suggests, they were super-patriots. They thought that as God intervened in the past to defend His people against their enemies, He will again come to their aid in their fight against the Romans. They led a revolt against the Romans in AD 66 which resulted in the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the Romans in AD 70.

2.5. The Qumran Community

There was one sect of the Jews about whose identity nothing concrete has emerged so far. They lived in isolation near the Dead Sea. It was an accidental finding of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947 by a Bedouin shepherd boy that led to the discovery about this group. This group devoted themselves to the study of the Jewish scriptures which are preserved in the manuscripts they left behind. The “Dead Sea Scrolls” included scrolls and fragments of about 800 manuscripts, written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. The Manuscripts have been dated to the last three or four centuries BC and the first century AD.

A letter found among the manuscripts suggest that the founder of the sect were Zadokite priests who separated themselves from the Jerusalem
of freedom, supposing that God alone had the power to achieve it. Cordial relations (cf. John 4:9).

Josephus speaks of a fourth “philosophy” among the Jews, whose members generally agreed with the Pharisees, but differed in one respect: their belief that God would restore their temple on Mount Gerizim. When the war came, it did not turn out as the community expected. The Romans destroyed the community in 68 BC.

Those who joined the community led a very strict and simple communal life, studying the Law and waiting for the new age. They contributed all their possession to the community and took their meals together. They considered themselves the people of the new covenant that God had promised to make with Israel (Jer 31:31-34). As such they regarded themselves as the true people of God in contrast to all other groups. They were “the sons of light” in contrast to “the sons of darkness.” The sons of light followed the spirit called “the prince of lights” or “the spirit of truth,” while the sons of darkness were motivated by “the angel of darkness,” “the spirit of error” or “Belial.”

The sect expected two Messiahs: one a priest and one a king. In that new age, when the old Temple had been desecrated, God would build a new Temple. The old age would end with a great war against Rome, in which the forces of light would defeat the force of darkness. Since they expected to play a role in this war, they kept themselves ready by following the regulations set out in the Hebrew Scriptures for soldiers of ancient Israel who engaged in holy war. This readiness involved maintaining ritual purity, including abstaining from sex. Hence only celibate men could be full members of the community, although the associate members who lived outside the community would marry. When the war came, it did not turn out as the community expected. The Romans destroyed the community in 68 BC.

2.6. Freedom Fighters

Josephus speaks of a fourth “philosophy” among the Jews, whose members generally agreed with the Pharisees, but differed in one respect: “they have an unconquerable love of freedom, supposing that God alone is ruler and master.” In fact, more than one band of Jew advocated the use of military force to drive out the Roman and re-establish Jewish independence. In AD 6, when the Romans imposed a tax on Judea, a Galilean man named Judas, supported by a Pharisee named Zadok, declared that “the taxation imposed nothing other than outright slavery.”

Judas called the people cowards “If they endured paying tribute to Romans and tolerated mortal masters after God.” When he persuaded others to join him in a revolt against Rome, the Romans killed Judas and scattered his followers (Acts 5:37).

At a later period, a revolutionary group called Sicarii (dagger men or assassins) concealed daggers under their cloaks and mingled with their crowds in Jerusalem, assassinating fellow Jews who collaborated with the Romans. When the first war with Rome started, another group that Josephus called “Zealots” fled from Galilee to Jerusalem and fought not only against the Romans but also against other rebels.

2.7. Samaritans

Though not Jews, the Samaritans practiced and still practice a religion related to Judaism. The origin of the Samaritans is uncertain. According to one tradition, they were descendants of Israelites from the ancient northern kingdom of Israel. According to another, they were non-Israelites whom the Assyrians settled in the region of Samaria after they conquered the northern kingdom in 722 BC. In any case, they practiced a form of Israelite religion, worshiping Yahweh as their God.

Samaritan practice differed from that of the Jews in two primary respects. First, they accepted as scripture only the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, the Torah they believed Yahweh gave Moses. Second, whereas the Jews sacrificed to God only at the temple on Mount Zion in Jerusalem, the Samaritans sacrificed at their own temple on Mount Gerizim near Shechem (cf. John 4:20). This temple stood until 129 BC, when John Hyrcanus, one of the Hasmonean rulers, destroyed it.

Since the Samaritans did not accept two division of Jewish canon, the prophets and the writings, they did not expect a Messiah of the type that Jews found predicted in those works. They did, however, await the coming of another eschatological figure, a prophet like Moses, whose coming they found predicted in Deut. 18:15-19. Their eschatology also included the belief that God would restore their temple on Mount Gerizim.

Samaritans and Jews, because of differences in religious practice and historical tensions between them, generally did not have the most cordial relations (cf. John 4:9).
2.8. Disciples of John the Baptist

Another Jewish sect arose shortly before the year AD 30, when John the Baptist began to warn the people to repent of their sins. According to the Gospels, John proclaimed that God was about to judge between the righteous and sinners. Those who heeded John’s warning he baptized (immersed) in the Jordan river. Crowds flocked to him to hear his preaching and to be baptized. Jesus of Nazareth was one of those people.

Josephus also mentions John in *Antiquities* 18.116-19, but does not portray him as predicting an imminent judgment. According to Josephus, John baptized in order to purify the body, not to cleanse the soul from sins. Some scholars think, however, that John intended his baptism to replace the sacrifices at the Temple. If one’s sins could be forgiven by baptism, then sacrifices of atonement would become unnecessary.

John’s popularity alarmed Herod Antipas, who was at that time the ruler of Galilee and Perea. According to Josephus, Antipas feared that John would incite the people to some form of rebellion. The Gospels say that John criticized Antipas for marrying Herodias, the wife of Antipas’ brother Philip (Mark 6:17-29). In any case, Antipas had John arrested and beheaded.

John started a movement that continued after his death. The New Testament occasionally mentions the disciples (followers) of John (Mark 2:28; Luke 7:18, 11:1; John 3:25, 4:1; Acts 19:1-7). Some of these apparently believed that John was the Messiah (Luke 3:15; Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions* 1.60.1-2). The disciples of Jesus, on the other hand, claimed that Jesus, not John, was the Messiah, and that John had only been his forerunner. In some localities the two movements competed for disciples (John 4:1).

4. Social Structure of Palestine During Greco-Roman Period

All these preceding discussions lead us to consider the sociology of Palestine during Greco-Roman period. The high priests continued to hold the upper echelons in the society because through all these times the high priest commanded over civil and religious affairs of the Jews. Besides, the wealthy and priestly aristocracy who belonged to the Hellenizing party in Jerusalem enjoyed the privileges of the royal court and curried the favour of the king. One significant development during the Hellenistic period is the emergence of the Houses of Onias and Tobiads who came to occupy a central place in society. These families vied for the office of the high priest by giving bribes to the ruling kings. As there were strong trade and commerce in Palestine merchants occupied important place in the society. Next in position seems to have been occupied by the military personnel and army.
Hellenizing Jews or among the diaspora Jews who were more favourable to Hellenism they were not completely assimilated to Hellenism. While they admittedly adopted Hellenistic way of life it is hard to discern whether the core of their beliefs and practices were really affected or changed.

End Notes


2 He exempted the Jews from paying tribute and a number of Jews were enlisted into Alexander’s army. Cf. W. O. E. Oesterley, The Jews and Judaism during the Greek Period: The Background of Christianity (London: SCM, 1941), 17.


7 Martin Hengel, Judaism and Hellenism, 36.

8 Examples are Ant hedon, Apollonia, Philoteria, Pan ion, Philadelphia.


11 Everett Ferguson, Background, 322.

12 An opinion found in Reicke, New Testament Era, 40.


14 Martin Hengel, Judaism and Hellenism, 59.

15 Primarily belonging to the upper class people who by their desires for power and status unquestionably adopted Hellenistic way of life.

16 Martin Hengel, Judaism and Hellenism, 60.

17 Martin Hengel, Judaism and Hellenism, 61.

18 See Martin Hengel, Judaism and Hellenism, 61ff.

19 LXX is “70” in Roman number. It is generally used to refer to the Greek version of the Old Testament. Tradition says that when Ptolemy II wanted to establish a big library in Alexandria he found out that the Hebrew Scripture was missing and because the Jews settled in Egypt could no longer read, write or speak Hebrew, he wanted their scripture to be translated into Greek. For this project he brought seventy two Jewish scholars, six each from each tribe (12 x 6 = 72) which gradually came to be referred as “70” standing for the number of those Jewish scholars who worked on it. It is also said that these “72” scholars finished the translation of the whole Jewish scriptures in “72 weeks”.

20 D. S. Russell, Between the Testaments, 15.


22 Oesterley, The Jews and Judaism during the Greek Period, 19.

23 Helmut Koester, Introduction, 209.

24 The same view can be seen in W. O. E. Oesterley, The Jews and Judaism during the Greek Period, 20-21.


27 Martin Hengel, Judaism and Hellenism, 56.

28 This is a summary from Delbert Burckett, An Introduction to the New Testament and the Origins of Christianity, 45-56.

29 Josephus, Jewish Antiquities 13.297.

30 Josephus, Jewish War 2.162.

31 Josephus, Antiquities 15.


33 Josephus, Antiquities 18.17.

34 Josephus, Antiquities 18.23.


36 Josephus, Jewish War 2.118.

37 Samaritans believed that Mt. Gerizim was the tallest of all the mountains at 2890 ft. above sea level and so it is the meeting place of heaven and earth. That is why, they regarded it as the “right place to worship God” (cf. John 4:20).

38 Samaritans believed in Jer 18:18 does not refer to the Messiah but to the “prophet” who is “Moses”. Therefore at the end time, they believed, Moses will appear again and restore the Temple in Mt. Gerizim and re-institute the sacrificial cult there.

39 Wilhelm Baldensperger proposed that the purpose of writing the Gospel according to John was to refute the claim by the disciples of John the Baptist that he was the Messiah by showing that no doubt John was a “man sent from God” (1:6) but he came only as a “witness” to Jesus who is the true Messiah.

40 That is why, they regarded it as the “right place to worship God” (cf. John 4:20).

41 Samaritans believed in Jer 18:18 does not refer to the Messiah but to the “prophet” who is “Moses”. Therefore at the end time, they believed, Moses will appear again and restore the Temple in Mt. Gerizim and re-institute the sacrificial cult there.

42 Martin Hengel, Judaism and Hellenism, 43-47.

43 Martin Hengel, Judaism and Hellenism, 41-42.


45 Jeremias, Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus, 87-119.


47 Helmut Koester, Introduction, 60.


50 Everett Ferguson, Background of Christianity, 342.
3

Economic Condition for 1st Century Palestine

The economic historian Karl Polanyi noted that there have been two senses of the word economic: a substantive economics that strives to provide the necessities of life for the individual, family, tribe or society; and a formal economics that refers to rational choices between scarce means in the pursuit of human ends.

The economic condition of Palestine in Jesus’ time is crucial because many of Jesus’ words and actions are concretely situated in the economic factors of His days and quite often they are uttered or did in order to articulate new economic values and order. That is why, D.E. Oakman says, “One the one hand, Jesus was limited and shaped by certain economic factors in his environment – first of all, by his activity as a rural artisan, but perhaps more importantly by major economic problems in early Roman Palestine….On the other hand, Jesus’ words and ministry can be understood in part as an attempt to articulate new economic values and a new economic behaviour.”

In the opinion of Davies, except Palestine, the Roman period was a period of prosperity, especially during Augustus (Octavian) reign but Koester suggests that during Herod’s time Palestine enjoyed great prosperity and economic growth for which he cites the extensive building projects undertaken by Herod as the reason.

The economic condition of the first century Palestine in which rural and village economy were focussed on domestic need and agriculture whereas in urban economy were based on taxation of surplus and redistribution for elite ends. It is generally agreed among the scholars that Palestine during the Herodian period (BC 37 – 70 AD) was “an agrarian society with a population mostly of peasant farmers eking out subsistence from the land either as free peasants, tenants, day labourers or agricultural slaves.”

1. Agriculture

Agricultural home production constituted the basis for the economic and living conditions. There were also larger agricultural units in Judea in the fertile areas of Galilee as well as in the lowlands of the Jordan. The main agricultural objects of production in the places of Palestine were especially barley and wheat, fruits like olive for oil, grapes for wine, vegetables like cabbage and lettuce, carrots, onions, melons, etc.

Upper Galilee was a fairly rugged and mountainous terrain. Though this terrain was relatively inaccessible, it had good opportunity for farming. Lower Galilee was a combination of low, east-west running ridges, fertile valleys, and the plains of the Esdron valley. The best wheat in Palestine was produced in places such as Chorazin, Capernaum and the valley of Arbel. Galilee was also well known for date palms, figs and walnuts. The larger producer of wine in Palestine was Galilee. According to Josephus, the entire region of Galilee was cultivated and Samaria was endowed with rich pasture; Idumea was better known for barely than wheat and produced vinegar. Arkalon produced grain, lenna, onion and herbs. Ptolemias produced grain and Caesarea, wine and cattle. While Lydda produced vine, figs and linen, the neighborhood of Antipatris produced grain, pumpkins and pulse; Emmaus, wine and grain; Samaria, wine and fruit and Seythopolis, grain, linen and olives.

2. Land Ownership

Land ownership was viewed from two perspectives: (i) Eltitist (“from above”) in which it is usually expressed in territorial or legal terms; (ii) Peasant proprietor (“from below”) in which land ownership in terms of relationship or “kinship”. The land was controlled by the political and religious leaders of the society. The Romans, their client rulers or governors, their officers and native aristocracy comprising mainly of the religious leaders controlled much of the land in the first century Palestine. Fiensy notes that through many of the members of the Jewish aristocracy were from the influential priestly families, not all of them were from the priestly families. It could be said that most of the land was under the control of Romans and the local elite who acted as the agents of Rome. To make the situation worse, the landlords of Palestine were accumulating land at the expense of the peasantry through debt manipulations. Kressig say, the concentration of land in the hands of the privileged few resulted in market social stratification and social tensions. Applebaum notes that three foci of revolt after the death of Herod the Great in 4 BC were located in the royal domains of Perea and Jericho. The big landowners, big businessmen, political and religious oligarchy controlled the economy of the first century Palestine. These three groups were not three different groups since the members of the ruling groups fulfilled these three functions.
3. Workers of the Land

The workers of the land had to depend on the landlords for subsistence. The estate of the ruling elite were worked by tenants, labourers and slaves. Tenant farmers were landless peasants who have lost their lands to increasing debt. It is observed that during this time in Palestine only a small portions of land, which belong to the small peasants, were free of rent to a local landlord. Perhaps the small land holders may have been forced to make loans secured through property due to bad harvest or burden of secular and religious taxation, coupled with the needs of his families and livestock and seed for the next crop. Oakman, clearly stresses the economic burden on the peasants as follows: (i) they had to derive subsistence for their family from their plot. (ii) They needed the fund of seeds for planting and feed for livestock. (iii) They needed reserved grains for trade and barter to meet household needs that cannot be met by their own efforts. (iv) They needed funds to cover expenditure arising from or necessitated by participation in the social order, for instance, for wedding, cults, festivals and other religious obligations. (v) Taxes or tribute. (vi) Rent paid to large land owner.

The day labourers were not even allowed a break during the work and his wages were not at all sufficient to meet the needs of his families. Work was from dawn to sunset, food was normally provided by the employer. Payment was sometimes in produced and sometimes in cash. Based on Matt. 20:2 it is generally held that, one Denarius was the daily wage of a labourer. The Gospels indicate that there was unemployment in the first century AD Palestine.

4. Industry

During the Roman rule in Palestine, the typical form of industry was the craftsmen shop with a direct transaction between the producer and the consumer. Syria produced woolen goods like carpets, blankets, woven stuffs and perfumed ointments and resins. The neighbourhood of Jerusalem produced oil, ointments and resins. The building trade flourished in Palestine during the Herodian rule for which stone was the most important material.

The typical form of industry of the period was the craftsman’s; i.e. the producer owned the means of production, put them to use and sold his products directly to the consumer without intermediary. The crafts were held in high esteem in Judaism at the time: ‘He who does not teach his son a craft teaches him bringandage’. Manufacturing never was so important in ancient times as it is today, for machine tools were practically unknown, and goods had to be produced by human labour. In many cases the factories were private enterprise employing slaves.

In Galilee, the largest industry was fishing. Both the Jordan and the Sea of Galilee were widely known for their fish. Salted or pickled fish was sold all over Palestine from this area. F.C. Grant states that fish from this place were shipped not only to Jerusalem but also to Alexandria, Antioch and even Rome. According to Josephus, Galilee had a fishing fleet of 230 (or 330) boats. Hoehner notes that the Gospels furnish sufficient evidence to show that fishing business in the New Testament times was extensive and profitable (Mark 1:16-17; Matt 4:17-22; 13:47-48; 17:27; Luke 5:1-11). Weaving of linen and silk was another important industry. There was also the making of coarse cloths and mats. A Peculiar vessel necessary for preserving oil was also manufactured in Galilee.

During that time industry which serves the general public were constituted by different trades like weaving and leather industry, potteries, bakers, butchers and water seller. The largest concentration of economic activity, both productive and commercial was in Jerusalem. Joachim Jeremias describes the industries related with the temple. Handicrafts connected with the temple constituted an economic unit in its own right. The temple annually supported 7000 priests and Levites and had a staff of physicians, scribes. Maintenance workers, butchers, weavers, metal workers, incense workers and bakers of showbread. The temple building industry employed 10000 additional labourers besides the trained priests. To meet the needs of the visitor to the Jerusalem, the city had workshops of weavers, cheese maker, wool combers, bakers, coppersmiths and cobblers.

5. Trade and Commerce

Trade and commerce were flourishing in first-century Palestine. Trade in Jerusalem before AD 70 had reached a stage of development corresponding to town economy, whether defined with Bucheras a period when goods pass directly from producer to consumer or with Schomoller as a period in which the town supports the economic organization. The safety of the roads was of vital concern to trade. Anyone who succeeded in reaching the market in Jerusalem had to pay duty to the tax-collector to whom the market of Jerusalem had been farmed out. Payment was ruthlessly exacted; however, there was some relief from AD 37 when the governor Vitellius remitted the market duty on crops (Antiquitates 18.90). There was also considerable trade in connection with the Temple at Jerusalem. Trade was regulated by a monetary apparatus in which Jewish coins circulated side by side with foreign coins: Roman (the Denarius), Greek (the Silver Drachma) and Phoenician. Tyrian coinage was the
most popular currency in Palestine and it was the currency used for buying sacrificial objects in the temple and for paying Temple tax. This clearly indicates that financial rather than national interests prevailed. The mixed coinages testify to the international character of trade in Palestine.23

There were Greek merchants from Athens in Jerusalem from the time of Hyrcanus II (76-67 and 63-40 BC). The Greek influence on the Palestinian trade and commerce is evidenced by the use of many trade loan-words.24 Camel caravans brought goods from distant places to Jerusalem. There were markets in Jerusalem for corn, fruit and vegetables, livestock and wood, cattle and even slave-markets. Glassware were brought from Sidon, fish and slaves from Tyre, costly materials like byssus (fine white linen) came from Babylonia, fabrics from India, spices from Arabia to Jerusalem.25 Banking system also flourished with borrowing, lending, exchanging of foreign currencies, discounting of notes, etc., having varied interest rates.26 Therefore, it shows that a strong trade and commerce flourished in Jerusalem with people coming from different places.

6. Foreign Trade

It already comes across fish merchants and other traders from Tyre, who displayed their goods for sale in the northern part of the city. Tyre was noted for its precious glassware and also for the costly purple die. There is also evidence of commerce in Tyre in the frequent equivalent drawn between the Jerusalem money and the Tyrian. The Jerusalem standard of currency was the same as the Tyrian. The prevalence of the Tyrian standard is explained not only by the brisk trade which went on, but also because in the Temple only Tyrian currency was allowed. Tyre was a centre for the slave trade, and most of the heathen slaves of both sexes from Syrian, and often even further away, came to Jerusalem through this slave market. In Jerusalem there was a stone on which the enslaved were displayed for auction.27

Babylonia exported costly materials, woven from blue scarlet and purple stuffs and white linen. These materials were used for the curtain in front of the Holy Place and for the high priest’s mitre.28 Fabrics for the Temple came even from India. Trade in the east, particularly with the Arabian had always been very brisk. Old Testament already speaks of Frankincense from Arabia (Isa 60:6; Jer 6:20). The incense used in the Temple came chiefly from the desert. Pseudo-Aristeas 119 suggests that copper and iron were imported from Arabia. The lions and other animal needed by Herod for his sports in Jerusalem were also obtained from the Arabian Desert. From Egypt Herod the Great imported grain during a famine.29

7. Local Trade

In early times the main concern of local trade was to supply the large city with food. The existence of the citizens was directly dependent on the import of grain. Most of the grain was received from Transjordan. The Hauran was the granary not only for Palestine but also for Syria. Herod had enforced public security East of Jordan. He had achieved his purpose not so much by the settlement of 3000 Idumeans in Trachonitis as by settling, in the district of Batanea, the fierce Babylonian Jew Zamaris and his dependants (Ant. 17:23-31). Besides Transjordan Hupolemus lists Samaria and Galilee as grain supplying areas. It was from the city of Samaria that Herod ordered grain, wine, oil and livestock, when the Roman Troops which had been sent to help him as he besieged Jerusalem complaint of a shortage of food (BJ 1:297ff).30

The limestone soil around Jerusalem is suitable mainly for olive trees and to a lesser degree for corn – growing and vineyards. Pseudo-Aristeas 112 keeps to this order exactly in his description of the neighborhood: the land is ‘thickly planted with olive trees, with crops of corn and pulse, rich moreover in vines and much honey, and other fruits and dates beyond reckoning. Eupeleumus says that, besides corn and fruits, livestock was imported. Josephus tells that Antiochus the Great issued a decree for his whole kingdom concerning the import of livestock into Jerusalem.31

8. Taxation

Taxes were oppressive. The Romans collected a water tax, a city tax, a tax on meat and salt, and a house tax. Taxes were also levied on imports and exports. Goods at transit were taxed at every frontier. The total tax burden was very great, averaging about 40% of a man’s income.32

In the first century Palestine33 taxes and dues were a constant source of tension and unrest. In all of the provinces there were two types of taxes,34 direct and indirect. Direct taxes consisted of taxes levied directly on the land or per capita. The indirect taxes comprised of all the tolls, duties, market taxes, and inheritance taxes etc. that were mainly used in the agrarian and commercial sectors.35 Direct taxes ‘tributa’ were collected by the governor of a province and his staff. The main tax in every province was the tributum soli, a tax on agricultural produce paid by those who occupied the land; owners of other forms of property were liable to a tributum capitis (a head tax; cf. “kenses” or census in Matt 17:25; 22:19).
Indirect taxes *vectigalai* (cf. *telos* in Matt 17:25), the frontier dues (*portoria*) were the most important. They were collected solely for revenue, not to control production or trade. The publican, contractors employed to collect indirect taxes, agreed to furnish a certain sum to the government; amounts collected above this sum were the profit of the tax-raisers. This system of collecting taxes – paying Rome for the privilege of collecting – encouraged corruption under the republic. At the time of Jesus the collection of these taxes was not sublet in Palestine; instead, it was the responsibility of land authorities to collect them. On the other hand, indirect taxes or dues were sublet. Of particular importance were the custom duty and transit payments associated with street and bridges etc. The state collectors were extremely unpopular because the citizens often justified and cheated.

(a) Political Taxes
The primary right of the state was asserted through imposing taxes. In Palestine it shot up immensely under Herod the Great who ruthlessly exacted the taxes. There is no doubt that the land enjoyed great development under him but it was possible only because of the high taxation he imposed on the people. This situation continued under the Herodian rulers. During the Roman rule the burden of taxation remained the same and Josephus says that Judaea had to pay 600 talents.

(b) Temple Tax and the Role of the Jerusalem Temple
The Jerusalem Temple did not play only religious function but also other political and social functions too. All the male Jews, including the Diaspora Jews, above the age of 20, with the exclusion of the priests, were required to pay an annual half-shekel Temple tax. Half-shekel was approximately equivalent to one day wage. The economic burden on the people became heavier because the Jews were asked to pay the half-shekel Temple tax in Tyrian coins. Those who needed currency exchange in order to pay the tax were to shell out a large amount of commission to the money changers. These commissions collected were shared among the money changers and the Temple priests.

Similarly, as the Jews had to offer the stipulated offerings and sacrifices in the Temple, the priests took full advantage of it. Surrounding the Temple they allowed business of selling those animals required for sacrifice. It is said that those animals sold in the Temple precinct were much more expensive than those available in the outside market. But the people had to buy from the Temple market only because once the priests came to know that the animals were purchased from the outside market they would reject those animals as “blemish” and unfit to be offered. The priests did all this because they were making huge profit out of these business. This kind of practice might be echoed in the act of Jesus cleansing the Jerusalem temple as we find in all the four Gospels.

9. Transportation and Travel
The rule of Rome over the provinces was greatly facilitated by its excellent system of roads. The Romans built their roads as straight as possible, making cuts through hills and using viaducts to bridge valleys and streams. Along these roads which stretched in every direction from Rome to the frontiers moved the armies and the Caravans of commerce. The imperial post carried the government dispatches, whereas private business had their own couriers.

Most of the commercial transportation was by water rather than by land. The Mediterranean Sea abounded in good ports which were busy all through the season for navigation. Most of the Alexandrian ships were engaged in the corn trade which supplied Rome with grain.

10. Peasant Indebtedness
The bulk of the labour force for the ancient Palestinian agrarian economy was supplied by the peasant family. The majority of the 1st century AD Palestinian Jews were peasants who worked hard to support the Roman tribute; Herodian regimes, the Temple, the Priest, and their own families, an examination of the peasant’s indebtedness will give more insights into the economic condition of the people. The urban aristocracy’s demand tithes and tributes, combined with the demands of the Roman state forced the peasantry to borrow. In order to obtain loans, the peasant had to give as surety, part of his property, his plot of land, or even himself or a member of his family. There are a number of indirect evidences in the Gospels that show indebtedness of the peasants in the 1st century AD to those who controlled large estates or stores of grain, oil or money, either to the ruler-owners or their servants (Matt 18: 23-33; Luke 16: 1-7). Indebtedness and dispossession of the peasants were the characteristics of the 1st century AD Roman Empire.

Thus the peasant indebtedness caused by the tremendous economic pressure of the various tithes, taxes and other dues must have driven them into increasing debts, poverty and hunger. According to Horsely and Hanson, this is an ironic situation, in which the wealth accumulated in Jerusalem by the rich and the powerful contributed further to the spiral of peasant indebtedness, loss of land and growth of large landed estates. This led to the socio-economic divisions within the Palestinian society. Jeremias maintains that there were very poor people in the 1st century.
11. Class Structure

In the Roman world there was a great gulf between the rich and the poor. The wealthy consisted of the political and ruling and the landowners who controlled public lands. In the other hand most people (poor) depended on agriculture for their livelihood.

At the top of society stood the ruler and a small governing class. It has been estimated that the 1-2 percent of the population accounted for 50 percent of the wealth. However, the bulk of the population, the common people had a little access to wealth or power. These consisted primarily of peasant farmers, but also included artisans (weavers, builders and potters) and even less reputable classes (prostitutes, out laws, beggars, and underemployed itinerant workers). Slave composed about a third of the population. Slave come from conquered peoples, criminals, debtors, etc. they could be freed, if they were set free by their master or brought their freedom.

In a nutshell, Palestine was politically under the control of the Romans who ruled it through procurators. They exacted taxes and tribute from the conquered province, and so, the Jews had to pay heavy taxes and tribute to the Romans. Economically, trade and commerce flourished but the economic condition of the majority of the population was low. Socially, they lived in a mixed environment. Therefore they were greatly influenced by Hellenization which deepened the gulf between the urban aristocratic landholders and tax farmers on one side who stood to benefit by increasing involvement in the Hellenistic world, and on the other, the rural peasantry who were largely its victims.

The economy of Palestine was uplifted by producing many agricultural products as the land was so fertile and the business was so flourishing. Considering the economics of Palestine in the Biblical periods to keep in mind that we can understand that the social ends were determined by powerful, rich, elites, upper class in the society and so ancient economy, political was also directly or indirectly involved. The understandings of this economic condition differentiate the difference of today economic condition and the 1st century Palestine. It is necessary to studied carefully the 1st century Palestine economic condition. It will help us to possess a basic foundation of knowing the people’s occupational life and business participation which are highlighted in the Bible. From the above discussion it can be affirm that inequality of society on the basis of this economic was existed during that time.

End Notes

2 W. D. Davies, Invitation to the New Testament (London: SPCK, 1979), 18;
5 Mathew, Temple Criticism in Mark’s Gospel, 88-89.
6 Mathew, Temple Criticism in Mark’s Gospel, 92.
7 Mathew, Temple Criticism in Mark’s Gospel, 94.
8 Mathew, Temple Criticism in Mark’s Gospel, 3-14; Gundry, A Survey, 30.
9 Mathew, Temple Criticism in Mark’s Gospel, 3-14; Gundry, A Survey, 30.
10 Mathew, Temple Criticism in Mark’s Gospel, 3-14; Gundry, A Survey, 30.
11 Mathew, Temple Criticism in Mark’s Gospel, 3-14; Gundry, A Survey, 30.
12 Mathew, Temple Criticism in Mark’s Gospel, 3-14; Gundry, A Survey, 30.
13 Mathew, Temple Criticism in Mark’s Gospel, 3-14; Gundry, A Survey, 30.
14 Mathew, Temple Criticism in Mark’s Gospel, 3-14; Gundry, A Survey, 30.
15 Mathew, Temple Criticism in Mark’s Gospel, 3-14; Gundry, A Survey, 30.
16 Mathew, Temple Criticism in Mark’s Gospel, 3-14; Gundry, A Survey, 30.
17 Mathew, Temple Criticism in Mark’s Gospel, 3-14; Gundry, A Survey, 30.
18 Mathew, Temple Criticism in Mark’s Gospel, 3-14; Gundry, A Survey, 30.
19 Mathew, Temple Criticism in Mark’s Gospel, 3-14; Gundry, A Survey, 30.
20 Mathew, Temple Criticism in Mark’s Gospel, 3-14; Gundry, A Survey, 30.
21 Mathew, Temple Criticism in Mark’s Gospel, 3-14; Gundry, A Survey, 30.
22 Mathew, Temple Criticism in Mark’s Gospel, 3-14; Gundry, A Survey, 30.
23 Mathew, Temple Criticism in Mark’s Gospel, 3-14; Gundry, A Survey, 30.
24 Mathew, Temple Criticism in Mark’s Gospel, 3-14; Gundry, A Survey, 30.
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27 Mathew, Temple Criticism in Mark’s Gospel, 3-14; Gundry, A Survey, 30.
28 Mathew, Temple Criticism in Mark’s Gospel, 3-14; Gundry, A Survey, 30.
29 Mathew, Temple Criticism in Mark’s Gospel, 3-14; Gundry, A Survey, 30.
30 Mathew, Temple Criticism in Mark’s Gospel, 3-14; Gundry, A Survey, 30.
31 Mathew, Temple Criticism in Mark’s Gospel, 3-14; Gundry, A Survey, 30.
32 Mathew, Temple Criticism in Mark’s Gospel, 3-14; Gundry, A Survey, 30.
33 Mathew, Temple Criticism in Mark’s Gospel, 3-14; Gundry, A Survey, 30.
34 Mathew, Temple Criticism in Mark’s Gospel, 3-14; Gundry, A Survey, 30.
35 Mathew, Temple Criticism in Mark’s Gospel, 3-14; Gundry, A Survey, 30.
36 Mathew, Temple Criticism in Mark’s Gospel, 3-14; Gundry, A Survey, 30.
37 Mathew, Temple Criticism in Mark’s Gospel, 3-14; Gundry, A Survey, 30.
38 Mathew, Temple Criticism in Mark’s Gospel, 3-14; Gundry, A Survey, 30.
39 Mathew, Temple Criticism in Mark’s Gospel, 3-14; Gundry, A Survey, 30.
40 Mathew, Temple Criticism in Mark’s Gospel, 3-14; Gundry, A Survey, 30.
41 Mathew, Temple Criticism in Mark’s Gospel, 3-14; Gundry, A Survey, 30.
42 Mathew, Temple Criticism in Mark’s Gospel, 3-14; Gundry, A Survey, 30.
43 Mathew, Temple Criticism in Mark’s Gospel, 3-14; Gundry, A Survey, 30.
44 Mathew, Temple Criticism in Mark’s Gospel, 3-14; Gundry, A Survey, 30.
45 Mathew, Temple Criticism in Mark’s Gospel, 3-14; Gundry, A Survey, 30.
46 Mathew, Temple Criticism in Mark’s Gospel, 3-14; Gundry, A Survey, 30.
47 Mathew, Temple Criticism in Mark’s Gospel, 3-14; Gundry, A Survey, 30.
The use of sociology in the study of the NT is something of a recent development. It has “emerged as a programmatic methodological enterprise in the 1970s.”¹ In spite of the diversity of key methodological question raised by scholars who have engaged themselves in this field of study, it has “provided many challenging new insights and fresh avenues for the New Testament critic.”²

Scholars have given various names to this approach of study such as “Sociological Approach”, “Social-Scientific Study of the Bible and the Biblical World”, “Sociological Exegesis”, “Materialist Reading”, and “Social-Scientific Criticism”. Sociological criticism “investigates biblical texts as meaningful configurations of language intended to communicate between composers and audiences.”³ It is not a completely new exegetical method, but it is a component and expansion of historical critical method. But it focuses more on the question of how far linguistic structures of the biblical texts reflect socio-economic circumstances of the community involved.⁴

1. Sociology as a Discipline

Sociology is “an attempt to understand society and social relations within society in a disciplined way.”⁵ Sociological study does not take things just for granted but its studies investigate beneath the surface to gain a real understanding of what was involved in the social behaviour of what one is studying. It is concerned with human relationships that undergo change and development, and the things what make for change and what inhibits change.

Sociological studies arose out of a dissatisfaction with the so-called idealism of traditional study of the NT, i.e., with its almost exclusive emphasis on ideas or theology.⁶ According to the sociological scholars,
NT scholarship has tended to ignore the social dimension of the NT documents, the social life in practical concrete terms of the primitive Christian communities, the social pressures which they experienced, and the possibility that social, rather than ideological, factors were determinative in some articulation of the early Christians’ self-understanding. It is with this mind that many scholars have turned to the discipline of sociology for help in considering the social aspects of early Christianity in much more depth.

2. Sociological Approach and NT Interpretation

Sociologists have propounded various methodological approaches for the study of the social world of the NT. Therefore, one can expect “no universal consensus regarding presuppositions, procedures, or even nomenclature” with regard to the sociological approach to the NT. Different approaches may be generally clubbed together into two categories:

(a) Social Descriptions: One area on which scholars have paid much attention is the social composition of the early Church. Social descriptions aim to describe the visible features of society in which the religion was found. Employing this method, Meeks argues that the apostolic Church comprised of people from general cross-section of Greco-Roman society at large and that early Christian’ social level was by no means uniformly low. His conclusion differed from earlier view that the early Christianity came from poor and dispossessed of the society.

(b) Sociological Explanation: Scholars who engaged themselves in this line of investigation employ either insights from “Sociology of Knowledge” or specific sociological categories for explaining NT data. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann developed the “Sociology of Knowledge” method in which beliefs and actions are determined by some circumstances and when these circumstances change the beliefs and actions automatically change. This method is applied by Elliot in his book A Home for the Homeless: A Sociological Exegesis of 1 Peter.

Gerd Theissen uses a “functionalist” mode of social analysis to analyze three standard patterns of behaviour in Jesus movement, viz., the “wandering charismatics”, “sympathizers in the local communities” and “the Son of Man”. One of the sociological theories known as “cognitive dissonance” suggests that when a group has a very strongly held expectations and are disrupted by world events, one reaction is to overcome the “dissonance” by evangelistic zeal persuading others that the system is after all correct. Gager sees such reactions from the early Christians after the crucifixion of Jesus.

3. Role of Sociology in the New Testament Studies

(i) It can describe the social facts of early Christianity and place it in its social context.

(ii) It can construct a social history of Christianity.

(iii) It can examine the social forces which led to Christianity and the social institutions which resulted from its foundation.

(iv) It can investigate the creation of the Christians’ worldview, their social construction of reality and the structures which maintained that worldview as plausible.

Sociology helps us to understand the growth and development of Christianity as a social movement bearing in mind as we do so the types of authority it demonstrated; the social classes it attracted; the social structure which crystallized, and the social effects it had. It takes into account that the members of the primitive church were not only the products of a theological ideal, but also the product of their social context.

4. Sociological Criticism and the Gospels: The Nature of Jesus Movement

The early disciples of Jesus were drawn from uneducated class and a quite backward civilization. Jesus’ parables portray a world of farmers and fishermen, small-time landowners and petty kings. They viewed the city, especially Jerusalem, as a place of evil doing. It did not confine itself to rural setting for a long time. But it switched over to urban setting where they grew and flourished in the more sophisticated part of the Roman Empire. It took root in cosmopolitan cities and attracted Greek-speaking followers. Thus its followers became a mixture of social classes.

Sociologists are interested in this social transition for they view that the NT itself is a product of this transition. The synoptic gospels, Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles reflect different social contexts. It is generally agreed that the Jesus movement should be interpreted as a millenarian movement—a movement which arises in a time of unrest and which promises decisive social change.

4.1. Recent Studies on the Jesus Movement

(i) Howard Clark Kee: H. C. Kee in his book Community in the New Age attempts to discover the purpose which lay behind the writing of the gospel of Mark. He believes that Mark was written by an apocalyptic community in Southern Syria just before A. D. 70. The purpose was to act as a guidebook and as an exhortation to the members of the community who were traveling charismatic preachers. His concern is to find a real social situation in which to fit the purpose of Mark.
The nature of Mark’s community is identified to have had its spiritual and cultural distinctiveness corrupted by the influx of Greek civilization, which in Jesus’ time had been subjected to Roman political power. This subjugation led to a feeling of moral and spiritual crisis, provoked a crisis of meaning. The way of response to this subjugation by the New Community of Jesus was that it began as a pure community of followers of prophet Jesus who came with a message of imminent and tragic judgment. Though membership was not restricted the demands were radical and transformed normal social and economic structures.

Kee compares two types of social groups with the early Christian community. First, he compares the other apocalyptic groups who believe themselves to be secure elect who would participate in the imminent judgment of their beliefs. Second, the wandering charismatic figures with the itinerant Cynic-Stoic philosophers. The Cynics urged people to opt for a simpler life-style by rejecting the false values of their culture. The Stoics had a vision of an ideal society of universal brotherhood. Out of these two comparisons, the main sociological interpretation of Jesus movement lies with the first one.

(ii) John G. Gager: The most thorough sociological account of the “social world of early Christianity” is found in John G. Gager’s book *Kingdom and Community*. He analyzes the Jesus Movement as a Millenarian movement from whom the consensus view is derived. He justifies the use of sociology in studying the NT. He argues that history has so stressed the particularity of events that it has failed to see the common threads. He promises the possibility of seeing old facts in a new light now.

He explores the reaction of Jesus’ followers when the promises about the ushering in of the Kingdom of God did not come true by using the method of cognitive dissonance. Then he explores the origin of the millenarian movement. It is the result of a process of social bargaining, even a power struggle, whereby different centres of interest within the initially diverse group crystallize their position vis-à-vis each other. The winners in this process become the holders of orthodox views and the losers become the heretics. He does not see the survival of Christianity as a result of its success as a movement. After a careful survey he concludes that the conversion of Constantine was not much a matter of faith but a shrewd political judgment.18

4.2. Models of Jesus Movement

4.2.1. Millenarian Movement

This is the consensus model in studying the Jesus movement. Sociologists do not relegate Christianity to a lonely shelf but it is compared and contrasted with the present movements in the world. Millenarian movements arise due to social unrest or where people are dissatisfied with their present social order. The promise the possibility of heaven on earth: an order quite different from the present order. A prophet who articulates human’s desires, lives himself according to the new system and is instrumental in bringing in the new order leads these movements. This millenarian movement “symbolises the meta-historical future in which the world will be inhabited by a humanity liberated from all the limitations of human existence, redeemed from pain and transience, from fallibility and sin, thus becoming at once perfectly good and happy.”19

4.2.1.1. Characteristics of Millenarian Movements

(i) The Desire for Change: From a sociological perspective, millenarian movements are drastic responses to a sense of deprivation. They project the replacement of the present social order with a totally different one in which the poor would become rich and vice versa.20 Millenarianism arises out of a strong desire for change in the social order. Those who seek this change are from the disadvantaged in terms of social, economic and political spheres. This was what the Jews were at the time of Jesus. They were under the control of the Romans so there was a strong yearn for change in political system. Bound with it were moral and spiritual issues. God seemed to have left them. God’s promise to them that he would keep the throne of David forever seemed to be a false promise. Moreover, evil ruled on the land. Violence, extortion, injustice, sickness, etc., seemed to be in control of their lives.

Sociologists see many indications that Jesus movement related to this feeling of oppression and desire for change. The followers of Jesus were mostly drawn from the lower rung of the society. They were the disadvantaged section of their society. Jesus’ ministry is directed mainly towards the sick, the outcasts, and the demon possessed. Most of his times were spend were those rejected by the society (Luke 19:1-10; Matt 9:20-22; John 5:1-9). All these had a strong desire for a change in their lives. The Gospels clearly portray them as symptomatic of the deeper problem of evil. Therefore, Jesus placed these problems side by side with deeper spiritual and moral problems and sees the former as the indicative of the latter. Hence Jesus explained his mission by identifying himself with those who desired change.21

(ii) A New Interpretation of Life: A millenarian movement is identified by its interpretation of the social situation in a new light. Thus, those who are without hope are offered hope in heaven; the poor are called rich in spirit. The Gospels record extensive accounts of such where Jesus does the same. His ministry was to “preach the good news to the poor, release for
the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and setting at liberty the oppressed” (Luke 4:18). His aim is to offer happiness to the poor, hungry, sorrowful and persecuted. This reinterpretation of life is seen in Jesus in his disinterest in political power. His attitude towards wealth, his unwillingness to maintain status in which he associates with the socially “nobody”. All this indicates how Jesus criticizes the existing social order and presents a new order and a new community.22

(iii) The Prophet: Every millenarian movement has a prophet or charismatic leader but it does not mean that the prophet is the primary cause of the movement. Rather the prophet acts as a symbolic focus for the desire that already exist. He himself becomes what the movement aspires and the carrier of the message of the new human. Max Weber developed this concept.23 The qualification of a prophet of a millenarian movement consisted of a call from God, a mission, could be able to view the situation and offer authoritative answers to their plights, which could be validated by miracles, should not rely on formal education, should not be an isolated figure, have followers and disciples, and then his gifts and calling be recognized by others.

This concept of a prophet can be easily identified with Jesus. He had an intimate relationship with God the Father (Matt 6:9; 11:25; Mark 14:36; Luke 23:34; 46), whose mission is clearly spelt out as to proclaim the kingdom of God. Jesus’ authority is demonstrated in many miracles he did, especially casting out of demons and healing of different sickness. He was the son of a carpenter who lacked formal education.24

(iv) A Heaven on Earth: The prophet is the agent and instrument through whom the new social order will be initiated and the discontented people will be vindicated. One distinguishing feature of the millenarian movement is its belief in the establishment of a new heaven and a new earth in which all the immoralities and evils will be wiped away.25 The Jesus movement as a millenarian movement is seen in its apocalyptic elements in Jesus’ teaching. Jesus announced the “nowness” of the kingdom; his parables spoke of triumph to the contrary, emphasized the finality of judgment. Everything was centred on the “zero hour.” The crowds believed the imminence of the kingdom which made them to make an attempt to take Jesus by force and make him king (John 6:15). His triumphal entry into Jerusalem was marked by the reception by the people as the expected Messiah.26

4.2.1.2. Drawbacks of Millenarian Approach
(a) It overemphasizes the eschatological aspect of Jesus’ teaching.
(b) It assumes that Jesus did not expect his movement to continue after his death.

(c) It selects only the radical nature of the life, teaching and ministry of Jesus as evidence and neglects other evidences which present Jesus in a more conservative light or as working within a more normal social framework.

4.2.2. Scholastic Movement/Jesus as a Rabbi
In contrast to the millenarian approach which emphasizes on Jesus as a prophet some sociologists view Jesus as a Rabbi. E. A. Judge argued that the early Christian community is more aptly seen as a scholastic community rather than a millenarian movement.27 Similarly, as we have seen above, Howard Clark Kee has seen a likeness between Jesus movement and the itinerant Cynic-Stoic philosophers.28 This proposition is based on the argument that the title “prophet” was a controversy, while everyone, including his enemies, called Jesus a “Rabbi” (Matt 9:11; 22:23; 8:9; 19:16; Luke 18:18). He himself seems to accept the title “Rabbi”. Jesus’ calling, training and commissioning of his disciples was in the norm of a Rabbi. As a Rabbi he was invited by the Pharisees for meal. His burial was arranged by two members of the Sanhedrin. At the end, he was condemned to death as a prophet but not as a Rabbi. This approach does not mean to de-emphasize the apocalyptic elements of Jesus’ teaching.29

4.2.3. Renewal Movement
Gerd Theissen began to view the earliest Christianity as a renewal movement within Judaism. However, many sociologists identify this approach with the millenarian movement. The merit of this approach lies in its emphasis on the continuity of Jesus’ work with Judaism. The origin of the earliest Christianity lies in Judaism. Initially the Jesus movement succeeded as a renewal movement within Judaism and it is this initial success which forms the core of this approach. But, in final analysis, Jesus movement as a renewal movement within Judaism was a total failure because instead of renewing Judaism it founded only a new religion.30

4.3. Organisation of Jesus Movement
The Gospels provide very scarce information about the structure of Jesus movement. In the centre of the movement is Jesus. Rather than the title “Messiah”, which would have led his disciples to expect a nationalistic and earthly king, or “Son of God”, which would have made them to expect only divine intervention in the world, Jesus preferred to call himself as the “Son of Man”. In this way both the transcendent and immanent aspects of his works are combined. Then the followers or disciples who are called to be free from petty Jewish Sabbath laws, are homeless and to serve others. There was a two-tier system of discipleship in Jesus movement:
wandering/itinerant charismatics who are seen to be more committed to Jesus, and sympathizers who were rooted/settled in local situations. Theissen identifies two types of primitive Christian itinerant preachers: itinerant charismatics and community organizers. The primary difference between them is that each of them adopts a distinctive attitude to the question of subsistence. The itinerant Cynic-philosophers arose in the social circumstances of the Palestinian region. While the second type arose in the movement of the mission into Hellenistic territory.

4.4. Factors Responsible for the Growth of Jesus Movement

(i) Socio-Economic Factors: During Jesus’ time in Palestine there were a number of natural phenomena like the famine in 25 A.D. and the epidemic in 29 A.D. There were also problems of over-population of Palestine and in the distribution of goods. The result of these phenomena was the dislocation of some people from their social situation. This problem is reflected in the reference to beggars or robbers in the Gospels. Other opted to join religious community like that in Qumran and other to join resistance movements. These made people to long for a change.

(ii) Socio-Ecological Factors: Jesus movement was rooted in rural or village setting, basically from Galilee. Being on the borders of territory the Galileans would be subject to more outside influences than those at the heart of the nation and their potential for revolt was well known. The parables of Jesus also reflect that they were more prone to economic problems.

(iii) Socio-Political Factors: There were three centre of powers which competed with each other. The older aristocratic families as encapsulated in the High Priest vied with the Roman client rulers of Herod’s family and they together jostled for power with the Roman procurator. Apart from these power centres there was a quest for theocracy which Jesus was meeting in his preaching about the kingdom of God.

(iv) Socio-Cultural Factors: With all these socio-economic and eco-ecological upheavals the Jews were undergoing an identity crisis. One question remained persistently unanswered: What did it really mean to be God’s people now? Different social groups responded to this question differently. Some like Pharisees argued that they should rigidly hold to the Law. The early Christians’ response to the quest was to intensify some norms and relax others. Norms about one’s behaviour was demanded (Matt 5:21-48) while norms about religious rituals were relaxed (Mark 7:1-13).

5. Problems of Sociological Approach

(i) Scarcity of Materials: Sociologists do not have much material to use as evidence. The New Testament and other contemporary documents do not provide enough information about the social setting since they were not written as sociological analyses.

(ii) No Consensus Methodology: Sociologists do not have a single uniform method and theory. Different scholars employ different methods of analysis which made the NT scholars confused with regard to the validity and appropriateness of different data.

(iii) Danger of Parallelomania: This danger arises when a superficial analysis of two institutions in two different cultures suggests that they resemble each other, which might lead to a conclusion that they are parallel phenomena.

(iv) Meaning of the Language: Examining the biblical text from sociological perspective may sometimes lead to ignoring the varied way in which a language can function. Language can reflect existing social structures, but it does not always do so.

6. Evaluation and Conclusion

In general, sociological approach broadens the horizon of New Testament exegesis. As a component and extension of historical critical method it fills up the gap in our understanding of the early Christianity, more particularly in its social setting. Therefore, it helps to understand better the meaning of biblical texts in their original social contexts. This makes the sociological approach an important tool for the interpretation of the NT.

However, there are some weaknesses with sociological approach, as we have seen above. The data available about the early Christianity is often too insufficient to support or refute any theory. There is also a strong tendency to fall into the trap of anachronism and often claiming much more than what the studies really assure. Moreover, sociological approach, or more precisely for the sociologists, theological meanings of the text is not very important. While giving more emphasis on the social structures and circumstances behind the text they tend to neglect the theological intention of the Gospel, and NT, writings. Another danger to be aware of is the tendency to view the realities of spiritual experiences from a human point of view. In spite of all its limitations it can be viewed as one of the most fruitful recent developments in NT interpretation.

End Notes

7 Christopher Tuckett, *Reading the New Testament*, 137.
17 Howard Clark Kee, *Community of the New Age*, 176.
22 Derek Tidball, *An Introduction to the Sociology*, 31-33.
23 Derek Tidball, *An Introduction to the Sociology*, 34.
26 Derek Tidball, *An Introduction to the Sociology*, 35-36.
30 Derek Tidball, *An Introduction to the Sociology*, 41-42.
33 Derek Tidball, *An Introduction to the Sociology*, 46-47.
39 Derek Tidball, *An Introduction to the Sociology*, 144.
PART - III

FORMATIVE FACTORS OF THE JESUS MOVEMENT
Infancy Narrative in Matthew

Infancy narratives of Jesus as they are recorded in Matt 1-2 and Luke 1-2 are important passages because they contain important theological themes and significance in the context of each of the two Gospels. There are issues in relation to its genre and source centered on whether Matt and Luke imitated the pagan birth legends or Jewish infancy narratives. Today most of the scholars opine that they followed Jewish infancy narratives when they composed Jesus’ infancy narrative.

Similarly, there are problems involved with regard to its source. Attempts have been made to link it with oral traditions or the Old Testament. But Matt and Luke must have made their own redactional activity with some creative editing, rewording of these historical sources according to their respective purposes.

1. Nature of Matthew’s Infancy Narrative

Matt’s infancy narrative can be called a Christian midrash. In Matt’s account the narrative is unfolded as though it were seen from Joseph’s point of view and in Luke’s account from Mary’s perspective. In Matt’s infancy narrative, “dream” plays an important role. Matt begins with Jesus’ genealogy and right after that Joseph’s reaction to the divine intervention in Mary’s life, followed by the birth of Jesus and the visit by the Magi, flight to and return from Egypt.

2. Jesus’ Genealogy in Matthew

2.1. Role of Genealogy in Matthew

What function does genealogy play in the Gospel of Matt? It is not to give an accurate history of Jesus’ lineage but to situate the story of Jesus. For the Jews, genealogy of a man was considered extremely important. Any male Jew who could not show his genealogy was considered a shameful thing and such people were even considered “illegitimate” Jew. That is why it was imperative for any male Jew to know at least up to the tenth ancestors. Matt’s Gospel was written to Jews and so keeping this Jewish sensibility he shows the line of Jesus ancestors.
Jesus’ genealogy as found in Matt and Luke has lots of differences. The earliest opinion on this matter is one since 1490 when Annius of Viterbo suggested that Matt traces Jesus’ lineage through Joseph while Luke traces it through Mary. Similarly, Matt’s genealogy is considered as Jesus’ legal lineage whereas Luke’s genealogy is thought to be of Jesus’ natural lineage.

Some characteristics of Jesus’ genealogy in Matt are: (i) Jesus’ lineage is traced down from Abraham through Joseph to Jesus; (ii) it is artistically divided into three groups of fourteen names; (iii) four women are included here; (iv) omission of various names; (v) an awkward roundaboutness at the end of the genealogy reflecting Matt’s belief in virginal conception of Jesus by Mary.

2.2. Jesus as Messiah for Both the Jews and the Gentiles

It is argued that Matt’s genealogy is an attempt to show Jesus as a true Israelite, of particular importance is that Jesus is of Davidic descent. It is believed that Matt attempts to emphasize Jesus’ virginal conception through the genealogy. However, Matt’s genealogy of Jesus is not only about that. Matt’s genealogy of Jesus begins with “Abraham” and ends with “Jesus, who is called the Messiah” (1:2, 16) and we should not miss its import here. For Matt, Abraham is the father of the Jews and it is from him through “David” (1:6) that the Messiah comes. The combination of “Abraham”, “David” and “the Messiah” has deep theological significance.

Matt wants to prove that the Messiah is the Messiah and that God’s act of redemption which He began with the call of Abraham reaches its climax in the person of Jesus, the Messiah. According to Jewish Messianic expectation, the true Messiah is to be from Abraham through David and in Jesus that long awaited hope for the Messiah is fulfilled. Similarly, Matt’s genealogy of Jesus has the “scope” of the divine “salvation history”. According to the book of Genesis, God established a covenant with Abraham with a promise that Yahweh “will make of you a great nation…and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:2-3). The word “families” mean “nations” and it is in this sense that Matt uses it in the Great Commission. The Messiah who is born in the line of Abraham is to be the one in whom “all the families of the earth” is to “be blessed”. We must acknowledge that Abraham himself was a Gentile from “Ur of the Chaldeans” before he was called by God and brought him to Canaan. Therefore, the inclusion of the Gentiles in Abraham’s call is not surprising but we seldom notice it. The “true” son of Abraham is to fulfill that promise. Just biological or physical lineage with Abraham could not qualify anyone to claim Messiahship. Only Jesus is the true and perfect “son of Abraham”.

Jesus is not only the royal Messiah of the Jews (son of David) but also the Messiah of the “families of the earth” (son of Abraham). Thus Jesus is both the promised Messiah and the universal Messiah.

2.3. Women in Matthew’s Genealogy

Matt also gives a startling list of Jesus’ genealogy having four “unholy” women (Tamar v.3, Rahab v. 5, Ruth v. 5 and “the wife of Uriah”, i.e., Bathsheba v.6). This list is surprising because the Jews never counted women in their genealogy. Looking at their life stories from the OT, these women seem misfits in the genealogy of the Messiah. Tamar was the one who deceived her father-in-law Judah to get involved with her in an incestuous relationship (Gen 38). Rahab was a Gentile prostitute from Jericho who protected the spies sent by Joshua (Josh 2). Ruth, the Moabite, showed exemplary commitment to her Israelite husband’s family (the Book of Ruth). Uriah’s wife Bathsheba might be considered a Gentile because she married a Hittite. David committed adultery with her and also committed murder when he liquidated Uriah in order to take Bathsheba as his wife.

There are four lines of interpretation on why Matt included these four women: (i) Matt intended to show that sinners are also included in the salvific plan of God wrought in Jesus Messiah; (ii) Matt wanted to include Gentiles/foreigners in the salvation Jesus brings; (iii) Matt wanted to show that in the new community that Jesus is about to form there will be no distinction between men and women. (iv) These four women share something in common with Mary: something extraordinary or irregular in their marital relationship. Even if Jesus is born in continuity with His own people there is something strange or novelty through which God acts: the virginal conception of Jesus, i.e. the “holy irregularity” and the four women show that “holy irregularity” in Jewish history. Elaine Wainwright also comments thus in this regard: “Perhaps women were the makers as well as shapers of this alternative tradition, constructing a female genealogy for Mary in whom Israel’s God was doing a new thing that could not be contained within the traditional cultural constructs….could characterize Jesus, the anointed one (1:1, 16) as son of Mary, of Tamar, Ruth, Rahab, and Bathsheba, as well as of David and Abraham (1:1), child of discontinuity as well as continuity.”

By dividing the genealogy of Jesus into three sets having fourteen names in each, Matt alludes to the Jewish numbering tradition. “Fourteen” is a number multiple of “seven”. For the Jews number “seven” represents wholeness or perfectness because in their tradition number “seven” signifies earth and heaven (“four” is the number of earth; “three” is the number of heaven), hence they assign number “seven” to God.
3. The Virgin Birth of Jesus (1:18-25)

Matt straight away comes to the birth of Jesus after genealogy of Jesus. He refers to Jewish marriage practices as well as to the origin and identity of Jesus. He says that Joseph and Mary are betrothed to each other but Joseph, being “righteous,” is contemplating to “divorce” her quietly. There were two stages in Jewish marriage practice: (i) engagement or betrothal, (ii) the real act of marriage when the groom takes home the bride. In the first stage, they can be called husband and wife but cannot enter into sexual relationship but if they want to annul their engagement it has to follow the OT divorce procedure in which the man has to give a “certificate of divorce”. Mary and Joseph are in this stage. But Mary is found to be pregnant without the role of her husband Joseph! That is why Joseph, the righteous man, contemplates to divorce her quietly without putting her to public shame including stoning to death because “any infringement on his marital rights could be punished as adultery” [through stoning]. Here enters the role of “dreams” in Matt’s infancy narrative because in a dream God reveals to him that the child Mary is carrying is not from any man but by the “power of the Holy Spirit”. This divine intervention in such a crucial moment in Joseph’s life echoes OT because there are many such interventions in the birth of many important OT figures (e.g. Isaac, Samson, Samuel, etc.). Matt seems to emphasize Jesus’ virgin birth by asserting that there is no involvement of any human being in the conception of Jesus.

3.1. Significance of the Name “Emmanuel”

“Emmanuel” carries special significance for the Jews. Because of the exilic experiences of the Jews their understanding of God underwent a tectonic shift. In the beginning of the Jewish history, their ancestors thought of God as being present in the world so they explained of God in anthropomorphic terms. In the dream of Jacob (Gen 28:10ff.), Jacob saw a ladder being set up on earth and its top reaching to heaven; and the angels “ascending (going up from earth to heaven) and descending (coming down from heaven to earth) on it” (v. 12). The angels ascended because during this time they understood God as dwelling on earth with human beings (Immanuel). But in the due course of time, primarily because of their exilic experiences when pagan kings plundered the Temple at Jerusalem (God’s dwelling place on earth) and took many Jews as captives to their lands, the Jews began to think that God was no longer in His dwelling place but has departed from it. This is the time when transcendental understanding of God emerged in Israelite history. That is why, during the latter part of the OT as well as the inter-Testamental period the Jews thought that God was very far away from them. The Greeks also had a belief in which they thought that after creating the world, god departed to a very far away place and he is not interested in the affairs of the world or not at all concerned about it (apatheia). Matt addresses this belief when he says that in Jesus the OT prophecy through Isaiah about “Emmanuel” is fulfilled. Since Jesus is “Emmanuel”, in and through Him God is no longer a transcendent (far away) God but an “immanent” (very near) God.

It is significant to note that Matt brackets his Gospel with the motif of “Emmanuel” (cf. “Lo, I am with you always,” 28: 20).

4. The Visit of the Magi (2:1-12)

Only Matt shows that the birth of Jesus was immediately followed by the visit of Magi with expensive gifts. With Magi, Matt again picks up his theological presentation of Jesus in the genealogy as both royal Messiah of the Jews as well as the Gentile/universal Messiah.

Matt makes a reference to Herod the Great thereby locating Jesus’ birth to concrete political situation of the Jews. Herod has been a client king over Palestine through trickery and treachery. We do not know much about the Magi because Matt says only that they were from the East. They might have come from trans-Jordan, Syria, Persia or even Arabia. There are three important concepts associated with them in this passage:

(i) Their question, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?” implies that Herod is an illegitimate king. The true king (=Messiah) of the Jews is the child (Jesus) who has been born not in the capital Jerusalem, i.e., Herod’s city, but in Bethlehem (“David’s City” which means “house of bread”).

(ii) They are not Jews but Gentiles. This picks up Abraham theme from the genealogy. Jesus is the Messiah of the Gentiles too that is why even before the Jews recognize Him to be their Messiah these gentle Magi recognize Him. That is why we find in Matt a special interest in the Gentiles, despite his Jewishness (cf. the Great Commission in chap 28 also).

(iii) Jesus is the royal Messiah that is why the Magi brought expensive gifts that are relevant only for a king. The “star at its rising” in 2:2 also has this significance (the alternative reading is “his star in the East”) because it can mean that the star itself is the Messiah. According to Werner Keller, developing on Johannes Kepler who said that sometimes two planets move so close to each other that they have the appearance of a single, larger and more brighter star, there was a conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn in the constellation of Pisces on December 4, 7 BC. He goes on to say that the three three
planets represent Messiah in Jewish tradition: (a) Jupiter – royal and lucky star for Israel; (b) Saturn – star that protects Israel; (c) Pisces – sign of Israel, sign of Messiah. Thus he opined that the “Star” which the Magi saw was the coming closer of Jupiter and Saturn making it appear a larger and more brighter star. This suggests that the “star” signified the birth of the Jewish Messiah.

The gifts that they presented to Jesus has received many interpretations. “Gold” refers to Jesus as the King (Royal Messiah), “frankincense” refers to Jesus as God (Divinity of Jesus) and “myrrh” refers to Jesus as Saviour (His suffering, death and burial).16

5. The Escape to Egypt and the Massacre of the Infants by Herod (2:13-18)

Herod had instructed the Magi to return and report to him about where Jesus was but again through a divine intervention to them in a “dream” they bypassed Herod. Similarly, Joseph is told in a “dream” to take the infant Jesus and the mother to Egypt because Herod is out to look for Jesus to kill Him. In this pericope and the next (return from Egypt) we find re-enactment of the Israelite history. Matt connects all these three episodes with some OT passages and show how these passages are fulfilled in them.

5.1. The Meaning of the Flight to Egypt

Matt presents Jesus as the “new Israel” or “new Moses”. Israel in the OT found themselves being enslaved and exploited by the Egyptians. Their migration to Egypt in search of food and livelihood seems to be what Matt refers to when he writes about the flight of Jesus to Egypt. The Egypt story in the OT is also God’s mighty act and His deliverance of His own people from the Egyptians. Egypt was the place of slavery, hardship and suffering and it is where the greatest Jewish festival, Passover, originated. Matt may be echoing this incident in Israelite history saying that since Jesus is Israel’s Messiah He has to share His own people’s experience.

Matt does not provide any information concerning how they went, what events took place on the way, in which part of Egypt they stayed and how long they stayed in Egypt. Many scholars propose Nile Valley or Gaza or borders along Wadi al Arish as the place they stayed. From some apogaphal writings certain incidents took place on their way to Egypt: (i) palm trees bowing down to Jesus and feeding the infant Jesus;17 (ii) lions and leopards paying homage to Jesus by wagging their tails; (iii) encounter with two thieves that would later become Jesus’ companions on the cross during His crucifixion. The Greek philosopher Celsus accused Jesus of practicing magic while in Egypt and later Jewish writers expanded his story and claimed that Jesus brought “witchcraft” from Egypt and led many Jews astray.18 The Coptic Church in Egypt take great pride in this story and give strong credence for its origin on the basis of this event.

Typically Matthean in character in this narrative, as we have seen elsewhere already, is the “fulfilment” formula. Matt quotes Hos 11:1.

5.2. The Significance of the Massacre of the Infants

Herod was a tyrant and he did not liked any authority besides his. That is why he even executed his own son and wife whom he thought were after his throne. He wanted to remain king forever. But he had known the Jewish expectation and belief about the Messiah and so when the wise men came and talked about the Messiah “he was frightened” (2:3). His interest on Jesus grew only to liquidate Him so that he can keep his throne secure. Therefore, not surprisingly, when he found out that the Magi have cheated him he got “infuriated”. In order not to leave anything to chance, Herod ordered that “all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or below” to be killed (2:16). The Israelite history in Egypt recurs again. In Matt’s narrative, Herod acts as the Pharaoh of the OT who ordered all the Hebrew midwives to kill all male child at birth, “When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him” (Exod 1:16). Likewise, the mourning of the Hebrew women in Egypt (“Rachel”) which is spoken of by the prophet Jeremiah (the suffering or weeping prophet of Israel) in Jer 31:15 is both applied and fulfilled in the massacre.

Thus, Jesus is taken to Egypt just like the old Israel and He experiences what the old Israel had experienced in Egypt.

6. The Return From Egypt (2:19-23)

The Exodus story is re-enacted here. The role of “dream” appears again in this section. Herod the Great died shortly after he massacred the infants of Bethlehem and his older son by Malthace, a Samaritan woman, Herod Archelaus succeeded his father, though in an inferior rank as ethnarch. He was so ruthless that under his rule people suffered too much forcing the people to appeal to Augustus to remove him. Augustus deposed him to Vienna in 6 AD. For this reason, Joseph feared him and returned to Nazareth.

The return of baby Jesus “from” Egypt re-enacts the coming out of the Jews from Egypt. The “second exodus” by the “new Moses”. Just as Moses led the people of Israel in their liberation from Egyptian slavery, Jesus, the “saviour” is to lead the people out of “slavery” of sin. Thus, the
flight “to” Egypt and the return “from” Egypt has this theological significance that Jesus is the new liberator not only of Israel but all nations.

Jesus is sent to Egypt to rectify the faults of “old Israel”, who despite Yahweh’s faithfulness to them were persistently and consistently unfaithful to Yahweh, and to bring to fruition God’s plan of salvation because in Jesus, the “new Moses” He constitutes and forms the “new Israel” and brings them out of “Egypt” (salvation from sin).

End Notes

1 Jose Maniparampil, *Synoptic Gospels* (Bangalore: Claretian Publications, 2004), 528. Midrash is a popular or homiletic interpretation of the OT.
6 This is the oldest interpretative approach beginning with Jerome. Example of contemporary writers who hold this view is Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey*, 199.
7 This approach was made popular by Martin Luther.
10 The concept of “righteousness” in the First Gospel begins when Matt introduces Joseph as a “righteous” man.
11 Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 123.
12 It refers to the 400 silent years between the OT and the NT. During this time many crucial theological doctrines and beliefs emerged among the Jews.
13 Matthew emphasizes the “fulfilment” of the OT in and through Jesus. So, in many places Matt uses this word to show how Jesus is the fulfilment of the OT.
17 The Quran (Surah 19:24).
18 For details see above, “Extra-Biblical Sources”.

**Infancy Narrative in Luke**

Luke’s infancy narrative is quite different from Matt’s. Right after his dedicatory preface, Luke begins his infancy narrative. Luke parallels John the Baptist’s story with Jesus’ story. He begins with the announcements about the birth of both John and Jesus, the birth of John and Jesus, shepherds worshipping with some “hymns” that interlude the narrative. Many of Matt’s theological emphases are absent in Luke’s infancy narrative and we find many Lukan distinctive theological emphases on it.

1. **Annunciation of the Birth of John the Baptist**

   Luke does not use the OT explicitly as it is found in Matt but Luke’s narrative is saturated with OT themes and concepts. Zechariah and Elizabeth bring to mind the OT characters who were pious but childless couples (like Abraham and Sarah; Elkanah and Hannah, etc.). It is noteworthy to observe that Luke begins his narrative (the Gospel) “in” the Temple – “sanctuary” and ends his Gospel “in” the temple (24:53). This shows that for Luke “temple” and its activities are important. Likewise, the Lukan infancy narrative also begins and ends in/with the temple (1:5 – “priest” which introduces the function within the Temple; 1:9; 2:41ff.). When Zechariah ministered in the temple he received a divine revelation that his wife Elizabeth is to give birth to a son. But Zechariah seems to “doubt” what he had heard, “How will I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years” (1:18). What is really meant here is not “doubt” (though v. 20 may suggest so) but that Zechariah is just expressing the “impossibility” of what the angel has just spoken about because biologically it “seems” impossible for the aged Zechariah and Elizabeth to have a baby. Therefore, in response, a “sign” was given to him that he would remain mute till the son is born to him.

The meanings of the names of characters also carry significant message in Luke’s Gospel and it is through these characters whom he introduces from the beginning of his Gospel Luke introduces his overall theological perspective. “Zechariah” means “Yahweh remembers”,...
“Elizabeth” means “Yahweh is my oath” or “Yahweh is fullness” and “John” means “Yahweh has shown favour or grace”. Through this family Luke conveys that Yahweh is still faithful to His people Israel (Zechariah) and to the covenant He has made with their ancestors (Elizabeth) by fulfilling what He has promised to them in the ancient past (John). This presents the over-all theological point of view with which Luke wrote his Gospel.

When Zechariah saw the angel (only in 1:19 the identity of this angel is revealed by Luke), Zechariah was filled with fear because that is not only the proper response of a person to a divine revelation but Zechariah knew that it could mean terror for him too. In the Jewish belief, God would appear to a priest inside the sanctuary and strike him to death if the priest is unholy and Zechariah was concerned about it. However, the angel told Zechariah not to “be afraid” (1:13) because he did not bring bad news but “good news” (1:19) to him.

The identity and ministry of the son to be born to Zechariah and Elizabeth is also spelt out clearly in this episode (1:14-17). Of particular importance is the “giving” of the name for the child right at the announcement (1:13) which is patterned in accordance to the OT theophanic revelations to childless couples. Even after the fact is stated and that fact is confirmed by the “giving” of the name Zechariah still doubted. Moreover, Luke connects “John” to that of Samson in the OT (1:15) and explicitly says that “God will go before him (John) in the spirit and power of Elijah” (1:17) introducing the “Elijah redivivus” theme in his Gospel. The mission of John will be similar to Elijah’s (1:16). Therefore, John is going to fulfill the words of Mal 4:5 bridging the promises in the OT with their fulfilment in Jesus. John’s “forerunner’s role” to Jesus is clearly stated here and implicitly Luke states that the long awaited Messianic age is dawning. How? Luke will show it in the later part of the narrative.

In accordance with the word of Gabriel, Elizabeth conceived and her words in 1:25 expresses that the stigma of barrenness with which she has been living among the people for many years has been taken away at last. Indeed, Yahweh, her “oath”, has “remembered” her at last by showing His “mercy” to her.

2. Annunciation of the Birth of Jesus (1:26-38)

Luke beautifully parallels the annunciation of the birth of Jesus with that of John. The “same” angel Gabriel is sent to a virgin in Nazareth of Galilee “in the sixth month” after he had appeared and announced to Zechariah about the birth of John. When Mary heard Gabriel she was also disturbed like Zechariah but the same word of assurance given to Zechariah is also given to Mary, “Do not be afraid” (1:30). Then the angel revealed to her the message he brought to her that she “will conceive…bear a son…call his name Jesus” (1:31). The same pattern as that of John’s is found here. The plan is announced (she will conceive and bear a son) and the name of the “son” is given (Jesus). If in John’s birth Yahweh’s mercy has come, then, in Jesus the “saviour” comes (because the name “Jesus” means “Yahweh saves”). Then the nature of His person and mission is stated by the angel (1:32-33). Mary gives a similar response to that of Zechariah, “How shall this be, since I have no husband?” Luke beautifully presents Elizabeth (along with Zechariah) and Mary at two opposite extremes: Elizabeth has husband but Mary has no husband; Elizabeth is old but Mary is virgin. The significant idea expressed here by Luke is that both Elizabeth and Mary are “unlikely women” to conceive and give birth to babies. But Yahweh is the one who “acts” and “does” in history. Therefore, these two unlikely women are going to see the “impossibility” happening with them because the day of Yahweh has begun to dawn (in and through Jesus) in which Yahweh is going to do the “impossible” (cf. 1:37).

How is Mary going to conceive when she has no husband? The answer is given by the angel: through “the Holy Spirit” (1:35). What kind of a son will He be? “Holy, the Son of God” (1:35). So, Jesus’ nature and person is clearly stated from the very beginning of Luke’s Gospel. Again a “sign” is given to Mary to confirm the word of the angel: Elizabeth is six months pregnant.

3. Mary Visits Elizabeth (1:39-45)

3.1. Superiority of Jesus to John

After the angel departed from her, Mary goes to visit Elizabeth because they are cousins (“kinswoman”, 1:36). As soon as Mary goes in and greeted Zechariah and Elizabeth “the babe leaped in her [Elizabeth’s] womb” (1:41). John, even before he is born, “knows” who is coming to him: Jesus. It means that Mary has already conceived in her womb according to the words of angel Gabriel. The “leaping” of John can mean two things here: (i) Jesus is superior to John so John leaps to welcome Him; (ii) Jesus is the reason for John to “leap for joy” (1:44) because in and through Jesus “joy” has come to the world.

3.2. The Song of Elizabeth (The Benedicta of Elizabeth)

The greeting of Mary is responded with a hymn of “blessing” (canticle in Latin) by Elizabeth. In this song Elizabeth expresses that Mary is more blessed than her because she is the bearer of her “Lord” (1:43). Jesus is not only introduced by Luke as “holy” and “Son of God” but He is also called “Lord”. The divinity of Jesus and His exalted position is affirmed
from the very beginning of Luke's Gospel. In and with Jesus, the real “joy” has come, making not only Elizabeth to be glad but the baby in the womb “leap for joy”.

4. The Song of Mary (Mary's Magnificat) (1:45-55)
Some manuscripts of the Gospel according to Luke attribute this song to Elizabeth but traditionally it has been accepted that this hymn was sung by Mary in response to Elizabeth’s song.³ Through this song Luke introduces some notable theological themes which he is going to elaborate in the rest of his Gospel. This song has two parts: (i) Mary’s personal praise of God (1:46-50); (ii) Mary’s proclamation of eschatological salvation (1:51-55).⁴

Several characteristic Lukan terms and concepts appear in this passage: “my saviour” (v. 47), “regarded” (with mercy), “lowliness” or “low estate”, “handmaiden” (v. 48a), “blessed” (v. 48b), “mighty” and “great things”, “holy” (v. 49), “mercy” and “fear him” (v. 50), the “reversal of fortune” motif (vv. 51-53), the faithfulness of Yahweh to Israel (vv. 54-55). Combined all the terms and concepts we get the idea that Yahweh who is the “mighty” one “saves” the “lowly people” and who “fear” him (here the OT anawim concept appears in which the pious/holy poor people faithfully wait on the Lord for salvation) through His “great things” he has shown “strength with his arm” by reversing the fortunes as it was promised in the OT. Of special interest is the “reversal of fortune” motif introduced in this narrative. Yahweh, on this day of salvation, has started to turn the tables on the people:

(i) The fortunes of the rich, the powerful and the mighty ones are reversed when He “scatter the proud”, “put down the mighty ones from their thrones”, and send away the rich people empty. Those who are already “somebody” God is making them “nobody”.

(ii) The fortunes of the lowly and the hungry are also reversed to the better when Yahweh acts on their behalf. When the rich and powerful are scattered, pulled down from thrones and sent away empty, Yahweh “exalts” the lowly ones and sets them up in the thrones and “fills” the hungry and the poor “with good things”. Thus, those who are “nobody” are made “somebody”.

This theme recurs again and again in the Third Gospel. All these things have become possible because the day of the Lord has begun in Jesus.

5. The Birth of John the Baptist (1:57-66)
As angel Gabriel has said, Zechariah remained mute till his son John was born. Elizabeth’s pregnancy was not known to others because she hid herself⁵ and when the “neighbours and relatives” come to know about it she becomes a witness among them about how Yahweh has acted on her life (1:58). The naming of the child was done on the 8th day and on the same day, in accordance to Gen 17:12, the child had to be circumcised. Circumcision was the mark of belonging to the covenant between Yahweh and Abraham so every male Jew was circumcised on the 8th day. The passage suggests that Zechariah had revealed to his wife Elizabeth the name that was to be given to his son. But the “relatives and neighbours” were not aware of it that is why they wanted to name him Zechariah after his father’s name. When Elizabeth objected they conferred his father and since he was mute he wrote down on the writing tablet the name of his son: “John”. Immediately he regained his speech and he began to speak “praising God”. “Praising God” is a typical Lukan theme because human beings have found reason to be glad and to praise God. “Fear” filled those gathered because they have seen strange things and they wondered about “what” kind of a person the child is to be.⁶

The song of Zechariah is Christological. It alludes to all the three parts of the OT (TaNaK=Torah, Nebi’im, Ketubim). It has five sections: vv. 68-69 – song of thanksgiving for the realization of the Jewish Messianic hope; vv. 70-71 – reference to the promises of God in the OT as contained in the prophetic prophecies (the Neb’im); vv. 72-75 – reference to Abrahamic covenant found in the Torah (Mosaic Law); vv. 76-77 – reference to the mission of John the Baptist; vv. 78-79 – reference to the Gentiles and their salvation.⁷

7. The Birth of Jesus (2:1-20)
7.1. Augustus Versus Jesus: Jesus is the Real “Prince of Peace”
Luke situates the birth of Jesus within concrete historical, geographical and political parameters. A “decree” for a “census” from the Roman Emperor Augustus (Gaius Octavius), carried out by Quirinius, governor of Syria, brings Joseph to Bethlehem.⁸ Whether Luke is historically and factually right is a concern with which scholars have wrestled for many years. But it has been argued that Luke had some theological purpose when he situates the birth of Jesus to Augustus’ reign. Augustus was considered as “prince of peace” by the Romans because he brought to an end a long history of turmoil and conflict for the throne upon the assassination of Julius Caesar and inaugurated the Pax Romana (Roman Peace also called Pax Augusta) under which the Romans enjoyed great prosperity. Roads and communication systems were constructed for easy mobility of the people, particularly the Roman army, from one end to the
other end of his empire. Recognizing the peace and tranquility that Octavian ushered in to them the Roman Senate bestowed on him the title “Augustus” in 27 B.C. Octavian ruled over the whole of Roman Empire from 27 B.C.-A.D. 14.

As he brought-in peace to the world Octavian was called the “prince of peace” by the Romans and was acknowledged as “the divine saviour who has brought peace to the world.” Not only that the Romans honoured him by calling him the “inaugurator of peace on earth.” Gradually, their respect for him developed into their worship of him as a “god” and “divine” which may be the beginning of “emperor worship” among the Romans, against this background many books of the New Testament were written. Similarly, the birthday of Octavian, September 23, became the New Year day in the calendar of Emperor worship which was commemorated as the “day of the arrival of the good news (or gospel) to the world.”

Jesus’ birth was during the reign of this Emperor who was considered as the “bringer of peace” and who was worshipped as “divine” and “saviour.” Only Luke, among the Gospels, emphasizes that Jesus Christ was born during the reign of the one who was worshipped as “divine”, “prince of peace” or “son of god”. It shows for Luke that the question of who is the real “son of God” or “prince of peace” was a crucial point. Luke 2:1-20 makes it remarkably clear that the birth of Jesus and the joy it brings is much better than the Caesar’s. The words and terms Luke uses to describe the birth of Jesus resonates the worship of Caesar as “divine” and “prince of peace.” At Jesus’ birth there is “great joy” (2:10b) for “all the people” (2:10c) and the baby who is born in a “manger” (not the one in the imperial palace) is the “Saviour” (2:11a). That is why His birth marks the “beginning” of “good news” (or “gospel”, 2:10b) to the world. Luke’s characteristic use of “today” or “this day” in 2:11 should not be overlooked. Luke uses this word quite often to suggest the “beginning of the time of messianic salvation.” Its import is that real joy and peace comes only with Jesus not prior to him. This baby born is the Messiah, the Lord (2:11b). One notable point we notice here is that, for Luke, the baby born in a manger is the Saviour because he is the Messiah and the Lord.

His teaching is that with the birth of Jesus human history enters into a definitive stage. Since it is not that exalted and dignified Caesar, adorned with all the honours and titles bestowed on him and who issues decrees from the magnificent royal palace in the imperial capital city of Rome, is the real “prince of peace” and “saviour”. But the real “prince of peace” and “saviour” is the baby born in a manger being wrapped in swaddling clothes in a lowly and insignificant city of Bethlehem and being worshipped by the shepherds (representing the lowly and humble ones as well as the Gentiles). Looking at the picture before us, we see here that what Caesar is Jesus is not. Caesar has power, honours, royal robes, subjects, throne and dwelling place in a royal palace but Jesus is lying in a manger being wrapped in swaddling clothes surrounded by lowly people. But the great paradox is that the baby in the manger is greater than the mighty Caesar!

If the birthday of Caesar Octavian was celebrated with great pomp and gaiety by the Romans throughout the Roman “world” then it is only in the birth of Jesus that the real “joy to the world” comes (Luke 2:14). The messengers of the birth of Octavian were mortal humans but the messengers of the birth of Jesus are “angel” and “a multitude of heavenly host” (2:13) thereby showing more cosmic significance of Jesus’ birth. The birthday of Octavian resulted in the happiness of the people but the birth of Jesus results in magnification and praise of God (2:13). The birth of Jesus reveals the “glory to God” effecting the onset of “peace on earth” (2:14) because He is the only and true “Son of God” because He himself is “the Lord”. In effect, the Caesar is a divinized human while Jesus is the humanized God.

8. The Naming of Jesus and His Presentation in the Temple (2:21-38)
Just as Luke began his infancy narrative in the temple he concludes it in the temple. Just like John, Jesus was circumcised on the 8th day and the name given by the angel is formally given to Him (2:21). It is quite significant to observe that till now the babe “wrapped in swaddling cloth, and lying in a manger” is not called by a name; only now Luke applies the name “Jesus” to Him.

Purification rite for the birth of a Jewish male baby happened after forty days (for girl child, the mother had to be purified after 70 days) according to the Mosaic Law (Lev 12:2-8). Luke emphasizes the faithful observation of the Jewish laws by Jesus and His family. According to Jewish rites, ransoming of a child was always important, especially the first born son because the first born son belongs to God. However, for Luke there is no “ransoming theology” here rather he is playing on the theme of the Lord’s coming to His holy temple. Recognizing the peace and tranquility that Octavian ushered in to them the Roman Senate bestowed on him the title “Augustus” in 27 B.C. Octavian ruled over the whole of Roman Empire from 27 B.C.-A.D. 14.
Luke says that salvation that Jesus brings is a universal salvation.

The second part of his farewell song concerns with how this child’s destiny is going to affect people’s destiny and pain Mary’s heart (vv. 33-35). Luke provides a “preview” or a “window” to see in advance what lies ahead for Jesus, the people and Mary. The role of Jesus as a “stone” is also brought out here. For some, Jesus is going to be a “corner stone” (for the “rising” of those who accept Him) but for some, He will be a “stumbling block” (for the “falling” of those who reject Him).


Scholars have argued that this section does not belong to the Lukan infancy narrative. Jesus is now 12 years old so he can be considered an adult according to some West Asian contexts. However, it concludes chapters 1-2 and is set between the birth narrative of Jesus and His subsequent public ministry which will begin from Chap 3. There is a typical Lukan emphasis in this section, i.e. Jesus is in His Father’s Temple. Since He is “God’s Son” (1:32, 35), Jesus comes as the rightful owner of the Temple.

According to Jewish tradition, a male Jew had to be presented at the age of 12 and make a conditional vow (to be ratified into a permanent vow at the age of 13) to abide by the Law of Moses. Jesus was “lost” and after “three days” of intense search on the part of His parents He was found “sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions” (2:46). “Three days” may be another “preview” pointing to Jesus’ resurrection on the “third day”.

End Notes

1 If “dreams” play an important role in Matt’s infancy narrative, then “sign” plays a crucial part in Luke’s narrative.
2 This is a medical language and it is used to support that “Dr.” Luke or Luke, the physician, is the author of this Gospel.
3 For a detail reading on the textual witnesses as well as defenders of these two variant readings see Brown, The Birth of the Messiah, 334-336.
4 Jose Maniparampil, Synoptic Gospels, 510.
5 Brown, The Birth of the Messiah, 368.
6 The use of “what” rather than “who” suggests the role that John is going to play. See Brown, The Birth of the Messiah, 370.
7 Jose Maniparampil, Synoptic Gospels, 513-514.
9 Good resources on the Roman Empire can be found in D. Braund, Augustus to Nero: A Sourcebook on Roman History 31 BC - AD 68 (London, 1985).
11 For details on Roman Imperial worship see D. Fishwick, The Imperial Cult in the Latin West (Leiden: Brill, 1987).
12 Luke does not use the actual name “Jesus” in this section. Rather, he consistently refers to him as “son” (cf. “first-born son” in 2:7), “baby” (2:12, 16) and “child” (2:17). Why is it so is not that surprising because Luke has already told us that the baby to be born to Mary is to be called “Jesus” (1:31). Here he identifies that Jesus as “Saviour” in 2:11 because the meaning of the name “Jesus” is “Saviour” or “the one who saves” (cf. Matt 1:21).
13 John Nolland confines the phrase “to all the people” as a reference only to the Israelites. He says, “The whole People”…is the whole People of Israel, as earlier in the infancy narratives (1:17, 68, 77).’ How far that kind of reading it is true is the only problem because Luke has a special interest on the Gentiles.
14 Being born in a “manger” Jesus identifies himself with the lowly and humble ones who are the focus of Lukan salvation theology. Similarly, “manger” exemplifies Jesus as “the bread of life”.
15 Jose Maniparampil, Synoptic Gospels, 520.
16 In the literary character of Lukan Gospel, there are lots of “preview” (introducing what lies ahead) and “reviews” (reminding the readers about what had happened).
17 For example, Jose Maniparampil, Synoptic Gospels, 522.
The Logos Prologue in John

The Greek term “Logos” occurs many times in the Fourth Gospel in several of its normal senses (e.g. “statement” or “saying” in 4:39, 50; 6:6; 7:36; 15:20; 18:9; God’s “word” as revelation in 10:35; God’s “word” revealed through Christ in 17:14). But its most significant use occurs in the prologue of John in 1:1-18. Here the term is used as a technical designation for Jesus himself, and much scholarly effort has been devoted to understanding the background and use of Logos in John.

Scholars are yet to prove beyond doubt whether the term Logos, as John uses it, is derived from Jewish or Greek backgrounds or from some other sources. John was writing with insinuations (allusion/reference) to the OT, but he was writing to an audience familiar with Hellenistic thought, and certain aspects of his use of Logos would occur to them. Both backgrounds are important for understanding this title as John uses it.

1. Greek Philosophical Usage of Logos
Logos in Greek philosophy referred to the “world-soul”, that is, the logos is the soul of the universe. This was an all pervading principle, the rational principle of the universe. It was a creative energy. In one sense, all things came from it; in another sense, people derive their wisdom from it. These concepts are at least as old as Greek philosopher Heraclitus (6th century BC) who wrote that logos is “always existent” and “all things happen through this logos.”

For the Stoics, the universe is pervaded by logos, the eternal Reason. For them logos was the “force” that originated, permeated, and directed all things. It was the supreme governing principle of the universe. But they never thought of the logos as personal, nor did they understand it as one would understand God. Thus, John’s use of the term could have appealed to the people in the Hellenistic circles.

2. The Jewish Background of the Logos
Recently, more attention has been given to Jewish sources as a background for John’s use of logos in his Gospel. First there is the OT to consider. The words of John 1:1 – “In the beginning” – undoubtedly recall Gen 1:1. But the use of Logos in John 1:1 also echoes Gen 1:3 – “and God said” – as well as Ps 33:6 – “By the word of the Lord were the heavens made” where the “word of the Lord” becomes the creative agent in the creation of the world. There is also the near personification of wisdom in Prov 8:22-31 in which pattern John personifies the Logos when he will identify Logos with Jesus. In many places the Targums (Aramaic translations of the OT) substitute “memra” (“word”) as an intermediary for God. Thus, for the Jews, the term “logos” as John uses it would make them to recall how the “word” (debar) of God acted as the creative agent in the creation of the universe bringing to mind its eternal existence.

3. Philo’s Usage of Logos
Philo attempted the formidable task of wedding the Jewish religion with Hellenistic philosophy. He preserved the Jewish attitude towards the OT as the inspired Word of God; but by his extreme allegorical interpretation he found philosophical concepts in the OT. He held the Greek view of a God utterly transcendent and separated from the world; and he employed the concept of Logos to provide a means of mediation between the transcendent God and the creation. Philo conceived of intermediate forces or “ideas”, which are manifestations of the divine activity. Manifested thus as creative power, directing and sustaining the universe, God is called Logos (Reason). Philo does not present any consistent concept of the Logos and its relationship to God. The Logos is conceived as inward, i.e. the universal plan of things in the mind of God; and as outward, i.e. the plan made operative in the world. The Logos is both the original pattern of the world and the power that fashions it. It is at once the chief of the series of forces or ideas emanating from God, and the totality of them. In brief, the Logos concept is employed by Philo in diverse applications to provide a concept of a mediator between the transcendent God and the universe, an immanent power active in creation and revelation.

4. Logos in John’s Gospel
John begins his Gospel with the Logos without giving any explanation about it. Greek readers would probably think he was referring to the rational principle that guided the universe and would be shocked to find that this Logos had not only become personalized but incarnate (1:14). Jewish readers would be more prepared for some sort of personalized pre-existent Word, but they too would be amazed at the idea of incarnation. After 1:14 where John identifies the Logos with Jesus the term does not occur again.
John’s Logos-Christology has four main emphases.

(a) **John 1:1** outlines the relationship of the Logos to God. “In the beginning was the Word” forms a clear statement of pre-existence. It states very plainly that Jesus existed from eternity. The word “beginning” does not refer to Jesus but to the cosmos with the implication that “in the beginning of the world” the Logos was already in existence. John does not speak whatsoever about the “beginning of the existence” of the Logos. For him, Logos has no beginning. It denotes that the Word “was” right from the moment God was. “The Word was with God” distinguishes God the Father from the Word showing that the two are not interchangeable, and yet suggesting that there is a personal relationship between the two. God and the Logos are two separate beings, yet one in nature and substance. “And the Word was God” affirms the full deity of the Word, and yet implies that there is more to God than Word alone. Thus, the Word existed from the very beginning before all creation, the Word existed with God but distinguished from God the Father and yet the Word himself is God.

(b) **John 1:3** gives the relationship of the Word to creation. The Logos is clearly distinct and separate from creation since the Word was the agent of creation. The Logos is not a creation but the Creator, a co-creator with God. Everything was created only through him. It augurs well with the Genesis account of God creating the universe through his command, i.e. word, and John equates this word uttered by God during the creation with Jesus. That is why the Word is above creation because he did not only exist before them but he was the sole agency in their existence. Everything owes its existence to the Word. Thus, there is an intrinsic unity between the Logos and the creation yet there can be no equation between them.

(c) **John 1:14** shows the relationship of the Word to humanity: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” This simple statement sums up the whole doctrine of incarnation – God becoming flesh. The word “flesh” is not used here in the Pauline sense of “sinful flesh” because the notion of sinfulness is incompatible with John’s presentation of Jesus (10:30; 17:22). Rather, it refers to the humanity of the Word, Jesus Christ, in his humiliation. It transcends the Greek’s notion of a transcendent, otherworldly God and fits well with the Jewish idea of personalizing concepts (cf. personalization of wisdom in the book of Proverbs, chap 8; 9:1-6, etc.) but goes beyond it declaring that God has taken the human form and is now found in human likeness.

(d) **John 1:18** shows that Logos is the full and complete revelation of God. “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son (or God)…who has made him known”. “No one” including the two great “friends” of God in the OT – Abraham and Moses – has seen God. Abraham “the friend of God” nor Moses “whom the Lord knew face to face” (Deut 34:10) and spoke to him “as a man speaks to his friend” (Exod 33:11) could see the full glory of God. According to Exod 33:18f., when Moses asked God to show His face the Lord replied, “You cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live” (v. 20). At best Moses was allowed to see only the “back” of the Lord after He had passed through Moses because God said, “...my face shall not be seen” (v. 23). In this regard F. F. Bruce says, “We should perhaps say, less anthropomorphically but equally metaphorically, that Moses saw, so to speak, the afterglow of the divine glory.” Thus, the OT presents a God who is hidden and other-worldly who can be known only a bit through theophanic experiences. Even the Greeks perceived God as an other-worldly being. Their transcendent understanding of God gave rise to the concept of “apatheia” which taught that God is very far off and unconcerned about the world. It is very difficult to know or approach that God. In both these traditions God is someone who is hidden and unrevealed to us thus creating a gulf between divine realm and human realm. But that “unknowable” God becomes “knowable” in Jesus because He is the full embodiment of God. Who God is, Jesus is; what God is, Jesus is because “I [Jesus] and the Father are one” (10:30). Therefore, the full revelation of God comes in Jesus because “he who sees me [Jesus] sees him [the Father] who sent me” (12:45). Again when Philip asked Jesus to show them the Father, Jesus replied, “He who has seen me has seen the Father; how can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me?” (14:8-10). Through this “mutual indwelling” motif, John shows that Jesus is the full and final revelation of God the Father. In Jesus, God the Father, dwells, walks and acts among us.

Thus the Logos concept in John’s prologue emphatically affirms the full essential deity of Jesus and his full humanity.

End Notes

1. Fragmenta 1, 50, 54, 114.
2. For more details see above, “The Portrait of Jesus in John’s Gospel”.
Movement of John the Baptist

John the Baptist plays a crucial role in the Messianic ministry of Jesus. According to many scholars, John started a movement and many of his disciples/followers believed him to be the Messiah. Even today, in parts of Iraq and Iran, there is a small sect called the Mandaeans who claim to have kept John’s movement alive. This belief is thought to be the reason why the author of the Fourth Gospel places John in high esteem but separates him invariably from Jesus and puts him functioning as a witness to Jesus as the Messiah (cf. John 3:22-30).

1. Life and Ministry of John the Baptist

Before Jesus is presented to us to begin His ministry we are introduced to John, the son of Elizabeth and Zechariah and the forerunner of the Messiah (Luke 3:1-20). According to the Gospels John retired from society and lived like a hermit in the vicinity of the Jordan River (Matt 3:1-6; Mark 1:6; Luke 3:1-6).

1.1. Qumran Connections?

Several reasons made some scholars to assume that John might have been a member of the Qumran community.

(i) Like John, the Qumran community had priestly connections along with an interest in priestly matters. Luke introduces to us that John had a priestly family connections because in 1:5 Luke says that his father, Zechariah, was a priest belonging to the “priestly order of Abijah”. Again, Luke indicates that Zechariah was an active, serving priest when the announcement about John’s birth was given to him in the Temple (1:8). Similarly, the Qumran sect had a special interest in priestly matters who even expected a priestly Messiah.

(ii) The geographical location of John’s ministry also suggests a Qumran connection. The Qumran community separated themselves from the other Jews of Jerusalem and settled in Dead Sea caves which is generally a desert place. Similarly, John is said to have ministered in the “wilderness of Judea” (Matt 3:1).

(iii) Connection between John and Qumran can be inferred from their use of Isa 40:3 also. This verse from Isaiah was a very important one for the Qumran sect so also John is introduced in the Gospel tradition with this passage (Mark 1:2-3).

(iv) Their diet and life style were also strikingly similar. John “ate locusts and wild honey” and was “clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist” (Mark 1:6). Likewise the Damascus Rule of the Qumran community 12.13-14 clearly specifies how to eat honey and locusts. They also lived with sparse belongings and clothes. Again, the ascetic life style of John corresponds to the Qumran sect because the Qumran community also separated themselves and lived secluded life in the wilderness.

(v) The baptism rite was practiced both by the Qumranites and John. For the Qumran sect, membership into their fold was through water baptism. Similarly, John also practised baptism in the Jordan River.

(vi) Both the Qumran community and John had eschatological orientation and beliefs. The Qumran community thought that God’s judgment was imminent on the corrupt religious leaders of Israel centred at Jerusalem. They also viewed the Jerusalem Temple with contempt because the corrupt form of Judaism led by the Jewish high priest emanated from the Temple. In the same way, John also preached a message about urgent repentance and his attitude towards the Jerusalem leaders was similar to that of the Qumranites.

However, in spite of such similarities, we cannot identify with absolute surety John the Baptist with the Qumran sect because when we meet him for the first time in the Gospels, John is not at all associated with the Qumran sect but he is an independent preacher. Again, there is possibly a difference in the water baptism practised by both John and Qumran sect. While John’s baptism is called a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4), the Qumran practice was not more than an initiation rite into the community.

2. Preparing the Way of the Lord

Taking Elijah as his model (2 Kings 1:8), John wore rough garment and subsisted on such fare as he could find in the wilderness. Also like Elijah, John was fearless in his rebukes directed towards both kings and the multitude. In him the voice of prophecy silent for centuries rang out again like a trumpet.
Among some Jews there was an expectation that Elijah would appear again in the last days. According to Mal 4:5-6, Elijah will appear before the great and terrible day of the Lord. Hence, during the 1st cent. AD there was a strong hope and expectation that the advent of the Messiah would be preceded by the coming of Elijah. This hope was fulfilled in John the Baptist. So he is presented in the Gospels as “Elijah Redivivus” (Reappearance of Elijah) not only by his striking similarities to Elijah in life-style and message but also through what Jesus said about him.

(i) Mal. 4:5f. – Promise of sending Elijah before the Day of the Lord
(ii) Mark 9:9ff. – The Jewish teachers say that Elijah must appear first before Messiah
(iii) John & Elijah – John 1:21, 24 (people ask John whether he is Elijah), Luke 1:16-17 (John will go in the power and spirit of Elijah), Matt 17:11f.; Mark 9:13 (Jesus says Elijah has already come), Matt 11:14 (Jesus says that John is Elijah)

This is significant because the voice of prophecy which was silent for about 400 years (the inter-Testamental period which is also called the Four Hundred Silent Years) began ringing afresh in and through John. Thus, in John the long expectation of the Jews that God would send a messenger ahead of the Messiah to prepare His way has been fulfilled.

Not only that, according to John’s Gospel, John the Baptist is the onewho had gathered disciples and who hands these disciples to Jesus (cf. John 1:35-42). He is the one who had been preparing the way of the Lord not only through his preaching but by his actual gathering of disciples and training them in the way of the Lord. Thus, when Jesus began His public ministry He takes up these already-trained disciples into His movement who would play important roles in his Messianic ministry.

3. The Preaching of John the Baptist

John was a forceful preacher who urged his fellow countrymen to repent of their sins, receive baptism in the Jordan, and live a righteous life. His message containing strong messianic hope attracted large crowds from every walk of life, even from those of Pharisees and Sadducees. He declared that nothing less than the Day of Yahweh was at hand and that at long last God would vindicate His people and deliver them from oppression. Since God was soon to invade history, and since judgment was so near at hand, John’s message took on a somber aspect. John had to tell his hearers that the nation as a whole was utterly unprepared for the Messiah. It was for this reason that John called the nation at large to repentance as the indispensable preparation for participating in the blessings of new epoch. As an outward symbol of an inward change, he baptized in the Jordan all who received his message with faith.

Two unique characteristics of John’s preaching were that his rite of baptism was performed once and for all (unlike Pharisees’ and Essenes’ daily ritual washings) and his insistence that in the coming judgment the privilege of belonging to the chosen people would count for nothing (Matt 3:9; Luke 3:8). Thus, in effect, John excommunicated the whole nation and received back only those who repented and be baptized.

Four major theological themes can be identified in John’s preaching.

(i) The Impending Judgment of Wrath: This theme is found in Matt 3:7 and 10 in which Israelites are invariably compared to a rootless tree. This image contains two central ideas: (a) the day of judgment is very close because the “ax is lying at the root of the tree”. John represented the expectation of the imminent divine intervention. (b) the impending judgment concerns with the “fruit”, that is, what is inside a person.

(ii) The Call to Repentance: Since the day of judgment is very near John wants his reader to repent urgently because the unfruitful tree is going to be cast into the fire.

(iii) John’s Baptism: His call to repentance was followed by “baptism of repentance”. Baptism did not precede repentance but repentance is needed which is confirmed by baptism. That is why, John’s baptism was an outward demonstration of the repentance of the person. Without repentance, baptism will have no meaning.

(iv) The Coming Messiah: John was making the urgent plea for repentance because he knew that “the One” was coming. Even if John does not explicitly name this “the One” through the language he uses we come to know that he is talking about the coming Messiah who is “more powerful than I” (Mark 1:7). He also speaks about the ministry of the Messiah as “he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (Mark 1:8). Similarly, he also speaks about the nature of the person of the Messiah when he says “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” (John 1:29).

His ministry, therefore, paved the way for the actual ministry of Jesus.

4. Social and Political Confrontations of John the Baptist

According to the synoptic tradition, John the Baptist died out of a sustained conflict with the ruling class (Mark 6:14-29; Matt 14:1-12; Luke 9:7-9). As soon as John appears in the Gospels, we see him attacking the religious leaders of Israel. He condemns their religious hypocrisy as well as the
meaninglessness of their spirituality. That is why he chastises them with acerbic words calling upon them to repent.

John also protested against Herod Antipas’ incestuous marriage with his brother Herod Philip’s wife, Herodias. Antipas had been married to the daughter of the Nabatean king Aretas IV. But when he visited his brother Philip he fell in love with Herodias, Philip’s wife as well as his niece. She agreed to marry Antipas provided he divorce his first wife. When Antipas’ wife learned of it she returned to her father which infuriated Aretas IV who took it as a personal insult and later took revenge on Antipas for his betrayal.  

When Antipas finally married Herodias, John strongly opposed that incestuous marriage. On this account Herodias bore a grudge against him and Antipas, being pressurized by Herodias, had arrested him, bound him and imprisoned him. But Herodias was still not satisfied. Finally Antipas had John executed on his birthday. Herodias had arranged a birthday banquet in Antipas’ honour with an evil design to eliminate John. It was during this banquet that Antipas promised that whoever would please him, he will give “whatever” is asked of him and it happened that Herodias’ daughter from Philip, Salome, was the one to please him so she went and consulted her mother about what to ask for from the king. Herodias sensed that the long awaited moment had finally came to her. So she advised her daughter to ask for “the head” of John the Baptist to which Antipas unwillingly yielded. This happened in A.D. 31/32.

However, Josephus in Jewish Antiquities 18.5.2 indicates that Antipas arrested and imprisoned John because he was afraid that John might instigate people to rebellion against him. Here Josephus is relating the execution of John by Antipas to political reason. Whether this was actually true is beyond our judgment, but it only goes on to reiterate that John antagonized the political rulers through his words and deeds.

End Notes

1 For more details on this, see above “Socio-Religious and Cultural Conditions for 1st Century Palestine”.
5 A similar belief existed among the Samaritans who believed that “a prophet”, the “Taheb” (whom they considered to be Moses) will arise on the last day and restore the cultic sacrificial system at Mount Gerizim.

Baptism and Temptation of Jesus

1. Baptism of Jesus

Probably early in A.D. 27 Jesus appeared among John the Baptist’s followers and particularly attracted his attention. Jesus was a kinsman of John (their mothers were cousins) and now Jesus joined the crowds that were rushing into the Jordan wilderness and presented himself for baptism. The Synoptic Gospels report that when Jesus emerged from the water, the heavens opened and the Spirit of God descended and alighted on Him in the form of a dove (Matt 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:21-22). At the same time a voice came from heaven acknowledging Jesus to be God’s beloved Son (Matt 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22). The evangelists thus indicate the full endowment of Jesus with spiritual power for His subsequent ministry.

By receiving baptism at the hands of John, Jesus showed His acceptance of John’s message of impending doom for the wicked and the imminent coming of the Kingdom of God. His own preaching at first echoed John the Baptist’s call to repentance (Matt 4:17; Mark 1:15).

But why was Jesus baptized by John? Did he need a baptism of repentance? If so, was Jesus a sinner? Matthew provides the answer to these questions by saying that it was “to fulfill all righteousness” (Matt. 3:15). In Matt, “righteousness” refers to “those who are upright and law-abiding, obedient and faithful to God’s commandments.” Here it is plain that personal penitence of Jesus is absent rather it proves one’s sinlessness. By undergoing baptism at the hand of John the Baptist Jesus identified himself with the people whom He came to save. Matt, from the perspective of the Jews, shows Jesus’ fidelity to Jewish customs and concepts. In the OT, righteous/unrighteous and clean/unclean was a strong social and spiritual markers. Since Jesus, according to Matt, is the Jewish Messiah promised and prophesied in the OT, He has to show His affinity and respect to the OT for the sake of the Jews. He is not confined to or limited by the OT but in order to let people understand who He is He is undergoing baptism.

Similarly, it denoted for Jesus a break in the sense that He would now enter a new phase in the accomplishment of His mission. Jesus’ reply expresses His realization that the time had come to devote himself to His special work leaving aside the carpenter’s work. Since for Jesus, John the Baptist’s message and movement were from God (Matt 21:25; Mark 11:30; Luke 20:4), by submitting to baptism He dedicated himself to God’s work which John had announced. Thirdly, His baptism in which He goes in and comes out of the water may be a dramatic pointer to His “death” and “burial” (going under the water) and “resurrection” (coming out of the water).

What is the meaning of the descend of the Spirit and the heavenly voice at Jesus’ baptism? The descend of the Spirit means that from this time onwards Jesus knew himself to be “the anointed of the Spirit” (cf. Is. 61:1 and Luke 4:18) and to be equipped with divine power. “You are my Son, the Beloved” (Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22) or “This is my Son, the Beloved” (Matt 3:17) is the coronation formula of the kings of Israel (Ps 2:7). In Mark and Luke, the voice from heaven converses with Jesus therefore it is both a declaration and affirmation about Jesus’ sonship. But in Matt the voice comes for the sake of the people around Jesus in order to let them know the identity of Jesus. Thus, the revelation of the person and identity of Jesus appears from the beginning in Matt. Many people have attempted to interpret this verse to suggest that it means adoption of Jesus by God to be His son. They argue that Jesus was not God’s Son prior to His baptism but only at His baptism Jesus becomes God’s Son. But this is an erroneous interpretation because nowhere do any of the Evangelists suggests so.

The second part of the voice, “With you I am well pleased” is the ordination formula of Isaiah’s Servant of the Lord (Is 42:1). It is the affirmation and declaration of the sonship of Jesus by the Father and declaring that Jesus is the King long awaited by the Israelites.

2. The Temptation of Jesus

All the Synoptic Gospels (Matt 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-3) agree that immediately after his baptism Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. How far this event is historical is debated among the scholars (Robert H. Mounce and A.M. Hunter reject its historicity) but there is little doubt that it was told by Jesus to His disciples. The testing in the wilderness grew out of Jesus’ experience at His baptism, when a divine voice proclaimed that He was the beloved Son of God.

In Judaism, wilderness or desert was regarded as the place where...
God and His people met and it also represents the place of God’s coming deliverance (Isa 40). It was also considered as a place of testing (Deut 8:2) and struggle and temptations (book of Exodus and Ps 95:8; 91:13). According to Exodus, God tested Israel in the wilderness and Israel also tested God there.3

“Forty days” is regarded as an oriental round/perfect number and it has rich OT background. All the synoptic Evangelists draw a parallel between Jesus and Moses and Elijah (cf. Moses in the mount of God, Ex 34:28; Deut 9:9; Elijah at Horeb, 1 Kings 19:8). In the Jewish tradition, Moses and Elijah represented the Torah and the Nevi’im of the OT. Only Matt makes an exact parallel between them and Jesus by saying that Jesus was tempted for “forty days and forty nights” (4:2). This parallel is important to show that Jesus is the fulfilment of the OT (note that during Jesus’ transfiguration also Moses and Elijah appear and talk with Him, Matt 17:3 and parallels).

“Forty days” also echoes the wilderness experience of the people of Israel. At first God planned the journey to be for “forty days” but because of their unfaithfulness and disobedience “forty days” became “forty years” (Num 14:34). More than the other parallels we see some striking similarities between Israelites’ wilderness experience and Jesus’ wilderness experience: (a) person – “son/sons of God”; (b) place – “wilderness”; (c) experience – “tested” or “tempted”; (d) period – “forty days/years. We can also add that both Israelites and Jesus went hungry (because the Israelites mostly complained about lack of food). But the outcome of their testing is completely different. The “old Israel” (“sons of God”) was “tested” for “forty days/years” in the “wilderness” and they miserably failed by succumbing to the devil’s designs; Jesus (“son of God”) is “tested” for “forty days” in the “wilderness” and He overcomes the test.

What does this comparison show? The “old Israel” failed the test in the wilderness but Jesus emerges victorious from the temptation. Thus, what old Israel could not overcome; the new Israel overcomes. Jesus, the inaugurator of the new people of God, overcomes the devil by which He established a New Israel that no longer fails but overcomes. So the new Israel that Jesus forms is to be a victorious community that conquers the devil.

In the Markan temptation story, nothing is said about how many times Jesus was tempted but he simply says that Jesus was tempted by Satan and was with the wild beasts (1:12-13). The mention of “wild beasts” has attracted different interpretations. The oldest and the traditional one is that “wild beasts” are placed as agents of Satan in this narrative to aggravate the situation to which Jesus is exposed. It also shows the physical dangers to which Jesus was subjected during the period of temptation. Some recent interpretations have argued that the mention of Jesus “with the wild beasts” is to show Jesus in peaceful companionship with the animals which were habitually perceived as inimical and threatening to humanity. Thus, in Markan temptation episode Jesus is depicted as “New Adam” in the “New Eden”. The peaceful and harmonious co-existence in the original Garden of Eden was disturbed due to humans’ sin. But in the later Jewish thought, the Jews believed that this enmity between animals and humans will come to an end in the Messianic age. Such thought is found in the OT (e.g. Isa 11:6-9). Jesus as the eschatological Adam restores that erekic and tranquil atmosphere between humans and animals during His temptation in the wilderness.

Matthean and Lukan version of the temptation of Jesus are almost similar but there are significant differences because of the redactional purpose with which they use this material. In Matt, there is a strong “mountain” motif running all along his Gospel (cf. 4:8; 5:1; 8:1: 15:29; 17:1; 28:16). That motif begins in this narrative when Matt shows Jesus’ victory over Satan on the top of a “mountain”. That is why Matt might have decided to climax the temptation on a mountain. In Luke’s Gospel, likewise, we see a strong “temple” motif (as we have already noted above in infancy narrative) and so the last temptation occurs on the “temple” and it is where Jesus overcomes the devil. Luke also adds a sentence which acts as a “preview” to something that will happen later: and the “devil departed from him until an opportune time” (4:13b). The devil is not departing for ever but only “until an opportune time” because he will appear/return to Jesus at His passion (cf. 22:3).

According to Matthean and Lukan narrative, Jesus fasted and wrestled with questions of how and for what purpose Jesus should utilize the extraordinary powers that He was conscious of possessing.

In the first temptation, to turn stones into bread, even the devil acknowledges/recognizes Jesus’ sonship: “If you are the Son of God” in Matt. 4:3 should better be translated, “Since you are the Son of God.” It was a temptation to use the powers given by God for His own advantage.

The second temptation in Matt, which is the last in Luke, to cast himself down from a pinnacle of a temple, expecting to be supported, was a temptation to win a large following by means of miracle and magic.

The last temptation in Matt, which is the second in Luke, to bow down to the devil to secure the kingdoms of the world, was a temptation to acquire power over secular kingdoms by associating with devil. In short, these three temptations, as B.M. Metzger6 puts it, were enticements to selfish security, cheap popularity and worldly power.
In all these temptations the primary weapon Jesus uses to defeat the devil is Scripture. His response to each temptation is by quoting Deut. 8:3; 6:16, and 6:13 respectively. Even when the devil quotes the Scripture in the second temptation (Ps 91:11-12) he is outwitted by Jesus by pointing out how the devil misapplied it.

These temptations had a far reaching significance in the life and ministry of Jesus. They involve the necessity of His deciding at the beginning of His ministry what kind of Messiah He could be, the strategy by which He would accomplish His mission and the extent of His warfare against the evil. Jesus’ temptation sets the tone for the beginning of the cosmic conflict between God and Satan and by overcoming the devil by Jesus the downfall of Satan and his kingdom has already begun. Satan is not yet fully vanquished but his end has already begun when Jesus defeats him during the temptation.

End Notes

3 Jose Maniparampil, Synoptic Gospels, 259.
5 According to Two Source Theory of the Synoptic Problem, this account comes from “Q” source but we do not know whose version is original.
PART - IV

TEACHINGS AND PRAXES OF JESUS AND THE JESUS MOVEMENT
1. Meaning of “Parable”

The word “parable” is derived from the Greek word *parabole* which means “putting things side by side for comparison.” In the NT, it includes almost any type of figurative language from short riddle to the long and fully developed allegory. It can include a proverb (Luke 4:23), a riddle (Mark 3:23), a comparison (Matt 13:33), a contrast (Luke 18:1-8) and both simple and complex stories (Matt 22:1-4). Parable was a technical term for a figure of speech in ancient Greek oratory. In the same way parables were an important vehicle for Jesus to quicken His message.

2. Parable and Its Relationship to Allegory, Simile, Metaphor and Example Story

(i) Parable and Allegory: An allegory is an extended metaphor of a story in the figurative language whose several points refer individually to some other event which is both concealed and revealed in the narration. Thus, each detail or character in an allegory is significant. In this sense, the parable of the Sower with Jesus interpreting all its major elements point by point (Matt 13:3-8, 18-23; Mark 4: 3-8, 14-20; Luke 8:5-8, 11-15) may be regarded as an allegory. That is why the traditional interpretation of this form as used by Jesus was that it represented allegory and needed careful point by point interpretation. But this trend of interpreting Jesus’ parables was challenged beginning from Adolf Jülicher by arguing that Jesus’ stories were not allegories with many separate but connected references but were parables with one main point (i.e. the kingdom of God).

   Taken from this perspective an allegory seems to have many separate but connected points of reference and each detail is important in itself, but the parable has only one major point and all the details serve only to build a single reference.

(ii) Parable and Simile: In a simile one thing is compared to another of a different thing and the similarities are expressed by “like” or “as.” It is a
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4.2. Extended Parables

Extended parables are the predictable unfolding of what is implicit in aphoristic parables. They are characterized by synonymous and antithetical formations. For example, the parable of the Wise and Foolish Builders (Matt 7:24-27; Luke 6: 47-49). There is no doubt, a beginning, a middle and an ending in this parable (building, flooding, standing or falling), therefore it can be regarded as a sequential narrative. But each half does not do more than unpack the details quite predictably in the opening words, “build on rock” or “build on sand”. These parables are very close to both aphoristic and narrative parables. Taken these things into account, extended parables form the “center of a parabolic continuum” in Jesus.

4.3. Narrative Parables

The narrative parables are the most famous parables Jesus used. It is those, for example, that gave to our language the images of the prodigal son and the Good Samaritan. Narrative parables have a beginning, a middle and an ending. Similarly, there is some amount of surprise and unpredictability in the narrative parables.

4.4. Example Stories

In example stories Jesus presents an example to be emulated or avoided. The parables of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) and the Pharisee and the Tax-collector (Luke 18:9-14) are classified under this type.

5. The Purpose of Jesus’ Parables

Parables are to engage and instruct people by quickening their understanding. However, Matt 13:10-17; cf. Mark 4:10-12; Luke 8:9-10, seems to contradict it. On the surface these verses argue that the “secret” (Greek “musterion”) of the kingdom is given by Jesus only to His disciples. To other “all things in parables in order that they may indeed look, but not perceive, and indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven” (Mark 4:11-12).

Though scholars debate about the genuineness of these words by
Jesus (C. H. Dodd says, “not a part of primitive tradition of the words of Jesus, but a piece of apostolic teaching”; C. F. Evans and A. M. Hunter regard these words as authentic words of Jesus but not spoken in this context) the importance lies in the words “secret” of the kingdom and “turn again”. In order to understand it we need to look at the original context of these words because they appear in a quotation from Isaiah.

In the OT the concept of the heavenly council with Yahweh as king and prophets as his “sons” (bene Elohim), and so his ambassadors, is a very important theme. In this motif Yahweh assembles His ambassadors and sends them down to the earth to gather information about the conduct and life of the people and report it to Yahweh, the King. Based on the reports the King devises plans and actions which are unknown (“secret”) to the people. But Israel is given the privilege of knowing these plans and actions beforehand through the prophets (Isa 6:48; Jer 23:18, 22; 1 Kings 22:19; Ps 82:1; 89:7). Now the disciples are put on an equal position with the prophets who now know what is going to happen through the parables of Jesus. But others who are stubborn, arrogant and stiff-necked, who despite hearing the message of Jesus again and again are unwilling to repent, the parables conceal rather than reveal these mysteries. Thus, C. G. Shapely maintains, “Christ by his parables tried his hearers. Those who were spiritually-minded saw the spiritual truth underlying them. Those who had not the spirit but were blind through their own pride, could not see the truth.”

6. A Brief History of Parable Interpretation

A study on parables is incomplete without taking a good look at the history of its interpretation. Jülicher’s work forms the crux of the history of parable interpretation.

(i) The Early Church’s Interpretation: An allegorical interpretation of Jesus’ parables has dominated throughout most of the church’s history. That is, people read into the parables elements of the church’s theology that had “nothing” to do with Jesus’ intention.

(ii) Jülicher: The traditional way of allegorizing the parables was genuinely combated by Jülicher. Jülicher denied that Jesus used allegory (a series of related metaphors) or allegorical traits (where a point in the story stands for something else in reality). The evangelists were held responsible where allegory or allegorical traits occur, such as in the parable of the Sower. Jülicher viewed Jesus’ parables as simple and straightforward comparisons that do not require interpretation. They have only one point of comparison: between the image and the idea being expressed.

(iii) Post-Jülicher: Whether positively or negatively Jülicher left a legacy to all subsequent studies on parables. Thus, subsequent studies on parables find their starting point or point of departure in him. Jülicher’s arguments, however, were opposed by others, especially by P. Fiebig, who argued that Jülicher derived his understandings of parables from Greek rhetoric rather than from the Hebrew world where allegorical parables are common.

(a) C. H. Dodd and Joachim Jeremias: The period from 1935 to 1960s was dominated by C. H. Dodd and Joachim Jeremias. Both Dodd and Jeremias gave emphasis to the historical and eschatological context of the parables. Both attempted to remove allegorical elements from the parables. Dodd understood Jesus’ message as realized eschatology: the kingdom had already arrived which he suggested to be the same message of even those parables that seem to deal with future of the kingdom.

Jeremias tried to ascertain the original form of a particular parable by stripping away all allegorical features or other traditional colourings supplied by the early church. While trying to do so he sought to provide historical and cultural evidence for understanding the parables which led to a reconstruction of the supposedly original form of a given parable. Jeremias’ point of departure from Dodd was that he understood Jesus’ message as an eschatology in the process of realization.

(b) Existentialist, Structuralist and Literary Approaches: Dissatisfied with the line of interpretation adopted by both Dodd and Jeremias on a historical approach many modern approaches emerged, with little success in delineating from Jeremias in stripping off allegorical and interpretive additions. Viewing parables as “language events” (Sprachereignisse) E. Fuchs and E. Jungel focused on the power of Jesus’ parables to bring to expression the reality to which they point. Similarly, G. V. Jones, A. N. Wilder and D. Via have all focused on the artistic and existential character of the parables.

Emphasizing on the surface and deep structures of various texts rather than on historical meaning or the author’s intention, structuralist approaches dominated the scene of parabolic interpretation during the 1970s. This approach sought to compare the movements, motives, functions, oppositions and resolutions within texts. J. D. Crossan belongs to this school.

Under the influence of literary criticism the 1980s witnessed several discernible shifts in parable studies. Here, emphasis was given to the technique and purposes of the Gospel writers. Importance was given to the reader-response approach in which a text’s meaning is determined by the interaction of the reader with the text. This approach is highly subjective and yields a variety of meanings, all of which are considered correct.
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Similarly, in the parables of the Sower, the mustard seed, the seed growing secretly, the weeds and the wheat, the leaven, the hidden treasure, merchant in search of fine pearl, etc. (Matt 13:1-51; Mark 4:1-34) we notice that Jesus was teaching that the KOG had already arrived, though many do not see it or know it, it is growing rapidly.

8.2. The Kingdom as Future

On the other hand, the kingdom is a future reality. In the parables of the wedding Banquet (Matt 22:1-14), the labourers in the vineyard (Matt 20:1-16), the ten virgins (Matt 25:1-13), the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), etc., hearers are invited by Jesus to be vigilant at all times. If the invitation given by Jesus is rejected by the original invitees it will be taken away from them and be given to others. The first will become last and the reward will be the same for everyone who by obedience do God’s will (Matt 20:1-16). The “reversal of fortunes” is a constant theme in such parables.

Thus, the KOG is a present reality but awaits its final consummation in the future. It is present because it was ushered-in in the person of Jesus (i.e. Christ-event), but it is not yet complete because its fullness is still to be realized in the future (i.e., Parousia).

8.3. Discipleship


Apart from these, the fragile beginning of the kingdom (the parable of the mustard seed and the yeast, Matt 13:31-33), the gratuitous gift of God (the parable of the seed growing secretly, Mark 4:26-29), revelation of the mercy of God (three parable in Luke 15:1-32), universal invitation to the kingdom (parable of the great banquet, Luke 14:16-24; Matt 22:1-10), and call to vigilance (parable of the doorkeeper, Mark 13:34-37; vigilant householder, Matt 24:45; the faithful servant, Matt 24:43-51; the parables of the virgins and talents, Matt 25:1-30) are other teachings or messages of Jesus’ parables.21

End Notes


Discourses of Jesus

There are both long and short discourses attributed to Jesus in the Gospels. Among them is the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew and the Sermon on the Plain in Luke.

1. Origin and Source of the Sermon on the Mount/Sermon on the Plain

The Sermon on the Mount (SoMt)/Sermon on the Plain (SoP) sets out powerfully both the gift of the gospel that Jesus brought as well as the demand of the gospel. Many NT scholars believe that the SoMt in its present form is a collection of several discourses of Jesus made on different occasions and in different contexts (Matt has five such long discourses – SoMt, 5-7; mission discourse, 10; chain of seven parables, 13; discourse on the code of conduct, 18; discourse on last days, 23-25).

The SoMt has its parallels in Luke 6:20-49 (hence from Q) in which Jesus preaches the sermon on a level ground, hence it is called the Sermon on the Plain. Even if Luke’s version is quite shorter in length the gist of the sermon is preserved, but it has attracted less attention down through the centuries than the SoMt. There are striking similarities in the order of the materials with each beginning with beatitudes, teaching about love and ending with the parable of the two builders. But there are also significant differences in their wording.

Some scholars believe that the SoMt and SoP are two separate discourses preached by Jesus at different times. But Luke knows that Jesus has been in the mountains (6:12) and he would have stood on some small plateau in order to teach large crowds. Therefore, there is no need to imagine that these two are entirely separate discourses (C.L. Blomberg). But why do they differ? Majority of the scholars opine that Luke’s version is more closer to the original version in Q than Matt’s (cf. Form Criticism). On the other hand, a small number of scholars argue that Luke drastically abbreviated Matt’s SoMt and used the omitted materials in other places of his Gospel. Thus, they see Luke as the first interpreter of Matt’s SoMt.

2


K. R. Snodgrass, “Parables,” 593.

K. R. Snodgrass, “Parables,” 593.

K. R. Snodgrass, “Parables,” 149.


Jose Maniparampil, Synoptic Gospels (Bangalore: Claretian Publications, 2004), 399.


For detail see Joachim Jeremias, Parables, 48ff.


Joachim Jeremias, Parables, 230.


Interpreting the Parables (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1990).

Generally following guidelines provided by K. R. Snodgrass, “Parables,” 597ff.

For details read Jose Maniparampil, Synoptic Gospels (esp. “Parables of Jesus”).
2. Sermon on the Mount in Matthew (Chaps. 5-7)

2.1. History of the Interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount

Clarence Bauman² discovered that there are no less than 36 approaches to interpreting the SoMt. We will discuss in brief 4 of these approaches.

2.1.1. The Sermon on the Mount as the Law of Perfection

Those who belong to this approach see the SoMt as a more stringent version of the Law of Moses. They ask, “Are we being taken back to the slavery of the Law though Christ has set us free?” The demand “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48) sets the tone for the law of perfection. The laws prescribed by Moses include many difficult obligations to be followed but the adherents to this approach view the SoMt as more difficult than what Moses prescribed. In this approach Jesus is seen as a law giver.

2.1.2. The Sermon on the Mount as an Impossible Ideal

According to this approach the SoMt cannot really be practiced by anybody even if they sound good. Martin Luther called the SoMt “Mossissimus Moses” (Moses multiplied many times) to mean that if the Law of Moses was too rigid, then the SoMt was several times more rigid. The underlying idea here is that since the SoMt is an impossible ideal out of necessity and helplessness people would turn to Jesus’ simple message of grace. This interpretation is maintained especially by the conservative Lutherans. Here Jesus is viewed as a preacher of repentance or a revival preacher.

2.1.3. The Sermon on the Mount is Just an Interim Ethic

This view maintains that the moral teaching given in the SoMt was meant only for a short period, valid only during Jesus’ lifetime. Albert Schweitzer promoted this view and followed by others like Johannes Weiss. They say that Jesus was convinced that the Kingdom of God would be realized in His lifetime, His ethic was meant for a time being. For Schweitzer, Mark 9:1; 13:30; Matt. 10:23 meant imminent arrival of the Kingdom of God during Jesus’ lifetime but many scholars do not read these passages in this way. Jesus is seen as an eschatological prophet in this view.³

2.1.4. The Sermon on the Mount as Kingdom Theology

Scholars like W.G. Kummel⁴ G. E. Ladd⁵ and Craig L. Blomberg⁶ support this approach of interpreting the SoMt. According to this view if the Kingdom of God has been inaugurated, then it seems best to assume that Jesus’ ethics are also meant for believers now. They are only partially realizable in the present but they should remain the ideal and their full realization will come only at the end.

2.2. Contents of the Sermon on the Mount

(a) The Beatitudes (“kingdom blessings”) – 5:3-12
(b) Metaphors of Salt and Light – 5:13-16
(c) Jesus and the Law - 5:17-48
(d) Religious hypocrisy – 6:1-18
(e) Wealth and worry – 6:19-34
(f) How to treat others - 7:1-12
(g) Conclusion: Only two ways – 7:13-27
(h) The Crowd’s reaction – 7:28-29

These discourses could be classified under the following groups:⁷

2.2.1. Saying pertaining to Jesus’ Messianic Mission

Jesus came to fulfill the law and the prophets not to abolish them (Matt. 5:17). The messianic awareness and authority of Jesus is well reflected in the antithetical sayings of Jesus in 5:21-48. According to Julius Schniewind the beatitudes are concealed testimonies by Jesus to himself as the Saviour of the poor, sorrowing, etc. At the same time Jesus is not merely a fulfiller of the old but one who demands a qualitatively superior way of life from His followers (5:20).

2.2.2. Crisis – Sayings

These are sayings pertaining to the imminent judgment and signs of the end-time (Matt. 5:25-26; 7.21-23; 24-27). What will happen at the end as the eschatological signs are contained here.

2.2.3. Higher Righteousness

The followers of Jesus should strive for higher standards in spirituality and practice (6:1-18). Jesus warns His hearers not to imitate the outward show of piety (religiosity) of the Pharisees (6:1; 7:3-5).

2.2.4. Words of Comfort

Jesus reassures His followers not to be anxious about anything whether about food, clothing or other material needs (6:25-34). He promises that these will be provided to them for the Father knows what they need.

2.2.5. Sublime Life-Style

These are saying which deal with the importance of telling the truth,
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The Sermon on the Plain (6:20-49) is a shorter version of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7). Luke 6:20-49 is called the “Sermon on the Plain” because of the reference to the “level place”. The sources are unclear concerning the question of the original addressess of the SoMt and SoP. Sermon on the Plain is addressed by Jesus to the disciples and people. Luke certainly interested in having Jesus addresses both the disciples and the people, probably because the disciples have been called from the people who represent the general readership of the gospel. This may have come from the source “QL”. It is generally accepted that one basic piece of tradition underlies the two Sermons and that both evangelists have expanded it and modelled it in accord with their own purposes.

There is no clue to the origin of SoP as a pre-synoptic source. The text is apparently designed from a Jewish Christian perspective, although written for the Gentile Christians. Sermon on the plain on the one hand is composed in a similar way but on the other hand differs so greatly from Sermon on the Mount is due to different genre or function but to the different addressess. Luke tries to say that Jesus’ life and ministry are for all placing Jesus in Plain land; especially mentions about Jerusalem and Judea and seacoast of Tyre and Sidon. Tyre and Sidon may imply a Gentile and Jewish audience of Luke.

3.1. Structure of the Sermon on the Plain

There is no unanimous opinion among the scholars about the structure of the Sermon on the Plain owing to the lack of clear breaks and variety of themes. Luke operates here with ‘bridging passages’ so that a verse or paragraph may be reckoned as both closing one section and introducing another. This is probably the case with 6:36.

(i) The majority of commentators recognize a break at 6:38/39 if we combine this with the universally recognized break at 6:26/27, we obtain a basic three fold division of the sermon which can be variously evaluated. Heinrici, Klostermann, and Hauck suggest that we have a prophetic section (6:20-26), a paraenetic section (6:27-38) and a parabolical section (6:39-49). Ellis regards the same sections as dealing with the promises of kingdom, the principles of kingdom, the meaning of discipleship respectively.

(ii) A refinement of the same scheme is found in Schurmann: 6:39-45 is seen as warning against confusing the teaching of Jesus on love (6:27-38) with other views, rather than as a set of illustrations on the character of love, and 6:46-49 is as conclusion to the sermon as a whole.

(iii) Other commentators ignore the break at 6:38/39. The most important of such analysis is that of Dupont: Exordium (6:37-42). Conclusions: the necessity of works (6:43-49). The advantages of this view is that it does justice to the apparent similarity of theme in 6:3f. and 41f. Its advantages is that it has to regard 6:39f. as a mamaldrct insertion. But the fact is that these verses are not in Matthew’s sermon but are found in two separate places (Matt 15:14; 10:24f,) suggest that they were not inserted here by Luke without good reason.

Joseph A. Fitzmyer structures the Sermon on the Plain as follows:

(a) Exordium (four beatitudes and (Blessing and woes) four woes, 6:20-26 ),
(b) Love even your enemies (6:27-36),
(c) Judge not one another (6:37-42),
(d) The role of the good deeds (6:43-45),
(e) The need to act on these words (with a parable, 6:46-49),
(f) On integrity on hearing and doing.

Howard Marshall summarizes the Sermon on the Plain as follows:

(a) 6:20-26 forms a single section in two contrasting parts. It pronounces divine blessing and woe upon two kinds of people, the poor and the oppressed who can look forward to their needs being satisfied by God, and the rich popular man will suffer divine judgment. The section thus challenges people as to what kind of life they intended to lead. This invites people to become disciples and comforts those who are already disciples.

(b) In 6:27-35 the disciples are commanded to love their persecutors, to give freely to all in need and thus to obey the ‘golden rule’. If they do this they will enjoy a heavenly reward and will show a character like that of God himself. Let them be merciful like him (6:36-38).

(c) But the thought of mercy belongs more closely with what follows: a command not to judge others, but to give freely and thus receive correspondingly from God (6:39-42).
(d) The following section is concerned with the kind of inward character that produces such outward behavior. A person who is blind cannot guide another person nor correct his faults. Hence the disciples are not judging other people, for they do not have the ability to do so, not even when they have been taught by Jesus (6:39-42).

(e) A person of bad character cannot produce good deeds or words (6:43-45). This warning is applied to the false teachers in Matt 7, but here the thought is rather that the disciples cannot bring forth the good deeds and words that are required of them unless they themselves are good and have good treasure in their hearts.

(f) This leads, finally, to an appeal to hear and to the words of Jesus (6:46-49). It is addressed to the people who heard, but did not do, what Jesus said, and hence reckons with the presence of merely nominal followers among the disciples. So this section of the Sermon is concerned with the personal character of the disciples.  

According to John Nolland, the Sermon has been variously sectioned, but it seems best to see a threefold development: (i) in vv.20-26 Jesus declares the blessed state of the poor, who in their poverty and need have been open for the action of God which is now taking place in Jesus and who identify themselves with the Son of Man at the cost of hatred and exclusion; (ii) in vv. 27-38 Jesus provides directives for those who are ready to come along with the plan of God in this time of the beginning of the fulfillment of God’s eschatological purpose; (iii) vv. 39-49 underline from various angles the absolute importance of implementing these directives of Jesus.  

3.2. Theology of the Sermon on the Plain

3.2.1. Poor and the Sermon on the Plain

Unlike Matthew’s version, the Lucan sermon is referring to those who suffer from real poverty and hunger, not to those who are “poor in spirit” (5:3) or who hunger and thirst after righteousness (5:6). The Lucan form of the sermon reflects and contribute to Luke’s overall concern with poverty and wealth.  

Luke’s beatitudes differ from Matthew in that Luke speaks in second person rather than the third person, they speak the real social-economic conditions rather than to spiritual conditions or attitudes, and they declare Gods partisan commitment to the poor and the oppressed. Luke’s preferential option and inclination towards poor can be seen in many passages in his gospel (4:18:6:20). This preference echoes in Elizabeth’s greeting to Mary (1:50-53), the prayer prayed by Hannah (1 Sam 2:2-10). The teaching of John the Baptist at the time of baptism also echoes this implication (3:19). Scripture reading in the synagogue at Nazareth and its interpretation shows Jesus’ attitude towards the poor, captives, the blind and the oppressed.  

In the light of OT usages the term “blessed are the “poor” has both an economic and a religious connotation. It contrasts the economically disadvantaged in Israel (anawim) with more privileged members of the higher social strata located especially in Jerusalem. Most of the poor were tillers of the soil or small trades people, and they observed the spirit of religion faithfully than the elite in the cities. This circumstance coupled the fact that the poor were often victims of oppression and had only God to turn to for hope of rescue.  

In the Hellenistic religion which described life with eternity and ‘poor’ stood for one’s miserable existence on earth. Luke deals clearly an economic realm and he does join material and spiritual condition but does not allow in the process the vaporization of ‘poor’ into some condition other than being without food, without shelter, without hope of anything better tomorrow.

For Alan Culepper, the blessing of the poor neither idealizes nor glorifies poverty. It declares God’s prejudicial commitment to the poor. To be poor, hungry, and weeping is not at all the situation that envisages in the ideal state of Christian existence. Renunciation is a very important theme in Luke, but it is never thought of as making oneself poor. Hunger and weeping are treated as aspects of poverty, preventing romanticized view of the poor. God’s promise is that the hungry will be fed. This echoes the OT expectations of an eschatological banquet for the elect (Ps 107:9; Isa 25:6; cf. Luke 12: 37; 13:29; 14:14:24) but the beatitudes will also be fulfilled by Jesus (6:1-5; 9:12-17) and by the early church (Acts 2:46; 6:1; 11:28-30)  

The fourth beatitude is different in form and assumes the situation of the early church. It envisions four situations in which the disciples may suffer abuse: being hated, excluded, reviled, and defamed. Jesus’ teaching are scandalous because they overturn very conventional expectation. The scandal of His ministry was His association with outcasts.

3.2.2. The Rich and the Sermon on the Plain

More than any other Gospel, Luke expounds the danger of wealth. They are short sighted and are lulled into a false security when they think that their present abundance ensures their future comfort (12:15-21). There is a correlation between treasures of the earth and treasures in heaven; it is an inverse one (12:21). The rich are apt to be so preoccupied with their possessions that they fail to respond to God’s invitation (14:15-24)  

They rich are not attacked because they are rich, Jesus’ sermon does not pit poor against the rich, for according to Lev 19:15 one is not to be partial to the poor or differ to the great. Jesus attacked because their prosperity
makes entry into the kingdom difficult (18-25). The rich have received the consolations. Like a buyer gets a receipt for money delivered on goods, they are in receipt of other consolation now. They live in the illusion that they are the privileged recipients of the benefits of the New Age. Jesus’ teaching in 18:18-23, he shows the radical nature of the call that Jesus addressed to the ruler has frequently been noted.

3.2.3. Kingdom of God and Sermon on the Plain

The first beatitudes section declares that the kingdom of God belongs to the poor. The coming of the Kingdom will bring a reversal of fortunes. The first two references about the Kingdom (4:43; 6:20) make it clear that one of the principal hallmarks of the Kingdom will be the redemption of the poor. They will be released from their degradation. Oppressed now will enjoy the God’s blessing in the kingdom. The hungry will be fed and those who weep will laugh. There are 32 references about the Kingdom of God in this Gospel. For Dupont, in the beatitudes, Jesus is announcing the nearness of the Kingdom of God, in which God exercises His royal justice in favour of the poor. This is good news for the poor. According to Dupont, it is not that the Kingdom of God is not also for others, but since a particular function of the ideal king in Israelites as other ancient Oriental royal ideology was to be protector and defender of the poor, it was for the poor especially that the coming of the kingdom was good news.

The fourth beatitudes, the condition of being despised, is then related to the church’s experience of being persecuted, and reward is promised for those who are faithful to the Lord even when they are cast out and reviled (cf. Isa 66:5; Jas 2:7) on behalf of Son of Man. In vv. 20-26 people regards of great good fortune through their poverty and identification with the Son of Man.

3.2.4. Love Your Enemies

Jesus instructs his disciples to love their enemies through vv. 27-38. There is no place in the Christian ethics for vengeance or retaliation. In vv. 27-28 contain a fourfold repetitions: the principle of love for one’s enemies is stated and then repeated in three variations. The principle itself is found in a verbatim parallel in Matt 5:44, and the last variation to pray for those who abuse you, is similar to the command to pray for those who persecute you in the same verse. The second and third variations of the principle have no parallel in Matthew. Vv. 29-30 are the four applications of the principle of love your enemies: turn the other cheek, do not withhold your shirt, give to the one who ask for you, and if your goods are taken do not ask for them back. For Danker, Jesus teaches His disciples that they are not to make distinctions between friends and enemies, fellow believers and unbelievers, or between those who have a good credit rating and those who are poor risks, perhaps because they are poor. The teaching of Jesus is centred in the maxim, “Love your enemies”. Those who love their enemy can expect reward ‘on that day,’ that is, the day of the Last Judgment (6:23).

Love of the enemy, however, not only corresponds to divine philanthropy but also exemplifies the Golden Rule (v.31) rightly understood (vv.32-35). Loving the enemy means taking the initiative in turning the enemy into a friend, a theory rooted in Greek ethics. The imperative to love one’s enemies can have a range of meanings, depending on its context. Win over your opponent by kindness; take the moral high road; shame your enemy by your superior goodness; deflect hostility or prevent further abuse by offering no resistance; rise above pettiness; or demonstrate a Christ-like character as a Christian witness.

3.2.5. Discipleship

The SoP conceives discipleship in terms of Greek education by which the ethics of Jesus is learned as a way to realize one’s humanity and as a means of survival in an evil and dangerous world. Sermon on the Plain is primarily concerned with the realization of one’s humanity. How it is possible is explained in clear. Its basis is the Greek ethical concept of the “the good person brings forth the good out of the treasure of the heart, but the bad produces the bad out of the bad” (6:45). The proper human response can only be that one in both generous and merciful and thus imitates God. A life of generosity and mercy in every respect is the proper response to divine generosity and mercy. Salvation can be experienced even now in overcoming ignorance (v.39), in improving one’s relationship within the community (vv.37-38, 41-42), in becoming a human person (vv. 43-45), and in surviving the hazards of life in general (vv. 47-49). Thus the life of discipleship is, however, threatened within at every point, so that constant self-examination and self-correction remain indispensable.

3.2.6. Present and Eschatological Dimensions of the Sermon on the Plain

The beatitudes are active and reformatory; they declare God’s favor on the poor, the hungry, those who weep, and those who are hated. How fortunate they are because theirs is the Kingdom. At the same time the woes declare that those who prosper now will be judged. A note of eschatological expectancy pervades both the beatitudes and the woes; the word “now” occurs four times in vv.21 and 25, suggesting the disparity between the conditions of this age and the rewards of the age to come and underscoring the force of the future tense verbs. This joining of the
present and future reminds us that the eschatological reality is already beginning with the advent of Jesus. Jesus has already announced as much: ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled’ (4:21).14

Two characters of SoP can be noted here as a means of conclusion:

(a) In four places Luke has added “now” to the traditions: to the beatitudes and corresponding woe on hunger (vv. 21a & 25a) and to the beatitude and woe on mourning and laughing (vv. 21c & 25c). These additions manifest Luke’s concern for Christian life here and now. No doubt, it agrees with Luke’s overall emphasis on “now” in his Gospel (cf. also “daily” in 9:23).

(b) There are four woes that correspond precisely with his four beatitudes (these are absent in Matt; cf. vv. 20-21 & 24-26). Most scholars accept that Luke added these four woes to the tradition from independent traditions. This is in sync with his overall emphasis on the “reversal of fortune” motif in his Gospel.

Thus, the Sermon on the Plain is Luke’s redactional work on the material Q. Sermon on the Plain shows Luke’s commitment to those who are poor and oppressed. He opposes the accumulation of wealth and attitude of the rich towards the poor. He wanted the conversion of the rich like Zachaeus (Chap 19). Luke gives new measures for love and discipleship. Through this Sermon he presents a present and future(eschatological) reality and the nearness of the Kingdom of God. Throughout this Luke gives a pattern for a true Christian living.

End Notes
3 For a better understanding on this approach see “The Quest of Historical Jesus” below.
5 In The Presence of the Future (Grand Rapids, MI.; Eerdmans, 1974; London: SPCK, 1980).
6 See his Jesus and the Gospels.
7 Here we follow the classification provided by M.V. Abraham, New Testament Studies (Tiruvalla: CSS, 2005), 74ff.
3

Basileia and Ekklesia Sayings of Jesus

1. Basileia Sayings of Jesus

It is widely agreed that the heart of Jesus’ authentic message centered on the kingdom of God (in Greek “Basileia tou theou”). The term never appears in the OT, but the concept of God as king and sovereign is pervasive throughout it, especially among the promises to David and in the Book of Daniel. In the Inter-testamental period, the term was frequently used to refer to God’s regal power, often in the context of some kind of hope for the restoration of a literal Davidic kingship to Israel. Jesus developed the idea of the Kingdom as the “inbreaking of God into history to realize his redemptive purposes” but dissociated his current ministry from the establishment of a politically free Israel. For Jesus the Kingdom was a reign more than a realm, a power rather than a throne. In this sense, the Greek word basileia which is generally translated as “kingdom” (as a noun) should properly be understood as “reign” (as a verb) and hence the term basileia tou Theou as the “reign of God” rather than the “Kingdom of God”. Therefore, the KOG in the NT, in its proper sense, means the power and reign of God which He exercises over all things.

1.1. “Basileia of God” and “Basileia of Heaven”

In the synoptic Gospels, we find about 80 references (about 15 times in Mark; about 35 times in Matt; about 30 times in Luke) but only two/three times in John to the kingdom of God. In Mark and Luke the phrase “kingdom of God” is used but in Matt the phrase “kingdom of heaven” is used. The terms “kingdom of God” and “kingdom of heaven” do not mean different things but they are interchangeable or synonymous term (e.g. Matt 13). Matt’s preference for “heaven” to “kingdom” does not mean that “kingdom of heaven” is something different from the “kingdom of God”. Matt was written to the Jewish Christians who knew that pronouncing the name of God was a curse. Keeping this Jewish sensibility Matthew uses “heaven” which was a well-known Jewish euphemism for God (e.g. Luke 15:21).

1.2. The Jewish Background of the Basileia of God

The reign of God might have meant three things for the Jews in Jesus’ time:

1. God is now and always king (the eternal sovereignty of God). His reign is eternal and therefore beyond time and space.
2. God’s reign is only partially recognized (in and through the covenant relationship between Yahweh and Israel). Israel is His special people, and among them His rule is realized as long as Israel obeys His will revealed in the Law.
3. The divine intervention in human history. Amidst the evil and misery of the present time the pious Jews dreamed of a blessed time when the living God would finally manifest His rule, overthrow the power of the evil and show His grace and mercy to His faithful people.

The concept of the kingdom of God in early Judaism was shaped principally by three factors:

1. The OT idea of Yahweh’s eschatological epiphany in judgment to punish the wicked and reward the righteous.
2. Daniel’s new understanding of the kingdom and its agent as transcendent, heavenly realities, cf. “the one like the Son of Man” in Daniel.
3. The centuries-long Gentile rule over Palestine which intensified the longing for liberation and national identity.

The Jewish expectation about the kingdom of God is always associated with the person of the Messiah. Hence, the age of the kingdom was synonymously thought in terms of Messianic age. The over-arching longingness for the Messiah has, by the time of the NT, primarily taken a political colour and so the Jews expected that with the coming of the Messiah the foreign oppressive rulers would be overthrown and vanquished thereby usher in the period of happiness and freedom that would mark the establishment of the kingdom of God.

1.3. Jesus and the Basileia of God

During the 19th century there were various socio-political interpretations of the kingdom of God which paved the way for Albert Schweitzer to conclude with consistent eschatology – the kingdom as entirely future. He argued that Jesus expected the kingdom or end to come during His life time. However Jesus was wrong in His anticipation so He decided to cast himself headlong to death in a final, heroic attempt to force God to set up His kingdom.
Schweitzer’s position was challenged by C.H. Dodd in his book *The Parables of the Kingdom.* Especially focusing his attention on Greek words like “ennigen” (Mark 1:15 and parallels) and “eiphasen” (Matt 12:28 and parallels) Dodd swung the pendulum to the opposite extreme arguing for an *entirely realized eschatology*, i.e. the kingdom as fully present.

But today most would follow Joachim Jeremias⁴ who interpreted the kingdom of God in terms of a motion towards realization — *eschatology in the process of realization*, and admit both present and future dimensions to the kingdom. In this line of approach the kingdom of God is understood as already inaugurated but not yet consummated/completed (popularly referred to as “already but not yet” tension).

### 1.3.1. The Present Aspect of the Kingdom

No doubt, the most striking feature of Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom of God is the present dimension. The “headline” of his entire ministry is the call to repentance because “the kingdom of God is at hand” (Mark 1:15). It is bound up with Jesus’ ministry of exorcism and the vanquishing of Satan (Luke 9:1; 10:18-19), demonstrating that the kingdom has come upon those in Jesus’ audience (Matt 12:28), a point Dodd thoroughly explained. In Jesus’ person, God’s reign appears even in the midst of His enemies (Luke 17:20-21). The parable of the mustard seed enforces that the kingdom of God is present now, though in a small measure but it is growing fast and even without anyone’s notice. Thus, in short, with the coming of Jesus a new stage of God asserting His power over the cosmos has arrived.

### 1.3.2. The Future Aspect of the Kingdom

The future dimension of the kingdom for Jesus most closely matches previous Jewish expectation. Jesus taught His disciples to pray “Thy kingdom come” (Matt 6:10; Luke 11:2). He promised to give His “little flock” a kingdom, when they will judge the twelve tribes of Israel (Luke 12:32; 22:28-30) and warns the crowds against a belief in its immediate appearance (Luke 19:11). Similarly, the expression “that day” (cf. Luke 10:12//Matt 10:15, etc.), which has a long history of usage in Judaism, would be understood to be the eschatological day. Jesus talks about the future “coming” of the Son of Man time and again and it also indicates that the kingdom of God, although it is present, is yet to be a future fulfillment. All these indicate that the kingdom of God is a future reality.

Thus we see that in Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom of God both present and future aspects are involved. But how can this be understood?

The kingdom of God is a present reality but awaits its final consummation in the future. It is present because it was ushered into the world with the coming of Jesus and His saving ministry, but, at the same time, it is future because the kingdom has not yet come in glory. It is here but it is not complete. In other words, the kingdom of God was ushered-in in the person of Jesus in His incarnation (first parousia), but its fullness is yet to be realized in the future (second coming of Christ). Therefore which is to come has come already; but it is in a motion, a process, moving towards consummation. Hence, the phrase “already but not yet” is a helpful slogan that encapsulates this combination of perspectives.

### 1.4. The Demands and Ethics of the Kingdom

In His teaching about the kingdom Jesus sets down certain demands and conditions as well as the ethics for the kingdom. About conditions and demands of the kingdom the first thing is to “repent and believe the gospel” (Mark 1:15; Matt 4:17). A childlike faith is pre-requisite for entering the kingdom (Matt 18:3; Mark 10:14, etc). The kingdom demands an undivided heart (Mark 12:29-30/). It is not lip service that opens the door of the kingdom but doing the will of God (Matt 7:21-23). It demands total loyalty (Luke 9:62), sacrifice of marriage and family (Mark 19:12) as well as wealth and possessions (Mark 10:21-27 and a theme scattered throughout Luke). The Sermon on the Mount in Matt 5-7 and its parallel Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6:17-49 outlines the ethical demands of the kingdom. Pure love, loyalty and devotion to God, and loving one’s neighbour including enemies are the crux of these ethical demands.

### 2. Ekklesia Sayings of Jesus

If Jesus was concerned with the creation of a community of radical commitments to Him, then His mission towards the fulfillment of that community formed the basis of the Church (in Greek “ekklesia”). Jesus did not establish a full-fledged community called the “Church” during His lifetime. In the estimation of many scholars, the developed and structured Church began only after the resurrection of Jesus and the Pentecost. However, there are Jesus’ sayings pertaining to the Church found in the Gospels, either directly like in Matthew or indirectly in the other Gospels.

#### 2.1. The Term “Ekklesia” in the Gospels

Of all the four Gospels, the actual word “Church” appears only twice in Matthew (16:18; 18:17). But there are ekklesia images and metaphors in Gospel passages like parable of the sheep and the sheepfold (John 10), vine and branches (John 15), sending of the seventy on a mission programme (Luke 10:1-12). Likewise, the nature and mission of the Church
Teachings and Praxes of Jesus and the Jesus Movement

Understanding the Jesus Movement in the Gospel Traditions

Matthew’s words put in Jesus’ mouth because this passage implies some kind of Church organization or structure which was missing during the lifetime of Jesus. Whatever may be the case, this passage speaks about proper conduct and discipline within the Church and when one member consistently sins the leaders of the Church should go and rebuke him/her, even taking witnesses with them. Even after repeated rebuking, if that person does not listen, then the leaders have to bring it to the notice of the “Church”. Even then, if that person does not listen to the Church, s/he should be excommunicated (“breaking off of relations”) from the Church.

2.3. Jesus and the Continued Existence of the Church

Even if Jesus did not elaborate on the structures or organization of the Church, He indeed did speak about the mission of the Church and its worship. In the Great Commission of Jesus in Matthew (28:16-20), Jesus speaks about “baptizing” those who are made disciples. This would suggest that Jesus envisaged baptism as a rite of membership or entry to the Church. Again, in the Lord’s Supper tradition in the Gospels, there is an insistence by Jesus, particularly as preserved by Luke, to continue to “Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). This may suggest that Jesus knew that the community He established would continue its existence even after His departure. As the Church exists, He instructed them to observe the Lord’s Supper as a memorial to Him.

End Notes

1 The Jews were prohibited from pronouncing the name Yahweh (represented by the Tetragrammaton, YHWH) so they pronounced it as Adonai.
Disciples and Discipleship

The word “disciple” in Greek is “mathetes” which means a “follower”. It also implies “one who learns” from a teacher (in Greek “manthano” means “I learn”). Therefore, a disciple is one who follows Jesus and learns from Him. It is a process. It also involves imitating Jesus in order to be like Him. It entails moulding up of the lives, conduct, speech, habit, thoughts, etc. of the disciples in the likeness of Jesus, the Teacher. “Discipleship” involves “the way” in which the disciples “follow” the master. In short, “disciple” deals with the person (the noun) who follow someone but “discipleship” involves the action (the verb) of following.

Jesus called “twelve” disciples to be His companions. Strictly speaking, therefore, “disciples” referred to the “Twelve” at first in the NT but the term goes on to include all who believed in Him. Thus, in Luke (and Acts) “disciples” refer to a multitude of people, especially in 16:13, 17. The call and training of the disciples constitutes an important aspect in Jesus’ ministry. From a very early stage of His ministry, Jesus selected a band of followers to be, as T.W. Manson has suggested, not his students but companions. The call of the twelve disciples was an acted parable to represent the number of the tribes of Israel (12).

1. The Call of the Disciples

The first call of Jesus rang out to two pairs of brothers - Peter and Andrew; James and John – from their fishing trade near Capernaum (Mark 1:16-20; Luke 5:1-11; John 1:35ff.). Apart from that the Synoptic Gospels record the call of Mathew or Levi from tax-collection (Mark 2:14, Matt 9:9) while John adds the call of Philip and Nathanael (John 1:43-51). We find no record about the call of the other five – Thomas, James, Thaddaeus, Simon and Judas – in the gospels. Jesus’ call was “Follow me” and the promise was that He will make them “fishers of men”. Thus, by His choice of twelve disciples Jesus proclaimed His intention to create a new Israel.

2. The Training of the Twelve

Jesus envisioned that after His death, resurrection and ascension some people had to carry on His mission. So the disciples were called by Jesus who gave them special training for this purpose.

The main task for Jesus in training the disciples was to initiate them into the nature of His messiahship and mission. The gospels show the failure of the disciples to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. Only in the Gospel of John the disciples are depicted as fully understanding the messiahship of Jesus. Even when they seem to understand the messiahship of Jesus the synoptic Gospel writers show that their understanding about Jesus as Messiah was in line with the general expectation of the immediate establishment of the Kingdom of God by Jesus (Mark 10:35-40; 9:33-34). The disciples could not visualize the suffering and death of Jesus as part of His messianic mission. Thus when Jesus told them about the coming suffering for Him it is Peter who rebukes Jesus (Mark 8:32). Jesus teaches them that suffering and death are part and parcel of His mission. So it was a great challenge for Jesus to change their understanding to His understanding of messiahship.

Jesus also spent time in privacy with the disciples. In Mark 7:24ff. and 9:30ff. there are two incognito travels of Jesus. In between these two incognito travels we get the period of His retirement from the active public ministry in Galilee. During this sabbatical period two important events took place for the disciples: (i) Jesus testing His disciples whether they had comprehended Him fully or not after all the teaching and training He had given to them. This episode culminated in Peter’s confession about Jesus at Caesarea Philippi (Mark 8:27-30; Matt 16:13-20; Cf. Luke 9:18-21). (ii) The transfiguration of Jesus (Matt 17:1ff.; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28ff.). Even if Jesus was about to suffer the disciples should not lose heart because the death was not the end. To this end transfiguration was a glimpse of His true and final destiny, His glory.

3. The Commissioning of the Disciples

The commissioning of the disciples is one of the best attested facts in Jesus’ life (Mark 6:7-13; Matt 10:1-42; Luke 9:1-6 and 10:1-20). Luke mentions two missions and two charges. The first one in 9:1-6 is a parallel to Matthew and Mark. The second one which is associated with the mission of the seventy or seventy two (which correspond to the number of nations listed in Gen 10) is a unique Lukan material.

After His call and choice of the twelve Jesus now sends them in pairs to different places. Now the twelve disciples become, for the first time, apostles (those who are sent out, “apostolos” in Greek). The time has come to test the results of their training.

Before they undertake their mission they are given instructions by
their Master. They are to travel light. Dispensing with food, collecting bag, or money, they are to carry only a stick, a pair of sandals and one tunic (Matt denies them even sandals and stick and Luke forbids carrying the stick). They are instructed to preach and heal. They are to preach the same message that Jesus preached: “the Kingdom of God has come near to you” (Luke 10:9).

They are charged to stay only with those who receive them and should shake off the dust from whoever does not receive them and go away. They are now ambassadors of Christ (Matt 10:40; Luke 10:16).

4. Terms Used for Discipleship

The Gospels use different terms and concepts for disciples and discipleship. Apart from the word “disciple” two associated technical terms or concepts are used to refer to disciples and discipleship in the Gospels. They are “to follow” (Mark 1:18; 2:14; 10:28, 52; 15:41; Matt 4:22; 9:9; 20:34; Luke 5:28; 18:43) and “on the way” (Mark 10:52).

In Matt, we see three distinct groups of people vis-à-vis Jesus. The first one is the “disciples” who believe in Jesus and so who are “with” Jesus. The second group consists of the Jewish religious leaders who do not believe and accept Jesus and so are depicted are “against” Jesus. The third group of people are the “crowd” (Greek “ochlos”), who are basically the objects of Jesus’ ministry, who are “neutral” about Jesus so Jesus appeals to them in order to make them believe in Him.2

Mark generally depicts the disciples as “failing disciples” because even if Jesus repeatedly tells them something they persistently do not understand what Jesus means. Mark presents two options before the disciples — “the things of God” and “the things of humankind” with Jesus teaching them to choose the “things of God”. But the disciples love “the things of the world” (cf. 8:33). The enigmatic ending of the “original” Mark3 also emphasizes this when the disciples saw the resurrected Jesus and having received the commission they “fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (16:8).

Luke shows the disciples as followers of the costly way. Luke metaphorically brings out the theme of discipleship through the geographical perspective (travel perspective). Luke concentrates on Jesus as He journeys the road “to” Jerusalem (Luke also adds that even while Jesus is in Galilee “his face was set toward Jerusalem - 9:53, cf. 9:51) with the disciples travelling along with Him “following on the way”. For Luke, salvation itself is “the way”, a pattern of life revealed by God. Discipleship begins upon entering the Way of salvation; it advances as

one travels along the Way. Luke specifies that self-denial, taking up the cross and following Jesus not only characterizes entrance into the Way but life on the Way.5

In the Gospel of John a disciple is one who knows Jesus and believes in Him that the Father has sent Him. Discipleship in this Gospel undergoes a process of gradual understanding and perception. The disciples lacked understanding at first but through the word and works of Jesus they gradually come to understand who Jesus is and believes in Him. A “true disciple” is also marked out from an ordinary disciple because “true disciple” is one who believes in Jesus without “seeing” or proof (cf. 20:29).

5. The Cost of Discipleship: Challenge to Carry the Cross

The “way” in which Jesus, the Master leads His disciples is not an easy one because it is the way of “suffering” and the “cross”. That is why all the Gospels, either explicitly or implicitly, talk about “the cost” of discipleship. Of particular significance is the synoptic passage in which Jesus vividly talks about the cost of discipleship (Mark 8:34; Matt 16:24; Luke 9:23). There are three “demands” or “costs” that are referred here:

(a) Self-denial: It means willingness to become the “least” and the “last” or to become a “servant” and “slave of all” (cf. Mark 10:44). It also means, in other words, to count others as better than oneself. It entails a willing heart to become nothing for the sake of Jesus. In Greek this demand is in the Aorist Imperative which suggests that Jesus wants His followers to deny the self at once, urgently, immediately, without delay.

(b) Taking Up One’s Cross: Cross is the symbol of suffering. Jesus’ “way” is “the way of the cross”. There is an added emphasis among all the Evangelists that the cross was a “divine imperative” for Jesus because there was no “other way” for Jesus since “it was necessary” (Greek “dei”) for Him that He “must” (again “dei”) suffer...and be killed” (Luke 9:22; cf. Mark 8:31; Matt 16:21). This “divine obligation” on Jesus to suffer and be killed is reiterated by Luke in many passages. Likewise, in numerous instances Jesus told and reminded His disciples that they will be persecuted, rejected, abused, imprisoned, beaten and even killed for His name’s sake (cf. Matt 5:11-12; 10:16; Luke 10:3; Matt 10:34ff.; 24:9; John 16:2). It is noteworthy to observe that right after this verse Jesus talks about “losing” and “saving” life. Jesus does not speak only about the necessity of taking up one’s cross but He unequivocally states that “he who does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me” (Matt 10:38). It is found in the Present Imperative in Greek meaning that the disciples should make taking
up cross a habitual, continuous process. Luke brings out the meaning of the tense beautifully by adding the word “daily”. It goes on to reiterate that taking up the cross “once” is not enough but it has to be “daily”, “continuous”, and “habitual”. There may be someone who “follow” Jesus without carrying the “cross”. Such people are not real or true disciples.

(c) **Follow Me:** Disciples are those who “follow” Jesus on the “way” of the “cross”. “Follow me” is the formula with which Jesus had called the Twelve and it is with the same formula that He calls the would-be disciples. Just like the demand to “take up one’s cross daily”, “follow me” is also in the Present Imperative in Greek having the same emphasis of continuity. “Following” Jesus for sometime and not following Him the other time will be nothing else but “perpetual hypocrisy”.

No one can become a disciple of Jesus without a willingness to suffer because a disciple can be no longer a disciple if s/he stops “following” Jesus on the way He leads. To be a disciple of Jesus is to be “discipled” by Jesus. Therefore, discipleship entails surrendering of oneself to the will of the Master, willingness to suffer always and following Him daily on the way of suffering.

**End Notes**

4 The oldest manuscripts of Mark have Mark ending in 16:8 and scholars argue that the so called “Shorter Ending” and the “Longer Ending” of Mark are later additions by a redactor of Mark’s Gospel who saw it awkward to send the Gospel without the resurrection appearances of Jesus.

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5

**Discourses of Jesus in John**

In the Fourth Gospel we do not find Jesus teaching in parables nor on “sermons” like the Sermon on the Mount or Sermon on the Plain. Rather Jesus teaches in “discourses” in John and there are lots of discourses, both extended or long and short discourses in John.

1. **The Nature and Form of Discourses in John**

“Discourses” are designed by repetition of words, formulation of antithesis, *inclusio*, structuring of verses within a unit in a chiastic pattern.”

Some of the characteristic features of John’s discourses are:

(i) The “thesis” is introduced by Jesus
(ii) The listener misunderstands what Jesus says, i.e. technique of misunderstanding
(iii) Jesus begins to expound the “thesis” He has already introduced which the listener has misunderstood
(iv) The “antithesis” is put forward by the listener
(v) A “counter thesis” to disprove the “antithesis”
(vi) “Dialogue” becomes “monologue” in which the original listener disappears from the scene and Jesus is the only one speaking
(vii) Singular person in the dialogue becomes plural in the monologue [“I-you” (sl) to “we-you” (pl)]

All these features can be clearly seen in Jesus’ discourse with Nicodemus (John 3).

(i) Jesus introduces the “thesis” on the necessity of being “born anew” or “born from above” (v. 3)
(ii) Nicodemus misunderstands what Jesus mean: “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” (v. 4)
(iii) Jesus begins to expound the “thesis” already introduced (v. 5ff.)
misunderstands the notion of ‘born again’ as a second human birth, and because of her word” but because they have seen Him. During this time the Kingdom of God (3:3). Nicodemus does not understand and also many people to Jesus. Those people also believes in Jesus “not only above” (Greek word “anothen” can mean both) before anyone can see and thus she becomes a “missionary” who goes to her village and brings teaches him about the necessity of being “born again” or “born from we see that she comes to believe in Jesus through “personal encounter” (3:2).7 So Jesus converses with Nicodemus, and also answers him and The woman believes Him and goes to bring others to hear Jesus. Here

3. The Discourses Explained

3.1. The New Birth (3: 1-21)

The first discourse of Jesus in John’s gospel is a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. The setting and context of Jesus’ dialogue with Nicodemus is given in 2:23-25. The subject of the dialogue is also the theme of faith.6 Nicodemus was one of the Pharisees who controlled the teaching in local synagogues and also ruler of the Jews in Judea. Many people believed in Jesus because of the signs, but Jesus did not approve such faith. Here Nicodemus is a representative of those who believed in Jesus because of signs and brought some question to Jesus (3:2).7 So Jesus converses with Nicodemus, and also answers him and teaches him about the necessity of being “born again” or “born from above” (Greek word “anothen” can mean both) before anyone can see the Kingdom of God (3:3). Nicodemus does not understand and also misunderstands the notion of ‘born again’ as a second human birth, and therefore he questions Jesus about the physical process involved (3:4). Then Jesus adds that no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being “born of water and spirit” (3:5). Nicodemus does not understand because he takes Jesus literally, and Jesus chides him for his slowness (3:9-12). Jesus also says that, just as Moses lifted up the bronze snake, so the Son of man must be “lifted up”, that whoever believes in him will have eternal life (3:14). From John 3:16-21 contains a discourse that may be intended either as a continuation of Jesus’ words or as a narrative insertion. In it, it is said that God loved the world so much that He gave His only son that whoever believes in Him has eternal life. Those who do not believe are condemned because they have rejected the light that has come into the world; and loved darkness because their deeds are evil.8

3.2. The Living Water (4:1-42)

After Nicodemus, we come to the remarkable encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. This chapter is composed of four main interlocking themes: ‘living water’ and ‘true worship’, ‘mysterious food’ and ‘mysterious harvest’.5 When Jesus and His disciples return from Judea they pass through Samaria, where Jesus discourses with a Samaritan woman who came to draw water. When Jesus asked for a drink, the Samaritan woman responds, ‘How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?’ (4:9). She responds from her own cultural context because the Jews and the Samaritans did not share their belongings to each other. The Greek word “sunchromai” that is used by the woman would literally means “sharing utensils” and in this verse she is expressing her doubt whether it is permissible to use her water jar to give water to Jesus. Jesus answers her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you … You would have asked him, and he would have given you water” (4:10). He promises to give her water from which she may drink and never again be thirsty; this water will be like a spring gushing up to eternal life. The woman misunderstands Jesus like Nicodemus, because she takes him literally. Jesus then tells her about her past, and because of Jesus miraculous knowledge, she comes to believe that he is a “prophet.”10 Jesus explains to her that true worship is “in spirit and in truth” and is not tied to a particular locale (either Jerusalem or “this mountain”, i.e., Mt. Gerizim) and He tells her that He is the “Christ.” The woman believes Him and goes to bring others to hear Jesus. Here we see that she comes to believe in Jesus through “personal encounter” and thus she becomes a “missionary” who goes to her village and brings many people to Jesus. Those people also believes in Jesus “not only because of her word” but because they have seen Him. During this time
Jesus tells His disciples, who have recently arrived, that His food and drink is to do the will of the one who sent Him and that the fields are ripe for harvesting.11

3.3. The Divine Son (5:19-47)
Jesus discourses about himself as the Son. The “witnesses” of Jesus are presented to those who persistently refuse to believe in Him despite seeing His signs. In this passage, five of the seven witnesses appear: Father, Jesus’ signs, the scriptures, Moses, and John the Baptist. After healing the sick man the Jews who came to know about Jesus started to persecute Him, because Jesus was doing such things on Sabbath. But Jesus answered them; the son works as the Father works (5:17), and only does what he sees his Father do (5:19). The Father loves the son and shows Him all that He does (5:20). The son gives life to whom He wills (5:21), and the Father has entrusted all judgment to the son (5:22). The dead will hear the voice of the Son and be raised from the dead, some to life and others to judgment (5:29). Jesus does not testify of himself; rather God testifies of Him, a testimony greater than John’s (5:31-35). The Son does the work that the Father has given Him to do, and this testifies that the Father has sent Him (5:36). Jesus rebukes His hearers for not believing in Him, since the scriptures speak of Him (5:39-47).12

3.4. The Bread of Life (6:22-71)
The sign of multiplying bread and feeding the 5000 leads Jesus to make a discourse about Himself as the bread of life. Using the metaphor of bread, Jesus tells the crowds to seek the food that leads to eternal life, which the Son of man will give them, rather than for food that perishes (26:27). To do the work of God is to believe in Him whom God has sent. In response to a demand for a sign like that of the manna that God gave to the generation of the Exodus, Jesus says that He is the bread of life that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world (32-33). When the Jews begin to complain about this saying, Jesus says that no one comes to Him unless the Father draws him (43-44). He then gives an even harder saying: that whoever eats His flesh and drinks His blood will have eternal life. He adds that the spirit gives life — the flesh is useless — and that His words are spirit and life (53-63). Because of this difficulty of His teaching, many of his disciples desert him. But the twelve do not; Judas, however, will later betray Jesus.13

3.5. The Life Giving Spirit (7:1-53a)
At the festival of Tabernacles, Jesus, having remained in hiding for the first part of the festival, but He later goes to the Temple and begins to teach. He says that His teaching is given to Him by God (16), and defends Himself against His alleged breaking of the Sabbath by healing. Jesus announces that He will not be with them much longer, but will be going to Him who sent Him (33). There is a dispute about whether Jesus is the Messiah or not, and the chief priests and the Pharisees attempt to have Jesus arrested. On the last day of the festival, Jesus teaches that whoever is thirsty should come to Him and drink because out of the believer’s stomach will flow rivers living water (37-38). Jesus is referring to the Spirit. As a result, there are more disputes about Jesus’ identity.14

3.6. The Light of the World (8:12-59)
Jesus says to the people that He is the light of the world and that anyone who follows Him will not walk in darkness. In response to the Pharisees’ accusation that He is merely testifying of Himself, Jesus says that His testimony is valid, because He knows from where He has come and where He is going. The Father testifies on His behalf, but His accusers do not know His Father or else they would know Him. Later, He says that He is going away and that He is from above, not from below, as His accusers are. Unless they believe in Him, they will die in their sins. Because His opponents do not understand Him, Jesus says that when the Son of man is lifted up, they will understand who He is. To those who have believed in Him, Jesus says that if they continue in His word, they will abide in His love and others to judgment (5:29). Jesus does what he sees his Father do (5:19). The Father loves the son and only does what He wills (5:21), and the Father has entrusted all judgment to the son (5:22). The dead will hear the voice of the Son and be raised from the dead, some to life and others to judgment (5:29). Jesus does not testify of himself; rather God testifies of Him, a testimony greater than John’s (5:31-35). The Son does the work that the Father has given Him to do, and this testifies that the Father has sent Him (5:36). Jesus rebukes His hearers for not believing in Him, since the scriptures speak of Him (5:39-47).15

3.7. The Good Shepherd (10:1-19)
John 10 introduces a new topic, but not a new audience; Jesus is still speaking to the Jewish religious leaders whom we met in John 9. The idea of Jesus as the good shepherd may evoke images of a Gentile shepherd herding his sheep through idyllic green pastures, flowing with water. Jesus says that He is the good shepherd who cares for his sheep. Altering the metaphor, He says that He is the gate of the sheepfold through which the sheep enter and are saved. He continues by saying that He is the good shepherd who gives His life for His sheep and that He has other sheep that He must bring into the fold. John intends such a picture needs
to be seen. The passage can be divided into three parts: (i) good and false shepherds (10:1-10); (ii) Jesus the good shepherd (10:11-18); (iii) the response of the Jews (10:19-21). It is of paramount importance to notice how Jesus differentiates Himself from the “hireling” who run away when dangers come leaving the sheep on their own. But He is the “good” shepherd who “gives His life for the sheep”. This refers to His impending suffering and death.

3.8. An Unattached Discourse of Jesus Used as a Summary Proclamation (12:44-50)

The discourses that Jesus give in these verses is clearly not in its original context: for, since Jesus has gone into hiding (12:36), this discourse has no audience or setting. One solution, adopted by Benard and others, has been to transfer (44-50) to a place between 12:36a and 36b. Bultman sees 44-50 as part of a long discourse on light consisting of 8:12, 12:44-50:8:21-29, 12:34-36, 10:19-21. Needless to say, there is no real proof for these ingenious proposals. Boismard, “Le Caractere”, points out that this discourse has some peculiarities in style and suggests that this passage of Johannine material may have had its own history of transmission. The fact that 12:40-50 is a very much like 3:16-19 makes it quite plausible that in part, 12:44-50 is a variant of material found elsewhere in John but preserved by a different disciple. In the final redaction of the Gospel this independent discourse was probably added where it would cause the least disarrangement. Actually, the redactor’s judgment was a good one, for this little discourse, which now comes at the end of the book of signs, nicely summarizes Jesus’ message.17

There too we are in the atmosphere of Deuteronomy, where “commandment” sets the pattern by which Israel is to fulfill its vocation as the holy people of God. (Deut. 32:44-47) says that the commandment of God given through Moses is a principle of life for the people, human lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Deut. 8:32). We also find an echo of the reaction of divine commandment to life in the Synoptic. (Luke 10:25-28).18

In John, however, it is very clear that the command of God that means eternal life is more than any other Old Testament commandments. It is the word of God spoken through Jesus that how sums up the covenant obligations of the believer. In verse 39 Jesus had criticized the in adequateness of searching the Old Testament scriptures in which the Jews thought they had eternal life. Now Jesus spells out in a positive manner that it is in his word that men do have eternal life. And so, in its own way, this short discourse of Jesus, placed as a summary statement at the end of the public ministry, is the Christian form of what Moses proclaimed “when he had finished speaking all these words to all of Israel” (Deut. 32:45-47).19

3.9. The Farewell Discourse of Jesus (14-17)

John has an extended farewell discourse of Jesus addressed to His disciples before His suffering and death. The farewell discourse of Jesus in John can be divided into two broad parts: (a) Chapters 14-16, (b) chapter 17. The main content chap. 14-16 revolves around Jesus’ teaching about the Paraclete.20 Since Jesus is about to leave them the disciples are disheartened, afraid, and discouraged. That is why, in this discourse, Jesus comforts the disciples and promises them to send the Paraclete to them so that the Paraclete would lead, guide, heal, comfort, counsel and teach them after His departure from them. Jesus’ main teaching on the Paraclete involves the following points.

Various meanings/words are given to the term “Paracletos” in the English Bibles: “counselor” (NIV, RSV), “advocate,” NRSV), “comforter” (KJV), “helper” (NKJV). I John sheds light for us for understanding this term in which Jesus is described as the “advocate” who speaks to the Father on behalf of sinners. In the Fourth Gospel the Paraclete is called “allos parakletos” (“another Paraclete” – 14:16) implying that the Paraclete is the same as Jesus.

According to Jesus the Paraclete is not an abstract thing or concept or power but the Paraclete is a person (cf. 14:17-15:26; 16:13) called “he” not “it” in John). M.V Abraham says this in this regard, “... for the author of this Gospel the Holy Spirit is not merely an invisible force or divine power, but God himself present as a Person, as he was present in Jesus Christ.”21 With regard to the nature of the Paraclete he is called the Spirit of truth (14:17; 15:26; 16:13).

Pertaining to the procession of the Paraclete, he comes from the Father at the request of Jesus (15:26; 16:7). The sending of the Paraclete to the world is only in the name of Jesus (14:26). The Paraclete is sent only after the departure of Jesus (16:7). This means that the Paraclete is the delegated representative sent on behalf of Jesus by the Father with the authority of Jesus. But the Paraclete is not just a substitute for Jesus, but the continuation of Jesus Christ. Thus, C. K. Barrett calls the Paraclete as the “eschatalogical continuum”22 because the Paraclete is the “successor” of Christ on earth.

Jesus’ promise of the Paraclete to the disciples is primarily to perform three functions:
(i) The Forensic Function. The Paraclete functions as a legal, defense lawyer. It implies a double role. First is to be a witness who would plead the case before God in favour of sinners for their deliverance (cf. I John 2:1-2), and second is to be a judge to condemn the world. The Paraclete will convict the world of sin, righteousness and judgment (John 16:8). He will prove that the world is guilty of sin; he will prove that the world went wrong in meting out justice to Jesus even though he was innocent; and that by condemning Jesus the world itself stands condemned before the judge.

(ii) The Hermeneutic Function. The Paraclete functions as an interpreter. He will guide the disciples into all truth; he will take what Jesus had already taught and clarify it (16:13-14; 26). He will not only endorse and attest what Jesus said, but he will also tell the things to come (16:15). He will direct the disciples to understand what Jesus had taught them. Thus there is continuity between the original message and the present inspiration of the Spirit.

(iii) The Therapeutic Function. The Paraclete will carry out healing, comforting and counselling roles (14:26; 15:26). It is for these roles that the term “Paracletos” is translated “comforter,” “helper,” “counselor,” etc. When Jesus departs the discouraged and disheartened disciples will be comforted by the Paraclete. Thus the Paraclete will fill the vacuum created by the absence of Jesus after his departure in the hearts of the disciples. The Paraclete will continue to be the very present of Christ himself in the Church (14:18ff.). Hence, the Paraclete is called “continuum Christi” (Latin – “continuation of Jesus”).

Above all this the chief function of the Paraclete is to bear witness for Christ (15:26). He does not repeat what Jesus had already told the disciples, but only testifies to it and endorses it. That is why the Paraclete is described as the “Spirit of Truth” who will guide the disciples into the whole truth (16:13).

Jesus also warns the disciples, once again in John, about the coming dangers and persecutions because they will be “put out of the synagogues” and some of them will even be killed and those killers will think that they are offering Qorban to God (i.e., holy sacrifice to God) by killing them.

Within this farewell discourse is the beautiful metaphor of Himself as the “vine”. His disciples as “the branches” and His Father as “the Vinedresser” (15:1-11). It is an exhortation by Jesus to His disciples to “remain” in Him always. The synoptic idea or concept of discipleship as a constant, daily process is found in this passage.

In chapter 17, we find the “High Priestly Prayer of Jesus” in which Jesus prays for the unity of the believers based on the “oneness” of the Father and Himself. Jesus prays that the disciples may be perfectly “one” just like the Father and the Son are perfectly one. The “mutual indwelling” of the Father and the Son, a motif that occurs repeatedly in John, becomes the basis for Jesus to pray for the unity of His disciples. This chapter is also taken as the basic passage for “ecumenism” or “ecumenical movement” within the Christendom. He prays that those believers in Him at present should be one.

How will they become “one”? God sent His Son to the world so that He will gather the world and bring them into a “communion” with God the Father. The believers in Jesus, though many and diverse, are “one” in Jesus because they have been begotten by God to “become children of God” (1:12-13). Therefore, the vision of Jesus as exemplified in this prayer is not about “unity in diversity” nor “diversity in unity” but everyone becoming “one” in and through Him. This is the highest level of “unity”.

This oneness is not only for those present followers of Jesus but also for those who “will” become His followers in the future through the words and preachings of His “present” disciples. This aspect of “unity” in which the future disciples are also incorporated into the “oneness” of the disciples has a distinct Johannine significance. Since John was written at a time when there were social, cultural, and religious ostracization of those who believed in Jesus as the Messiah from the larger Jewish society, there were many skeptics among them who started to doubt whether their faith in Jesus had any value. Many of the Johannine community members were second-generation Christians who have neither seen nor heard Jesus personally but have come to believe in Jesus through the testimony of the “eye-witnesses”. For them, “following” Jesus and “believing” in Him had attracted only hardships, sufferings and rejection both from their families and the society at large. Therefore many among those second-generation Christians were questioning whether there was any reward for their faith in Jesus. In such a context, it is of particular importance for John to convince them that Jesus never excluded them from His movement but put them in a special level (cf. 20:29).

The prayer of Jesus in John 17 is, therefore, both “inside directed” (“ad intra”) as well as “outside directed” (“ad extra”). This reveals that John had in mind both those who had already come to believe in Jesus as well as those who will come to believe in Him in the future.23

The farewell discourse of Jesus in John is, thus, reflective of the “sitz im leben” in which this Gospel was written.
that the prayer that Jesus taught was not an original creation by Jesus.

Based on different textual readings of the verb “believe” in those verses.

There are some scholars who would argue that prayer within Jesus’ teaching on prayer is significant because it 

The Gospel According to John is written to those who are already believers; (b) Missionary Purpose – which shows that John is written to the “unbelievers” so that they 

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The Prayers of Jesus

The Gospels portray Jesus as a man of prayer. He spent time in prayer at crucial moments in His life. Of all the Gospels, Luke emphasizes the prayer life of Jesus by showing Him in prayer during or just before he took an important decision. That is why Luke records seven unique prayers of Jesus (3:21; 5:16; 6:12; 9:18, 28-29; 11:1; 22:32). (Every student should read books and understand the importance of those prayer moments).

1. The Lord’s Prayer

The prayer which Jesus had taught His disciples is known as the Lord’s Prayer which is found in two versions in the NT – Matt 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4. Craig L. Blomberg is of the opinion that this prayer should better be entitled “the Model Prayer” or “the Disciples’ Prayer” on the argument that it is one prayer Jesus never prayed nor could have because Jesus could not say “forgive us our trespasses.” It is very easy to memorize but its content had captivated the thoughts of many people. Henry Ward Beecher wrote in this regard: “I used to think that the Lord’s Prayer was a 

Similarly, the early Church Fathers like Tertullian and Cyprian described the Lord’s Prayer as a compendium (summary) of the Gospel.

In Matt the Lord’s Prayer is a part of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount while in Luke it is found in Jesus’ discourse on prayer. Luke’s placing of the prayer within Jesus’ teaching on prayer is significant because it accentuates Luke’s emphasis on prayer. Many NT scholars feel that the Lukan version, which is shorter than Matt’s, may have been the original form in which Jesus taught it. There are some scholars who would argue that the prayer that Jesus taught was not an original creation by Jesus.

End Notes

1 Jose Maniparampil, Reading the Fourth Gospel, 77.
2 The Greek word “anothen” which Jesus uses here can mean both “born again/anew” and “born from above”. John uses this word as a word having double meaning and undoubtedly Nicodemus understands it in its ordinary or general meaning. But what John would mean Jesus intends is the “special” or “deeper” or “spiritual” meaning, i.e., “born from above”.
3 In Greek the “you” in vv. 3, 5, 7, 8, 10 and the first one in v. 11 are all singular but beginning from the second “you” in v. 11 till the end of the discourse are in plural.
4 Jose, Maniparampil. Reading the Fourth Gospel, 39.
6 Jose, Maniparampil. Reading the Fourth Gospel, 207.
7 Cornelis Bennema, Excavating John’s Gospel, 51.
9 Jose, Maniparampil. Reading the Fourth Gospel, 221.
10 The Samaritans believed that the “Prophet” Moses would arise at the last day. This prophet was called by them as “Taheb”. The Samaritan woman does not explicitly uses the word “Messiah” but when she confesses Jesus to be the “prophet” she is confessing Jesus as the “Messiah”.
12 Cornelis Bennema, Excavating John’s Gospel, 29.
13 Jose, Maniparampil. Reading the Fourth Gospel, -261.
14 Cornelis Bennema, Excavating John’s Gospel, -88.
16 Cornelis Bennema, Excavating John’s Gospel, 29.
20 Scholars have debated about the “person” of the Paraclete as it is used in John’s Gospel. Traditionally, “paraclete” is identified with the Holy Spirit but some scholars like F. Spitta, H. Windisch, R. Bultmann, O. Betz have doubted that this identification is true to the original picture and have suggested that the Paraclete was once an independent salvific figure, later confused with the Holy Spirit. For a fuller treatment of such issues, see Raymond E. Brown, “The Paraclete in the Fourth Gospel,” New Testament Study 13/2 (January 1967).
23 There are several purposes proposed for the Fourth Gospel. We find, in this chapter, two of them: (a) Pastoral Purpose – which means that the Gospel according to John is written to those who are already believers; (b) Missionary Purpose – which shows that John is written to the “unbelievers” so that they “may come to believe in Jesus”. These two purposes are found in 20:30-31 based on different textual reading of the verb “believe” in those verses.
There are ideas and even phrases which were borrowed from Jewish prayers. While we agree that there are similarities between these prayers the theory of dependence by Jesus on some existing Jewish prayers can be contended with. The Aramaic version of the Qaddish prayer, which is a prayer in praise of God’s holiness, and Talmud (interpretations of the Scriptures by Jewish rabbis) contain some of these ideas and phrases. But they, especially the Talmud, were written only in the 4th and 5th centuries A.D. So the borrowing may have been in the reversal, i.e. from Christianity to Judaism. Thus, according to C. G. Montefiore the content and depth of the Lord’s Prayer is not found elsewhere.4

2. The Content of the Lord’s Prayer

The first three petitions (“Hallowed be Thy name,” “Thy kingdom come,” “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”) are petitions related to God (Thou-Petitions). While the next three (“Give us this day our daily bread,” “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who trespass against us,” “Lead us not into temptation”) are petitions relating to human beings (We-Petitions).5 The opening clause – “Our Father who art in heaven” – is a common invocation applicable to all the petitions.

2.1. The Prayer Opening

The prayer opens with an address to God – “Our Father who is in heaven.” “In heaven” does not show the location of God but the transcendence of God. At the same time God is the “Father” which brings him close to us. Hence the transcendence as well as the immanence of God is emphasized here. The word used for “Father” here is the Aramaic word “Abba” which was used by the children to address their fathers in Palestine. It was a homely and informal form of address which is equivalent to today’s “daddy.” For the Jews God was too holy to address Him by this informal term. Jesus’ usage of this term shows His close and intimate relationship with the Father (filial relationship) and he enables His followers to address God by the same term he uses. For His followers have now the privilege of having personal and intimate relationship with God through Jesus.

2.2. The Thou-Petitions

2.2.1. “Hallowed be Thy name”

The first prayer a Jewish child is taught was “Thy name be hallowed, and Thy kingdom come.” The biblical concept of the name of a person is not to reveal one’s identity but to denote the person’s character (e.g. Moses means pulled out of water; Jacob means deceiver; Abraham means father of the nations; Saul is asked of God, etc.). This is the characteristic feature of the worship in the Semitic religions where God’s attributes are praised.

2.2.2. “Thy Kingdom Come”

The concept of the “kingdom of God” was a very lively belief among the Jews during Jesus’ time.6 In Jesus’ time the word “kingdom” had political overtones. But Jesus through this prayer taught that God’s rule would come true, and it was a spiritual concept rather than political or racial. It points to the fuller consummation of the rule of God in the future. It has come “partially” in and through Jesus’ life and ministry; but it awaits “future” consummation or completion.

2.2.3. “Thy Will be Done on Earth as It is in Heaven”

The will of God is the supreme rule for Jesus as well as for His followers. It demonstrates the total submission of Jesus to the Father which He wishes to be the attitude of every believer. It should be understood in the light of Jesus’ prayer in the garden of Gethsemane – “Father, if it is your will remove this cup from me, yet not my will but your will” (Matt 26:39). Divine sovereignty and human finiteness are expressed here.

In all, the Thou-Petitions of the Lord’s Prayer are future oriented having eschatological overtones.

2.3. The We-Petitions

2.3.1. “Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread”

Though Jesus taught that our heavenly Father knows our needs even before we ask, and would grant them even without asking (Matt 6: 32), but He also taught that it is our privilege as His children to ask what we need. That is a sign of our intimate relationship that we could have with our “Abba” through Jesus.

Some interpreters like Martin Luther and Jerome understood the petition for daily bread in an allegorical or spiritual or as supersubstantial (that which is not substance) rather than material bread. But we can take this petition in its literal sense because Jesus is one who took material seriously [e.g. Jesus’ feeding of the 5000; Jesus eating with the disciples (John 21:9ff.)].

The interpretation of the word “daily” causes some problems. It is the translation of the Greek word “epiousios” which can mean the coming day; tomorrow; day by day; continual; sufficient or necessary. According to Joachim Jeremias, Jesus might have used the Aramaic word “Mahar” for the word “daily”. In a 2nd century writing the same Aramaic word is used
to mean the “coming day”. It is important for us to know that the Lord’s Prayer was said in the morning as well as in the evening in the early church. Thus to pray “give us the bread for tomorrow” would make better sense (cf. Matt 6:34). However, for the 4th century church Father, Theodore, the Greek word “epiousios” means “sufficient” or “necessary” because he said that if we have plenty and our future is secure then we lose the sense of dependency on God and thereby the prayer is rendered meaningless.

It is also noteworthy that the Lord taught his disciples to pray for “our bread” instead of “my bread”. It shows that this prayer encompasses all God’s children and the disciples should be concerned for others’ needs as well.

(ii) “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgave those who trespassed against us.” This second petition emphasizes on interrelatedness of personal and interpersonal relations. Our relationship with God should lead us to have good relations with other humans (cf. Matt 11:25; 5:24).

This petition highlights two points: (a) that sin is a reality whether we recognize it or not; (b) all of us are guilty and stand in need of forgiveness. In the Lukan version the Greek word used is “hamartia” (trespasses or sins of commission, Luke 11:4) while in Matt it is “opheilemata” (sins of omission, Matt 6:12). The word “opheilemata” means indebtedness or obligation; not performing something which was an obligation. As forgiven people the believers are taught to show the same attitude towards others by forgiving them. Thus the forgiveness which we received from God pushes us to forgive everyone who has done something wrong to us. The believers can ask God to “forgive” them only when they have “forgiven” others.

(iii) “Lead us not into temptation.” To this petition Matt adds another clause “and deliver us from evil” (6:13). The words “lead us not” might suggest to us that God is deliberately leading us into temptation. The God that we know in Jesus would never do that (cf. James 1:13). According to the OT scholar, Theodore Robinson, the Aramaic word that Jesus used has no motive of compulsion, as if God were driving us to test. Thus it would underscore that since God knows everything, even the possibility of falling into temptation and sin, we pray to him not to allow us to do that.

The Greek word for temptation is “peirasmos” which has various meanings in the NT like hostile experiences, enmity of people and physical harm and situations where one’s faith is at stake that would even result in apostasy.

(d) The Prayer Ending

The prayer concludes with “For Thine is the kingdom, the power and glory for ever.” This doxology is found only in Matt which is also absent even in some ancient manuscripts of Matt. Probably, it was not a part of the original prayer that Jesus taught. But generally Jewish religious prayers ended with an appropriate doxology from the leader so the later church might have adopted this tradition. Whatever may be the origin of this doxology, it is an appropriate ending to the Lord’s Prayer. It is an affirmation of faith in God the Father who is able and willing to grant all the petitions of his children. It is also an affirmation that God is the rightful owner of the kingdom, power and glory.

End Notes

1 Craig L. Blomberg, Jesus and the Gospels, 251.
3 The form and textual critics of the NT generally accept that the shorter text is the more reliable reading of a material.
5 In the outline and explanation of the Lord’s Prayer, we follow M.V. Abraham’s New Testament Studies, 56-67.
6 For more details on this aspect, see above “Basileia and Ekklesia Sayings of Jesus”.
7 The Gospel of the Nazarenes.
Life Style of Jesus

As an ordinary Jew, Jesus adopted a life style that was commonly current during His time. He observed and followed many of the Jewish customs and traditions, yet, at the same time, He was against many of their practices and rituals that did not place value on human dignity.

Since the Gospels are not full biographies of Jesus, we do not see much about His lifestyle mentioned or discussed in them. However, The Gospels make a uniform and consistent presentation about the kind of person and the lifestyle He lived.

Lifestyle should not be mistaken with “fashion” like dressing, hair style, etc., because it has much more to do than that. It refers to the “kind” of life a person lives. It refers to the quality of a person’s life. Outward actions or “style” are results of one’s inward convictions.

In order to understand the “lifestyle” that Jesus adopted, therefore, we need to look at His life in entirety: languages He used in His interactions with others, His attitude which will be reflected through His actions or reaction in or to a particular situation, etc. What He said or did reflects His lifestyle. Moreover, we must also look at what He “did not say” or “did not do” in a given context because they are also equally reflective of His inner convictions that determined His words, action and reactions. For example, after His encounter with women with the issue of the flow of blood (cf. Luke 8: 43-48) Jesus never performed rites of purification for himself, because, according to the Law He should do that, He did not consider these women “unclean” and that His contact with them rendered Him impure.1

Jesus lived within a concrete historical context. Therefore the current cultural practices and thought form are all visible in Him. But Jesus was equally a “radical” because, many a time, He went beyond the accepted norms of His day in His speech and actions. That is why the kind of lifestyle we see in Jesus is a “radical lifestyle”. By “conforming” to the socially marginalized and disoriented groups of people, for instance, He did not conform to the normal, accepted standards of His day.

1. Simple Life Style

Jesus lived a simple and “sombre” life. His birth in a “manger” pointed to this and throughout His life He carried the “lowliness” and “simplicity” of the manger with Him. He trusted fully in His Father and so He was not worried about owning properties and riches. His family consisted of brothers and sisters (cf. Mark 6:3; Matt 12:46) which might have been a significantly “big family” with average income to manage. His earthly father is called a “carpenter” and likewise Jesus is quite often identified with the simple profession of “carpentry” (Mark 6:3).

There is no record about Jesus owning properties, wealth and riches. He did not look for any of them. He did not place His mind and heart on them, rather, He trusted God for sustenance. He knew that God provides and so He discouraged His disciples from “storing up treasures on earth.” His simplicity of life made Him a humble man who never looked for recognition and power. That is why, He taught His disciples to desist from power (cf. Mark 10:35-45; Matt 20:20-28). His simple life style also made Him to value human dignity, not by what they possessed but by their being created in God’s image.

2. He Kept Friends for Company

Just like any ordinary person, Jesus had friends for company. He spent time with them, conversed and shared ideas with them. As a boy of twelve years of age, He followed His parents together with the “company” (Luke 2:41-44) to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. He called “Twelve” men to be His disciples who constantly remained with Him. Out of the Twelve, there were “three” – Peter, James and John – who formed Jesus’ “inner circle” so that, at least, these three would be with Him always (cf. Matt 17:1ff. – during the Transfiguration of Jesus, He took these three up to the mountain). He called His disciples “friends” (cf. John 15:15) and there were large crowds that followed Him.

3. Sharing Meals

Jesus associated with people from different ethnic groups and profession. This He exemplified through His sharing of meals with them. In the Gospels Jesus is shown in association with socially disoriented people in the table fellowship scenes (Matt 9:10-11; 11:19; Mark 2:15-16; Luke 5:30; 15:2). During Jesus’ time, “dining with” or “reclining at the table with” someone meant two things:

(i) Dining in common established among its participants a bond of fellowship, violation of which was considered betrayal.

(ii) It was through table fellowship that the ritual distinction between “the
clean” and “the unclean” and the moral distinction between “the righteous” and “the sinners” found concrete social expression.

During His time, eating and dining was restricted to one’s own group. The Jewish concept of “clean” and “unclean”; “righteous” and “unrighteous” was lived out by their practice of eating. No one who considered himself/herself “clean” or “righteous” could sit at the table along with whom they considered “unclean” or “unrighteous”. Therefore, the concept of “purity” was seen by the association or company that one kept. However, through His association with sinners in the table fellowship Jesus negated these age old discriminatory concepts. Jesus as a revolutionary is seen particularly when we meet Him sitting together with those who were considered “impure”, “unclean” and “unrighteous”.

4. Unconditional Love and Sacrificial Service

Jesus loved without any precondition. He did not look at the good of others in order to love. He also did not look for what He is to get in return by loving others. There was no prejudice and bias in His love. This unconditional love for humanity made Him to live a life of sacrificial service. All His words and actions are centred on it. He taught humans to love and to do good to others (cf. Matt 7:12). He spoke against injustice meted out to unprivileged people. He got indignant when He saw wrong being done to someone (Mark 10:13-16).

His miracles are acts of service. Despite stiff opposition from the Jews, He did not cease to heal those who were sick with diverse sicknesses which involved even breaking the Jewish laws like sabbath statutes. He exorcised those who were possessed by demons taking the entire conflict with the demonic powers upon himself.

Jesus did not only teach about love and service but He lived them out. John 13 shows Jesus “washing the feet of the disciples” during which He became like a slave, girding himself with a towel on His waist. Right after this “acted parable” He admonishes them to “do as I have done to you” (v. 15). His censure of His disciples on the way to Jerusalem in Mark 10:35ff. is also centred on this life style. For Him, power and authority, first and greatest is not the parameter or principle by which the greatness of a person can be judged. Rather it is unconditional love and selfless sacrifice for the sake of others that accounts for greatness.

5. Praying Life Style

Jesus spent considerable time in prayer. He spent time in privacy and solitude. These prayer moments were essential to Him in order to re-energise with the power of God. Despite His popularity and busy-ness, He took quiet time with His Father. This life style is especially emphasized and brought to the fore by Luke. In Luke we see “seven” unique prayer moments of Jesus (3:21; 5:16; 6:12; 9:18, 28-29; 11:1; 22:32). It is noteworthy to see that all these prayers happened during crucial moments in Jesus’ life.

End Notes

1 For details on this aspect see, “Formation of Inclusive Community” below.
Miracles and Signs of Jesus

In biblical scholarship the English word "miracle" normally denotes a supernatural event, that is, an event which so transcends ordinary happenings that it is viewed as a direct result of supernatural power. In the Gospels such events are due to the exercise of God's power—whether directly through human or superhuman agents—and reveal or effect His saving or judging purposes. An event, whether natural or supernatural; in which one seems an act or Revelation of God.

In the NT, the miracles of Jesus, mighty deeds of God's salvific and creative power are understood to be one of the ways in which the final, decisive reign of God has come into history. Jesus' miraculous healing and exorcistic activity freed broken human lives from the bonds of demonic possession and restored and corrupted human bodies to their state. Jesus' miracles demonstrated that the end-time kingdom of God, in which God would over-throw the power of Satan, has arrived in his Person (Matt 12:28; Like 11:20).

1. Miracles in the Synoptic Gospels

There are more than 30 miracles of Jesus recorded in the Gospels, besides the summary statements to the general healings. The meaning of miracles is the manifestation of God's power present in Jesus. Therefore, attributing the power with which Jesus performs the miracles to Beelzebul is tantamount to negating the power of God resting in Jesus. Hence, it is called "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit" (Matt 12:31-32).

1.1. Terminologies Used for Miracles in the Gospels

While the English word "miracle" comes from the Latin word "mirari" which means to "wonder", the Evangelists use several Greek terms for miracles. (a) "Dunamis" (dynamis from which we have got English words like dynamo, dynamic, etc) referring to "acts of power" or "mighty deed"); (b) "Ergon" which means "work"); (c) "Terata" which means "wonder works"); (d) "Semeion" which means "sign". In a miracle the importance does not lie on the supernatural or marvellous aspect of the miracle, but on the person who does it (the performer of the miracle).

1.2. Kinds of Miracles in the Synoptic Gospels

Gospel miracles are ultimately the manifestation of God's salvation and mercy. Jesus' intervention in human situations of perils point to His mission as liberation of humanity from all enslaving elements of the world. The manifestation of God's mercy in the form of miracles. The miracles proper could be divided into four:

(i) Exorcisms: Violently insane behaviour (Matt 5:1-5), the inability to speak (Matt 9:32) or to hear (Mark 9:25), blindness (Matt 12:22), epilepsy (Luke 9:39) apparent tendencies of psychologically divided self (Matt 17:15), etc. were attributed to the work of the evil spirits in the ancient world. Therefore, they are not "healed" but "exorcised" in the Gospels (Mark 1:32). Thus exorcisms are the clear proofs that the kingdom of God has broken into the present world order. Exorcisms manifest the downfall of Satan's kingdom. In the great cosmic conflict between Jesus and Satan, Jesus is gaining ground day by day rendering the demonic powers more and more impotent. The long eschatological and Messianic age has dawned in Jesus thereby making the days of Satan numbered.

(ii) Healing Miracles: The most common miracles are physical and mental healings. From curing ailments like a fever (Mark 1:30) to the healing of more complex sicknesses. The synoptic Gospels abound in such healing miracles. Sicknesses and diseases were attributed to the control of the demons over the individual in the antiquity. Therefore, all the healing miracles also point to the downfall of Satan.

(iii) Nature Miracles: These miracles were connected with things and with the world of nature, not with the world of people. Examples include Jesus walking on the water (Mark 6:48 and parallel), the stilling of the storm (Mark 4:38 and parallel), feeding of the multitudes (Mark 6:35 and parallel), etc. They have their own existing message for us, because they remind us that God is at work in the world of things as well as in the world of people.

(iv) Resuscitation or Revivification: We have few resuscitation stories in the Gospel tradition such as the stories of the raising of Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:21-43, etc.) and the son of the widow of Nain (Luke 7:11-17). In the Fourth Gospel there is the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. These stories are essentially a proclamation of Jesus' power over sickness and death. The resurrection stories indicated to the power of God present in Jesus over death. The
realities of death is there. But, God has a purpose for it, and controls
over it. The boundary between healings and exorcisms, however, is sometimes
ambiguous due to a popular belief of the time that a demon or spirit is
responsible for causing sickness or disease. For e.g., in the story of Peter’s
mother-in-law’s healing, in which a demon or spirit is not explicitly
mentioned as the cause of her sickness, the fever as if it were a person—
leaves her (Mark 1:31). Exorcism and resuscitations may be regarded as
belonging to healing stories in their form as well as content. Both follow
the same pattern of the story telling of a typical healing story; the meeting
of the healer and the sick one; detailing the nature and severity of the
sickness; reaction of the witnesses. Regarding content exorcisms are
healings of persons passed and resuscitations are healings of persons
who have died of illness.

Despite their overlapping ambiguity, the four categories are often
quite recognizable. Although more than half of Jesus’ miracles or healings,
all of the four groups are present in each Gospel except John.

1.3. The Miracles of Jesus as Signs

Jesus refused to work miracles as signs in order to convince unbelievers,
for He knew that such conviction was worthless (Matt 4:5-7; Mark 15:32,
etc.). Yet He regarded His miracles as signs to those who already had
eyes of faith. His exorcisms were the sign that Kingdom of God was at
hand and that Satan’s kingdom was at an end (Mark 3:22-27). His
preaching and His healing work were the fulfilment of the signs foretold
by Isaiah concerning the days of Messiah (Matt 11:2-6; cf. Isa 35:5-6, etc.).
The significance of the miracles of Jesus as “signs” of the divine activity of
redemption is understood only by those who believe in Him; others are
offended at Him.

1.4. Theological Significance of the Miracles

The Gospels are not very much interested in the wonder aspect of the
miracle. The evangelists are concerned with the theological import of
Jesus’ mighty deeds. Secondly, the attitudes of Jesus towards miracles
are manifestations of God’s compassion and the Messianic kindness of
Jesus, the Shepherd (Mark 6:35; cf. Mark 1:43, Jesus was moved with
pity). Jesus understood the miracles as the signs of the Kingdom of God
which He is ushering into the history of humanity to liberate it.

Jesus explicitly connects exorcisms as the sign of the dawn of God’s
rule (Matt 12:28; Luke 11:20). They mark the end of Satan’s rule, and the
beginning of God’s reign (Mark 3:27).

The healings are indications of the dawn of the eschatological age.
They are qualified as the “deeds of Christ” (Matt 11:2-6; Luke 7:18ff). The
end has begun in the life and ministry of Jesus.

Miracles are saving events, which anticipate the final salvation in the
glorious Kingdom of God. They are the provisional signs of the final salvation.

This saving dimension takes for granted the role of faith in the miracles.
Faith is pre-requisite for a miracle. The inner saving meaning of the miracles
can be perceived only by the eyes of faith.

1.5. Theological Message of the Miracles

The most important aspect of a biblical miracle is not the “marvellous” or
“wondrous” aspect. Jesus refused to do such spectacular signs (e.g.,
Matt 4:1-11).

The miracles of Jesus are the signs of his Messianic mercy towards
the sick, the marginalised and the downtrodden (e.g., Mark 1:43; 5:19).
They are the signs of the Kingdom of God already inaugurated in the
person of Jesus of Nazareth.

Only faith can explain an event as an act of God. Jesus is not a
magician, but He works by the power of God, the power of His word.

Miracles have to be re-interpreted today. Miracles bring true liberation
and healing. Jesus brings liberation to any situation that makes us captive,
whether it is sickness, passion or the powers of nature, etc. In today’s
world we need exorcisms from the possession of immorality, the lust of
sex, corruption, hatred, war, casteism, etc.

1.6. Theological Interests of the Evangelists

1.6.1. Mark

Mark has narrated the story of Jesus in a dramatic way. He has given
important place for the works of Jesus. Jesus demonstrated the power of
dawn of the Kingdom of God mainly by healing illness or demon
possessions demonstrating end of Satan’s reign. But, in most cases,
Jesus charged the beneficiaries not to reveal His identity (1:25-34; 3:12,
etc.). Theologians call this motif “messianic secret” of Mark. Jesus is not
to be viewed as a ‘miracle worker’ but rather ‘he must suffer and die.’ The
salvation of the world can be achieved by death on the cross and not by
“descending from the Cross” that they may “see and believe” (15:32).

1.6.2. Matthew

In Mark, the central action of a miracle is described in so many words. But
in Matthew it is said as just “He touch.” The healing action is reduced to
"Sign" is used in John as an act or manifestation that points to something beyond the sign itself. Jesus' signs are public acts. Though most are miraculous (John 2:1-11; 4:41-54, etc.), the symbolic function of the sign takes precedence, for every sign points away from itself and from the earthly realm to that which it symbolizes in the heavenly realm. 

It denotes an outward indication of an inner or hidden purpose, usually that is God himself. A sign is not necessarily supernatural in character, though frequently it is itself a prodigy, since in NT times it was considered reasonable to expect that God would authenticate any disclosure of His intention by means of supernatural occurrences.

Thus the question of “Who is Jesus?” is a very important point in John’s signs. In the Jewish thought, they believed that Messiah will be a miracle working Messiah and that signs and wonders will accompany the Messiah. This thought is reflected in John 7:31; 10:41; 11:47. What John aims or to what effect John uses the “signs” vis-à-vis Jesus is to show that Jesus is the Messiah in accordance to their belief. They need not hesitate nor confused neither reject Him because in Jesus their long wait for the Messiah has been fulfilled.

2.2. Use of Signs in John

There are 7 Signs in the Gospel of John:
(a) Turning water into wine (2:1-11)
(b) Healing of an official’s son (4:46-54)
(c) Healing of man at the pool of Bethsaida (5:1-9)
(d) The feeding of the five thousand (6:1-14)
(e) Jesus walking on the water (6:16-21)
(f) Healing of a man born blind (9:1-12)
(g) Raising of Lazarus from the dead (11:1-45)

Of these seven signs only two are found in the synoptic Gospels while the other five are unique to John. For this reason, scholars have posited a separate “Signs Source” for John and in their argument John got the five unique “signs” from which he copied them. But what about the other two signs which he shares with the synoptics? Scholars opine that John might have copied them from the synoptics or by sharing the same oral tradition. Another interesting feature in “signs” in John’s Gospel is that he does not mention any of the exorcisms which we find quite often in the synoptics.

The very term “signs” recalls the Exodus tradition and the role of Moses whom God empowered to work “signs” before Pharaoh (Ex 4:17).
Since signs point to the “doer” John’s intent is to use signs to signify who Jesus is. The signs reveal who Jesus is. Therefore, at the end of the signs there is a reaction from the people, either positively or negatively. Thus, after the first sign, Jesus’ disciples believe in Him (2:11). Similarly, when Jesus performs sign at a feast in Jerusalem many believe in Him (2:23).

Even in 20:30-31 the author says that Jesus did many other signs but only few are recorded. In fact, he has chosen to record only “7” of them. For the Jews, “7” was considered “complete” or “perfect” number made up of the number of the world (4) and the number of heaven (3) that is why they attributed “7” to God (4+3=7). Therefore, John has given enough proof to show that Jesus is God’s Messiah.

2.3. Signs and Faith

Just like in the synoptic Gospels, Jesus in John refuses to perform signs in order to illicit faith (cf. 4:48), but, for the most part, John presents the signs of Jesus as if they ought to evoke faith in Him. The signs in John play a positive theological role in calling attention to Jesus’ origin, power and purpose. Therefore, merely seeing the signs or believing in the signs as miraculous deeds is not enough (2:23), but to reject them is to reject Jesus’ identity and His divine mission. Sign “bear witness” to Jesus (5:36 where the word “the works” is used). Their function is to act only as testimonies to Jesus. Thus in John, it is significant to notice that no one who rejects Jesus’ signs comes to believe in Him.

2.4. Signs as Revelations

Jesus’ “signs” in John also act as “revelatory”. But they are not “full” or “complete” but “preliminary revelation” for two reasons.

(i) Anyone who believes the testimony of Jesus’ signs (5:37) may go forward to a deeper, fuller and theologically indispensable faith in Jesus as the Son of God, the Messiah.

(ii) The proper and fuller interpretation of the “signs” awaits Jesus’ “glorification” on the cross, i.e., His death and exaltation.

End Notes

4 Jose Maniparampil, Synoptic Gospels (Bangalore: Claretion Publications, 2004), 429.
Understanding the Jesus Movement in the Gospel Traditions

Pharisees appear as legalistic and intolerant in the Gospels. Along with the Torah, they also accepted the "tradition of the elders" (i.e., interpretations of the Torah by the Rabbis) as authoritative and binding on the Jews (Mark 7:5, Matt 15:2). Therefore, it is not unusual nor surprising to find Jesus, who quite often deviated from the kind of Pharisaic use of the Torah and their religiosity, attracting the wrath of the Pharisees.2

Jesus and the Pharisees differed in the interpretations of the Law.3 In the teachings of Jesus, Pharisees appear playing a negative role. They hardly receive any commendation from Jesus. Most of Jesus’ acerbic language is directed against them (for example, “whitewashed tomb”, “hypocrites”, “serpents”, “brood of vipers”). Jesus used them in negative role in His parables (e.g., the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax-collector, Luke 18:9-14), warned His disciples about Pharisees’ hypocrisy (Matt 5:20), condemned them with a series of “woes” (Matt 23),4 they are those who stop others from entering the kingdom of God. What is expected, therefore, is a constant conflict, disagreement and confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees.

Jesus, in Matt, condemns the “righteousness” of the Pharisees and the scribes and so He demands a “higher righteousness” from them (Matt 5:20). Their false religiosity is attacked by Jesus on many occasions. Their long but empty prayers, their fasting, their loud prayers on the streets are all mocked by Jesus and challenges His disciples not to be like them. Instead, He teaches them to go to the inner chamber while they pray so that nobody will see them praying (Matt 6:6). He also negates their adherence to the Mosaic Law with a series of “antithetical” interpretations with the formula “you have heard that it was said…but I tell you” (Matt 5:21ff.). In such passages Jesus demonstrates that He is superior to Moses, whom the Pharisees revered and whose Law they upheld and tried to impose on other Jews. Jesus is more authoritative than Moses because He has the power to negate what Moses said with what He was saying. Moreover, the severest condemnation of the Pharisees, together with their scribes, is found in Matt 23. Jesus censures them on their hypocrisy and how they increase the burden on others. He denounces them with a series of “woes” or the “woe passages” calling them with sharp and bitter names. They considered themselves to be “righteous” and “clean” but Jesus calls them “hypocrites” who are “serpents,” “brood of vipers,” “whitewashed tombs,” etc.

Similarly, the Pharisees are always after Jesus looking to find fault on Him and to trap Him. They confronted Him and asked diverse questions with a motive of proving Jesus wrong so that they could condemn Him. Their questions involved such matters like “plucking grains on Sabbath,”
“washing of hands before meals,” “fasting,” “marriage,” etc. They accused Jesus as being possessed by the power of the devil and that Jesus was able to exorcise the demons “only by Beelzebul” (Matt 12:24). All this suggests that the Pharisees constituted the main opponents of Jesus.

1.1. Points of Contention between Pharisees and Jesus

The confrontations and conflicts between Jesus and the Pharisees revolved around the following matters:

1.1.1. Sabbath Observance

One of the major issues on which Jesus and the Pharisees conflicted was on the observance of the Sabbath. When Jesus’ disciples plucked heads of grain on a Sabbath and when Jesus healed on a Sabbath day (Mark 2:23-3:6; Matt 12:1-14; Luke 6:1-11), the Pharisees confronted Jesus saying that they were breaking the Sabbath law. According to the OT, Sabbath must be kept holy and so the Jews must abstain from work. For them, therefore, plucking grains and healing on Sabbath was in contravention of the Mosaic Law on Sabbath. Jesus replied that Sabbath is meant for humans not humans for Sabbath. What Jesus means is that the welfare of the people should take precedence over the observance of the Sabbath. Saving life even on Sabbath is more lawful and permissible even by the Mosaic law than killing life in the name of Sabbath. Moreover, Jesus pointedly tells them that He is (“the Son of man”) is the “lord” of Sabbath. Jesus does not say “outside of Sabbath” but what He means is that He is “above the Sabbath”. Therefore, He has authority and power to revise the Sabbath regulations or even to annul them. What the Pharisees have forgotten was that their Rabbis permitted circumcision to be performed even on a Sabbath, making circumcision law to take precedence over Sabbath law, and allowed some work on Sabbath like self-defence.5

1.1.1.2. Ritual Cleansing/Washing

In Matt 15:1ff. and Mark 7:1ff. Pharisees and scribes combine together and question Jesus on not observing ritual cleansing. Their main contention here is not about the “act” of cleansing but for transgressing the “tradition of the elders” (Matt 15:2). As noted above, the Pharisees accepted “tradition” of the Rabbis as equally inspired and authoritative as the Torah. Jesus in this passage counter accuse them of transgressing “the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?” (Matt 15:3). Jesus, like the majority of the Jews and unlike the Pharisees, considered “the commandment of God” as superior to “the tradition of the elders”. According to Mark, “washing” included washing hands, cups, pots and vessels of bronze (7:4).

1.1.1.3. Marriage

The Pharisees confronted Jesus with a question about marriage (Mark 10:2-12; Matt 19:3-12). Both Mark and Matt say that their intention was to “test” Jesus (Mark 10:2; Matt 19:3). The Markan report is more clear because he included a counter question from Jesus in the beginning of the narrative (which Matt places in the middle), “What did Moses command you?” (v 3) and they are made to give the answer to their question. However, in both Mark and Matt, Jesus exercises His authority and superiority over Moses in giving a new “Law” concerning marriage with an appeal/reference to the “Torah” (in this to the book of Genesis) which the Pharisees were zealously observing. But Jesus exposes their “selective amnesia” by showing that Torah indeed tells about God creating “male and female” (reference is to Gen 1:27) and concluding that divorce is not permitted by Moses.

1.1.1.4. Taxes to Caesar

Matt and Luke do not directly put Jesus and Pharisees here because Matt has the Pharisees sending “their disciples” along with the Herodians (Matt 22:16) while Luke say that this question was asked by the “spies” (Luke 20:20) of “the scribes and the chief priests” (Luke 20:19). Only Mark uses the word “Pharisees” here along with the Herodians (Mark 13) who were sent by the “chief priests and the scribes and the elders” (Mark 11:27). This was a very hot political issue for the Jews. That is why we find here both the Jewish religious leaders (who are against Jesus and are looking to destroy Him) and the political masters of the Jews (the Herodians) coming to trap Jesus. They thought that they would trap Jesus and get a reason for His condemnation. For, if Jesus would say “give” He would be found supporting the Roman hegemony exercised over the Jews through the Herodians, and if He would say “don’t give” He would be found standing against the Caesar.6 Anyhow, they thought, they have an inescapable question for Jesus. But they were outwitted by Jesus who makes a critical separation between God and Caesar when He told them to give Caesar “the things that are Caesar’s” and God “the things that are God’s” (Matt 22:21).

1.2. The Sadducees

They do not appear as often as the Pharisees in the Gospels. One major belief that was distinctive to Saddusaic group was that they did not believe in resurrection. Therefore, it is quite expected that when Jesus talked about death and resurrection, the Sadducees got offended and confronted Him. There is a triple tradition in the synoptic Gospels about the Sadducees where we find them coming and asking Jesus a question on resurrection.
(Mark 12:18ff.; Matt 22:23ff.; Luke 20:27-40). They asked a seemingly difficult question to Jesus about a woman who became wife of all seven brothers, one after another, and so “in the resurrection, whose wife will the woman be?” (Luke 20:33). In response, Jesus exposed them of their ignorance about “the scripture” and “the power of God” (Mark 12:24) and proved them wrong.

In this same passage, Luke adds a very interesting detail in v. 39. There were also some scribes, most probably associated with the Pharisees, who heard and saw how Jesus proved the Sadducees wrong. They complimented and commended Jesus for shaming the Sadducees. It shows how Jesus stood in the middle of the confrontations among the Jewish religious sects.

In Matt 16:1-12 we find them, together with the Pharisees, demanding Jesus to perform “a sign from heaven”. Even if this incident is found also in Mark, he does not club them together but he has only the Pharisees (cf. Mark 8:11-12). Matt may be intending to accentuate the significance of the question by clubbing the Pharisees and Sadducees together as representing the entire Jewish leaders because their demand is related to the Messiah. According to John 7:31; 10:41; 11:47, signs will accompany the Messiah because when the Messiah appears He will perform signs. Thus, both the Pharisees and Sadducees are asking Jesus to show them a sign to prove that He is the Messiah. But Jesus flatly refused their demand because He did not require to “prove” Himself before arrogant people. Jesus has been performing “miracles” and “signs” on many occasions and they speak about whom Jesus is.

As far as Jesus’ death is concerned, the Sadducees seem to be the responsible group, rather than any other group of the Jews, who condemned Him to be crucified.7

1.3. The Scribes

Most of the time, the scribes are clubbed together with either the Pharisees or the chief priests. So their confrontations with Jesus will be given only briefly. When Jesus demands of “higher righteousness” in Matt 5:20 it is set against the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and the “scribes”. Similarly, the “woe passages” in Matt chap. 23 are directed against both Pharisees and the scribes. They are also a party with the Pharisees in accusing Jesus of transgressing the tradition of the elders (Matt 15:1ff.). In Matt 12:38-45, they, along with the Pharisees, demand a “sign” from Jesus (note that in Matt 16:1ff., the same demand is made by the Pharisees and Sadducees).8 But in Mark 11:27ff., they are no longer with the Pharisees but with “the chief priests” and “the elders” questioning the authority of Jesus. In this passage, they think that they are the rightful “owner” of authority in the Temple and so when Jesus cleansed the temple they view Jesus as an imposter and usurper of their authority (for more details, see below as explained under “chief priests”).

In Mark 12:28ff., a scribe asked Jesus about the greatest commandment. The scribes were learned in the scriptures and their word consisted of interpretation and preservation of the law, teaching the law, guardians of the law and they also acted as lawyers, theologians and curators among the Jews.9 So his intention was not to learn it from Jesus but to test whether Jesus knew it or not. Again, in Mark 12:38ff. and Luke 20:45-47, Jesus warned His disciples about religious hypocrisy of the scribes who “wear long robes, get salutation in market places, occupy the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour in feasts” but they are those who “devour widow’s houses and make long prayers”. Because of their hypocrisy “they will receive greater condemnation”.

1.4. Herodians

Herodians were political class. Beginning from Herod the Great, the Herodians viewed Jesus with suspicion. So the Gospels show frequent conflict between Jesus and the Herodians. Both Herod the Great (Matt chap 2) and Herod Antipas (Luke 13:31-35) wanted to kill Jesus. The Herodians were Caesar’s proxy in Palestine and they exacted heavy taxes from the Jews in order to pay a huge tribute to the Roman Emperor. According to Mark 12:13-17; Matt 22:15-22 and Luke 20:20-26, the Herodians came to Jesus, along with the Pharisees, with a politically sensitive question about paying taxes to Caesar. So it was not a simple question but a delicate one which concerned all the Jews (for detail explanation of this passage, see above “taxes to Caesar”). Likewise, Jesus also warned about “the leaven of Herod” in Mark 8:15.

1.5. Chief Priests and the Elders

In many instances we find “the chief priests and the scribes and the elders” forming as a group in opposition to Jesus. In the triple tradition of Mark 11:27-33 and parallels in Matt and Luke, they came to Jesus and opposes Jesus’ activities in the temple. They are considered the guardians of the temple and the scriptures and the Rabbinic tradition. So their main jurisdiction of authority is in the temple precinct. When Jesus entered the Jerusalem temple and drove out the merchants and turned the tables of the money-changers (Mark 11:15-19; Matt 21:12-17; Luke 19:45-48), Jesus had directly insulted them. The merchants and money-changers carried on their businesses only with the permission of the priests. Indeed, it is argued that they shared their
profit in terms of “commission” paid to them. Therefore, they were making huge income out of these commissions they received from the merchants and the money-changers. Hence, through His act, Jesus had given an open challenge to their authority. That is why, they confronted Jesus on the issue of “authority”. But Jesus outwitted them by its counter-questions and they were made to admit their ignorance, “We do not know” (Mark 11:33).

The Gospels show us that they always looked for a way to kill Jesus. Therefore, in the arrest, trial and crucifixion of Jesus, they took a prominent role. They induced Judas with money to hand Jesus over to them (Mark 14:10-11). They were there at Jesus’ arrest and Jesus was tried before them by the high priest (Mark 14:53ff.; Matt 26:57ff.). The trial of Jesus before them culminated in the condemnation of Jesus on charges of blasphemy (Mark 14:64) which deserved death penalty according to their Law (cf. Lev 24:16). Thus, according to Mark and Matt, Jesus was crucified by the Jewish religious leaders represented by the high priest, the chief priests, the scribes and the elders.

In short, Jesus faced conflicts and confrontations from many Jews, especially their leaders. Through His teaching and actions Jesus antagonized them and so they became His bitter enemies during His life time.

End Notes
1. Sinners and Outcasts

1. For more details, see D. Moody Smith, The Theology of the Gospel of John, 48ff.
2. However E.P. Sanders in his book Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), argued that there was no significant or serious conflict involved between Jesus and the Pharisees.
4. The Beatitudes of Jesus on His disciples in chap 5. is paralleled by His “woes” on the Pharisees and the scribes in chap. 23.
5. This kind of interpretation or relaxation of the Sabbath law can be traced back to the Maccabean period when, after many Jews were killed by their enemies on a Sabbath day because they did not fight back since the Law did not permit them to do so, they taught that even on Sabbath self-defence was permitted.
6. Later on the Jewish religious leaders will condemn Jesus on religious ground and bring a political accusation against Him before Pilate.
8. Read the explanation on this demand as explained under “Sadducees” above.
10. For details on this topic, see above as explained under “Economic Conditions for 1st Century Palestine”.

10

Formation of an Inclusive Community

Jesus did not come preaching any lofty philosophy or message nor did the wealthy, the educated or famous people were His target groups because He said, “those who are well do not need a physician”. Rather His primary focus was on those socially marginalized and ostracized people and His message was a simple call to repentance for the Kingdom of God was drawing near. His vision for an inclusive community included those “outsiders” whose existence and survival was in the “margins” of the society. Hence the neglected section of the society, those who lived in the periphery of social, economic and political life, such as the poor, the sinners and outcasts, tax collectors and women received special attention of Jesus.

1. Sinners and Outcasts

One of the most distinctive features of Jesus’ message and ministry is the promise of salvation to sinners. Not only is there much material which includes that message, but it is found in diverse forms - ranging from sayings and parables to reports of Jesus’ activity and accusations against Him. Jesus is said to have associated with sinners (Mark 2:15,16; Matt 9:10-11) and have sought out sinners as one who was lost (Luke 15:10). Jesus flatly declares that He came “not to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mark 2:17; Matt 9:13; Luke 5:32). It is easy to understand the general use of “sinner” in the gospels that it designates the person who commits acts of sin defined by Law. But in the gospels the term “sinner” also designates a narrow segment of the people. A well-known combination, “tax collectors and sinners,” appear to specify an identifiable segment of the people called “sinners” as being linked with “tax collectors” (Matt 9:10-11,13; Luke 5:30).

The question of who are the sinners has attracted scholars’ attention and recent scholarly investigation has shown the following identifications.

(i) Sinners are those who do not observe sectarian rituals (J. Jeremias is a representative of this opinion).
During the time of Jesus the tax-collectors were despised and hated by the common people. They were regarded as ceremonially unclean on account of their continual contact with the Gentiles, and their need to work on Sabbath. But their profession demanded work on Sabbath as well as their constant contact with the Gentiles. Therefore, the Jews despised them and looked them down and considered them "sinners" or "unrighteous". But all the synoptic Gospels affirm that Jesus associated with tax-collectors, especially through table fellowship. One of His disciples, Matthew, was a tax-collector by profession (Matt 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15).

Jesus did not only associate with the tax-collectors but He used them as subjects of lesson for the Jews. Tax-collectors appear as role models in the teachings of Jesus. In the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax-collector (Luke 18:9-14), the tax-collector stands in the positive side to the astonishment of the readers. The parable is addressed to those "who trusted in themselves that they are righteous and regarded others with contempt." Both the Pharisee and the Tax-collector go up to the temple to pray. The Pharisee by his very posture demonstrated his self-righteous arrogance and set himself apart from "all other people" including the Tax-collector. But the Tax-collector "standing far off" acknowledged his sins and prayed with remorse and contrition. At the end it is not the Pharisee who comes out to be the hero but the Tax-collector. Thus, Jesus turned the tables on the arrogant, self-centred and self-righteous Jews who knew how to despise others. At the end, the one who judged is judged and found to be wanting on matters he had condemned the tax-collector. Thus the hypocrisy of the religious and self-righteous people was exposed and at the same time testified that the condemned one was actually the one who was justified.

Again the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10) heightens the point of breaking the barriers of accepted norms by Jesus. Jesus readily goes in, even without being invited, "to be the guest of the one who is a sinner." This story shows that Jesus has no inhibitions about His association with such "outcast" people. Rather Jesus is their friend and His message and ministry has a special dimension for the tax-collectors.

What all these passages suggest is that the tax-collectors, though judged and condemned by the other Jews are willingly receiving the "good news" of Jesus because they admit their sinfulness. But, on the other hand, the religious and self-righteous Jews do not accept Jesus' words because they think that they are full when actually they are utterly dry and empty.
3. Women

Jesus lived and preached in a patriarchal society. During Jesus’ time women were regarded as inferior sex. Women were given secondary position both in private and public life. They were considered as men’s properties. They were always under the care and control of men: under their father before marriage and under husbands after marriage. Their roles were mostly confined to child-bearing, child-rearing and doing household chores. In this regard Joachim Jeremias observes that a typical Jew considered women “in every respect of less worth than a man.”

Even a Jew was taught to pray, “Blessed be to you, God, for not making me a gentle, nor a woman nor an ignorant person,” while a woman was content to say, “I praise you, God, for creating me according to your will.”

On a cursory examination of the gospels it might be possible to see Jesus as just another advocate of a patriarchal society, since He chose only twelve men to be His personal companions. But this is only one side of the story, for the gospels also portray Jesus as one who accepted women both as followers and as traveling companions (Luke 8:1-3). This same Jesus is said to have preferred a woman to listen and learn as a disciple would, rather than to serve Him in a woman’s traditional capacity (Luke 10:38-42). In fact, Jesus rejected many Levitical laws about clean and unclean and allowed unclean women to touch him (Mark 5:25-34; Matt 9:18-26; Luke 8:40-56; 7:11-17, 36-50). It is remarkable to see Jesus in contact with women who were ritually considered unclean because of the flow of blood which was regarded as one of the most serious cases of uncleanness. Most importantly, Jesus never considered Himself being rendered unclean by such encounters because nowhere it is recorded that after such occasions Jesus went through the regular Levitical procedures of purification (Lev 18).

Jesus clearly regarded women as persons of dignity and worth by His many healings of women, by His acceptance and forgiveness of undesirable and ritually unclean women (Matt 8:14-15; 9:18-26; Mark 5:21-43; Luke 13:11-17). Even Jesus dared to call such women “daughter of Abraham,” probably an important status marker for a woman during those days (Luke 13:16). When He used the term “daughter of Abraham” Jesus willingly forgave women who were understood to be guilty of sexual sins (John 7:53-8:11). In Matt 5:27-30, Jesus places the onus (responsibility/duty) of adultery to the lust of men rather than women’s immorality, something that was radical and unusual in Ancient West Asian culture.

Equally significant is that Jesus used women as positive examples in His teaching. Women of extraordinary faith appear as role models – the widow of Zarephath (Luke 4:26), the Syro-Phoenician woman (Matt 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30), the persistent widow (Luke 18:1-8), woman at the altar (Luke 21:1-4). Similarly, in the parable of the lost coin (Luke 15:8-10) a woman stands at the centre of the story which is told to present Jesus’ earthly mission.

Women appear at their best in the resurrection narratives of Jesus in the gospels. All the four gospels record that after His death and resurrection Jesus first appeared to women followers (Matt 28:1ff.; Mark 16:1ff.; Luke 23:55-24:12; John 20:1ff.). It is not unusual because when His close disciples have disappeared from the scene it is the women who constantly are keeping their eyes on Jesus. Similarly, if the resurrection is the crown of Jesus’ earthly life and ministry then it is significant that women became the first recipients and proclaimers of that news of victory. Thus Jesus found women worthy to be the first eye-witness of His glorious resurrection.

End Notes

1 Tax-collectors were Jews hired by the Roman overlords to collect taxes for the Romans. Therefore, they were disliked by the other Jews who accused them as traitors.

11

Life-Giving Life of Jesus

Jesus is described by D. Bonhoeffer as a “Man for Others”. Jesus became a human only to save humans through His death. He lived for others and died for others. He chose to be the servant of all.

Mark 10:45 contains a very important Christological declaration. Jesus did not come as a Master to be served but as a slave to serve others and to offer His life as a “ransom” for many (cf. Matt 20:28). The context of this passage is important in order to get the full significance of this verse. Mark says that the two brothers – James and John – came to Jesus with a “demand” (the tone of their words says that they are “requesting” but “demanding” from Jesus) to make them the chief officials of Jesus in His kingdom (in Matt, it is their mother who brought them and made the “request” on their behalf). They said this because they have a great ambition for authority and power. But it was not only these two brothers who wanted to possess power and authority. The remaining other ten disciples too were ambitious about authority. That is why only, when they heard James and John making the “demand” they also get indignant at them (v. 41).

Then Jesus gave His “principle” for power and authority to them. For Him greatness lies in humility and servanthood. Therefore, He told them that to become “great” they must become servant of all and to be “first” they must be willing to become “slave of all”. He invited them to learn from Him because even if He is the Master and Lord He has chosen to be slave of all. This principle is “acted out” by Jesus when He washed their feet and also told them to do the same to one another (John 13).

2. OT Background for Jesus as a Ransom

The Christological titles “Lamb of God” or “Lamb” or “Paschal Lamb” all carry this significance. The “Paschal Lamb” has its background in the deliverance of the people of Israel from Egypt. When they were in Egypt, God sent angels to strike the Egyptians by killing their firstborns. But Israelites were asked to kill a lamb and smear its blood on the doorposts so that when the angel of the Lord came, seeing the blood on the doorposts, they “passed over” their houses. The Passover festival commemorates this event and at every Passover a lamb is killed. From the lamb killed on Passover festival the title “Paschal Lamb” is derived. Another possibility for this title is the Greek word “pascho” which means “suffer”. According to this, Jesus is called the “Paschal Lamb” because He is the “Suffering Lamb” (cf. Isa 53).

The other “Lamb” titles are rooted in the OT sacrificial practice. According to the OT, the Jews had to offer sacrifice of atonement on the Day of Atonement. The high priest could enter the Holy of Holies once in a year on this day for this sacrifice. On this day a sheep had to be slaughtered and a portion of its blood taken into the Holy of Holies by the high priest and smeared over the Ark of the covenant. Again the remaining blood of the lamb was smeared over a goat and was released in the wilderness symbolizing that the goat carried away their sins. Their belief was that the blood of the “lamb” has ransomed them of their lives because life could be ransomed only by blood (life is in the blood). From this lamb that was killed on the Day of Atonement the NT writers derived their Christological title “Lamb of God”.

3. Jesus’ Life as a Ransom for Many

Just like the lamb slaughtered in the Jewish Passover festival, Jesus is the “Passover Lamb” because through His blood forgiveness comes to sinful humans. According to the Bible, death is the result of sin (cf. Rom 6:23). Since humans were dead to sin, Jesus’ blood ransomed them to life. Through His blood they are brought back to life from death. His life was a “ransom” because:

(i) Jesus is God: The divinity of Jesus makes Him to be the absolute ransom for the sinners. John’s Gospel has a special emphasis on Jesus’ divinity (cf. 1.1c and 20:28). When Jesus pronounces “forgiveness of sins” before miracles, the Jewish religious leaders accused Him of “blaspheming” (Matt 9:3). In Luke’s account of the same miracle in 5:17-26, Luke adds the scribes and Pharisees ironically confessing the divinity of Jesus (“Who can forgive sins except God?” v. 21) because they know that only God can forgive sins and they now see Jesus (=God) forgiving
sins. The fact is that Jesus is not only “pronouncing” the forgiveness of sins but He is indeed forgiving sins.

(ii) Jesus is Sinless: A sinner cannot save another sinner. Jesus is sinless from the very beginning of His life on earth. It was “impossible” for Him to sin. He “could not” sin also because sin was not in His nature. The Lamb imagery is applied to Him to emphasize His sinlessness. Jesus’ life was a ransom because He was without sin.

His life did not ransom only certain group of people or community. But He ransomed “many”. The word “many” can mean “many individuals” or “many groups” and in this passage it means the latter. Jesus’ life and death did not result in salvation of many individuals of a particular group of people but it effected salvation of diverse groups, race, sex, class, etc. That is why the Evangelists, especially Matt and Luke, presents Jesus as universal saviour who saved both the Jews and the non-Jews (the Gentiles). The shedding of His divine and sinless blood saved both Jews and Gentiles, men and women, rich and poor (cf. Gal 3:28).

Jesus lived His life for the sake of others. His life became life-giving life because through His life many received life. He lived His life as a slave so that He could serve others to make them live “life in all its fullness” (cf. John 10:10). He died so that humans are ransomed back to life from death.

End Notes

1 Scholars opine that Matt seems to tone down the disciples’ hunger for power and their failure as we find them in Mark. That is why, Matt redacted this material by inserting their “mother” into the narrative and showing her possessing an interest in power rather than the two brothers.

2 It should be differentiated from He “did not” sin because it will imply that it was “possible” for Jesus to sin.

Jesus and the New Temple Motif in the Synoptics and John

“Temple” occupies a central focus in the life and teaching of Jesus. How the evangelists present Jesus as the “new temple” has profound implication for understanding His life and teaching. As we have noted above, Luke has a special emphasis on the Temple because he brackets his Gospel within two references to the Temple (1:9 and 24:53) thereby placing the life and ministry of Jesus revolving around it.

1. Meaning of “Motif”

A motif occurs when a “concrete image, sensory quality, actions, or object happens again through a particular narrative.” It may be a way of organizing a narrative, giving it formal coherence, or it may be symbolic. It may rely on key words, and it may not be meaningful in itself outside the context of the narrative. The narrative is the defining context for a motif.

2. Temple and Its Cultus During Jesus’ Time

The original Jerusalem Temple built by Solomon was destroyed long ago in 587 BC by the Babylonians which was later rebuilt by such people like Ezra-Nehemiah and Zerubbabel. Over the following centuries this Temple was destroyed many times before Herod undertook the rebuilding of it in 20/19 BC.

The Temple occupied a central place in the national and religious identity of the Jews. They gave great honour to the Temple and hence any speech or act against the Temple was never tolerated (see how the charge brought against Jesus at His trial before the Sanhedrin is over His utterance against the Temple, Matt 26:61; Mark 14:58).

By the time of Jesus, the Temple and its cultus had become corrupted. From the time of the Seleucids and Ptolomite’s reign over Palestine, corruption crept in into the Temple and its religion. So the Temple’s role was far more extensive and crucial than religious. As we have already
noted, the priests became the agents of exploitation and corruption. They connived with the business people and made huge income out of it for themselves. There was a market around the Temple and it is in this market that the merchants and money-changers carried out their business. Through this “temple market” the economic burden on the common people increased because they had to shell out extra money in order to participate in the Temple worship. Their annual temple tax had to be paid in Tyrian coin and for that they needed to “exchange” money (hence the money changers) for which they had to pay an exorbitantly high percentage as commission. Similarly, animals for sacrifices were sold at a higher rate in the temple market (hence the sellers of animals) and only those animals bought from the temple market were accepted by the priests for sacrifice. This is referred to in the episode of Jesus’ cleansing of the Temple in Mark 11:15-17 and parallels.

Therefore there was a general negative attitude towards the Temple among many of the Jews (like the Qumran community).

3. Jesus and the Temple in the Gospels

There are three important pericopes in which Jesus and the Temple appear in the Gospels.

(i) The cleansing of the Temple by Jesus ((Matt 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-17; Luke 19:45-46; John 2:14-17).

(ii) Jesus’ sayings about Him destroying the Temple and building it up in three days (Matt 26:61; 27:40; Mark 14:57-58; 15:29-30; John 2:18-22).

(iii) Jesus’ prophecy about the destruction of the Temple (Matt 24:1; Mark 13:2-3; Luke 21:5-6).

Of these three, the first two contain the “new temple” motif.


In some important OT passages (like Ezek 40-46) there is a hope for the restoration of the Temple and its worship. The Jews thought that such an expectation would be fulfilled in the Messianic age. Most importantly, in Ezek 43, the prophet talks about the returning of God’s glory to His Temple and His glory filling the Temple (v. 5). The “new temple” motif in the Gospels, therefore, has to be understood within this background and see how, according to the evangelists, Jesus fulfils that OT expectation.

4.1. Jesus’ Cleansing of the Temple

All the four Gospels attribute certain acts or speeches of Jesus in relation to the Temple. All the four evangelists use the cleansing of the temple by Jesus to great effect in their own distinctive ways. All of them agree that the present cultus practised in the Temple was corrupt.

Their presentation of the “new temple” motif is particularly based on Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem and His purging of the Temple (Matt 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-17; Luke 19:45-46; John 2:14-17). The synoptic Gospels present this event as Jesus’ triumphant entry into the Temple as a “King” while John uses this event to accentuate his “replacement motif” by presenting Jesus as replacing the “old” Temple and its worship with a “new” one.

4.1. Matthew

Matt uses the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem and His cleansing of the Temple to heighten Jesus as the Messiah through his fulfilment quotation of Isa 62:11 and Zech 9:9. Jesus enters the city of Jerusalem riding the “ass” (and the colt), just like Balaam in Num 22:21ff. The Jerusalemites are puzzled yet the crowd knows what the citizens do not know. “Who is this?” they asked and the crowd replies, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee” (vv. 9-10). Matt also presents this as a theophany by using the word “stirred”.

At the actual act of the cleansing, Matt again shows, through a fulfilment quotation, how Jesus is the rightful owner of the Temple (“My house”, v. 13). Except Luke, the other three Gospels refer to Jesus driving out the money changers and those who were selling animals. Combined with this report is the words of Jesus accusing them of making “My house” “a den of robbers” (cf. Mark 11:17) because literally those merchants and money changers have been “robbing” the people by charging higher prices or commissions. One unique feature in Matt is that the insiders are chased out of the temple and the outsiders are brought in to the temple (vv. 12, 14). Jesus censures the Temple priests of their corrupt lifestyle. Jesus respected the Temple but He chastised “the abuses and formalism perpetuated by the religious elite.” Similarly, Jesus is rightfully claiming the Temple to be His house because He is “the son of David” (v. 9), a theme which he has introduced in the infancy narrative to show Jesus’ Messiahship.

4.1.2. Mark

In Mark the incident of Jesus’ temple cleansing is used as “the symbolic destruction of the temple”. Mark intercepts the entry of Jesus to the city of Jerusalem and His cleansing of it with the cursing of the fig tree which would symbolize unfruitfulness of the Temple. He does not allow anyone
to carry on the business transactions (v. 16). With what purpose Mark uses this event in his narrative is disputed. Three proposals are given: (i) Mark intends to show Jesus preserving the spiritual nature of the Temple by purging it of commercial transactions; (ii) He tries to show Jesus objecting to the abuse of the pilgrims by the merchants by overcharging; (iii) He wants to show that Jesus protested against the involvement of the priests in the business of the Temple market. In Mark's narrative one notable emphasis is the double Temple charge against Jesus in the crucifixion narrative in 14:58 and 15:29.

4.1.3. Luke

Luke uses this incident to show Jesus preparing the temple. Luke situates this entire episode within the framework of His weeping over Jerusalem. Luke tones down by omitting merchants and money-changers. However, Luke also suggests that through its oppression and exploitation of the people, the Temple has ceased to be a place where God’s mercy and His universal salvation could be realised. The immediate outcome of Jesus' cleansing of the temple for Luke is that “he was teaching daily in the temple” (v. 47), thereby portraying Jesus as a Jewish Rabbi. He is a different Rabbi, not like the other Jewish rabbis. The Temple belongs to Him and He belongs to the Temple. We must recollect that in the infancy narrative itself Luke shows Jesus in His Father’s Temple (2:41-51). Since He is “God’s Son” (1:32, 35), Jesus comes as the rightful owner of the Temple. For Luke, temple cleansing by Jesus is the way how Jesus prepares the temple to launch the new movement which is to be centred in Jerusalem (cf. Acts 1:8).

4.1.4. John

In John’s Gospel, Jesus' temple cleansing is used to highlight replacement of the “old” temple with a “new temple”. It is noteworthy to observe that John places it in the beginning part of Jesus’ public ministry and intersperses with the other replacement motifs. Jesus in John, especially, fulfils the Temple restoration spoken about by Ezekiel. In John, Jesus' body is the “new” and eschatological Temple which is the centre of the new mode of worship “in spirit and in truth” (4:23). The Jews and the Samaritans competed against each other over the question, “Which is the right place of worship: Jerusalem or Mt. Gerizim?” (cf. John 4:20). John’s Jesus answers, “…the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem” (4:21) because the “rightful” worship is now going to be in His “Temple”.

Thus beginning with chap 2:1, there is a strong “new Temple” motif running through chap. 4 because in the wedding at Cana (2:1-11) when Jesus turned the water into wine, there also we can see Jesus “replacing” the “water” of Judaism with His “wine”. That is why Jesus’ action or reaction during His temple cleansing act is more pronounced and violent with “whip of cords, he drove all of them out” (v. 15). The climax of this incident in John is found in v. 19 and the subsequent dispute arising out of it. How is Jesus going to replace it? By His body because His resurrected body is the Temple that has replaced the old temple.

End Notes
1 In “Infancy Narrative in Luke” above.
4 For more details on it, see “Political Conditions of First Century Palestine” above.
5 In “Economic Conditions for 1st Century Palestine”. Since we have already explained about the economic role of the Temple and its priests in a greater detail there, readers are directed to read that portion once again to understand this topic.
11 “Replacement motif” is a very important feature in John through which he shows Jesus replacing the old one with a new one (e.g. through water turned into wine, chap 2; “new birth”, chap 3; “true worship, chap 4, etc.)
12 Jose Maniparampil, Reading the Fourth Gospel, 203.
13 John says that the “old” faith was “empty” (cf. “fill the jars with water,” v. 7), “incomplete” (“six stone water jars”), and “inferior” to the “wine” Jesus gives (cf. v. 10).
Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus

Resurrection of Jesus on the third day of His crucifixion is of paramount importance in the Evangelists, proclamation about Jesus. For all of them Jesus died according to the scriptures and He was raised up by His Father who exalted Him above everything.

The resurrection, the post-resurrectional appearances of Jesus and His ascension form a crucible part of the Evangelists’ proclamation of Jesus. Basing on the Markan priority of the “synoptic problem”, the earliest Gospel, if it is true that the original Mark ended in 16:8, has no record about Jesus’ post-resurrectional appearances. However, what we get is that there is a unanimity among the four Evangelists, albeit in different words and details with different theological emphases, that Jesus was raised from the dead because they all testify about the “empty tomb”.

1. The Resurrection of Jesus

1.1. Doubts Raised About Jesus’ Resurrection

1.1.1. Was Jesus Real or Is He Just a Myth? Is it Resurrection or Resuscitation?

There are certain basic principles about Jesus’ resurrection which every faithful person must know. The first concerns the question which many people ask in their attempt to disprove Jesus’ resurrection – “Did Jesus really lived?” Such people argue that Jesus never lived; He is just a myth. However, the New Testament contends with such questions and affirms that Jesus, though He is divine, He became flesh. He was a real, historical person “born of a woman” (Gal 4:4). That issue gave rise to another question, “Did Jesus really die?” According to them, since Jesus never lived in history, He never died. Even if they did not win the first argument, they continued to argue that Jesus did not die on the cross but He only swooned or that He just pretended to be dead, making Jesus the greatest actor of all times! The Roman soldiers mistakenly thought that He was dead and so they handed Him over to His disciples. Thus in their attempt to prove Jesus’ resurrection as a lie they propounded the “resuscitation theory.” Resuscitation or revivification refers to unconscious bodies regaining senses with the implication that Jesus was only in a comatose state and He regained consciousness after sometime. The Gospels’ mention of some women going to Jesus’ tomb early morning of the third day of His death with ointments is interpreted by some people as that they were going to give “massage” to Jesus with those ointments because they knew that Jesus was not dead.

However, the NT also witnesses to the disciples’ conviction that their diehard belief in Jesus as Lord is not based on a lie, a farce but on the fact of the resurrection of the historical Jesus. Jesus died. The Roman soldier pierced the side of Jesus with his spear and at once “blood and water came out”. Can a human person survive after that? Not at all. They were also unmistakably clear that it was the same Jesus who died, has been raised. That is why, all they could say or do was – “I/we have seen the Lord” (cf. John 20:18) and for that fact they were not afraid to face hardships, sufferings, persecutions and even martyrdom.

1.1.2. Is the Resurrection Historical or a Fraud and a Deception?

Many people question the historicity of Jesus’ resurrection. Along with the “swoon theory”, they deny Jesus’ resurrection by saying that Jesus’ disciples stole His body and hid it elsewhere then began to proclaim that He had been raised from the dead. This implies that the resurrection message of the earliest Christians was a deliberate fraud, a lie. They also say that Mary went to a wrong tomb, found it empty and mistook the gardener through the tearful eyes to be Jesus raised from the dead (cf. John 20:15). Another repudiation of Jesus’ resurrection is by the “vision/dream/hallucination” theory which states that the resurrection of Jesus lies in the level of dream/vision – either subjective or objective. That is, the disciples saw Jesus as alive in their dreams (subjectively) or that God hallucinated them and made them to see Jesus in their visions through a “telegram from heaven” (objective vision theory) and hence proclaimed Jesus as being raised. But the Gospels’ record of what happened to Jesus’ disciples immediately after His death should not be missed. They did not espouse any notion of His return to life prior to His resurrection. They did not even imagine that their Master would be raised. All they knew was that Jesus had been crucified and all their hopes had gone (cf. Luke 24:21 where “hope” is spoken of in the past tense, “had”). Their hopes died with Jesus. It is not their faith in Jesus that resurrected Him, as Bultmann suggested; but it is Jesus’ resurrection that produced their faith in Him.
1.1.3. Miracles or Coincidences: Is God in Control of the Universe?

While rejecting the historicity of Jesus' resurrection, many theologians, including Rudolf Bultmann, deny the possibility of "miracles." Their argument is that the universe is a closed system, governed by its set of rules—the laws of nature. Everything happens according to the laws of nature. No outside force, including God, can interfere in or disturb it. They argue that if Jesus was a historical person then there is nothing wrong in saying that he died. That is natural. But to say that He was raised is not only unnatural but also against the natural. That is both unacceptable and impossible. That is why, in the opinion of Bultmann, Jesus' resurrection is not an event in history but myth; Jesus is risen only in the kerygma of the Church, the proclamation of the Gospel. This is nothing less than denying the whole truth of the entire Bible which affirms that God created and sustains the universe. Since He is the creator and sustainer, God can interfere in the course of history. Ladd is right when he states, “Christ’s resurrection is the climax in Christian revelation. It tells us that the God who stands above history acts in history.”14 So this theory stands in a very weak and unbiblical ground.

1.2. Biblical Teachings on the Resurrection of Jesus

1.2.1. “Jesus is Risen” or “Jesus Has Been Raised”?

Perhaps we should also deal with the correct way of saying about Jesus’ resurrection. Which is the biblical way of putting the resurrection of Jesus: Jesus is risen or Jesus has been raised? For those who are not adept in grammar, “Jesus is risen” is in the active voice, putting the entire power and glory of resurrection on Jesus himself; “Jesus has been raised” is in the passive voice which would require a second person to resurrect Jesus from the dead. Just take a pause and think about which of these phrases you are acquainted with or which phrase is mostly used in the churches today. When we read the earliest Christians’ witness about the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the New Testament we see that they consistently talk about the resurrection of Jesus Christ in terms of “Jesus has been raised.” (for example, Mark 16:6; Matt 28:6-7; Acts 2:24; 3:15; 5:30; 10:40; 13:30; Rom 4:24-25; 6:4; 2 Cor 4:14; Eph 1:20; Col 2:12; Heb 13:20; 1 Pet 1:21, etc.). This is called the “divine passive” in which God, the Father, raises Jesus, the Son, from the dead. This, however, does not take anything away from Jesus’ divinity; rather it shows that the complete Godhead, the Trinity, acts in the saving work of humanity that culminates in Jesus’ resurrection.

1.2.2. The Nature of Jesus’ Resurrection

The Gospels present a continuity as well as a discontinuity between the earthly and resurrected Jesus. Jesus, even after His resurrection, had physical body with “flesh and bones” (Luke 24:40) that is why He was able to carry the scar of the nails in His hands and feet and the mark of the spear on His side. He could even invite His disciples like Thomas to touch and feel Him (Luke 24:39). He ate food just like any human person even after His resurrection (Luke 24:42; John 21:13). Yet He could enter even when the doors were shut (John 20:19, 26).

All this indicate that Jesus had physical body even after resurrection just like before He was crucified. Paul also explains it through two metaphors in 1 Cor 15: “firstfruits” and “sowing and reaping.” Jesus is the “firstfruits” of the harvest which signals that the entire crop is now ready for harvest because the firstfruits can represent the entire field. Again, just like the seed that is sown does come out in another form (plant). There is a continuity between the body that is buried and the body that is raised. At the same time there is a discontinuity between the two because what comes out is a transformed and imperishable body (1 Cor 15:35-54).

1.2.3. The Significance of Jesus’ Resurrection

What is the significance of Jesus’ resurrection for us? We must deal with the “divine passive” briefly again. Jesus’ resurrection was not a mere event in history but it has cosmic and historic significance. The tense of “has been raised” is also important here. The perfect tense refers to “an action completed in the past but its result continues in the present.” Jesus died and He has been raised. He died “once and for all” (hapax, which cannot be repeated) for many so also He was raised only once for many. There can be no plurality or repetition of His death and resurrection. But what happened to Him has its present significance. His death and resurrection is still dynamic for salvation for everyone who believes.

Firstly, the future bodily resurrection awaits us (Rom 8:11). The bodily resurrection of Jesus is the guarantee of our future bodily resurrection. The resurrection that awaits us is not only a spiritual one but also a physical one, but in a transformed body, just like the body of the resurrected Jesus.17 What is hope without a guarantee? If Jesus had not been raised there is no guarantee; we do not have any ground for hope. But we hope for our resurrection because Jesus has been raised. And what is hope that disappoints? Hopeless! (cf. Rom 5:3-5). Jesus is the “firstfruits” of the resurrection in whom the first act of the eschatological resurrection had begun. In that we hope. Here is the ground of Christian hope. Without hope Christian faith will be dead.

Secondly, our present victorious spiritual life. In His resurrection, Jesus has defeated death (1 Cor 15:55). We are made partakers of that...
victory through faith in Him. Therefore, Paul says that we die and raise with Christ (Rom 6); we are being raised from death into life (Eph 2). Moreover, we can now, in this present evil age (Gal 1:14), have the foretaste of the eternal life. Therefore, even when we continue to be “saints who sin” there is not only hope to be victorious in the future, but we are made to be victorious in all our weakness in our present earthly life.

Our hope is not based on a vague promise nor on an abstract philosophy but it is grounded on the fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Through faith we become partakers of Jesus making us to share in His life. The Spirit of God which is given to us as the “guarantee” (in Greek “arrabon,” 2 Cor 1:22; Eph 4:30) bears witness to that fact.

2. The Ascension of Jesus

The ascension of Jesus is recorded only in Mark and Luke (Mark 16:19-20; Luke 24:50-53; cf. Acts 1:6-11). We may argue that the Fourth Gospel, though not explicitly mentioned, is saturated with “ascension” thought because we find in this Gospel the “descend and ascend” motif in many passages through which John speaks about the “ascended” and “exalted” state after Jesus’ earthly life (the Christ-event). “The present, ascended status of Jesus is a foundational aspect of the apostolic faith, well attested in the NT writings,” says K. Giles.18

There were forty days between the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. According to Metzger, the ascension of Jesus refers to His entering into a higher sphere, a spiritual existence in heaven from where He had come. The “right hand of God” is the symbolic language for divine omnipotence. It means that Jesus is not simply “sitting” or resting but He is reigning as king, wielding the powers of divine omnipotence.19

In Luke, Jesus had taken His disciples “as far as Bethany” (24:50) and as He was blessing them He “parted from them, and was carried up into heaven” (v. 51). One significant absence here is Jesus sitting at the right hand of God as we find in Mark 16:19. In Acts 1:9, Luke mentions that Jesus ascended to heaven in full view of the eleven disciples (Judas is no longer alive). How was He taken up? “A cloud took him out of their sight” (Acts 1:9). Many people object to the ascension story because they argue that “heaven” as a place “above the earth” is an outdated idea. Luke in Acts situates this ascension event just as the Transfiguration of Jesus event because “two men stood by them in white robes” and speaking to them about Jesus (1:10-11). What these “two men” said points to the Parousia, the second coming of Jesus Christ: “This Jesus...will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” It also echoes Jesus’ apocalyptic sayings in other parts of the Gospels where Jesus says that He will come in clouds with a host of angels blowing trumpets (cf. Mark 13:24-27; Matt 24:29-31; Luke 21:25-28).

The following can be said as the purpose of the ascension of Jesus.20

(i) It was to convince the disciples that the transition period (from resurrection to this event) has now come to an end.
(ii) It shows the Lordship of Jesus Christ.
(iii) “I go to prepare a place for you” (John 14:2)
(iv) It is a sign that His atoning work is complete and final. This can be inferred from Him “seated at the right hand of God”.
(v) He intercedes for His people.
(vi) He is waiting until His enemies are subdued after which He will return and bring to completion the Kingdom of God He has established.

End Notes
1. It is a hotly debated issue among the scholars whether Mark ended with 16:8 and the “Shorter Ending” and the “Longer Ending” being added later by a redactor. The best and earliest MSS of Mark end with 16:8. The two oldest Greek MSS-Sinaiticus and Vaticanus, Old Latin Codex Bobiensis (“it”), the Sinaitic Syriac MS, about 100 Armenian MSS, and the two oldest Georgian MSS (written c. 897-913 A.D.) omit 16:8b-20. Similarly, two important early Church Fathers, Clement of Alexandria and Origen, show no knowledge of the existence of these verses. Furthermore Eusebius and Jerome attest that the passage was absent from all Greek copies of Mark known to them. Several witnesses, including four uncial Greek MSS of the 7th-9th centuries (L, Ψ, 009, 0112) as well as old Latin Bobiensis (k) and few minuscule or lectionary MSS (274, 579, 66, 13, 14) and certain ancient versions continue with the so-called “Shorter Ending”. The traditional ending of Mark or the so-called “Longer Ending” of Mark (16:9-20) is present in the vast number of witnesses, including uncial A C D K W X ΔΘΙΙΨ. Church Fathers Irenaeus and Diatessaron show no knowledge of the existence of these verses.

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other. While resurrection talks about rising from the dead, resuscitation talks about regaining consciousness from a comatose state which means that Jesus was not dead.


8 They did not mistake the resurrected Jesus with someone else. Even if they did at first (as John 20:15 may suppose) they came to know that it was Jesus.

9 Over against the popular imagination of many including fiction/novel writers like Dan Brown. If at all there was a “secret” and if at all there was a “group” to guard that secret, rather than facing martyrdom for guarding a false story, at least one of them, should have revealed the secret by now.

10 Actually such an idea originated from the Jews because Matt 28:11-15 says that the Jewish high priests “bribed” the guards when they found out that the tomb was empty and told them to say that His disciples stole Jesus’ body. That is why many people are still obsessed with finding the earthly/bodily remains of Jesus even today. John Dominic Crossan of the Jesus Seminar also suggested that the body of Jesus was probably dug up and His body devoured by dogs! But According to William L. Craig the “empty tomb” is the greatest and best proof for the resurrection of Jesus.

11 Though Bultmann may say so but John 21 contends such an idea because what we find here is the disciples, rather than waiting for his resurrection, led by Peter, are already back to their original profession.

12 Miracles are understood as supernatural events, the events that take place from outside of the laws of nature.


15 Exception can be Luke 24:5 where the English versions translate the Greek Aorist Passive in the active voice (as in NRSV, New Jerusalem Bible, NIV).

16 The Letter to the Hebrews brings out this aspect more than any other NT writings.

17 The Gospels show that the body of the resurrected Jesus was both spiritual and physical. He could come inside the locked room where the disciples were assembled (John 20:19) yet He could invite Thomas to touch and feel Him (John 20:27) and ate breakfast with them (Luke 24:43; John 21:12-13). This is what Paul talks about in 1 Cor 15:35-54.


PART - V

JESUS OF THE JESUS MOVEMENT
1

Designations of Jesus

The leader of the Jesus Movement is designated by a complexity of titles. They are not simply to identify Him or to distinguish Him from others. But the designations that were given to Him had other functions. These designations bring out His personal identity, nature and character as well as His mission.

1. Messiah

The term “messiah” is the translation of the Hebrew term “masiah,” which is derived from the verb “masah,” meaning “to smear or anoint.” When objects such as wafers and shields were smeared with grease or oil they were said to be anointed; hence the commonly used term was “anoint” when grease or oil was applied to objects by Israelites and non-Israelites. The term “messiah” is not used to refer to “anointed” objects that were designated and consecrated for specific cultic purposes but to persons only. Persons who were anointed had been elected, designated, appointed, given authority, qualified and equipped for specific offices and takes related to these.¹

Jewish Christians differed from other Jews primarily in their belief that Jesus was the Messiah or Christ. Yet what kind of Messiah was He? The Davidic Messiah was a king from the line of David who would defeat Israel's enemies and reign in Jerusalem over an earthly, political kingdom. Jesus hardly fit this picture, since He had not driven out the Romans, but had been crucified by them. The Messiah in the Similitudes of Enoch remained hidden in heaven from before the creation of the world until the final judgment, over which He presided. Jesus did not fit this picture either, since He appeared on earth yet did not conduct the final judgment. Even though Judaism had not a single conception of the Messiah but variety, Jesus seemed to fit none of them.²

“Messiah” was evidently not a role that a person might simply assume by identifying himself with it. The Gospels consistently show Jesus’ reluctance to accept the designation “Messiah” without qualification.
Although “Messiah” did not unambiguously denote a person who would claim the political position of “King of Israel”, Jesus’ execution as “King of the Jews” (Mark 15:2, 26) makes that association with the title probable. John applies this designation to Jesus more than the other Evangelists. From the very beginning of his Gospel, John shows who Jesus is: Messiah, through the confession of Andrew (1:41) and he ends his Gospel with it (20:31).

2. Son of God

“Son of God” (Greek huios tou theou) is a title or a means of expressing a relationship especially of Jesus to God. Its usage as it is found in the Gospels for Jesus can be explained only in light of a Jewish background and peculiarly Christian additions. Although Jesus preferred to refer Himself as “Son of man,” there is sufficient evidence that His identity as “Son of God” goes back ultimately to His own assertions. This is especially true of John, but instances of it are also found in the Synoptics. In John 10:36 He admitted saying, “I am God’s Son”. Frequently He referred to God as “my Father” (5:17; 6:40; 8:54; 10:18; 15:15). Such assertion as “I and the Father are one” (10:30) and “the Father is in me, and I in the Father” (10:38) shows that Jesus conceived of His divine sonship as unique and unparalleled.

Just as Israelites were “son of God” in the OT, so are disciples of Jesus in the NT, although Jesus is Son in a unique sense (John 3:16; 18; 4:9). Even though Jesus Himself used this phrase of His followers (Matt 5:9, 45), Jesus is God’s “only” Son and hence those who believe in Jesus can only “become” (i.e., through adoption in and through Jesus) “children of God” (1:12). There are also numerous passages in John where “son” language is used by Jesus with the implication that God is His Father.

The Gospel of John presents the view that the being who become flesh His Son in to the world (John 3:17; cf. 1 John 4:9). The idea of the pre-existent Son of God also appears in the writings of Paul (Gal 4:4; Col: 1:13-20; cf. Phil 2:5-7).

3. Son of Man (The Human One)

In the Gospels, Jesus frequently calls himself “the Son of Man.” The phrase appears elsewhere in the New Testament only in Acts 7:56. The Greek form of the expression represents an earlier Aramaic expression bar enash or its Hebrew equivalent ben adam, an idiom meaning simply “man” in general or “a man.” However, in the Gospels, this phrase has become a title for Jesus. The title apparently identifies Jesus, as the “one like a son of man” in Daniel 7:13. Like earlier Jewish interpreters, such as the authors of the Similitudes of Enoch and 4 Ezra 13, Jewish Christians interpreted the “one like a son of man” in Daniel 7:13 as the Messiah. From that passage they developed the expression “the Son of Man” as a messianic title referring to Jesus.

The NT usage of the term “Son of man” is at the first sight simple enough. With one exception (Acts 7:56) and apart from the citation of Ps 8:4 in Heb 2:6 and an allusion to Dan 7:13 in Rev 2:13, the term is used exclusively by the earthly Jesus in reference to himself. In the book of Ezekiel, “son of man” occurs as the particular name by which God addresses the prophet (2:1, 3, 6, 8; 3:1, 34, etc.) in the sense of “mortal” (see NRSV). Many scholars have argued that the “Son of man” usage in the Gospels has its background in the book of Daniel where the prophet “saw one like a son of man” (“a human being” in NRSV, 7:13-14). Another probable background for “Son of man” in the Gospels is the “Similitudes of Enoch” where the “Son of man” has a Messianic role.

In the synoptics “Son of man” is used by Jesus for Himself in the sense of “I am”. Among the synoptics, Mark presents a more theologically significant usage of the “Son of man” as applied to Jesus. Jesus as the “Son of man” in Mark has three stages: exalted Son of Man; the suffering Son of man, and the coming Son of man. But in John “Son of man” as a self-referent of Jesus has a more varied usage, the most characteristics being those sayings that speak of the exaltation of the “Son of man,” an expression that makes a double allusion to the cross and exaltation (John 3:14; 8:28; 12:34). John 1:51 looks like an original Parousia saying transferred to the present ministry of Jesus. John 6:53 speaks of “eating the flesh” and “drinking the blood of the Son of man,” and John 9:35 of believing in the Son of man.

4. King

One of the Gospel pictures of Jesus is that as King, the ruler over the entire universe. Isaiah had anticipated a future ruler who would sit upon David’s throne (Isa 9:7). The writer to the Hebrews applies Psalm 45:6-7 to the Son of God: “Thy throne, o God, is forever and ever, the righteous scepter is the scepter of thy kingdom” (Heb 1:8). Jesus himself said that in the new world the Son of man would sit on a glorious throne (Matt 19:28). He claimed that Kingdom of God was His (Matt 13:41). Matt has a special interest in presenting Jesus as King. In his genealogy Matt shows Jesus to be the “son of David” and hence the “royal Messiah” of the Jews and at His crucifixion the soldiers taunt Him, with an ironic implication, as “the King of the Jews” (27:29). Similarly, John also shows Jesus as Israel’s King through the placard that was placed above Jesus’ head: “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews” (19:19).
5. Servant

A person of either sex who is in the service of a master is called “servant”. He/she is under obligation to obey, to work for the benefit of his/her master. He/she usually receives some protection in return. The terminology of the Bible does not consistently distinguish “servant” from “slave” or “bondmaid”.10

In the OT, the Hebrew word for servant, “ebed”, contains at least two key ingredients: action (the servant as “worker”) and obedience. Servants belonged to other people (Gen 24:35; Exod 21:21), and performed a variety of work. In the NT, “doulos”, which has a more deeper sense, is frequently used to designate a master’s slave (one bound to him), but also a follower of Christ.11

Jesus is designated as a “servant” but very rarely we find the noun form “servant” as applied by Himself. But there is the verb form “serve” used by Jesus in relation to His ministry (Mark 10:45) or through “actions” of Jesus (cf. John 13). Jesus is the model servant of God whose will is to do the will of the one who sent Him (John 5:30), as any faithful servant-representative would do. He describes His mission as that of serving rather than being served (Matt 20:28; Mark 10:45; Luke 22:27), even to the point of giving His life as “ransom for many”. As a dramatic illustration of what He has been talking about, He performs the servant role at His final meal with the disciples by washing their feet (John 13:1-15).12

6. Teacher/Rabbi

Jesus was regarded as a “teacher” by His disciples as well as His opponents (Mark 12:14; John 3:2) and the people generally. All the evangelists, except Luke, preserve the Aramaic word “Rabbi” or its variant “Rabboni”. He taught publicly in the open air, in synagogues and in the temple. Privately He taught His disciples. Like contemporary Jewish teachers He gathered disciples though, unlike them, He did not create a school of scriptural interpretation but sent His disciples to share His own proclamation (Mark 6:7-13). As a recognized rabbi He was consulted on questions of conduct and doctrine. The gospels record that He was asked about the legality of divorce and gave distinctive teaching in reply (Mark 10:1-12), about a particular accusation of adultery, about a family quarrel (Luke 12:13-15), and about the legality of Jewish tribute to Caesar (Mark 12:13-17). In all these matters Jesus was moving entirely within the interests of contemporary teachers and on some points at least, His teaching was closely similar to theirs.13

In the synoptic Gospels, the teaching of Jesus is dominated by the kingdom of God. The fundamental content of this phrase is derived, by way of a rabbinic form of expression, from the OT where the dual conviction is maintained that God is already King and will finally reign in open triumph. This duality is present in those parables of Jesus which depend on the idea of growth. At the same time, the parabolic application of the metaphor indicates an effective working of this sovereignty in the course of history. In all His teaching, Jesus closely associated a body of disciples with Himself. They were to learn His teaching and pass it on; they shared His work of proclamation, healing and feeding, to receive or reject the disciples was to receive or reject Jesus Himself (Matt 10:40; Luke 10:16).14

7. Bridegroom

The prophets often use the analogy of the bridegroom and the bride in describing the relation between God and Israel (Isa 62:5; 54:5; Hos 2:19-20; Ezek 16). The appeal to Israel to return in repentance is an appeal to forsake false lovers and to deck herself in bridal attire for what is nothing less than a remarriage (Isa 49:18; 69:10). The grace of God is receiving back His people is to be dimly pictured in the husband who goes to the slave market to buy back and remarry the former wife who has sold herself to bondage in her iniquity (Hos 3).15

In the NT, John the Baptist refers to Jesus as the “Bridegroom”, he himself being the “bridegroom’s friend” who arranges the wedding and rejoices when, after standing before the bridal chamber, he hears the bridegroom’s voice announcing his coming (John 3:29). Jesus identifies Himself with the divine Bridegroom in explaining why His disciples need not fast when He is with them for they are in His wedding party (Matt 9:13-14).16

8. Saviour

Jesus is the “Saviour” because that is what the name “Jesus” means. “Saviour” means one who delivers from a present and or future danger. The primary usage of the word “saviour” in the OT is in reference to judges and other leaders raised up by God to bring deliverance to Israel in times of national crisis (Neh 9:27). It was also used of God, who of course, used these human saviours as His agents. In the Deutero-Isaiah it became a recognized title for God (Isa 43:3) in connection with the deliverance brought to Israel in the return from the Exile. This usage represents a turning point in the history of the word, since from then on salvation by God acquired more than purely political or military significance and prepared the way for its NT use in reference to the end-time salvation brought by Christ.17
“Saviour” also had political connotations. With the adoption of the imperial cultus in the eastern Roman Empire, the emperors assumed the title “god and saviour.” This imperial usage may explain why the title “saviour” only became common in second century Christianity. The true saviour is not Caesar but Christ. Here it is no longer used in the sense of end-time deliverer but to refer to Christ as the bringer of present, personal benefits such as cleansing from sin.

9. Lord

The New Testament refers to Jesus as “Lord” (kyrios) in two primary senses: (1) often the term is simply a title of respect, used in much the same way that English idiom uses “sir”; (2) at other times it has a more maim exalted sense, used of someone who has lordship or dominion. In the latter sense, gods, emperors, and kings were called “Lord”. The Jewish people used the term to refer to their God, Yahweh.

In Greek there are two words for “lord” and “master”. “Despotes” denotes the lord as owner and master in the spheres of family and public life, where lordship sometimes entails harshness and caprice. “Kyrios” which occurs more often means lord, and carries with it overtones of the legality and acknowledged authority of lordship. “Despotes” is twice used with reference to Christ in 2 Pet 2:1 and Jude 4 which uses the same underlying idea. In both passages the term is used in opposition to heretical statements. “Kyrios” as applied to the earthly Jesus is in the first instance a polite form of address, as it is with other people. This form of address also implies recognition of Jesus as a leader, and willingness to obey Him (Matt 7:21; 21:29 ff; Luke 6:46). As “Son of man”, Jesus is also “kyrios” of the Sabbath. He has control over the holy day of God’s people (Mark 2:28 f.). Even after His death and resurrection the words of the earthly Jesus have unrestricted authority for the Christian community.

The Lordship of the Messiah, Jesus, is a present reality. He is exercising in a hidden way God’s authority and Lordship over the world and will bring it to completion in the eschatological future.

In the biblical tradition, God and Lord are understood and used as interchangeable titles. It is significant to note, therefore, that though many people rejected Jesus’ divinity, i.e., Jesus as God (and it is on this charge that Jesus is condemned by the Jewish leaders), the immediate Easter community’s confession was “Jesus is Lord” (1 Cor 12:3; Phil 2:11; cf. John 14:5; 20:28; Acts 2:36) and the Jewish opponents of Jesus and His movement seem to find nothing objectionable in that confession.

10. Wisdom of God

In the NT the Greek word “Sophia” occurs frequently and repeats most of the OT usages supplemented by the relation Christ bears to the divine wisdom. Wisdom is an attribute of God (Luke 11:49), the revelation of the divine will to humans (1 Cor 2:4-7), a religious and spiritual understanding of the will of God (Matt 13:54; James 1:5), and the human intellectual capacity (Matt 11:25; 12:42). There is also a proud human wisdom that spurns the divine wisdom and leads only to destruction (1 Cor 1:19-20). The distinctive element in NT wisdom is its identification of Jesus Christ as the wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:24), who becomes the ultimate source of all the Christian’s wisdom (1 Cor 1:30).

Some recent Christological speculation has seized upon the fact that “wisdom” (Sophia) is a feminine noun in Greek and has sought to add a feminine dimension to God even to Jesus on the basis of that.

James M. Robinson writes of Jesus as “very goddess and very man”. Most see this line of reasoning as highly suspect theologically and at the very least, confusing grammatical gender with natural gender. To say Jesus embodied the wisdom of God as a quality is one thing—even Paul does this (1 Cor 1:24); to say that wisdom is a substantive feminine divine, feminine potency is quite another.

11. Logos

Logos is the transliteration of a common Greek word that generally means “word”, “speech”, “account”, “story” or “message”. Logos is used 128 times in the Gospels. The frequency of its occurrence is about the same in all four Gospels. Matthew and Mark use “logos” in a non-philosophical sense. Luke begins to use “logos” in a more technical sense. The Johannine prologue uses “logos” in a particular way to refer to Jesus. Matthew and Mark use “logos” fairly frequently with its general meaning of “speech” or “message”. Sometimes the word can bear the specific meaning of the “word of God” or the “word of Jesus” where it may refer to the message of the Scriptures, of the gospel or of the kingdom. In a very few instances logos describes the authoritative word of Jesus over evil. Luke uses “logos” less frequently with its general sense of “speech” and more frequently for the particular “word” of Jesus, whether it is His message or His authoritative word. There is even an instance where Luke equates Jesus’ “word” with the “word” of God (Luke 5:1).

In the Fourth Gospel almost every occurrence of “logos” is in some syntactical sequence with Jesus or God, but it is not always easy to tell if there is an exact nuance to the word or if it refers generally to Jesus’ speech. In a few instances it is used in the context of a fulfilment formula (John 18:9, 32), that is, Jesus’ prophetic word about himself is fulfilled. The word of Jesus is even equated with word of God (John 14:24; 17:14).
But the most distinctive sense in which John uses “logos” is his personalization of “logos” and its identification with Jesus (cf. 1:1-3, 14). The word is the person of the Godhead through whom the world was created, who took on human nature in history and who is the source of life and light of humanity.27

12. Prophet
Long before the time of Jesus, prophecy had ceased to appear in Israel (Ps 74:9; 1 Mac 4:46; 9:27; 14:41), although a special form of it continued to flourish in the writing of apocalyptic visions. The Jews, however, fully expected its revival in the coming age of the Messiah (cf. Joel 2:28-29; Zech 13:4-6; Mal 4:5-6).

It was the preaching of John the Baptist, however, the “prophet of the Most High” (Luke 1:76) that excited the Jews with an awareness of the return of authentic prophecy. Not only was he widely held by the people to be a prophet, even to be Elijah redivivus (Matt 14:5; 21:26; Mark 6:15; 11:32; Luke 9:8; 20:6); but Jesus Himself paid tribute to John as a prophet (Matt 11:9-15; Luke 7:24-28). Jesus was acclaimed as a prophet, both by the nature of his preaching and teaching and by the miracles that he performed (Matt 16:14; 21:11, 46; Mark 8:28; Luke 7:16 etc.). The Fourth Gospel employs the title of Jesus as “the prophet” virtually as a synonym for “Messianah” (cf. 1:21, 25; 16:14; 7:40). The messianic interpretation of the Deuteronomic passage seems to have been original to the church; it is not known in contemporary rabbinic exegesis.28 The current association of Messiah to prophet was not confined to the Jews alone. Even the Samaritans, as John 4 shows that the Samaritans expected that the “Prophet” (Taheb) would appear on Mount Gerizim. The Samaritan woman recognizes Jesus, therefore, as their expected “Prophet” and that leads Jesus to declare Himself as the Messiah to her.

13. “I am” Saying in John
“I am” sayings form a peculiar material in John. These sayings are found in three categories.

(i) The Absolute Use or No Predicate Complement
In this category of “I am” sayings of Jesus, there is no predicate that follows the “I am” statement. In John 8:24 Jesus says, “You will die in your sins unless you believe that I am”; again in 8:28 Jesus says, “when you have lifted the Son of Man, then you will know that I am.” The most important and Christologically most significant statement of Jesus without a predicate complement is in John 8:58: “Before Abraham was, I am.” In all these instances “I am” is put in the absolute sense, that is, there is no explanation about who or what “I am” is. Scholars have attempted to show their parallels with mystery religions, Hemitic literature and Mithraic cult but a careful comparison shows that the Johannine use of the absolute “ego eimi” (“I am”) is unique to him.

The most likely background for this absolute use of “I am” lies in the OT when Yahweh revealed himself to Moses as “I am who I am” (Ex 3:14). However, other scholars like Francis J. Moloney have suggested Deutero-Isaiah to be a possible background for this usage.

In this absolute use of “I am” Jesus reveals his identity by taking over a formula used by Yahweh to reveal himself to his people. Jesus equates and identifies himself with the Yahweh of the OT (cf. also 20:28).

(ii) Understood Predicate Complement
An example of this form of “I am” saying is John 6:20 – “I am, do not be afraid,” which would simply mean “It is I, do not be afraid” (as NRSV has it). A similar use is found in 18:5 – “I am,” in which Jesus answers that whom they were searching for is He only. Therefore, “I am” in this verse is understood to mean “I am the one you are looking for.” These passages should be understood in the light of the OT use of “I am Yahweh” in theophanies. There is a revelation of God in the two above mentioned passages: the first one is to comfort and strengthen the frightened disciples and the second is a revelation that leaves those who have come to arrest Jesus in prostration with fear and awe before the revealer.

(iii) Expressed Predicate Complement
While the above forms of “I am” sayings are closely linked to the revelation of God in and through Jesus, this final form is more closely associated with the function of Jesus. There are seven of such sayings preserved in John:

✓ “I am the bread of life” (6:51).
✓ “I am the light of the world” (8:12; 9:5)
✓ “I am the door” (10:7, 9)
✓ “I am the good shepherd” (10:11, 14)
✓ “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25)
✓ “I am the way, the truth and the life” (14:6)
✓ “I am the true vine” (15:1, 15)

Scholars like Rudolf Bultmann29 have argued that such “I am” statements are polemical statements against the claims of other revealer figures as life, light, truth, etc., and thus that they are “strongly stressed and always contrasted with false or pretended revelation.” For others these strong affirmations of the uniqueness of Jesus are much better understood within the context of a past which has now been replaced by Jesus [e.g., the manna given by Moses vs. Jesus as the bread of life; the light at the feast of Tabernacles vs. Jesus as the light; the way of Torah vs. Jesus as the way].

14. Lamb of God

In non-sacrificial contexts, the lamb as an animal for slaughter was called “aren”. The diminutive form “arnion” originally meant lambkin, but later simply a lamb. In a figurative theological context especially in Matthew and John, Israel and the Christian church are often referred to a sheep (“probate on”), and occasionally in John and 1 Peter Jesus is likened to a lamb, “amnos” (in John), “arnion” (in Revelation). In the LXX both “amnos” and “aren” are used, while “arnion” is no longer felt to be a diminutive, either in the LXX or in the NT.30

In the NT Jesus is described 4 times as “amnos” (John 1:29, 36; Acts 8:32; 1 Pet 1:19). In John 1:29, 36 John the Baptist describes Jesus as “ho amnos tou theou”, “the lamb of God”. This is not merely a comparison in which Jesus is said to be like a lamb; rather he is the Lamb of God. The Christological titles “Lamb of God” or “Lamb” or “Paschal Lamb” all carry the meaning of “ransom” or “redemption”. The “Paschal Lamb” has its background in the deliverance of the people of Israel from Egypt. When they were in Egypt, God sent angels to strike the Egyptians by killing their firstborns. But Israelites were asked to kill a lamb and smear its blood on the doorposts so that when the angel of the Lord came, seeing the blood on the doorposts, they “passed over” their houses. The Passover festival commemorates this event and at every Passover a lamb is killed. From the lamb killed on Passover festival the title “Paschal Lamb” is derived. Another possibility for this title is the Greek word “pascho” which means “suffer”. According to this, Jesus is called the “Paschal Lamb” because He is the “Suffering Lamb” (cf. Isa 53).

The other “Lamb” titles are rooted in the OT sacrificial practice. According to the OT, the Jews had to offer sacrifice of atonement on the Day of Atonement. The high priest could enter the Holy of Holies once in a year on this day for this sacrifice. On this day a sheep had to be slaughtered and a portion of its blood taken into the Holy of Holies by the high priest and smeared over the Ark of the covenant. Again the remaining blood of the lamb was smeared over a goat and was released in the wilderness symbolizing that the goat carried away their sins. Their belief was that the blood of the “lamb” has ransomed them of their lives because life could be ransomed only by blood (life is in the blood). From this lamb that was killed on the Day of Atonement the NT writers derived their Christological title “Lamb of God”.

Therefore, the “Lamb of God” title as it is applied to Jesus signifies forgiveness of sin through His suffering and death on the cross. That is why John testifies of Him as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” (John 1:29).

End Notes


18 See “Infancy Narrative in Luke” for more on it.


Gospel Writers’ Christological Interpretations of the Life and Death of Jesus

Each evangelist has unique and distinctive theological emphases with which he writes his Gospel and these are brought out throughout his Gospel climaxing in the death of Jesus on the cross. How each of them views Jesus or how they want their readers to look at Jesus is seen more clearly in the way they present the suffering and death of Jesus as recorded in the passion narratives (PNs) of each Gospel. That is why, Martin Kähler regards Gospels as “passion narratives with extended introduction.”

Therefore, we will make a brief analysis of the Christological interpretations of the life and death of Jesus in each Gospel with special reference to the PNs in all the four Gospels.

1. Was There Literary Interdependence among Evangelists in the PNs?

The PNs are not simply factual accounts of the last part of Jesus’ life but they themselves are interpretative in nature. They are condensed with theological motifs showing the thought of the evangelist in relation to events of the supreme importance to him, and so with special care and vigour bringing out that idea. Some scholars consider the PNs to be the first material shaped into a narrative.

Just like in the case of the other parts of the synoptic Gospels there are lots of similarities among the synoptists in the PNs which would suggest that they copied from each other on this part also. Like in the “Synoptic Problem” which considers that there was a literary interdependence among the synoptics in the composition of their Gospels, there is a question about whether the synoptists depended on each other in the PNs. But there are also lots of differences, albeit the similarities, among the synoptists which show their distinctive characters. Similarly, there is also a question about the relationship between the synoptics and the Fourth Gospel in the PNs. While John’s is a completely different Gospel both in style and content, there are certain striking similarities between
John and the synoptics in the PN materials. One such similarities is seen in the role of “Satan” in the suffering and death of Jesus in the Gospels of Luke and John (cf. Luke 22:3; John 13:2, 27). For this matter, some scholars have argued that John depended on Luke to attribute the death of Jesus to Satan. However, it is not very easy to give a definitive answer to that issue. At best, what many scholars opine is that such similarities among the synoptic Evangelists as well as between John and the synoptics may be due to the use of similar or same oral tradition while composing their respective PNs.

2. Matthew’s Christological Interpretation of the Life and Death of Jesus

“At the centre of Matthew’s interest is not Jesus’ message, but Jesus himself. The First Gospel is strongly ‘Christocentric.’ Matthew makes this clear from the very beginning of his Gospel, “An account of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” (1:1). The actual genealogy which follows makes the same point, being structured in three groups of fourteen generations, from Abraham to David (1:2-6), David to the Exile (1:6-11), with the numerical point reiterated in his summary (1:17). Matthew is claiming that Jesus is David’s son three times over. Jesus shares His name with Joshua, meaning “God is Salvation,” and He is also Emmanuel, “God with us” (1:21-23).

The baptism of Jesus (3:13-17) marked His entrance into the public life. At least four reasons are suggested why Jesus was baptized by John (a) Jesus needed to identify with the sinful humanity He came to save. (b) His burial in water by baptism and the coming out of it would dramatize His coming death, burial and resurrection. (c) His baptism fulfilled the demands of consecration to God (verse 15). (d) His baptism by John would release John from the role of the prophet and the herald of the king. John recognized Jesus at His baptism as the Messiah.

Immediately after Jesus is baptized, and heaven’s approval upon Him for Messiahship, Jesus was led up by the Holy Spirit into the desert. There His moral excellency and right to be King was challenged. Jesus was tempted by Satan. The tempter is identified in verse 5, 8, and 11 as the ‘devil’ and in verse 10 as ‘Satan.’ “Devil” is the translation of Greek word “diabolos” meaning slanderer, seducer, and malignant accuser. His ambition was to cause Jesus to sin and to make Jesus His servant. “Satan” means adversary or opposer. Living up to his name, he tried to hinder the purpose of God, that the kingdom of heaven might not be established by Christ.

When Jesus was about thirty years old, He began to proclaim “kingly rule of God.” In the open air and sometimes in synagogue, He preached to those who would listen. He gathered a group of disciples. Jesus taught people to recognize God’s authority as King, and to accept God’s claims upon them. He showed God’s royal power in action by healing those who were sick, and by setting free those who were in the grip of evil.

After His ministry Jesus was arrested (26:47-56), and He was tried before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin (26:57-68). Jesus was handed over to Pilate and He was mocked by the soldiers in the Praetorium (27:27-31). The Praetorium was where the Governor lived and was the headquarters of the soldiers. The whole cohort or company of 600 soldiers gathered around their new prisoner. They were ordered to take Jesus and nail Him to a cross. But before doing so they wanted to have some cruel “fun” with Him. They played a game “Hail to the King.” They took an old used officer’s robe of red or purple. After taking off Jesus’ clothes they put this on Him. Some made a crown of long, sharp thorns which grew nearby. They put it on His head and reed in His hand. Then they knelt before Him mocking, “Hail, King of the Jews.” They spit in His face and kept hitting Him over the head driving the thorns deeply into His forehead and face.

In Matthew’s narrative sequence the mockery of vv. 39-44 took place in the early stages of Jesus’ time on the cross during the morning. Now a new phase begins about noon, reaching its climax in Jesus’ death soon after the ninth hour (3 pm). The focus is not now on the wider circle of bystanders, but on Jesus Himself, and on those immediately around the cross, the centurion and the soldiers. But alongside the human drama at the cross Matthew records a series of physical events, the darkness, the tearing of the temple curtain, the earthquake, and resurrection of people, which add a powerful sense of the far reaching significance of the death of Jesus, and contribute to the climactic exclamation of the soldiers in verse 54. Within the dramatic setting, the actual death of Jesus is recorded in brief phrase which however seems carefully chosen to avoid the impression that he simply faded away. The loud cry which preceeds Jesus’ death and His equally loud shout in verse 46 indicates that, unlike most crucified men, Jesus died in full control of his faculties, perhaps even that He died when He himself chose. Therefore, what Matt seems to suggest is that Jesus was not killed but He died on His own.

Among all the powerful motifs which crowd these verses, two seem to be of particular theological significance for understanding Jesus’ death, His sense of abandonment by God (v. 46) and the tearing of the temple curtain (v. 51). Together they provide a suggestive basis for thinking through what Jesus may have meant when He spoke of “giving his life as a
ransom for many” (20:28) and of His “blood of the covenant poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (26:28; cf. 1:21, “save his people from their sin”), and for reflecting on the consequences of that blood-shedding for the future relationship between God and His people. The distraction between God and humans, in the form of the “curtain,” is now removed so that humans can freely access to God.

According to Matthew, the death of Jesus was a self-sacrifice, “a ransom for many” (20:28) in accordance with prophetic scripture (26:24), but He is raised from the dead (12:40; 17:9; 20:19), assumes authority at the right hand of the Mighty One (26:64) and will return on the clouds with his angles (16:27; 24:31) in power and great glory to judge the nation of the world (19:28; 24:27,30,39,44; 25:33-46; 26:64).

3. Mark’s Christological Interpretation of the Life and Death of Jesus

Jesus is God’s Anointed One, the Messiah (1:1). It is confirmed for the reader at the baptism, the first appearance of Jesus in person in the story of Mark (1:11-15). The voice from heaven at the baptism (1:11) calls Jesus “my son.” At the same time, the voice also declares Jesus to be the one with whom “I am well pleased,” an echo of Isaiah 42:1. This passage introduces the Servant who, God equips with a Holy Spirit (Isa 42:1-2), an event portrayed in Mark 1:9-11 by the coming of the Spirit at the baptism. The baptismal scene is the centrepiece of the main part of Mark’s story. God himself participating as “actor” in the story, formally identifies for the reader “who Jesus is.” Hence, the baptismal scene elaborates such frame-passage as 1:1 (“Jesus- Messiah, the Son of God”) and 1:2-3 (Behold, I send my messenger before you).

Unlike Matthew in his account of baptism, Mark is not concerned to explain why it is that Jesus should even submit to baptism by John (Matt 3:14-15). Jesus goes up from the water and two revelatory events occur, one of sight and one of sound (1:10-11). Jesus “going up from the water” (1:10a) removes Him from the presence of John and these revelatory events. Jesus alone experiences them and they bear the stamp of apocalyptic eschatology.

As Mark portrays, the temptation or testing of Jesus (1:12-13) follows hard on the events of His baptism. The pronominal references to Jesus indicate that He stands forth in this pericope in the same capacity as in the baptismal scene: as the royal Son of God. That Spirit should drive or lead Jesus out into the desert reveals that it is God who wills that Jesus should confront Satan (1:12). The “desert” is the abode of Satan (1:13). The reference to “forty days” is reminiscence of the forty years Israel spent in the desert, during which time it, too, was tested (Deut 8:2). “Satan” is figuratively named the “Strongman” in Mark 3:27: he is the cosmic antagonist of Jesus (3:23-27; 4:15). The image of “being with the wild beast” is best interpreted as an allusion to the eschatological age of salvation when humankind and wild animals will once again dwell in place with one another.

The Gospel is the opening movement, a fast-paced narrative with lots of scurrying violins and loud clashes on the brass, as Jesus moves around Galilee and the northern territories healing, teaching and fighting against evil at a rapid pace. Jesus is described as miracle worker, a healer and an exorcist. While the unclean spirits know who He is, “Jesus of Nazareth…the Holy One of God,” the people are simply amazed and wonder (Mark 1:23-27). Mark recounts no fewer than seventeen exorcisms (1:23-26; 5:1-10), healings (1:30-31, 40-44; 2:1-12; 3:1-5) and power over nature (4:36-41; 6:35-44,47-51; 8:1-9). Mark also characterizes Jesus as a teacher. Jesus is called “didaskalos” both by his disciple (4:38) and by those seeking His help (5:35; 9:17), while Peter (9:5,11-21) and Judas (14:45) used the original term “Rabbi.” Yet Mark records surprisingly little actual teaching, only four parables: the sower (4:1-20), the seed growing secretly (4:26-29), the mustard seed (4:30-32) and the tenants of vineyard (12:1-12).

Mark portrays the journey of Jesus to Jerusalem and His suffering and death. At the beginning of Jesus ministry, Mark twice raises the spectre of His “betrayal,” once when he reports that John, the forerunner of Jesus, is “handed over” into the custody of the authorities (1:14) and once when he identifies Judas, in citing the name of the twelve, as the one “who also betrayed him” (3:1).

In his Gospel (8:27-16:8), Mark leads the reader through a series of three stages in the gradual disclosure of the identity of Jesus. The first stage focuses on the confession of Peter (8:29) and the second stage on the appeal of Bartimaeus (10:47-48) and on the acclamation of those who accompany Jesus to Jerusalem (11:9-10). In the third stage, the Roman centurion, seeing Jesus expire on the cross, affirms that He was “my son.” At the same time, the voice also declares Jesus to be the “Strongman” in Mark 3:27: he is the cosmic antagonist of Jesus (3:23-27; 4:15). The image of “being with the wild beast” is best interpreted as an allusion to the eschatological age of salvation when humankind and wild animals will once again dwell in place with one another.
of the event, for which there are numerous parallels. The darkening of the sun marks a critical moment in history and emphasized the eschatological and cosmic dimension of Jesus’ sufferings upon the cross. About three o’clock in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice those shattering words borrowed from Ps 22:1, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” This is the only saying from the cross recorded by Mark. In Ps 22 the initial cry is an urgent appeal for God to intervene on behalf of the righteous sufferer. This cry of Jesus is not a cry of rejection or desertion of Jesus by His Father. But it is a cry to His Father to urgently intervene in the circumstance.

On the one hand, Mark sets out his theme from 1:1 itself which affirms Jesus’ Messiahship, but, on the other hand, he emphasizes the suffering and death of Jesus, the Messiah. Thus, for Mark the question, “Is Jesus the Messiah ‘in spite of’ His suffering and death or ‘because of’ His suffering and death?” seems to be a crucial one. Mark affirms the second because for him, Jesus’ suffering and death is not an aberration to His Messiahship but very much a part and parcel of it because He is “suffering Messiah” (Cf. 10:45). Hence, Mark also works on the meaning of the “divine necessity” of Jesus’ suffering and death.

4. Luke’s Presentation of Jesus in His Gospel
4.1. Luke’s Presentation of Jesus in His Gospel
Most of the Christological themes Luke which he has already introduced in the infancy narratives recur throughout his Gospel. If, for Luke, the eschatological or Messianic age begins with the birth of Jesus then he shows, how in and through Jesus, God forms a community of “equals” drawn from diverse background such as Jews and Gentiles, men and women, “saints” (righteous/holy people) and sinners, and any such hyphenated groups of the world. In this last age, God makes all of them free members of that eschatological community of equals. That is why, in the understanding of Luke, the movement that Jesus forms is pluralistic in nature and in which everyone can be treated as “equal” to the others.

Luke presents Jesus as the “Messiah-Servant-Prophet to Lord” in his Gospel and he develops this theme in and through diverse contexts and narratival styles. There are numerous instances in which Luke beautifully weaves different OT traditions and applies them to Jesus as the Messiah, Servant and Prophet (chap 1-2; 4:16-30; 11:47-51, etc.). But through his PN, Luke emphatically brings out Jesus as the Lord and so we will survey Luke’s PN in a greater detail to understand this theme.

4.2. Luke’s Interpretation of the Life and Death of Jesus
4.2.1. Luke’s Interpretation of the Life and Death of Jesus
One of the major problems in Lukan studies is the sources of his PN on which scholars do not give unanimous assent. Scholars have argued that Luke’s narrative shows far more divergence from Mark than Matthew, so much so that many of them hold that Luke had an independent PN, into which he incorporated elements of Markan story. But the more convincing opinion is that Luke used Mark as his source for the PN. However, due to his distinct theological and Christological purposes he even composed “fresh narratives” and shaped the narrative story in literary ways for calculated effect. Therefore to attribute any new or distinct word, theme or motif to a separate source undermines the literary capability of the author. Thus, it is now generally held that much of Luke’s special and extra materials are his own composition, expressing his own theological and religious ideas. Accordingly, scholars like Robert J. Karris trace Luke’s literary artistry in selected themes of the Gospel, finding their resolution in chapter 23. That is, he tries to understand the theology of the Lukan PN within the larger context of Luke’s entire Gospel.

(i) One major emphasis of the Lukan PN is that Jesus’ suffering and death is a “divine necessity” which is explicitly expressed by the word dei: “The Son of Man must (dei) suffer many things, and be rejected...and be killed...” (9:22). The word dei is characteristically Lukan and plays an important role in Luke’s theology of promise and fulfillment. It also emphasizes that Jesus’ death is of God’s design and intention. Therefore no plots of Satan or human beings can interfere with it or disrupts God’s beneficent intention because His death is a “necessity” (13:33; 17:25; 22:37; 24:7, 26, 44). Fidelity to God’s will leads to the “necessity” of the cross. Hence, Jesus who experiences lethal opposition “fulfills” the Scriptures by His life and death.

(ii) As the Passover draws near, the leaders – the chief priests and the scribes – are planning to put Jesus to death and their plan is made possible by the co-operation of Satan-possessed Judas (22:1-6). Satan’s involvement in the PN is unique to Luke in the Synoptic tradition. Having departed from Jesus “for a while” in Luke’s story (4:13), Satan reemerges “entering into Judas” (22:3) because it is now his “hour” and his is “the power of darkness” (22:53). Therefore it is not primarily the Romans who govern Jesus’ fate but Satan-possessed disciple. However, Jesus’ victory over Satanic evil is implied in His prayer for Peter (22:32) and in His words to the penitent criminal on the cross (23:43).

Here Luke wants to emphasize the cosmic dimension of a contest between demonic forces and God which affects the destiny of the world. Thus,
Jesus who is shown in constant conflict with the demons throughout the Gospel—in his exorcisms and healings—is depicted as the ultimate winner against these evil, demonic forces.26

(iii) The setting of the drama is no longer the Temple. The Temple has been purged in order to become the scene of Jesus’ Jerusalem teaching ministry. There Jesus pronounced judgment on Jerusalem itself (21:20) and its leaders (20:19ff.). Now the city and its leaders will pronounce judgment on Jesus. Thus, the PN opens with conspiracy of the leaders and will climax on Jesus’ trial.27

(iv) Another distinct nature of the Lukan PN is his preference for the word “agonia” (“agony” or “anguish”) over “perilupos” (“grief” or “deeply distressed” as in Mark 14:34). Jerome Neyrey makes an interesting study in this regard concluding that in the ancient world the emotion of grief could have a connotation of weakness. It was one of the classic “passions” considered a disorder in popular Hellenistic philosophy and in the cultural context of the ancient world “grief” meant shrinking from impending struggle or combat. The threat of death made one collapse in fear. In some Jewish traditions grief was considered as a sign of punishment for sin or a symptom of guilt. Thus when Luke omits the word “grief” from Jesus he dramatizes Jesus to be practising the virtue of “courage.”28 Thus, Jesus faces death courageously, without fear, in the Lukan PN.

(v) Unlike other Synoptic evangelists Luke does not portray the isolation of Jesus and the failure of the disciples. Jesus is not isolated because He is attended by the lamenting “Daughters of Jerusalem” (23:28), “women who had come with him from Galilee” and “all” His acquaintances (23:49). Jesus is presented in communion with His Father throughout, and so the last words of Jesus are not an anguished cry but a calm “Father, into your hands I place my Spirit.” Peter is assured that Jesus has prayed for him so that his faith might not fail; and when Peter denies Jesus, Jesus reminded him of that by looking back at him.

(vi) In Luke’s account, the disciples, even though they are weak and uncomprehending, continue to follow Jesus and would never leave Jesus thereby bringing to fore their fidelity to their Master. Thus disciples as a whole are congratulated and rewarded for having remained with Jesus in His trials (22:28-30); only a discreet silence about them after Jesus is arrested gives evidence that Luke knows they fled.29

(vii) Luke does not portray the negative aspects in his presentation of the passion. In Matthew and Mark victimization and failure dominate the passion where sudden reversal by God comes only after Jesus’ death. But for Luke the healing and forgiving power of God is already active in the passion before Jesus’ death. As seen throughout the Gospel, the Lukan Jesus heals as He goes to death-healing both the wound of the servant’s ear as well as the antagonism between Pilate and Herod (22:51; 23:12). The magnanimous Jesus is shown, even in his death, forgiving those who crucify Him and even forgives and rewards the penitent thief. This act is also the consummate expression of Jesus’ compassion.30

(viii) In similar vein, the Lukan passion does not portray the Jewish participants in the negative. Both in Matt and Mark the Jews, whether authorities or crowds, are hostile to Jesus. But in Luke, while the leaders’ malevolence is emphasized, a multitude of people follow Jesus to the place of crucifixion. Throughout most of Jesus’ public ministry and even into His final days in Jerusalem, the “crowds” and the “people” respond positively to Him (as in 20:9-19 where the “people” react in horror to the parable of the wicked tenants but the leaders plot His demise). Even in the PN, they take no part in any mockery but are sympathetic to Jesus and are repentant who beat their breasts after seeing what is happening (23:48). It is because of the fear of the “people” that the leaders can not lay hands on Jesus (22:2). Moreover, unlike in Mark, it is the leaders themselves that come to arrest Jesus which is improbable from a historical viewpoint but it drives Luke’s view about the people’s neutrality and even their sympathy to Jesus in His death.31 Thus a careful demarcation between the response of the Jewish leaders and the “people” are made by Luke. He convicts the leaders for the death of Jesus while vindicating the “people” over Jesus’ death.

(ix) Another important motif presented by the Lukan PN is that the legal trials of Jesus point to the legal trials of Paul and Stephen in Acts.32 The appearance of Jesus both before Herod as well as Pilate, which is peculiar to Luke, is matched by the appearance of Paul before a Herodian king and a Roman governor. So also Stephen dies praying and forgiving his enemies.

(x) The Lukan PN also portrays Jesus as a prophet and martyr.33 Throughout the Gospel, Jesus is presented as a prophet (4:24-27; 7:16; 9:8, 19; 24:19) with frequent resemblance to Elijah and Elisha. That prophetic role comes with foreboding, for the ancestors of the present generation persecuted and killed the prophets (6:23). The innocence of Jesus is affirmed throughout the PN in Luke. That is, Jesus comes to His death for God’s cause as the just and holy suffering one—a martyr. Jesus as an innocent sufferer is a recurring and important theme for Karris’ study.34 The three accusations brought by the Jewish leaders against Jesus are carefully balanced by Pilate’s threefold declaration that Jesus is innocent (23:2, 4, 14, 22). Herod also concedes that Jesus is innocent.
creation and so there is a clear distinction of Jesus from the creatures. "become" is never used of Jesus in relation to His sonship in John. He "was in the beginning", v.1), divine (v. 1c), He is the agent of God in the faith in Jesus they cannot become "children of God". Likewise, the word For John, Jesus is the "Word of God" in "flesh" (1:1-14). He is "pre-existent" "one sent from the Father" can become "children of God". Without this 5.1. John's Christological Interpretation in His Gospel 

For John, Jesus is the "Word of God" in "flesh" (1:1-14). He is "pre-existent" ("was in the beginning", v.1), divine (v. 1c), He is the agent of God in the creation and so there is a clear distinction of Jesus from the creatures (23:15). More importantly, in contrast to Matt and Mark, the penitent criminal, a unique material of Luke (23:41), as well as the Roman centurion declares Jesus as innocent (dikaios, 23:47; cf. "the Son of God" in Matt and Mark). This declaration about Jesus’ innocence is the climax of Lukan PN thereby ultimately exonerating Him from all the charges brought against him. This emphasis on the innocence of Jesus has a distinct Christological and political implication in Luke’s Gospel.

(xi) Unlike Mark 10:45b Luke does not say explicitly whether he views Jesus’ death as an atoning or expiatory death for sin. But, according to Brown, this theme is implicitly present in the Gospel and is implied by the words of Jesus when he said "my blood which is poured out for you" (22:20). Salvific value is implied in the passion prediction that "the Son of Man ‘must’ suffer many things, be killed, and raised" (9:22). Thus Luke also views Jesus’ death as an atoning death.

For Luke the passion is a time of the resumption of intense demonic activity. Jesus is a righteous sufferer who forgives His enemies even as He suffers. Even in the verge of His suffering and death Jesus does not cease to demonstrate His love and compassion to the people. He trusts completely in God, right up to His last breathe, and He is the prophet-martyr who “fearlessly” proclaims God’s justice even in the face of rejection and execution. The innocence of Jesus, which has high Christological and political overtones in Luke, is heightened in the PN showing that despite being condemned by some people Jesus suffers and faces death as an innocent man. The climax of the Lukan PN, thereby, turns the table on those who condemn Jesus (presuming that they are “innocent”) and Jesus as “guilty”) that they are those who are actually “guilty” in condemning the “innocent” One. Moreover, Jesus courageously, willingly and obediently submits himself to the “divine necessity” thereby fulfilling what has been promised. His death ushers in new covenantal relationship between humans and God. Lukan PN also emphasizes Jesus’ ultimate victory over Satan because He is the Lord.

What we can gather from all the above explanations is that Jesus, in Luke, is the “righteous sufferer” because He is an “innocent victim” and that through His death the world is saved (Jesus as the Saviour of the world, i.e., universal Saviour).

5. John’s Christological Interpretation of the Life and Death of Jesus 5.1. John’s Christological Interpretation in His Gospel 

For John, Jesus is the "Word of God” in “flesh” (1:1-14). He is “pre-existent” (“was in the beginning”, v.1), divine (v. 1c), He is the agent of God in the creation and so there is a clear distinction of Jesus from the creatures (v.3), He is the full revelation of God (v. 18). All these Christological themes are expounded in the latter part of the Gospel.

More than any other Evangelists, John brings out Jesus as the Messiah more directly and explicitly. From the very beginning of this Gospel, the Messiahship of Jesus is brought out through many people’s “witness” and confessions. On many occasions scattered in the beginning chapters of John, John the Baptist testifies about Jesus as Messiah (1:6-8, 19-36). The first explicit confession of Jesus as the Messiah is given by Andrew, Peter’s brother in 1:41. Both Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman confess Jesus as the Messiah implicitly (3:2; 4:19). Of special interest in John’s presentation of Jesus as the Messiah is found in chap. 5 where he presents five of the “seven witnesses” to Jesus: John the Baptist (v. 33), the works of Jesus (i.e., the signs of Jesus, v. 36), God the Father (v. 37), the scriptures (v. 39), and Moses (i.e., the Torah, v. 46). In John the incarnate Logos is one with the Father through “mutual indwelling” (1:1; 10:30; 14:9-11, 23).

Through an “inclusio” of 1:1 and 20:28, John emphatically presents Jesus as “God”, i.e., His divinity. John 1:1c says that the "Logos was God" and in 2:28 which is the climax of the Fourth Gospel, the divinity of Jesus is heightened through the confession of Thomas, “My Lord and my God”. What more proof about Jesus’ divinity is required? What more answer can be given to the question, “Who is Jesus”? John shows the divinity of Jesus by using the two most important names for God in the OT: Yahweh and Elohim.

Similarly, the divinity of Jesus is also emphasized by “sonship” of Jesus which appears quite often at crucial junctures in John. Particularly, John emphasizes that God the Father has “Only One Son”, there is no other sons of God. The emphasis on the singularity of God’s Son is a uniquely and characteristically Johannine. That is why John says that Jesus was “full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father” (1:14). Again he says that since Jesus is the “only” son of God, the full and final revelation of God the Father comes in Him (1:18). Similarly, John never uses the title “son of God” for anyone except Jesus. He reserves this title exclusively for Jesus. That is why, those who are “born of God” (1:13) can only be called “children of God” (1:12). There is also a clear distinction between Jesus’ sonship and the believer’s “childrenhood” in John. The believers can become “children of God” only through the “son of God”. Jesus is the intermediary or agent in making them children of God. Only those who “believe” in Jesus as the “one sent from the Father” can become “children of God”. Without this faith in Jesus they cannot become "children of God". Likewise, the word “become” is never used of Jesus in relation to His sonship in John. He
never “became” a “son of God” nor was He ever “made” a “son of God” because He “was” God (1:1c).

In the Christological interpretation by John, the title “Son of Man” as it is applied to Jesus also bears significant importance. John describes the incarnation in terms of the “descend” of the Son of Man and His passion, death and resurrection as “glorification” and crucifixion and ascension as the “ascend” of the Son of Man to His original place. Through the “descend and ascend” motif John applies the “ladder” in Jacob’s dream (Gen 28:12), which connected the world to heaven, to Jesus Himself (6:38, 62) in order to emphasize the point that “Jesus is the Way to the Father”. He also makes use of the Exodus tradition to explain this theme when he applies the “serpent” that was “lifted up” in the wilderness (Num 21:9) to the “lifting up” of the Son of Man (3:14). In this regard, D. Moody Smith says, “The descending and ascending Christ is the hallmark of the Fourth Gospel.”

5.2. John’s Christological Interpretation in the Passion Narrative

Right from the beginning of his PN, John shows the revelatory nature of Jesus’ identity. Some people might have doubted that the one who was arrested and crucified on the cross was someone else not Jesus.39 In such a context, the conversation between Jesus and those who came to arrest Him becomes important. Jesus had asked them, “Whom do you seek?” (18:4) and they answered, “Jesus of Nazareth” (v. 5). Then Jesus said, “I am” (v. 5b). “I am” is to be understood with a predicate so as to mean, “I am Jesus of Nazareth that you seek”. Through this “I am” saying Jesus is both identifying himself as “Jesus of Nazareth” as well as revealing who that “Jesus of Nazareth” really is. That is why John, through an irony, shows how those who wanted to arrest Jesus, instead worshipped Him: “They drew back and fell to the ground” (v. 6). Here is a Messianic revelation.

The role of the Jewish Council (18:19-24) and Pilate (18:28ff.) also contains some Christological bearing in John. Here Jesus, the Messiah, is directly standing before human authorities, religious and political. Before the Jewish leaders, Jesus speaks about speaking “openly to the world” (18:20). Especially, when “one of the officers….struck Jesus” Jesus appeals to OT and confronts them to bring witnesses to whatever crime He has committed (18:22-23). Ironically, they kept silent because the Jewish Messiah is blameless.

Pilate’s role is more expressed and has more profound significance. When Jesus is brought to Pilate, the Jewish leaders gave a political accusation against Jesus (“evil doer”, 28:30) but when he began to question Jesus Pilate asked a religiously and implicitly political question to Jesus, “Are you the King of the Jews?” (18:33).40 Jesus as “King” concept in John becomes more prominent and it has Messianic overtones. Jesus does not negate it but seems to agree with it (v. 34). Later on, their conversation zeroes down to the theme of “truth” (v. 38).41 Pilate exonerates Jesus of any crime (18:38b; 19:4). The Jews return and in John’s narrative their crowning, clothing and mocking of Jesus has ironic significance. The question of whether Jesus is “the King of the Jews” (cf. 18:33) is ironically answered affirmatively when they “crown” Him with a “crown of thorns” and “put” on Him “purple robe”. This re-entacts the coronation of kings of Israel in the OT. Their “mocking” of Jesus with the slogan “Hail, King of the Jews” is, in a mysterious way, their “worship” and “adoration” of the “King of the Jews”. Thus, in an ironic way, they proclaim that Jesus is “the King of the Jews”. This is later confirmed by the inscription above Jesus’ head on the cross: “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews” (19:19).42 The Jews object to the wording of the inscription but Pilate, again ironically becomes the one to “confess” Jesus as “the King of the Jews”, when he rejects the demand of the Jews to change it. Thus, Jesus is proclaimed as “the King of the Jews” (i.e., the Jewish Messiah) at His death. In effect, this is the coronation ceremony of Jesus as the “King of the Jews”.

In short, John interprets the life of Jesus as the long expected Jewish Messiah about whom the OT bears witness and who is proclaimed as Israel’s King at His death but that King suffers and dies as “the Lamb of God”.

End Notes

4. For details see above “Infancy Narrative in Matthew”.
Some people conjecture that Jesus had the ability to change His appearance so He must have disguised and escaped the arrest while Judas mistook someone for Jesus and hence they arrested someone else in place of Jesus.

For a more detailed explanation on why Pilate surrendered Jesus to the Jews, see my editorial article on "Why Did Pilate Hand Jesus Over to Be Crucified?" ABS Journal, Vol. 4, No. 1 (April 2012).

"Truth" is one of the most important theological concepts in John. Jesus is the "Truth" and so what He speaks is "true".

Notice how John connects the Messianic revelation in the arrest scene (18:5) and the Messianic confession by the Roman governor about the "identity" of Jesus at His crucifixion.

Some people argue that Jesus died only as a human being because just before He died God the Father deserted Him by forsaking Him to be His son. These people see an "adoption of Jesus to be God's Son theory" during Jesus' baptism with the implication that He was only a human being till His baptism. They go on to argue that He died as a human being. This kind of interpretative enterprises are attempts to disprove Jesus as God and that forgiveness and salvation He brought is a farce.

For a detailed study on this topic, see my article, "The Sources and Character of the Lukan Passion Narrative," ABS Journal, Vol. 1, No. 2 (August 2009): 10-16. What is presented below is a summary of this article.

Some people believe that the "disciples" (15:27) and the "Paraclete" (15:26) were the other two witnesses to Jesus in John apart from these five.
The Historical Jesus in Modern Scholarship

Beginning with Albert Schweitzer, the quest of the historical Jesus has been an important point of research in scholarly circles. It heightened the impression that scientific research into the life of Jesus showed a dichotomy between Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith or Creed. The period covered by Schweitzer in his book The Quest of the Historical Jesus, i.e. from Reimarus to Wrede, is commonly referred to as the First Quest of Historical Jesus; the Second Quest of Historical Jesus (commonly referred to as the New Quest of Historical Jesus) began in the 1950s by Bultmann’s followers, and more recently, the Third Quest has been coined to describe the renewed interest in Jesus in His own historical context.

1. The First Quest of the Historical Jesus (1778-1906)

In 1778 an anonymous article, “On the Intention of Jesus and His Disciples” appeared. This article was taken from Hermann Samuel Reimarus, the Hamburg scholar’s manuscript (MS) of Apology or Defense of the Rational Worshippers of God. Since it did not get published by that time, few people were allowed to see the MS, among whom was Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. Between 1774-1778, Lessing published extracts from the MS under the title Fragments from an Unknown Author in which included attacks on the historicity of the resurrection narratives. “On the Intention of Jesus and His Disciples” depicted Jesus as a pious Jew, dedicated to calling Israel to repentance in order to establish the Kingdom of God on earth but Jesus did not intent to introduce new teaching or ceremonies. As time went by Jesus became more fanatical, obsessed by the idea that He could force God by dying a martyr’s death. But He miscalculated popular support and His beliefs about God proved to be wrong. He died disillusioned with God who had forsaken Him. Christianity might never have existed except for the ingenuity and duplicity of Jesus’ disciples. It was these disciples who were guilty of encouraging false expectations of the coming of the Kingdom of God. J.S. Semler responded to these new ideas with line-by-line refutation.

The latter part of the 18th cent. saw a growing number of accounts of the life of Jesus. Some were more conservative with meditations and paraphrases of the Gospels (like J.J. Hess’ three volumes The History of the Three Last Years of the Life of Jesus) or combination of text and meditation set to music (like J.S. Bach’s Passions). Some were fictitious reconstructions of Jesus’ life like K.F. Bahrdt’s The Execution of the Plan and Purpose of Jesus in which he depicted Jesus as a tool in an Essene plot to transform Jewish society. Jesus faked His death with the help of Nicodemus who gave Him painkillers and Jesus “appeared” to public to convince that He had risen from the dead.

F.D.E. Schleiermacher (1768-1834) was the first professor to give lecture on the life of Jesus. He regarded John’s Gospel to be more historical and he reinterpreted Jesus with his own philosophical theology based on religious experience. Jesus was a man in whom a sense of utter dependence on God was uniquely developed. In Schleiermacher’s theology Jesus’ unique awareness of God replaced the traditional doctrine of Christ’s two natures. Others like H.E.G. Paulus denied the historicity of the miracles of Jesus in their accounts of Jesus’ lives.

David Friedrich Strauss (1808-1874) repudiated both the supernaturalism of orthodoxy and the rationalists to salvage the underlying historicity of events by professing rational explanations. He said that the historical outline of Jesus’ life from His childhood to death was overlaid by the creative imagination of the early Church which interpreted these events as fulfillment of prophecy. The early Church also created and added myths and legends to Jesus. Thus the historical Jesus turned into the divine Christ (=Messiah) because of these erroneous devotion of the Church. Likewise his emphasis on the role of myth in religion gave rise to the History of Religion School and his view of the preliterary formation of the Gospel material gave shape to form criticism.

Johannes Weiss (1863-1914) argued that Jesus’ teaching about the Kingdom of God was definitely eschatological in which Jesus understood that the Kingdom of God was transcendent, future. He is not the founder or inaugurator of the Kingdom of God and He is a rabbi or prophet who would become the Son of God in God’s appointed time. But, eventually Jesus realized that this would not occur during His life time but only after His death.

William Wrede argued that the Gospels are post-Easter community product. Jesus did not claim to be the Messiah but it was the Church which made Him to be the Messiah because of their Easter consciousness.
Whenever people professed Him to be the Messiah Jesus had forbidden them from saying so because He did not see himself as the Messiah. In sum, Wrede opined that Gospels do not present the real, historical Jesus but their faith and belief in Jesus as the Messiah, hence the Gospels are unreliable to know about the real Jesus.

The Form Critics claimed that the framework of the Gospel stories was created by the Evangelists for their own purposes and was therefore valueless. They detected three life situations (Sitz im Leben) for the Gospels: Sitz im Leben Jesu (life situation of Jesus); Sitz im Leben Kirche (life situation of the Church), and Sitz im Leben Evangelion (life situation of the Evangelists). Particularly R. Bultmann concluded that the Gospel materials throw more light on the second Sitz im Leben - life situation of the Church - and many utterances attributed to Jesus in the Gospels are actually the words of the early Christian prophets. Thus he widened the gap between the “historical Jesus” and the “Christ of Faith” even the more. His contention was that we can hardly know the real Jesus from the Gospels because the historical Jesus is shrouded with myths of the early Church.

2. The Second or the New Quest of the Historical Jesus

Ernst Kasemann’s lecture on “The Problem of the Historical Jesus” in 1953 provided the watershed for the emergence of the “New Quest of Historical Jesus”. He protested against his teacher Bultmann’s thesis and argued that even if it is impossible to write a biography of Jesus, excluding the historical Jesus or disengaging from it would result in docetism. The way forward, according to Kasemann, was to discover the earthly Jesus by investigating His preachings. Beginning with his insistence other scholars followed his steps in arguing for the historical trustworthiness of the Gospel’s portrait of Jesus.

J.M. Robinson disdainfully dismissed as positivistic the methods of the original quest, claiming that the old objectifying approach to historiography had been replaced by existential historiography which required openness to encounter. Inquiry into historical continuity is replaced by inquiry into inner necessity. Thus he wanted to de-emphasize the obsession with historical Jesus by emphasizing on what Jesus means himself.

Another scholar, N. Perrin, followed the contours of the New Quest. He distinguished between “historical knowledge”, “historic knowledge”, and “faith knowledge”. He also persisted in his severe evaluation of logia Jesu (words of Jesus). It was from this perspective that he set out to define the criteria by which one could determine if a logion of Jesus was indeed genuine: criterion of dissimilarity, criterion of coherence and criterion of multiple attestation. Using these criteria he attempted to show that the Gospels’ records about Jesus are indeed genuine, historical and trustworthy. Thus he concluded that there is no such distinction between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith.

3. The Third Quest of the Historical Jesus

In this Third Quest there is no uniform methodology or sense of unity of purpose beyond the conviction that more may be known about Jesus than was known before in the earlier quests. There is a strong line of continuity between the Third Quest with the earlier quests and the only line of discontinuity seems to be the belief that Jesus was not the Jesus of liberal Protestantism or of the New Quest but that Jesus was a historical figure rooted in concrete historical situation/context of the 1st cent. Judaism.

3.1. Approaches in the Third Quest

The “third quest” of historical Jesus has three main lines of approach.

3.1.1. The Radical Tradition

It is represented by the Jesus Seminar in the US which takes the NT as well as extra-canonical texts to develop a firm data base for determining who Jesus was. Using colour coding system, their findings about Jesus and His words are published in Red Letter Editions (Red: genuine; Pink: probably; Grey: doubtful; Black: definitely inauthentic).

3.1.2. The Conservative Tradition

Graham Stanton, I. Howard Marshall, J.A.T. Robinson and C.F.D. Moule belong to this tradition. Especially Moule in The Origin of Christology seeks to reject the idea of an evolutionary process (cf. History of Religions) for Jesus in which the historical Jesus is transformed into another species through the Hellenistic saviour cults. Instead he sees a developmental process taking place which relates later perceptions of Jesus to Jesus himself.

3.1.3. New Perspectives

Perhaps the most distinctive development in the Third Quest is the search for new approaches by way of forming general hypotheses to account for questions posed by the text. Such hypotheses seek to address questions sometimes neglected in the past and endeavour to understand Jesus in the context of religious, social, economic and political world of Judaism. From this angle many Jewish scholars take keen interest in Jesus (like J. Klausner, M. Buber, G. Vermes). Similarly many non-Jewish scholars pay
much attention to the Jewish world in which Jesus lived. One common
goal among those that belong to this tradition is an attempt to understand
Jesus in the context of the 1st cent. Judaism. This would enable them to
know more about what and why Jesus said or did as He said or did. This
in turn makes the point that if we want to know Jesus then we should
know the context in which He lived and how far He was influenced by it.
If Jesus has to be historical then He should conform to His context, at
least to a certain extent and how far the Gospels’ portrait about Jesus fits
to that context would be of utmost importance.

3.2. The Third Quest of Historical Jesus and the Criteria for Determining
the Sayings of Jesus

Swimming against what was essentially a negative current (because the
onus was put on the person who would argue for the sayings of Jesus as
presented in the Gospels), Joachim Jeremias argued that a more
positive assessment concerning “Logia Jesu” could be reached. Basing
his analysis on a putative Galilean version of Western Aramaic he
asserted that such sayings, as the use of the divine passive (Matt 11:25
9:37 and 11:26, etc), literary devices such as antithetical parallelism,
rhythm, alliterations, “Amen” statements and “Abba” pointed to the ipsissima
verba Jesu (very own words of Jesus).

But more than anyone else it was Norman Perrin who persisted in
his severe evaluation of logia Jesu. It was from this perspective that he
set out to define the criteria by which one could determine if a logion of
Jesus was indeed genuine.

The three principles he formulated or defined were:

(i) The Criterion of Dissimilarity

This criterion holds that if a saying or teaching of Jesus can be shown to
possess dissimilar characteristics to the emphasis of ancient Judaism
and of the early Church, then it could be considered genuine. This would
be especially so if the evidence demonstrated the Church modifying it
away from its original Jewish stress. Perrin argued for the authenticity of
Jesus’ use of “Abba” as a test case of this principle’s application.

While this principle received widespread acceptance among scholars
it was not accorded a catwalk either. The basic premise of this principle is
that the early Church did not distinguish between the sayings of the
historical Jesus and those of the risen Christ, but freely added to them
according to its needs, was strongly opposed. James D.G. Dunn, for
example, presented arguments to sustain the view that the early Church,
instead of liberally creating de novo (something very new) sought to
preserve the original sayings of Jesus. He noted the instance of St.
Paul who makes a careful demarcation between the teaching of Jesus
and his own (1Cor 7:10, 12, 25; 9:14; 11:23-16).

R.T. France also argued that this principle’s drawback lies in its
negative aspect as a principle of exclusion. Similarly scholars after
scholars today show that Judaism was not a monolithic structure or a
single entity. Rather it was constituted of many sects (Qumran and
Essenes), beliefs and practices (Pharisaic and Saddusaic) all beneath a
veneer of apparent unity and uniformity. Therefore, as pointed out by an
Indian NT scholar Fr. John Matthews, these studies lead us to the
following conclusions:

(a) The available information concerning Judaism clearly points to the
fact that many beliefs and facts existed in Palestine. Hence, defining
what “Judaism” believed would be difficult.

(b) To require that a saying could be authentic only if it was totally different
from the teachings of Judaism is to create a historical non-entity. To
say that Jesus is a historical figure entails that He was nurtured and
conditioned by the religious, cultural and linguistic constraints of His
time. And these would have left their own imprints on the person,
speech and actions of Jesus.

Added to these two points is the one provided by E.P. Sanders which is that an implicit historical situation, which reflects neither the
Judaism of Jesus’ time nor the scenario of the early Church will be
meaningless in contributing to our appreciation of the historical Jesus.

(ii) The Criterion of Coherence

By this Perrin means that any material which harmoniously agrees with
the sayings determined as being genuine by the first principle can be
deemed as authentic.

Despite the faulty premise on which this principle is erected, it has
the benefit of expanding the evidence for the historical Jesus. John P.
Meier approves of this principle as “less probative” than the others.
However he hastens to add that by itself it fails to secure evidence. The
principle could at best authenticate the “message” of the historical Jesus
and not substantiate whether a saying actually originated from the historical
Jesus himself.

(iii) The Criterion of Multiple Attestation

As per this test, if any saying or act of Jesus has been documented in
more than one or more independent literary source (Mark, Q, John, Paul),
then it may be considered as authentic. Meier would expand this to include a literary genre too, so that a saying’s appearance in more than literary form (e.g., parable, controversy story, miracle story, prophesy or aphorism) could also be termed genuine.

Both Perrin and Meier agree that this criterion is more effective in determining the authenticity of general themes and motifs, such as the Kingdom of God, a theme scattered throughout the NT (Mark, Q, “M”, “L”, John, Paul) and presented through various literary forms (parables, beatitudes, prayer, aphorisms, miracle story). Nevertheless, such important logia Jesu as the words of Eucharistic institution (Mark 14:22-15; 1 Cor 11:23-26) and the prohibition of divorce (Mark 10:11-12; Luke 16:18=Q; 1 Cor 7:10-11) could be ascertained.

J. D. Crossan, one of the founding figures of the currently infamous “Jesus Seminar” which eliminated, as John Matthews would say by an ingenious method of voting, 85% of the sayings in the Synoptic Gospels as inauthentic and have agreed that only 18% can be established as genuine, appears to favor this particular principle in isolating the evidence for his quest. But in the case of Crossan the application eventually ends up placing more historical value on non-canonical sources than the Gospels, an indication of the inherent flaw in the use of this principle (Refer to the use of the Gospel of Thomas by the “Jesus Seminar” in their The Five Gospels and their colour-coded voting on the sayings of Jesus: Red: Undoubtedly authentic logion Jesu; Pink: probable; Grey: the ideas are his though he did not say this; Black: no way, undoubtedly inauthentic).

To these three criteria propounded by Perrin, Meier has added two more, which are:

(iv) The Criterion of Embarrassment

By this Meier refers to sayings and actions of Jesus which proved to be a source of embarrassment or difficulty for the early Church. The rationale is that the Church would not create material which would diminish the stature of its founder or provide ammunition to its critics to weaken its stance. Hence, the only reason such embarrassing material is found in the Gospels is that it can be traced back to the historical Jesus [e.g., baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist, a fact attested by several independent accounts (Mark, John). Jesus’ acknowledgment that He did not know the exact time of the eschaton [Mark 13:32; Matt 24:36, a view not shared by the omniscient Revealer of John’s Gospel [5:6; 8:14; 9:3; 11:11-15; 13:1-3]].

Meier also warns against using this principle to exclude other data but it must be used in tandem with the other principle, mainly because such embarrassing instances are too few in the Gospels.

(v) The Criterion of Rejection and Execution

One undeniable characteristic of the historical Jesus was that He was rejected by many and eventually executed. This was certainly not an unpremeditated act but the culmination of a process for Jesus had angered, infuriated and threatened people during the course of his ministry. Thus sayings or actions which cohere with this pattern may be deemed to be authentic.

End Notes

1. In his Answer to the Fragments (1791).
2. C. Brown, “Historical Jesus, Quest of,” Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, 326. What follows is a summary of this article.
3. C. Brown, “Historical Jesus, Quest of,” 327.
5. In his book Jesus’ Proclamation of the Kingdom of God (1900).
8. Thus Bultmann proposed the method of “demythologization” through which only, he argued, we will be able to see the “real” or “historical” Jesus who is hidden under the myths of the early Church.
10. In Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus (1967).
PART - VI

RELEVANCE OF THE TEACHINGS AND PRAXES OF THE JESUS MOVEMENT IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT: PERSPECTIVAL READINGS OF RELEVANT PASSAGES
General Introduction to the Perspectival Reading

The Bible is dynamic in nature. It does not change; but it can address any situation at any given time. It can transcend any culture or age. It is not bound by time and space. It was written thousands of years ago, yet it is relevant for today. This "ancient" book is applicable and appropriate to the post-modern and post-postmodern world.

The Bible may not contain many of the actual words or terms that are in use today. It may also not directly or explicitly deal with many of the problems or issues that we face today. Words and issues like HIV/AIDS, caste, homosexuality and lesbianism, drugs abuse, patriarchy, ecology, etc., may not actually appear in the Bible. But it has much to say on these issues because there are similar "concepts," "ideas," and "thoughts" that resonate such problems in it.

Jesus did not face many of the problems we face today. Many of today's questions might not have been questions in Jesus' time and society. However, there are certain issues and problems which concerned Jesus and which continue to concern us now as well, our context and society today, albeit in different form and shape, like the problems of immorality, divorce, corruption, exploitation. While we should be wary and careful about anachronism,\(^1\) we must acknowledge that the contemporary issues are reverberated in the Bible. To see how they are reflected, we need to study the Bible more seriously and diligently. The "hidden" voice of the Bible must be discovered in order to let it talk to us anew. We should allow the Bible to address our present socio-economic, religio-cultural and political situations and permit the Bible to challenge as well as to transform our society.

In order to let that happen, we need to upgrade our reading, interpreting and understanding of the Bible to a higher level. The traditional way of reading and interpreting the Bible will not be adequate or sufficient for this to happen which has, more often than not, failed to address the needs and aspirations of all sections of the people in society. That is why,
newer methods of interpreting the Bible keep emerging which are attempts by the “side-lined,” “silenced,” and “forgotten” people to make the Bible speak/address them and to make it relevant to them. Some of such newer reading of the Bible are the Subaltern and postcolonial biblical hermeneutics.

While we make an attempt to read the Gospels from Indian context, the above mentioned points must be borne in mind. Similarly, we will not make an in depth analysis of the issues confronting the Indian society today because those issues are studied in detail in other subjects. Hence, after briefly highlighting the main contours of the issues, we will concentrate mainly on bringing out the relevance of the relevant passages from the Gospels to the Indian context from these perspectives.

End Notes

1 “Anachronism” literally means “wrong use of time”. It is “an act of attributing a custom, event, or object to a period to which it does not belong.” Cf. The Oxford Dictionary of Difficult Words. Applied to biblical studies, it is used to mean asking wrong, irrelevant or “out of the context” questions to the Bible, or say Jesus, or using or applying inappropriate ideas in the study of the Bible.

Poverty and Suffering

India is a land of paradoxes: it has one of the highest number of billionaires in the world, yet it has one of the highest number of poor in the world; there is a good number of urban world-class IT hubs in India, yet there are also many un-electrified Indian villages; it is a land of “plenty” yet a great proportion of the Indians live in “poverty”.

After the economic liberalization in 1991, India began to enjoy, more than ever before, a great economic boom. The living standards of many people got transformed. Access to wealth and money became more easy for many. But at the other spectrum were majority of the common people who remain to be poor. For some of them accessibility to wealth, money and resources became more difficult. Globalization, liberalization, development, etc. became to be a curse for many of them because it only heightened their misery, poverty and suffering.

1. Globalization

Due to scientific discoveries and advancement in technology the world seems to have got shrunk in size. It has become smaller and smaller as scientific and technological advancements come along the way. What happens in one corner of the world is immediately known from the other end. Transportation has become cheaper and easier so also communication. What was once considered “unreachable” and “unknowable” is in everyone’s fingertips.

With globalization, the gates of the nations were opened to each other. Rigidity gave way to fluidity in all aspects. MNCs,1 which are transnational, are set up. The “nation state” theory underwent a sea change due to globalization. Economic boom was a result of globalization in many respects. Globalization and economic liberalization go hand in hand. It opened a flood-gate of opportunities to the citizens of a country because they could now work and earn in other countries without much difficulty or hazards.

But globalization also created an atmosphere in which the gap
between the rich and poor got bigger and bigger. As globalization go
down to the drains as “individualism” took over. “Collectivity” and “community”
began to be regarded as less fashionable and irrelevant because of the
“self-centric” philosophy

With globalization also came colonialism in a new mask. Neo-colonial
powers started to exert immense power because of their higher economic
power. Imperialism and hegemony appeared in a new form because
even if a nation enjoys political freedom, it became an “economic” slave
to the more stronger economic country. The global economy that is
controlled by few rich, developed nations like G8, which make other
countries oblige to their capitalist, exploitative agenda. In such a scenario,
the poor masses bear the brunt of economic inequality and exploitation.

One such instance is the plight of the poor farmers who are forced to sell
their produce at very low price but the capitalist businessmen sell them in
the urban malls at exorbitantly high price. For example, when the market
price of onion in August 2013 is Rs. 70 per kilo, it is reported that the
farmers had sold them at a meagre sum of Rs. 8/kg.2 That means the
middlemen take a whooping Rs. 62/kg! Such is the unjust economic
environment where the poor are placed at the mercy of the rich. There is
biased economic policies which favour only the rich. Therefore, there is a
glass ceiling within which the poor have to struggle and suffer under
extreme poverty. The thriving economy has no use or benefit for the poor
rather they are made to compete in an unequal marketing playground.

2. Corruption

One of the most serious and persistent problems India faces today is
corruption. There is corruption in every level. There is rampant corruption
in government offices. Many top politicians in India have long history of
corruption, accumulation of unaccounted wealth, disproportionate assets
cases, etc. Bureaucrats are convicted on corruption cases. We even hear
about corruption in the judiciary when judges, those who are supposed
to be of highest moral integrity, are accused and convicted of corruption.

Nothing happens without bribe in India today. Those who give bribe
and those who accept bribe are equally guilty. But since no file moves
without “donations” the poor are made to give bribes in order to get their
work done. To do this, in many cases, they are forced to borrow from
moneylenders at high interest rates. When their works undergo a never
ending process in offices these poor people are made to live in debts for
years so that by the time their works are finished they have to hand over
everything to the moneylenders.

In times of natural calamities and accidents, the relief packages and
aids are “announced” for the victims. But it is a sad reality that they end up
getting less than half of the amount earmarked for them because the
“relief money” has to come through a long tunnel with corrupt officials all
along waiting to take “commissions”. It is often noted that there are massive
corruption in those policies that are aimed at uplifting the poor from their
economic burden, such as MGNREGS, like embezzlement of those
funds by the power-to-be, unutilized lapses, etc. That means, the targeted
poor people are not the real beneficiaries of such schemes but those in
authorities and power end up enjoying those funds. Similarly, lackadaisical
attitude from those who are supposed to implement such schemes so as
to benefit the poor and eradicate poverty kill the entire purpose and goal
of such welfare projects.

Such corrupt practices take heavy toll on the poor. Sometimes they
are made to suffer double which make them to go under more deeper
economic dungeon. Even if welfare schemes are enacted/legislated by
governments there is a serious flaw in their implementations due to corrupt
officials. That is why, poverty remains an ever increasing problem in India
with a huge number of its citizens not even getting two square meals a
day.3

3. HIV/AIDS

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and Acquired Immune Deficiency
Syndrome (AIDS) is a universal phenomenon today. India is also greatly
affected by it. In spite of huge spending on research on AIDS, it is still
considered an incurable disease.

AIDS can be passed on from one person to another through blood.
Hence, it can be contacted by a baby from an infected mother, from the
infected needle in blood transfusions and through sex. Hence, those who
have sex with infected partner and drug abusers are highly susceptible
to AIDS.

Those people living with HIV/AIDS do not fight with the disease
alone but they have to fight against the social stigma that HIV/AIDS carries.
People living with HIV/AIDS are generally ostracised by the society. They
are unwelcome in any social gatherings and they are looked down as a
“curse”.

4. Relevance of Jesus’ Teaching and Praxes to the Context of Poverty
and Suffering
4.1. Matthew 25:31-46: God is Seen in the Poor

This passage forms the concluding section of Jesus’ Olivet discourse (24:1-25:46). Here Jesus speaks about the “final judgment” that will follow His “second coming” (the Parousia). The judgment will be in the form of “separating” the “sheep” from the “goats” (v. 32). The “sheep” are those that are kept at the right side of the “King” who have ministered to the hungry and the needy during their lifetime (vv. 35-40). This passage clearly shows that God/Jesus identifies Himself with the poor, the needy and the destitute: “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (v. 40). This is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer means when he talks about “God’s preferential option for the poor.” What they did to the needy and the poor ones are service done to God. God is the defender and protector of the poor. He is concerned about their well-being. He is pained when He sees the rich and the powerful exploiting the poor.

The “hungry,” the “thirsty,” the “strangers,” the naked,” the “sick” and the “prisoners” are used to represent those sections of people who are socially, religiously, economically, culturally and politically neglected. Those are the people whom the larger society has “forgotten” and whose existence is not acknowledged by anyone. In the Jewish society during Jesus’ time, the poor were considered as a burden and curse. Similarly, the poor are considered as expendables and an unnecessary or unwanted baggage by the rich people. But God takes the sides of the poor, the needy and the destitutes.

In the poor and the needy ones, God offers an opportunity to the rich to exemplify their Godliness by caring for the poor. Having the poor people around is not to be considered a burden rather the rich ones should understand that they are given a chance to serve God by helping those poor ones. There is an implicit teaching on this passage that “service to humanity is service to God.” It also implies that the invisible God can be seen in the poor and the suffering ones.

The passage also contains teaching about the relationship between “how” one lives in this world and “what” one becomes in the next life in the other world. Those who see the need of the poor and minister to them by sharing their possessions they are preserving their “riches” in the next world. But those who have but do not take care of the poor and the needy ones are preserving “poverty” in the next world. The rich ones are offered a splendid opportunity to work out their “salvation” when God places the poor ones around them. Since God comes in the form of the poor, then caring the poor and extending help to them is a divine service. Therefore, there is a divine obligation that is presented to the rich to take care of those in need and for those who are suffering. This passage summons the rich to use their wealth in the service of God. They can do so by sharing their wealth and riches with the poor which is a form of offering to God His share.

4.2. Mark 10:17-31: The Perils of Riches

There is an emphasis in Jesus’ teaching about the dangers of wealth and riches. Jesus had said, “No one can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon” (Matt 6:24; Luke 16:13). Such passages reiterates how wealth and riches becomes a stumbling block for discipleship.

In this passage, the rich young ruler comes up and a conversation is struck between him and Jesus about “eternal life”. Jesus talks about “obeying” and “keeping” the commandments that are contained in the OT (vv. 18-19). The young man, when he justifies himself by saying that he observes all of those commandments that Jesus has just mentioned, Jesus tells him to “go, sell what you have, and give to the poor” (v. 21a). It is a bomb-shell for the young man because he finds it hard to accept what Jesus has just said. He is unable to understand that “giving to the poor” is the gate-way to inherit “treasures in heaven” (v. 21). Jesus, then, invites him to “come, follow me” (v. 21b). Inheriting eternal life would entail surrendering everything, including one’s own riches and wealth, and following Jesus. Unsurprisingly, the young man refuses the “ticket” to “eternal life” offered by Jesus and instead chooses riches, possessions or wealth.

It is noteworthy that Jesus brings up the theme of “discipleship” and “riches” in this pericope. Jesus adds that there is real dangers in wealth and riches because the rich naturally loves riches rather than God (vv. 23-25). The short-sightedness of the rich are exposed because they are more inclined to choosing the “treasures of this world” rather than the “treasures in heaven”. Similarly, Jesus exposes their ignorance about the ways and means to true riches because they do not understand that “losing” this world’s riches is to “gain” the riches of the next world since those who willingly denies the riches of this world will “receive a hundredfold” from God of what they have denied.

What this passage means to a context of poverty and suffering is that if the rich people are willing to give to the poor then there will be a double blessing: (i) the poor will be blessed when the rich people share what they have with the poor; (ii) the rich people will receive much more than what they give away, including “eternal life”. This passage contains a
teaching which says, “To double your riches, divide it with the poor.” In God’s economic principle, subtracting is actually multiplying (not only adding). Since God is the one who takes the poor, the needy and their suffering seriously, those who have the ability but do not give a serious concern and give a serious effort in eradicating poverty, God will act on behalf of the poor against those unconcerned and selfish rich. Thus, the rich has a social responsibility and managing their riches properly includes sharing them with the poor. They will be held accountable by God for the suffering of the poor and the needy.


Luke has several unique materials that deal with the right use of wealth and riches. That is why, Luke is sometimes called “the pastor to the rich”. In this passage, Luke presents two persons who are contrasted dramatically: (i) One is unnamed but he is only called “a rich man”, the other is named (Lazarus) who is also called “poor”; (ii) the rich man lives a luxurious life, the poor man has nothing to eat; (iii) the rich man is clothed in purple clothes and fine linen, the poor man is naked and is full of sores; (iv) the rich man has rich, royal friends for company, the poor man has no one for company except dogs licking his sores.

Luke’s choice of words to describe the rich man’s life is not to be missed. The one word used for rich man is flamboyant or showy who was among the rich and famous and other people admired and envied him. Life was comfortable for him and he felt secure. He makes wealth or money his god and cares nothing for the needs of those less fortunate. The rich man’s sumptuous way of life is now described. It was his custom to wear garments of “purple” such as kings and nobles wore in the form of a magnificent long robe and fine underwea. According to Pharisaic theology, wealth and riches was promised to the righteous (Ps 112:3). But poverty and sickness were looked upon as judgment for sin.

But the implied part of the story is important. Everything around him is not so good because just outside his gate lays Lazarus. This is a God-given opportunity to him to share the food he enjoys with his friends, at least bits that he is throwing away. Not only that, but, there is a chance just before him to show his love to this poor man by nursing his sores and taking care of his health. Therefore, he is guilty of not seizing the “opportunity” and also of not making use of his “ability” to help Lazarus. But he chooses to be blinded by his love for money. The danger of wealth about which Luke repeatedly warns his readers is what he chooses (cf. 16:13). By choosing to serve “mammon” he did not use his God-given riches righteously by sharing it with Lazarus. Not loving Lazarus is tantamount to not loving God.

Thus, he lacked nothing – wealth, fame, friends or whatever – he lived a very dignified life on earth. But he failed to do the most important thing in life.

On the other hand, the poor man is deliberately contrasted with the rich man. Unlike the rich man he is named Lazarus. He was “laid” at the rich man’s gate daily not necessarily because he was sick and crippled, but because he was “laid” there by God for the rich man’s sake. But the only attention he got was from the dogs not from the rich man. The beggar lays at the gate and not beside the table from which the scraps fell, and so the reference may be not to crumbs that fell unwittingly from the table, but to pieces of bread which the guests used to wipe their hands and then threw under the table. Such crumbs were normally eaten by the “dogs” which also turn their unwelcome attention to the beggar. In the Jewish tradition, the beggars waited at the gate of the Temple for alms and almsgiving was considered a sacred duty. The rich man is offered the opportunity to perform his sacred duty by having Lazarus at his gate. The “dogs” are also considered to be ownerless dogs that roam the city and act as general scavengers, and it was so low that such dogs were his only friends.

The contrast made by Luke between the rich man and Lazarus are important. If the rich man wore “purple and fine linen”, then Lazarus is “covered with sores”; if the rich man “feasted sumptuously every day”, then Lazarus “longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table”. If the rich man feasted with his rich friends daily, poor Lazarus went hungry daily in the company of stray dogs which nursed him by licking his sores.

Their contrasting ends (vv. 22-23) is the crux of the passage. The “reversal of fortunes” appears from v. 22 itself. Both Lazarus and the rich man were meant to live on this earth only for time being. Both die. Lazarus (note that Luke puts Lazarus first and the rich man last)! is now transported directly “to be with Abraham” “by the angels” (v. 22a). He who was considered the cursed one is now not only “with Abraham” but “in Abraham’s bosom” (Greek “kolpon”). “Bosom” indicates “heart” and for the sons of Abraham what greater honour is there than to be “in Abraham’s bosom”? “Abraham’s bosom” was a Jewish idiom for the presence of God.

Again Lazarus, whose earthly company and helpers were the dogs, is now “carried away by the angels”. “Carried away” would mean here “away from the uncaring, unloving rich man” or from the ignominy of dog’s company to a glorious state. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, The History of the Synoptic Research, is probably right that Lazarus was given no burial by
Similarly, in spite of his wealth, the rich man also dies (cf. Ps 49:6-9) and is buried. His wealth or friends cannot save him. All his glory, name and fame desert him. He might have been given an expensive funeral as the Jewish tradition with its paid mourners, costly spices and elaborate tomb but Luke says that his earthly life comes to an end with his “burial”. According to the Pharisaic teachings the rich man should have been transported immediately to God’s presence and welcome to the joys of eternal as we see in the OT (v.22). But the rich man found himself “being tormented” in “Hades” (Hell). He sees “Abraham far away with Lazarus in his bosom” (v.23) which would indicate the chasm that exists between him and Lazarus. When they were in the world, Lazarus was near him and he did not do anything good to him. Now he does not have the opportunity to care for Lazarus because their fortunes have been totally reversed. It is he who needs Lazarus’ help now.

In Hades, he realises the importance and usefulness of Lazarus. Therefore, he makes an improbable request to Abraham (v. 24): even though he did not share even a broken piece from his sumptuous feasts with Lazarus during their lifetime, he asks for a “drop” from the “fingertip” of the one whom he neglected for so long, someone whom he never cared. Now the rich man, the representative of Pharisaism, seeks comfort at the hands of outcasts. In his lifetime, he trusted his riches to redeem himself but from hell he confessed the greatness of his torment saying, “I am in agony in the fire.” The rich man calls out to Abraham for mercy with the hope that he will send Lazarus to help him to cool his burning tongue with a single water drop, because now he is aware of his total unworthiness.

During his earthly life, he needed nothing, but Lazarus needed everything. He had everything; Lazarus had nothing. When he had everything he did not open his eyes and see the needs of Lazarus. But when he is in need he recognizes the importance of Lazarus. That is why the one who “feasted sumptuously every day” is in dire need of a “drop of water” while the one who lacked even a “drop of water” on earth has everything. When he had everything in plenty and Lazarus in poverty, he did not make friend with Lazarus. But when he is friendless and helpless he seeks Lazarus’ help.

Abraham refuses his request because he had already “received” his “good things” while on earth so that there is nothing more in arrear for him. “The good things” had been his wealth and riches. But he never considered that in Lazarus he was given an opportunity to make use of his wealth properly and wisely. Lazarus, laying on his gate, was a God-given opportunity to him to use his wealth properly. But throughout his life he used his riches in unimportant things. He did not invest on the eternity. Abraham also refers to “his bad things” which is for Lazarus’ physical suffering and going hungry every day. There is an impossibility involved in his request because the scheme of the heavenly world is completely different from the earthly ones, even though there is a clear relationship between these two.

V. 25b is the “reversal of fortune” in its best. “But now” is to be differentiated from their earthly lives which has become “then” in this “now”. What he did or did not do “then” has its consequence for what or where he is “now”. God has “already” given him his “good” but he turned it to something “bad” because God had put (“laid”) Lazarus on his gate so that by using it righteously by sharing with Lazarus he could have inherited the eternity. He was “comforted” then but he is in “agony” now and Lazarus was in “agony” then but he is “comforted” now. His riches and wealth were not evil but “good” in themselves but he made it evil by misusing them on himself not on the needy ones. That is why, the reason for him being “tormented in Hades” lies on how he used his possessions during his earthly life.

V. 26 refers to the “great chasm” which is in clear contrast to Lazarus being laid at the gate of the rich man (v. 20). It expresses inaccessibility to each other from either side. The opportunity to do good to the poor comes only once and whoever does not seize that opportunity loses it forever. The rich man cannot but see the justice of the situation even if his own case is hopeless, something may yet be done for those to whom he is bound by the ties of family affection. Lazarus could reappear on the earth just as it was anticipated that Elijah and Enoch and others would appear someday (cf. Mal 4:5). His desperation is understood from his extra care of the one whom he neglected for so long, someone whom he never cared. Now the rich man, the representative of Pharisaism, seeks comfort at the hands of outcasts. In his lifetime, he trusted his riches to redeem himself but from hell he confessed the greatness of his torment saying, “I am in agony in the fire.” The rich man calls out to Abraham for mercy with the hope that he will send Lazarus to help him to cool his burning tongue with a single water drop, because now he is aware of his total unworthiness.

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with their wealth and riches has an inevitable bearing for what s/he becomes in the next world. The poor people are to be taken care of by the rich neighbours. If the rich people fail to do it then there is “misery” waiting for them. God will reverse their fortunes and when that finally come the unloving and unkind rich ones will suffer more than the poor.

4.4. John 5: The Neglected One

John 5:1-16 is a story about the struggle and suffering of a person for long 38 years. It is a story about the apathetic attitude of the society towards this man. Just like the people affected with HIV/AIDS he had been abandoned and disowned by the society. He had been a neglected and forgotten “member” of the Jewish society.

Where he had been lying for all these years is important: Jerusalem. Jerusalem is the capital city of the Jews. It is the centre of their Jewish religion with the Temple to which Jews from different parts of the world thronged annually on their “religious pilgrimage”. All pious Jews used to worship in the Temple. The sick man is, in one sense, not a “stranger” in this place because many of the Jews who came there to perform their religious duties might have seen him at least once during these 38 years.

However, the man is, indeed, an “outsider” even when he is a member of the Temple cult that is vigorously pursued by the Jews. Even if he is in the “centre” he is an “outsider” because nobody recognizes him. In the midst of a city with a large population he is left alone to tend to his needs all by himself. The society had been blind to him.

They not only did not help him but they even resist when someone tries to help him. Traditions, rituals, and customs were more important for them than this “person” in need. That is why he is treated with contempt by the society. Therefore, when Jesus heals him they accuse Him of breaking the Sabbath law. Helping this poor, ostracized, neglected, forgotten was not important for them but the “sanctity” of the Sabbath. They are those who are trivializing the priority and prioritizing the trivial.

In spite of such strong and vehement opposition from the larger society, Jesus heals him and puts him where he belongs: at the centre of the society, not as a burden anymore but as a healthy contributor for the good of the society. On this account, Jesus also faces stiff persecution from the Jews but he did not regard the healing of the man as something of a waste but as a worthy cause. For Jesus the “person” is more important than traditions and customs. Anything can be set aside for the good of a person. In effect, therefore, what we find in this pericope is that the Jews are “rebels without a cause” while Jesus is a “rebel with a cause”.

Conclusion

The rich people have a sacred duty thrusted on them, that is, to care for the needy and the poor by sharing their wealth and riches. In a context like India, where there is poverty and suffering in abundance the rich should grab the God-given opportunity. Both in the persistence of poverty and suffering as well as in the eradication of poverty and suffering the rich have a part. If they share their abundance with the “have-nots” then they will be contributing towards building a hunger free India. But if they do not do that then they will be guilty of supporting poverty and so they will be held accountable for the suffering and pain of the poor.

The Ao Naga practice of Mithun sacrifice has a very apt implication in this respect. The rich Aos used to sacrifice Mithuns in gratitude to their God for the blessings received. During this Mithun sacrifice, their granaries were kept opened, plenty of food being prepared and served for everyone for days. Everyone could eat as much as s/he could. No one was prohibited from it. It was an open feasting time for the entire villagers. Such feasts were given by the rich families not to earn name and fame but as a mark of thanksgiving to God for the blessings. In return they offered their best to God by sharing a portion of their wealth and riches with the community members. Such spirit of sharing with the poor is what is envisaged in the passages we have studied.

The Church should give practical teachings and guidelines about concrete participation of its members against corrupt practices. Not only the “talk” but the Church must also “act”. It should free itself from “accumulation theology” and embrace “sharing theology” where in lies the real meaning and significance of Christian “koinonia” (fellowship). The Indian Church must derive a lesson from what the Church of England has resolved to do to help the helpless poor. Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, has announced that he will invest the Church’s vast wealth in establishing a pro-poor “bank” which will give low interest or interest-free money to the poor. He decided to do this because there are money lending organisations called “pay-day loan companies” in Britain. These companies are profit making companies who lend money at exorbitantly high interest rate, sometimes more than 100% a month. In order to rescue the poor people from the jaws of these money lending sharks he decided to start a rival “pay-day loan” bank by making use of the Church’s money for the poor through lending money at “very low or even at no interest.”

It does not mean that the Church in India is not making use of its finances and resources for the poor. But it should aim at long term projects rather than short term or one time projects. It is also not always about “how much” we do but “what” we do. Therefore, the Church in India should...
take the lead in showing how to help the poor by taking concrete steps. In order to do that there is a need for a relook at the concept of mission too.

More often than not, the Church in India is accused of being partisan, biased and caste ridden. It is often said that there is class division inside the Church and it supports only those who are elite and rich. The Church is so far is a closed and exclusive community because it does not willingly embrace the socially ostracised people like the poor and people affected by HIV/AIDS. If the Church in India is the Church of Christ then it must follow and adopt what Jesus said and did. It must become a community of equals by accepting those at the margins of society.

End Notes
1 Multi-national corporations.
2 Hindustan Times (August 22, 2013).
3 Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, one of the Congress-led UPA’s flagship programme to give assured employment of minimum 100 days a year to rural poor families.
4 A great debate is going on among Indian intellectuals on the “criteria” (how much amount of money they get in a day) to determine those who are living below poverty line (BPL) and those who are not. However, the real concern should be whether everyone is getting adequate food not for a day or month but throughout their lives. Unless and until, everyone gets adequate, hygienic, and nutritional food, poverty will remain a dark reality in India even if it does not appear in official records.
5 “Mammon” is a Semitic word for “money” or “riches”.
6 For details on these teachings, see “Disciple and Discipleship” above.
7 Purple and linen is designated as the Syrian and Egyptian upper garments which were sold for twice its weight in gold, also mentioned in Rev 18:12 in association with silk.
8 The one who was never considered the “first” on earth is now given priority by Luke.
9 Here the central idea of “Abraham’s bosom” is a Jewish designation for heaven and Abraham is the father of Israel who stood at the head of the old covenant. According to rabbinical teaching, the Pharisees believed that father Abraham sat at the gate of the Hades and would not let one of his sons pass through. Cf. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Luke’s Gospel, 849.
10 The metaphor of the bosom may suggest in two ways as (i) A child lying on his parents lap; (ii) the proximity of a guest to the host at the banquet. So the poor man enjoys the close fellowship with Abraham at the Messianic banquet. The rich to the end of his life he enjoyed luxury, and did not suffer any earthly loss (such as lying unburied) which might have mitigated his fate in the next world.
11 Though it has been caricatured as “feast of merit” by many writers, there are other aspects as well.

Casteism and Oppression

Casteism is a social reality in India. The Church in India is, quite often, a slave of casteism. Casteism is propounded, propagated and promoted only for the advancement of few people in the society. In the name of casteism, people are not only divided into four castes but there are also people called “out-caste”. The “out-caste” are those who are kept outside the four caste thereby making them non-humans. The Dalits are considered as the “out-caste” in India.

Though the Dalits and the Tribals are sometimes clubbed together, the Tribals are not “out-caste” because they are a separate and different social group. They are not identified by caste. They do not, from time immemorial, practice caste system in their social structures. Rather they have phatry/clan system of a society in which different clan does not mean different caste. In a Tribal society, each and every clan, whether big or small, are in equal category and status.

Both the Dalits and the Tribals in India experience perpetual alienation and segregation from the so-called “mainstream” society, i.e., the high castes and the non-Tribal societies. Though they are the original inhabitants of the land, today they are treated as second-class citizens of the country, or even as people without identity, dignity and rights.

Thus their history is a history of isolation, exclusion and exploitation. Their experience is an experience of oppression and subjugation.

Reading Relevant Gospel Texts in the Context of Casteism and Oppression in India

1. Mark 1:40-3:6

1.1. Jesus and “Untouchability” (1:40-45)
During the time of Jesus, people affected by leprosy (i.e., the lepers) were considered as dead people walking. They were not allowed to live inside the village or society. They had to be abandoned at the village gate
and food was supposed to be thrown to them from a distance. They were regarded as “unclean” people not because of their physical condition but mainly because of the religious and social attitude towards them. They were kept in isolation. No one was allowed to go near them. If someone approached them they had to cry out “leper, leper” in order to warn the other. Thus they were treated as “untouchables” and sub-humans.

Moreover, in Jewish society, according to the Mosaic law, a priest had to declare that a person has been affected by leprosy. During those times, any skin disease was considered as leprosy. So “leprosy” was misused quite often against a person in order to condemn him/her to dungeon of “leper”. Similarly, a priest had to examine the one affected by leprosy and upon thorough examination the priest had to pronounce him/her “clean” then only they were re-admitted to the society which required long rituals of purification.

In such a context, a “leper” came to Jesus for healing (vv. 40-45). “Kneeling” has an implication of “worship” and so the leper beseeched Him in worshipful gesture to “cleanse” him. Leprosy was such a dreadful disease that it carried the notion of “uncleanliness” and “impurity”. That is why they were treated as “untouchable” ones in Jewish society. Hence, restoration from leprosy is called as “cleansing” in the Gospels. It was not only the physical healing that they had to bear but they had to live with negative religious attitude that was the dominant force against people affected by leprosy. The stigma that it brought was more severe than the disease itself. When this man came, Jesus not only had pity on him but He did not hesitate to make contact with him. So He “stretched out his hand and touched him” (v. 41). It was a revolutionary act by Jesus because He did not consider that this man was “a leper” or that He was rendered “unclean” by His contact with the man affected by leprosy who was considered ‘unclean’ by the society.

Untouchability is practised in the name of caste system in India. The “outcasts” are considered as “unclean” and so association with them is regarded as making oneself “unclean” which had to be purified. The “outcasts” are not allowed to draw water from the common well, they are not allowed to touch the belongings/items of the high caste people, etc. The objects which are handled by the “outcasts” are considered to be rendered “unclean” so the caste people consider that touching those objects renders them “unclean”. That is why, there are instances of high caste landlords cutting off the hands of an “untouchable” for drinking water from their jars, killing them on such petty issues, etc. It is also reported that there is untouchability in mid-day meals in schools where those children belonging to low caste/outcaste families are refused to be served mid-day meals. Another tragedy that befalls upon the “untouchables” is that while they are regarded “impure” and “unclean” and the “caste people” think that associating with them makes them “impure” but in India many Dalit and “untouchable” women are raped. Does the act of sexual intercourse, which is considered as one of the most intimate relationships or associations between a man and a woman, not render them impure?

Jesus never considered anybody, whatever their origin or condition was, as “untouchable” because He considered everyone equal and worthy of His love and power to heal. He never discriminated anyone on the basis of race, class, gender, territory, health condition, etc. He invited all and accepted all.

1.2. Jesus and Sin/Sinner (2:1-17)

Sickness or disease was considered a result of sin during Jesus’ day. The Jews thought that sickness or disease comes to a person who has committed sin. Not only that but they considered that a sinner is under the control/captivity of the devil who makes the person suffer from sicknesses.

Over against such general attitude and perception about sickness and disease we must understand the stories of Jesus healing the paralytic man in Mark 2:1-12. Therefore, when the paralytic man was brought to Jesus He straight away talks about “forgiveness of sins” (v. 5). Jesus is referring to the Jewish idea about sickness/disease based on which they have already judged and condemned the paralytic man to be a sinner who is suffering because he is under the control of the devil. That was the underlying problem this man needed release from. So through His action, Jesus exposes that the real sick man is not the paralytic man but those who judged and condemned him as a sinner.

If his sickness was a result of his sin, then, Jesus at once “forgives” him bringing “healing” upon him because once he is forgiven then he is healed. When the Jewish leaders accuse Him of “blasphemy” (v. 7) they are indeed professing Jesus to be God because they “know” that only God can forgive sins and, here they are, “seeing” Jesus “forgiving” the paralytic man. In effect, they tried to stop this man from being set free by invoking God’s power to forgive sins but indeed they ended up invoking divine wrath on themselves.

The oppression that this man was experiencing is removed and he is released. Any force of oppression, any power that dehumanizes is destroyed by Jesus. He is the liberator. The movement that He forms is to be a movement/community of free people who will be counted as equals.

Likewise, the tax-collectors were deemed as “sinners” by the Jews.
The tax-collectors were despised by the Jews because they were considered as “traitors” of their mother land. Since the tax-collectors collected taxes from the Jews for the Romans they were treated as disloyal to their nation. Not only that, but they were considered as “sinners” because they constantly broke the Sabbath law which prohibited work on that day. But their profession demanded “work” on Sabbath so the tax-collectors sat at their tax booths and collected taxes even on Sabbath thereby incurring the wrath of the “pious” Jews. Again, they were considered as “sinners” because of their regular “association” with the Gentiles. The Jews were not supposed to intermingle or associate with the Gentiles who were regarded as “sinners” by the Jews. But the tax-collectors had to collect taxes from the resident Gentiles too which required “contact” with them.

But Jesus did not follow their narrow outlook and judgmental, “holier than thou” attitude. For Him everyone were equally “sinners” or “saints”. He did not discriminate anyone on the basis of their profession. So when Jesus called the tax-collector Matthew, he dismantles that narrow mindedness and incorporates those who are considered “sinners” by the society into His community.

1.3. Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath (2:18-3:6)
Religious duty, religious piety and religious traditions were important for the Jews. Giving alms, offering sacrifices, fasting, prayer, observing the Sabbath statutes, etc. were considered important religious acts which every devout Jew must practice. So there was a question to Jesus about why His disciples were not fasting (2:18-22). What they are trying to do is to expose that Jesus is not a “good” or “true” teacher because He does not teach His disciples the proper lessons. As was expected from all Jewish Rabbis (Teachers), it was expected that Jesus should teach His disciples about prayer and fasting. But Jesus talks about His pre-eminence over such religious practices.

Similarly, in the following Sabbath controversy, Jesus outlines His lordship over the Sabbath. Sabbath observance was a big religious concern for many Jews. In the name of keeping the Sabbath holy and undefiled, they prohibited any work on Sabbath. Therefore “plucking heads of grain” on Sabbath was considered unacceptable because it constituted work. The “thirst” and “hunger” of the people was less important than Sabbath observance. Thus, they were making Sabbath regulations as a dehumanizing force against the poor and needy in the society. “Doing good” and “saving life” was considered less important than keeping the Sabbath holy. Humans were, therefore, made slaves of Sabbath laws. They were prioritizing the trivial and trivializing the priority. Therefore, in such a context, Jesus sets the principle straight by stressing that it is not Sabbath but humans that is important: “The sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the sabbath” (2:27). Jesus is able to say all that because He is the Lord of the sabbath. He observed Jewish traditions and customs but He is bound by it. Jesus advocates that He is above all dehumanizing cultural beliefs and practices.

This passage affirms that whatever traditions and customs that become a yoke of slavery and burden for humanity, which, does bad rather than doing good for humanity, has to be abolished. Practices and beliefs, traditions and rituals, etc. must serve the good of humanity rather than dehumanizing them.

The Samaritans were despised by the Jews on several reasons. One of the main reasons why the Jews did not like and accept the Samaritans was because of their mixed blood through inter-marriages with the non-Jews. Therefore, during the time of Jesus, the Jews and the Samaritans had been living in a long, conflicting environment of suspicion, hatred and animosity. It was not necessarily the Samaritans who disliked the Jews but the problem of their enmity rested on the Jews’ superior and “holier than thou” attitude towards the Samaritans. The Jews never accepted the Samaritans as pure Jews. They were regarded as un holy, disloyal people. Therefore, the Jews considered the Samaritans as “outcasts”.

However, Jesus, even though He was a Jew, never categorized the Samaritans according to the Jewish mentality. He did not look at the Samaritans through the prism of the Jews. But for Him, the Samaritans were worthy people of commendation. Therefore, in Luke 10:25-37 Jesus portrays a Samaritan as a true “religious” person and as one who “fulfils” the Mosaic Law. The good Samaritan becomes the unlikely hero in this parable over against the Jewish religious leaders, including the priestly ones (priest and Levite). It was expected by the Jews that the priest and the Levite knows the commandment of God to “love your neighbour as yourself” and also to exemplify that through their actions (spirituality). But they were indeed spiritually dead because they were concerned for their own good rather than the good of the others. The “outcaste” Samaritan becomes the one who is nearer to “inheriting eternal life” (cf. v. 25 on which the parable is given) than the Jewish religious leaders (the high caste people) because he was the one who not only knows the “law of God” but fulfils it by action (by taking care of the half-dead person). True piety is demonstrated by this unlikely Samaritan not by the Jewish religious leaders. Thus, to the astonishment and shame of the Jews, including their priests and Levites, Jesus tells them to learn how to do good and how to
Patriarchy and Children at Risk

Patriarchy is a social system in which lineage is reckoned through the father's line and the male members inherit the inheritance. “Patriarchy” comes from two Greek words, “patros” (father) and “archon” (chief, ruler, etc.) or “arche” (beginning), hence it literally means “rule of the father” or “everything begins from the father”. In a patriarchal society, the women and the children are not given due recognition. They are considered as the father’s belongings because the father is the owner of his family which includes his wife and his children. Their wives are regarded just as those who assist them in the preservation of their lineage by giving birth to their sons. Since women are prohibited from inheritance, sons are treasured and daughters are regarded as burden for their father.

In a patriarchal society like India, women’s and children’s plight are generally deplorable. They are not respected with full human dignity and rights. The women are not given rights in the family and society. Their role is mostly confined within the four walls of her house without much freedom and rights. They are not given chance to decide for her life and family because it is the father who decides everything and they are supposed to meekly obey him. Women’s role in society is relegated merely to procreation and rearing the babies. The men consider that women are good only for bearing children and rearing them apart from which they cannot share any of the privileges both in the family and society. In the larger society too women are not allowed to take active part. They are supposed to be passive participants by giving their nod/approval to what men decide.

Since patriarchy advocates the right and might of men, women are never given due respect and honour. Rape, dowry system, female infanticide, foeticide, child sacrifice, child marriage, etc., are some of the social evils that comes with patriarchy. Imbalance in sex ratio between male and female in India is getting more worse which is a direct upshot of patriarchy. Girls are considered unwanted in India because it heightens the economic burden of the fathers. That is why a huge number of girls...
remain illiterate. In order to lighten the economic burden of the fathers with come along with the girl child because they have to give huge sum of money and properties as dowry during their marriages, many female foetuses are terminated illegally before birth or even after birth they are killed, in many cases through “sacrifice”.

Dowry harassment and dowry deaths are rampant in India. Women are harassed and tortured by their husbands demanding more dowry and when they cannot give the demanded sum or property many of them are killed under the guise of suicides or accidents. It can be possible to see a dowry connection in many of the married women’s suicides or unnatural deaths.

Many children are at risk in India. Child sexual abuse is rampant. Children include both boys and girls. Sexual abuse is not only about actual rape, molestation, sodomy or caressing of the private parts, but it also includes many sexual overtures which may come in different forms like gesture, indecent talk, etc. There are many reports how children are sexually abused in schools or in school buses/vans. Among the children also, girls are at a greater risk of being abused. They are abused by parents (generally fathers or brothers), teachers, tutors, wardens/matrons, school bus/van drivers, neighbours, and in many cases relatives. Even in Christian homes and institutions like orphanages child sexual abuse happen. This puts the children at high risk environment. Moreover, since they are innocent, when such abuse happens for the first time they do not realise what is happening to them and so they become easy prey to the sexual perverts. Undue attention and care is given by the abusers to their targets and after winning their confidence they seduce them and exploit them sexually. Quite often the innocent children are indoctrinated that it is just fine to let them touch them which eventually blossoms to more severe form of abuse.

What Jesus has to say to such a context is extremely important for us to examine.

1. Jesus and Patriarchy

Like our’s, Jesus’ context was a strict patriarchal society. Women were given secondary importance at best, if not they were regarded as their husbands’ properties. Nobody cared for the welfare and wellbeing of the women. In such a situation, women having the issue of the flow of blood (haemorrhage) were considered ceremonially unclean. But nowhere in the Gospels, we find Jesus restricting women from coming to Him or such women suffering from haemorrhage he never hampered them from approaching and making physical contact with Him (Mark 5:26-34).

Moreover, He never considered Himself being made impure or unclean when haemorrhaging women touched Him. Therefore, when the Jews should normally undergo ritual cleansing after such an encounter, Jesus never underwent ceremonial ritual cleansing in order to purify Himself again.

Likewise, in Luke 13:10-17, we see a story in which Jesus heals a woman who was crippled for long 18 years. According to Joel B. Green, she was not “bent over” and could not “stand up straight” (v. 11) not necessarily because of her sickness but primarily due to the social stigma that she was carrying. Whether that is a valid interpretation of the text or not, but what he emphasizes is the social burden and stigma that the women carried with them, particularly the sick ones. Moreover, it was a Sabbath day on which they were not supposed to do any work. But for Jesus, helping needy and rejected people other than observing certain religious practices was more important. Therefore, despite stiff opposition from religious leaders, Jesus heals her on the Sabbath day.

Jesus did not condemn women even on the basis of serious crime or offences committed by them because He was more concerned about how the larger society exhibits hypocrisy in judging them and condemning them as guilty of a serious crime like adultery which carried death penalty in Jewish society (cf. John 8:1-11). Whether this Johannine passage is genuine or not is beyond our discussion now, but its significance should not be missed. The woman was accused of adultery and she was brought to Jesus expecting that He would hand her over to them for stoning to death. No doubt they were ready for the act of stoning her to death but Jesus convicts those men who brought her to Him of their sin (v. 7). What is astonishing and remarkable in this episode is the absence of the man who was committing adultery with the woman. Can a woman commit adultery all alone by herself? It is said that she “was in adultery” which would mean that she was caught red-handed when she was actually committing the act of adultery, not a past crime, but where is the man? Did he ran away? Or did the mean let him go and caught only the woman? The last one is most probable because, according to Jewish tradition, women were held guilty for adultery and so women had to bear the consequences while men were set free because they were considered as being seduced by the adulterous women. Therefore, here is a woman, guilty and condemned by men to be stoned to death. But what they did not know was that they were equally guilty of other sins, like the woman’s sin of adultery. Whatever kind of sin it is and in whatever form it may be, sin is sin; there is no bigger sin and smaller sin. Therefore, when Jesus told them to “let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a
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Stone at her” they all went away quietly in shame. The hunter is hunted and the “righteous” ones are proved to be “guilty”. They had condemned her with their hypocritically righteous and Jesus exposes it and defends the right of the woman.

Above all, Jesus does not only accept them as worthy recipients of his healing but He calls them “Daughter” (Mark 5:34) and more specifically in Luke 13:16 He addresses the woman as “a daughter of Abraham”. This is a very important point that Jesus is making. Since His context was a purely patriarchal society, the male Jews considered themselves “sons of Abraham” with which came prestige, honor and identity for them. But they did not want their women to be a part of privileges that was given by being “Abraham’s offsprings”. Women were never regarded as partakers of and participants in the community of the children of Abraham. They hijacked the status of being “son of Abraham” and excluded women from it. Therefore, when Jesus calls them “daughter” or “daughter of Abraham” He is giving them the “badge of status” and bringing them to the “centre” of the society which had marginalized and ostracized them.

Thus Jesus, never advocated patriarchy at the expense of women. His vision was for a community of equals where men and women, Jews and Gentiles would become partakers of God’s salvific plan.

2. Jesus and Children

During the time of Jesus, the Jews did not regard the humanhood of children. Even male children were not given recognition and hence their testimony/witness was regarded invalid. This attitude is reflected in Matthew’s version of Jesus feeding the 5000 (14:13-21). Matt says that 5000 do not include “women and children” (v. 21). It shows that attitude with which the Jews looked at women and children.

However, Jesus never rejected children. When people were bringing children to Him they were not allowed by His disciples. His disciples shared the larger Jewish mentality in ignoring children. They did not realize that children were important to their Master. When Jesus found that children were being hindered by His disciples from coming to Him He gets “indignant” (Mark 10:14). Not only He welcomed them but He made them the model for everyone. He gave them their own share of value and dignity. We may also argue that when Jesus asked the children to come to Him, He is making a double invitation. Children, especially the young ones like the suckling, are mostly found with their mothers so when He is asking them not to hinder the children from coming to Him, He is inviting both the women and the children.

Moreover, Jesus used them as role models for disciples and discipleship. There can be numerous opinions which character of children is Jesus putting before the people to imitate: their simplicity, honesty, faithfulness, trustworthiness, etc. All these are good virtues that Jesus wants His disciples to possess. However, what Jesus wants to present in this context may be the “insignificance” of the children. Jesus again and again emphasizes “self-denial” and “servanthood” as the way to greatness. The children were insignificant in the society. They were recognized, never acknowledged, never counted. But Jesus counts them as precious. “Jesus loves the little children” as the kids’ song says. He has a heart for the “little angels”. Therefore, He not only welcome and accepted them but He “blessed them, laying his hands upon them” (Mark 10:16). The rejected, ignored ones are in the “bosom” of Jesus when He took them in His arms. They are special to Him. Their rights and value He respected in a society where no rights and value was given to children.

End Notes

1 “Daughter” itself means “daughter of Abraham.”
1.2. Was Jesus Anti-Gentiles?

At times, Jesus seems to share the Jewish mentality vis-à-vis the Gentiles because He seems to have prohibited His disciples from evangelizing the “Gentiles” (cf. Matt 10: 5-6; “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans”). He is sometimes seen hesitant to minister to the Gentiles (Matt 15:23a). But that is only one side of the story which stemmed from unique circumstances with redactive emphasis. Deep down in Jesus’ teaching and praxis lies a real openness and accommodating attitude towards the Gentiles.

1.3. Jesus Accepted All without Distinction and Discrimination

When Jesus was approached by a “Gentile” woman (Mark 7:24-30; Matt 15: 21-28), Jesus at first turns her away. He refers to the Israelites as the “children” and the Gentiles as “dogs” (Mark 7: 27; Matt 15:26). According to Matt, Jesus says that His primary mission is to evangelize the Jews (“lost sheep of the house of Israel”). The Jews who do not accept Him or are willing to follow Him are only referred to a mild term “lost sheep” because they still belong to the “house of Israel”. But Jesus refers to the Gentiles with a derogatory and disparaging term “dogs”. Dogs were considered as one of the dirtiest, unholy animals and the Jews normally identified the Gentiles with these dogs. But that is not the end of the story, rather what has taken place so far is only to accentuate what follows. The “dog” knows who He is and believes in Him. Therefore, the climax of the story is that “dog” is better than the “lost sheep of the house of Israel” because the dog listens and comes to Him but the sheep do not. Since the Gentile woman exhibits her “faith” in Jesus, He commends her for that. Similarly, Jesus “marvelled” seeing the “faith” of a “Gentile” centurion at Capernaum, a “Gentile and said, “…not even in Israel have I found such faith” (Luke 7:9; Matt 8:10).

There was nothing that with-held Jesus from accepting the Gentiles and welcoming them into His fold. His mission was universal in scope because His gift was for everyone. He did not discriminate anyone on the basis of his/her religion and culture. Since He had that open mindedness and accommodating attitude when Gentiles came to Him He never sent them away (cf. John 12:20-36). Jesus never viewed that Gentiles were hopeless and doomed for destruction.

The future of the Gentiles will be same as the fate of the Jews. Moreover, the inter-relatedness of different religious and cultural groups is found in the Great Commission of the resurrected Jesus in Matt 28:16-20. Since, there will be a universal gathering in Him at the end, His disciples are commanded by Him to make disciples of “all Gentiles” (the Greek...
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End Notes

1 Mark says that she was a “Greek, a Syrophoenician by birth” (7:26) while Matthew calls her “a Canaanite woman” (15:22). Matt might have changed Mark’s “Greek” to “Canaanite” in order to accentuate the importance of the episode since the Jews disparaged and despised the “Canaanites” and considered them as unclean people.


3 Bishop Geevarughese Mar Osthathios once said, “No preacher is supposed to condemn another religion.” Cf. “Human right is the most important thing” an interview with Geevarughese Mar Osthathios in the Deccan Herald, February 20, 2005.

2. Implication of Jesus’ Attitude towards Other Religions to the Indian Context

The Christian community in India must exhibit the attitude of inclusiveness in their interaction with people of other faiths. Without compromising the centrality and lordship of Jesus, the Christians can present Him to people belonging to other religions keeping in mind their sensibilities, with respect and openness. That would require avoiding exclusive and superior mentality, judgmental attitude and use of abusive, disparaging language that would hurt their sentiments. Quite often it is due to Christians’ arrogance that drive away people from coming to Jesus. The Christian community must acknowledge the “universality” of Jesus which would entail the acceptance of the fact that He can work mysteriously in and among people or communities outside of the Church. Since He is “all embracing” in nature He is concerned for all, calls all, and accepts all.

The Church in India must adopt and follow the attitude of Jesus, that is, receptiveness to others which would necessitate re-orientation of faith-praxis. Christians should reject anything that impinges on others’ rights or that are detrimental to people of other faiths. Christians must also remember that “there is a need to be sensitive to the feelings of the Hindus as well as to the people of other faiths.” This would mean that the Church should reject all manipulative proselytizing practices which violate human freedom and dignity of human persons. The Church, while pursuing other ways of evangelism, should reject all aggressive and crusading evangelism which offends people of other faiths. The point is, while we practice and propagate our faith in the midst of religious plurality we should not target and condemn other religions. The need of the hour is more of witness than evangelism because as Christians our everyday life, both in private and public, can be a witnessing life or community that would win people to Christ.
Cultural Nationalism

1. The Indian Context

A strong wave of cultural nationalism is blowing in India for quite some time. The chief proponent and advocate of cultural nationalism in India comes from the “Sang Parivar” (SP) groups led by Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). This cultural nationalism is called by the SP as “Hindutva”. Despite its political ambition, the RSS claims to be only a social and cultural organization. Its goal is to achieve Akhand Bharat (undivided India) and Hindu Rashtra (Hindu nation). The preamble of its constitution says that its aim is to “inculcate in Hindus, the spirit of service, sacrifice and selfless devotion to the Hindu Samaj”. Its idea of having a free and just society is by following the ancient dharma (faith). According to them, the Muslims and the Christians are those who propagate values that lead to denationalization and the westernized “élite” that propose capitalism, socialism or communism for India. Therefore they are identified as two hostile forces. Hence, the RSS warns them to respect and adopt Hindu cultures and to be subordinated to it about which Golwalker writes thus:

The non-Hindu people in Hindustan must adopt Hindu culture and language; must learn to hold in reverence Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but those of glorification of Hindu race and culture…(they) may live in the country wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less preferential treatment – not even citizen’s rights.

Again Golwalker summarizes the main ideologies of the RSS in his book “Bunch of Thoughts” thus:

That it is not tricolour with a wheel that is our national flag, but the ‘Bhagavadhwaja’; the abolition of landlordism and princely rule was a mistake; democracy is not suited to the Indian genius; socialism is a foreign import; our constitution is a poison seed, all state assemblies and state ministries should be abolished; there should be a unitary form of government with one legislature and one government; so long as Christians and Muslims do not accept Hindu culture they should be treated as hostile, the Nazi doctrine of racial purity was correct and the Hindus should profit by the example of Hitler’s purge against the Jews…

Thus their aim is to return to the ancient Brahmanical social structure based on caste system. Culture is the Brahmanical culture; dharma means accepting the right of the Brahmins to rule over others.

The Hindutva movement concerns itself for building a strong Hindu nation based on the tenets of “Hindu Dharma” and “Hindu Rashtra” (Hindu Nation). According to V. D. Savarkar, the propounder of Hindutva doctrine, a Hindu is a person who regards the land of Bharatvarsha, from the Indus to the Seas, as his/her “Fatherland” (Pitribhumi) as well as his/her “Holyland” (Punyabhumi). For him there are three fundamental bonds that unite the Hindus: the territorial (rashtra), the racial (jat) and the cultural (samskriti). These three form the “bedrock of Hindu rashtra” that regards only the Hindus as the true citizens of the land while non-Hindus are aliens and strangers in Hindustan. Thus, the primary object of the SP is to “maintain, protect and promote the cause of the Hindu race, culture and civilization for the advancement and glory of the Hindu rashtra.” They aim to achieve this through sangathan and shuddhi, i.e., union of the entire Hindu race to create a strong Hindu nation and re-conversion of Indian Muslims and Christians back to Hindu dharma. Thus, “only Hindu identity is promoted and other identities are suppressed” by them.

2. Jesus and Cultural Nationalism

For Jesus, culture or tradition is meant for humanitarian purpose. Anything that devalues human dignity is against God’s will. Jesus did not consider the Jewish culture in itself as bad or inhuman nor was He opposed to the Jewish culture in its entirety. But what He disliked and could not stand was the dehumanizing aspects of their culture. Jesus saw and respected positive values in the Jewish culture as well and He himself practised them. However, He opposed certain features of Jewish culture, particularly how certain Jews understood them and attempted to impose their ideas on others. The Pharisees, therefore, appear in the Gospels as the chief opponents of Jesus because their interpretation of the Torah and the kind of “culture” they practised, promulgated, and advanced had dehumanizing tendencies, which were undoubtedly opposed by Jesus.

2.1. Jesus and Ceremonial Rituals and Marriage/Divorce Practice

The Pharisees meticulously observed ceremonial rituals and followed the Mosaic Law strictly (cf. Mark 7:1-23; Matt 15:1-20). With regard to ceremonial cleansing, which was based on their idea of “clean-unclean,” “holy-unholy” and “pure-impure” dichotomy, the Pharisees, who followed the tradition of the elders who said that hands must be washed before eating, regarded not observing the rituals of washing hands before eating as a “sin”. Therefore, they argued that whoever eats without following the
ritual cleansing defiles himself/herself. To add to that, they considered that not following the prescribed rituals was a mark of disrespecting and dishonouring the elders. But Jesus said to them that washing or not washing hands and following or not following the traditions of the elders was not the important matter in the life of a person but keeping and obeying the commandment of God (Mark 7:6ff.). Jesus is, in effect, convicting the Pharisees about imposing an unnecessary “tradition” upon the people which did not serve the good of humanity but humanity was put to chain under these traditions.

Jesus also appeals to the priority of “heart” over “rituals” (Mark 7:14ff.). Doing something “for” God or in the name of God (rituals) without sincerity and love for God and His people (heart) is nothing else but hypocrisy. Not only that but by appealing to the “heart”, Jesus points out that the “heart” is the “machine” (=mind) or “processor” and “actions” are the visible signs of what lies within the heart. Therefore, the problem lies within; purity or impurity, clean or unclean lies in the heart not in the visible actions because “heart” is the root but actions are only the fruits. If the root is good then the fruit will automatically be good but what the Pharisees understood, did and wanted everyone to do was the contrary. Heart must be changed if actions and behaviour have to be changed. Hypocritic religiosity and spirituality that the Pharisees practised is thereby condemned.

Similarly, Jesus repudiated cultural practices that were only one sided or biased against other sections of the society. Therefore, when He was asked whether it was lawful “for a man” to divorce “his wife” (Matt 19:3ff.; Mark 10:2-12), Jesus stated in unequivocal terms that their “culture” that permits divorce was biased against the women. In Jewish culture, divorce was the prerogative of man and women had no right either to defend or object. Divorce was considered as a result of the woman’s unchastity or infidelity, thereby putting all the blame on the wife for divorce. In such a context, Jesus appeals to the “original intention” of God in creating “male and female” and concludes that both in marriage and divorce both the husband and the wife have equal rights in decision making. Moreover, He also allows wives to divorce their husbands on the same ground that the husbands had been divorcing them thereby convicting men of immorality and infidelity that were bases for divorce. Thus Jesus, over against their cultural practices, empowered women with their rights.

2.2. Jesus and the Idea of Moral Contract

In Matt 20:1-16 there is a parable of the labourers in the vineyard of a householder who sends the labourers to his vineyard at different times of the day but pays equal wages to all of them. Some work whole day, some work half day while some work only one hour. As expected, from human cultural practice perspective, complaints come to the householder (20:11-12) saying that by giving equal wages to those who work whole day and to those who worked only for an hour he is being “unfair” to those who worked whole day. But through this parable Jesus makes the point that God does not operate according to contracts. Jesus stresses that God does not pay what they have earned but He gives everyone what s/he needs. By repudiating the idea of contract, Jesus shows that divine principle is quite different from human principle. Even if it seems “wrong” or “unfair” from human cultural perspective, God’s principle and His operating method will prevail.

2.3. Culture is for Humanizing not Dehumanizing

Jesus received people from all cultures and backgrounds. He did not elevate any culture over the others. The necessary point we can gather from the above discussion is that “culture” as such has both positive and negative elements. Those who zealously seek to promote one’s own culture at the expense of other cultures must know that upholding one culture and attempting to “nationalize” and “universalize” that “one” culture might end up dehumanizing and devaluing the “others” and “their” culture. If, for Jesus, culture is meant for humanizing of the humans then any attempt to “enslave” humans with irrelevant, dominant and dehumanizing culture has to be resisted.

End Notes

1 Aleyamma Zechariah, Modern Religious and Secular Movements in India, Revised Ed. (Bangalore: TPI, 1994), 171.
2 Aleyamma Zechariah, Modern Religious and Secular Movements, 171.
3 Aleyamma Zechariah, Modern Religious and Secular Movements, 171.
4 Therefore, issues like Ram Janmabhumi and the construction of a Ram temple in Ayodhya came to the fore of political scenario.
7 C. V. Matthew, “Cultural Nationalism and Its Challenges to the Church and Its Mission in India,” 163.
9 Notice that the questioners – the Pharisees – appealed to the Mosaic Law when they asked this question to Jesus and Jesus also appeals to the “Mosaic Law” but applies it in its true sense by referring to God’s intention in creation of male and female.
Social Exclusion and Inclusion

1. The Indian Scenario

Indian society is characterized by plurality in all aspects. There are various and diverse groups of people living in India. Hundreds of cultural and linguistic groups are found. However, there is an undeniable fact that there is promotion of only one or few cultures belonging to certain groups. That is why a good number of people are considered outside the “mainstream” Indian society.

The “subalterns” are the excluded communities in India. According to Ranajit Guha, the term “subaltern” means “of inferior rank” and it is used to refer to the common people, the masses, the ordinary people. Hence, the term “subaltern” refers to any group of people who constitute the lower and marginalized strata of society like the Dalits, the Tribals, Adivasis and women. Therefore, subaltern studies include the studies and issues related to these groups of people.

The Dalits, the Tribals, Adivasis and women constitute a large proportion of the total population in India but more often they are excluded from social, political, religious and historical narratives. Their worth is not recognised by the so-called “mainstream” society. They are kept at the margins in all aspects of life.

Some of the reasons for social exclusion in India are:

(i) Caste system which propagates the theory of hierarchy in which higher caste people are regarded as the most important ones while those who do not belong the caste hierarchy are considered “non-humans” or at best as “sub-humans”. Due to this the Dalits are excluded from the larger community.

(ii) Domination by the stronger and majority culture over the weaker and minority community also contributes to social exclusion in India. Though the Tribals and Adivasis are the original settlers of the land in India they are pushed to the periphery both in terms of geographical/territorial as well as socio-political structures. Since they are weaker people (because of their lower living condition) the dominant cultural groups have almost pushed them to the verge of extinction. The dominant cultural force keep them in a “quarantine” situation.

(iii) Patriarchy also contributes to social exclusion to a great extent. Almost half of the Indian population is women. But they are not given due share in society. They are not recognized as worthy citizens of the country who can contribute much to the society. They are not assigned human value and rights but they are treated as second class citizens. Since many of them still remain uneducated and powerless, India as a nation and the Indian society does not see much progress in many areas.

(iv) Capitalism and economic disparity is also another factor that leads to social exclusion. The poor or the “have-nots” find it difficult to squeeze themselves into the social arena. They remain voiceless not because they cannot speak but they are “silenced” by the rich, elite and powerful ones. Thus they live in a virtually non-existent status in India.

(v) There are also other factors that discriminate and stigmatize certain/particular groups of people like transgender, gays, people living with HIV/AIDS or people affected by leprosy, etc. The society does not recognize them and do not give attention to them. Therefore such people form an unorganised group of excluded people from society in India.

2. Jesus’ Teaching and Praxis of Social Inclusion

Jesus associated freely with those who were rejected and excluded by the society. During His time, people affected by leprosy, demon possessed people, women, etc. were regarded as subsidiary members of the society. Jesus declared time and again that He came to seek the “lost,” the “sick” and the “sinners” (cf. Mark 2:17; Luke 19:10). He made friendship with those who were considered expendables and unimportant by the society.

2.1. Jesus’ Practice of Social Inclusion Through “Table Fellowship”

In the Jewish society, the people with whom one ate meals constituted an important status marker. Only when someone considered the other as equal in social status then only they came together and sat at the table for dining. Similarly, when persons were estranged an invitation for a meal opened the way for reconciliation. Such table fellowships or eating and dining together were very important social practices through which social boundaries, hierarchies, and status were reinforced. The practice of table-fellowship was so important that anyone who disregarded or broke this practice was looked down with contempt.

Jesus sat at the table for eating with socially excluded people like
the lepers, tax-collectors and sinners (cf. Mark 14:3; Luke 5:30; 19:1-10; Matt 9:11, etc.). Lepers, tax-collectors and the ambiguously general term “sinners” were not considered by the Jews as “one of them.” They were regarded as the “other.” They were never brought to the “centre” or the “mainstream” of Jewish society. Through the “table-fellowship” or “eating” with the socially ostracised people, Jesus identified himself with them. He never considered them as unimportant rather He saw their worth and mixed up with them. Therefore, Jesus faced stiff opposition from Pharisees and scribes on many occasions about “eating” together with condemnable people.

But there is an interesting piece of story where a Pharisee invited Jesus “eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee’s house, and took his place at the table” (Luke 7:36). Even though Pharisees were the main critics of Jesus when He dined with sinners, tax-collectors and lepers, He accepted the Pharisee’s invitation to dine with him. This shows that Jesus had no grudges against His enemies. Moreover, some of the Jewish general public disliked the Pharisees, even if the Pharisees regarded themselves more pious than the common people and so by soliciting the invitation given by the Pharisee He identified himself with him.

But by fellowshipping at the table with the socially rejected ones Jesus welcomed and embraced them into the “centre” of His community. He identified with them and clearly told His opponents that He came only for their sake.

2.2. Jesus Accepted and Included Women as Worthy Persons
Throughout the pages of the Gospels, we find that Jesus allowed women to come to Him and to receive healing for their physical ailments. Though it is often alleged that Jesus supported patriarchy, He had many women followers and friends. Over against the Jewish accepted norm, He gave priority to women, accepted the value of womanhood, and championed their cause, albeit in a small scale according to the 21st century parameter. He saw their plights as genuine concerns and He went the extra mile in order to defend them.

However small Jesus’ acts may seem to us today, what He did for women’s cause was revolutionary. The Jewish society within which Jesus lived and ministered was a strict patriarchy in which women were relegated to worthlessness and uselessness. In such a context, He was willing to speak for women, often complimenting them, and using them as positive characters in many of His parables. Moreover, Jesus never thought himself to be bound up by the levitical ceremonial cleansing statutes which regulated cases like coming in contact with “unclean” people. He did not consider that the “flow of blood” was a reason that rendered women “defiled” or “unclean”. The Jews had to keep themselves away from such “bloody” women in order not to defile themselves. But Jesus not only talked to such women with issues of flow of blood but He allowed them to touch Him for healing. Significantly, He never “purified” himself after such encounters because He did not consider himself of being made “unclean” by those women.

When “sinful” woman came and touched Him (Luke 7:37, 39), and when the Pharisee who had invited Him into his house for meal started complaining for allowing this woman to touch Him, without being afraid of antagonizing His host and dishonouring his hospitality towards Him, He “rebukes” His host by defending the action of the woman (Mark 14:3-9; Matt 26:6-13; Luke 7:36-50). He not only commends her for her action but inscribes her name in their “history,” of which she was not regarded as part so far, by stating that what she had done to Him is to be “preached in the whole world...in memory of her” (Mark 14:9). He saw the good in her which her society could not see because He looked at her as a human person, not as an object.

2.3. Jesus Accepted the “Others”
The Jews regarded the Samaritans as the “others”. Even though they share certain commonalities, the Jews did not accept the Samaritans as “whole” or worthy human beings. Their Rabbis even prohibited sharing of utensils with the Samaritans which virtually demarcated the boundary between the Jews and the Samaritans.

But Jesus never considered the Samaritans as unacceptably unworthy, unholy people. Rather He looked out for them and took the initiative in breaking the invisible boundary that separated Him from the Samaritans (John 4). An immoral “Samaritan woman”, a combination which the Jews could not stand, is the one with whom Jesus interacts. He identified with them and clearly told His opponents that He came only for their sake.

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(i) Women – represented by the Samaritan woman. How sinful and unworthy they may be, Jesus was always sympathetic to them and embraced them into His sheepfold.

(ii) “Others” – the Samaritans who were not accepted by the Jews.

In the same passage, we find Jesus at Capernaum during which a centurion came to Him asking Him to heal his son who was “at the point of death” (John 4:47). Jesus did not send him away on the reason that he
was a non-Israelite. “Salvation” was offered to this foreigner because He saw that even foreigners are worthy of His love.

3. Implication for the Church in India

The community of the people of Jesus Christ, the Ekklesia, must practise what Jesus practised. If it is called a community of Jesus’ disciples (followers or learners) then the Church should learn to do and continue what Jesus did and started.

We can find that the Church often remains aloof and closed. Rather than being an open, inclusive and accommodating community it sometimes becomes exclusive and unwelcoming to the “others”. Even within the Church there are certain groups of people who are perpetually kept in “isolation”. The poor people hardly finds any space within the Church to be themselves. The Gospel proclamation is more often presented in such a way to please the rich, the influential and prominent section of the community. There is hardly any “good news” for the poor. We hardly hear any preaching from the pulpit that addresses concrete social issues like corruption, exploitation, human rights violations, etc. The “pulpit” is often detached from the “world”. Directly or indirectly, dominant theology that we Indians have inherited from the West is what is still practiced and propagated from the pulpit.

The Church needs to realise that majority of its members belong to the marginalized, neglected people who seek to find solace and acceptance in and from the Church. If Jesus started a community encompassing all sections of society comprising of men and women, rich and poor, Jews and Gentiles, righteous and sinners, then the present Church seems to have deviated from this original nature and structure of the Church. Those members of the Church who belong to the weaker sections of the society – women, poor, Dalits, Tribals, Adivasis, specially abled, etc. – are kept under constant “colonial” and “dominant” forces.

Women, who contribute half of the Church’s membership and who make notable contributions to the Church, continue to suffer under a “glass ceiling”. There is still a general perception that women are not capable of taking up leadership positions in the Church. Their worth is not yet discovered by her own community of believers. Even within the Protestant Church, which believes in the “priesthood of all believers” (cf. 1 Peter 2:9), women are denied this role in many Churches because they are not allowed to stand in the pulpit, to preach, to minister, etc. That is why ordination is not given to women in many Church traditions. Based on the irrational argument of women being “weaker sex” they are kept in isolation even within the Church.

The same can be said of the Dalits, the Tribals and the Adivasis. Sometimes they are virtually treated as “untouchables” within the Christian community. Practice of caste and class distinction can be seen in certain churches in some places in India.

The Church is meant to be a community of equals where all barriers, dividing walls of separation on the basis of sex, caste, class, race, colour, etc. have to be demolished. Only when it gets rid itself of all such discriminatory practices that are found within itself then only it can become “the salt” and “light” of the world in reality.

God put the Church “in the world” not to be conformed but to transform the world. He did not keep it “out of the world” even when He called and “set them apart” (cf. John 17:6ff.). The mission of the Church cannot be spelt more clearly than this that the Church which is meant to be “holy” is kept “in the world” so that the whole world might be sanctified in order to make it become a holy, sweet smelling, aromatic offering/sacrament for the Lord.

But as long as it allows the world to be “in the Church”, rather than the Church being “in the world”, the mission of God entrusted to them by their Lord and Master cannot be fructified. The Church should lead from the front in standing against social stigmatization of a particular group of people and excluding them from full participation in the everyday affairs and conduct of social, economic, religious, and political fields. The Church should accept and embrace everyone and give equal privileges to them without any discrimination. Then it should stand for the rights and human values of those who are ostracised by the society and fight for their rights and livelihood. The Church’s mission must focus on bringing those in the margins to the centre and mainstream.

End Notes

1 For details on this topic, see “Formation of an Inclusive Community” above.
3 Luke seems to have reworked Markan report because Mark says that the anointing happened “in the house of ‘Simon’ the leper” (14:3) but Luke says that it happened in the house of a “Pharisee” but goes on to say that this “Pharisee” was named “Simon” because Jesus addresses him by that name (7:36, 40, 44).
Ecological Crises

The world is undergoing a serious ecological crisis. Technological progress and economic growth, better living standards and changed life style of the people is taking a heavy toll on the nature. The “Mother Earth” is sick due to humans’ irresponsible way of life.

Greed is unquenchable. It demands more and more. Accumulative philosophy and development to make human life more comfortable has done a great disservice to the nature. Human wants are unlimited but the means, i.e., the resources, are limited. Want and greed asks the nature more than what it can actually give to us. Anthropocentric development has denigrated the importance of the eco-system.

1. Factors Responsible for Ecological Crises

When we consider the factors that are responsible for the degradation in eco system there is an underlying element that runs through various factors that may appear in different form: human’s changed life style and the philosophy of accumulation. Commercialization of commodification of everything, including nature, for profit making has resulted in a huge ecological imbalance. Thus, in effect, ecological crisis is a human generated crisis that come back to haunt them. The following are the major factors responsible for ecological crises.

(i) Smoke emitted from the kitchen fires
(ii) Traffic fumes
(iii) Chimney smokes
(iv) Poison from pesticides
(v) Plastic and polythene
(vi) Nuclear and chemical radiation
(vii) Genetic manipulation,
(viii) Toxic wastes from factories and industries,
(ix) Deforestation
(x) Mining, etc.¹

2. Aspects of Ecological Crisis

2.1. Global Warming

Unlimited release of poisonous gases from industries and motor vehicles into the atmosphere causes global warming. “Greenhouse” effects lead to rising sea level and climatic changes on earth. Greenhouse is the phenomenon that absorbs heat in the earth’s atmosphere. Excessive concentration of water vapour, carbondioxide (CO₂), methane, nitrous oxide, which are beneficial gases to maintain and keep the earth habitable, in the earth’s atmosphere heats up the greenhouse leading to global warming.

Uncontrolled production of CO₂ through use of fossil fuel and cement manufacture combined with deforestation contributes to global warming. CO₂ is absorbed by the tress but by cutting down of trees which leads to concentration of CO₂ increases.

2.2. Depletion of Ozone Layers

Ozone layer protects life, including human and non-human lives, against deadly ultraviolet-B radiation. Ozone layer is in the stratosphere, 15-50 km. above the earth. But due to Chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) used in refrigeration and in aerosols this ozone layer is destroyed creating holes in the layer through which the dangerous ultraviolet-B rays come to the earth bringing death to life on earth.²

2.3. Acid Rains

The huge amount of nitrogen oxides and sulphur dioxides released from industries, factories, vehicles and coal-based power plants disturbs the eco system. These poisonous gases released into the air becomes nitric acid and sulphuric acid which get mixed up with the rain and come down to the earth in the form acid rains. The acid rains kills forests and other lives in it.

2.4. Soil Erosion and Rising Water Level

Several factors lead to soil erosion and rising of water levels on earth. Soil erosion and increase in sea water level happens due to a combination of many factors such as deforestation and global warming. When trees are cut down it leads to soil erosion as well as excessive concentration of CO₂ that generates heat in the earth’s atmosphere since there is no enough trees to absorb the heat, which in turn affects the greenhouse. When greenhouse is affected it leads to global warming. Rising temperature in the earth’s atmosphere leads to warmer earth which in turn leads to melting of icebergs. Rising sea water level again leads to...
loss of forests and land in huge amount which also contributes higher level of water vapour. Such a combination of factors become so fatal for the earth’s habitation. It leads to creating a huge imbalance in the nature.

3. Relevance of Jesus’ Teaching and Praxis for Ecological Crises

Jesus did not leave behind a systematic exposition on His understanding of ecology or ecological crises. Nor do we find the exact word “ecology” in the Gospels. It does not mean that ecology was not an important matter for Jesus and the Evangelists.

However, when we gleam through the pages of the Gospels we will see that Jesus used concepts or metaphors that represents “ecology”. Not only that but we clearly see that Jesus addressed the “root” cause of ecological crises when He talked about simplicity of life and non-accumulative attitude. Jesus emphasized on the necessity of dependence on God for survival because He said, “your Father knows what you need” and that God will clothe them more than He clothes the grass or will feed them more than He feeds the lilies of the field (Cf. Matt 6: 25-34; Luke 12:22-34).

3.1. Jesus Refers to the Ecological Crises

Many of Jesus’ parables are based on nature. These parables are called “nature parables”. The lessons that Jesus wanted to convey to His audience is made through the nature (cf. Mark 4:1-34). The parables in this chapter contain the fact that Jesus addressed the economic system of His day by which the “land” and its productivity had been adversely affected.

The first parable, which is commonly called the “Parable of the Sower” (Mark 4:1-8 // Matt 13:1-9; Luke 8:4-8) is suggested to be called “Parable of the Soils” by G.A. Buttrick. This parable stresses the relationship between the soil and the agricultural process because “soil” is the key for agriculture and agricultural produce. Jesus mentions “four” different types of soils in this parable. The sower sows the same seeds upon these soils. Whether the seeds grow or not depends, therefore, not on the quality of the seeds, but on the quality of the soil and its surrounding circumstances. The bad soils receive but cannot sustain the seed’s growth but the good soil absorbs the seeds and sustains their growth and helps in yielding “thirtyfold”, “sixtyfold” and “hundredfold”.4

The crux of the matter here is not that the bad soils were bad by themselves. “Birds” that “devour” the seeds that fell “along the path,” “scorching sun” that kills the seeds that fell on the “rocky ground,” “thorns” that “choked” the plants refer to a combined forces against the seeds. Thus “birds”, “sun” and “thorns” are the main responsible forces that affects the productivity of the soil.

The nature is disturbed and affected by these forces. The soil stops sustaining the plants because it is rendered unproductive or unyielding due to these forces. Through all these imageries and symbols, Jesus refers to the ecological problem which was caused by outside force.

3.2. The Nature Can Produce by Its Own But Humans Cannot Survive Without the Nature

Through the “parable of the growing grain” (Mark 4:26-29) Jesus emphasizes that the nature can, independently of humans, grow and produce by itself. The “sower” in the parable completely disappears once the sowing is done. He is not at all involved in the growth and production of fruit by the seeds. He does not know how the seeds “sprout and grow” not to mention about him contributing to its growth. The climax of the parable, therefore, is on the ability of the “soil” or “earth” to “produce of itself”. The “soil” independently produces but the “sower” is dependent on it so when the harvest is ready he comes and gathers the fruit for himself.

Similarly, the “parable of the mustard seed” (Mark 4:30-32 // Matt 13:31-32; Luke 13:18-19) also seems to emphasize on the growth of the seed independently of any human agency. The sower does not contribute anything to its growth nor does it help it grow.

In both these two parables, a clear contrast is made between the sower and the “soil”. The sower becomes inactive/passive right after the sowing is done but the “soil” remains always active and generative. Another contrast is the independence of the “soil” in producing soil but the dependence of the sower on the “soil” for sustenance. It should not be taken as the servitude of the “soil” to the “sower” because these parables has no idea of it rather than that humans cannot survive without the “soil” (the nature).

3.3. Jesus Attacks Human’s Greed

Jesus had told His disciples not to worry about their life, what they shall be eating or clothing tomorrow. Ecological crises begin with human “want” and “greed”. Humans are so concerned, worried and anxious about what they possess. Their unquenched thirst and unsatisfied hunger leads to the accumulation of more and more. Even then they are not satisfied. Jesus’ words are not just empty talk but it contains the whole truth that however hard humans work, what they get is not what they have earned. Rather whatever they “have” come from God because He is the provider and sustainer of all.
Understanding the Jesus Movement in the Gospel Traditions

3.4. God Provides What is “Needed” Not What is “Wanted”

While addressing misplaced concerns of humans about their wealth and possessions, Jesus puts the nature as models from which they must derive lessons. However insignificant and small they may seem to be, the smallest of creatures and the tiniest of the plants have a lesson for human beings. The nature bears lots of things for humans to learn. Those humans created “in His own image” are directed to learn lesson from “lesser” creatures because it is these “lesser” creatures that depend of God for survival. Whatever humans have yearned for and achieved has led them only to rebel against God. They act like God, taking pride in their achievements, they think that they can now live without God but they do not realize that it is God who “gives” and “provides” what they need. Dependence on God with a “trust” that He will provide is Jesus’ answer to ecological crisis. If ever humans could learn this lesson from Jesus, then the problem of ecological crises would not have arisen at the first place.

3.5. God Cares for All Equally

Jesus makes use of the “creatures” – ravens, lilies, grass, etc. (Luke 12:22ff.) while teaching humans how to be dependent on God. Jesus talks about God providing what humans “need” not what they “want”. Just as He feeds the ravens who “neither sow nor reap…have neither storehouse nor barn” (Luke 12:24), or the “lilies of the field…they neither toil nor spin” (Matt 6:28), God will feed and clothe them. God is not only the Creator but He is the one who sustains. Thus Jesus indicts humanity of its greed which leads them to accumulate more and more thereby creating imbalances in the created order of the universe and bringing ecological crises.

In a nutshell, Jesus repudiated the “capitalist philosophy” that demands more and more. Unquenched desire for unending accumulation just leads to self-destruction. Jesus would say that human greed is the mother of all ecological problems. Nature can exist and survive without human beings but humans are completely dependent on nature. They cannot survive without the nature.

End Notes
1 Taken from Bas Wielenga, Towards an Eco-Just Society (Bangalore: CSA, 1999), 12-46.
2 Bas Wielenga, Towards an Eco-Just Society, 14.
3 In The Parables of Jesus (London: Hodder 7 Stoughton, 1929).

Building the Basileia-Ekklesia of Emancipation

Jesus’ idea of community that He formed was a community of believers where everyone is treated and counted as equals. Though its members come from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds He wanted them to experience “koinonia”, fellowship in its fullness. He envisioned a community of “unity in diversity” as well as “diversity in unity”. The intimate relationship of the Father and the Son and the oneness of Himself with the Father is the starting point of this “koinonia” so that whoever becomes a member of this new community He established must find their full identity within it.

The community He established must be an “assembly of equals”. The members may represent unequal social status but within they must be treated as “equals”. Whatever identity one may bring into this community must be submerged into the reality of the “oneness” (cf. John 17). Just like the ocean which is made up of hundreds and thousands of rivers so also the Ekklesia of God should be. All the rivers that flow into the ocean lose their individual, separate identity once it merges into the vast reality of the ocean, so also each individual must surrender his/her own separate identity what s/he possessed once s/he becomes a member of this community. They must take up a new identity, a new birth, once they belong to this community.

The faceless, identity-less, nameless people who lost their faces, name and identity under the heavy burdens of traditions and culture must be accepted with full honour because this community is meant to be a community of emancipated people. Within this community they must find a space to breathe and to speak. They must be set free (that is what “emancipation” means) from any age-old tradition, customs, culture or practice, force that dehumanised them, chained them and taken away their rights and identity.

1. Building Basileia-Ekklesia of Emancipation Means Searching for the “Lost”

The “lost” can be understood in many ways. From a spiritual sense, which is the traditional sense in which it is used in the Church, “lost” means
unsaved souls or, in a very narrow and exclusive sense, the “non-
christians” or “unbelievers”. But in a wider sense, it includes everyone
who are under socio-economic, religio-political and cultural bondages
who are deprived of their full humanhood due to oppressive structures.

Jesus’ concern was not only to make people gain spiritual salvation.
Not only spiritual, but He was concerned about their “earthly” life which
was grounded in concrete social, economic, religious, cultural and political
realities. The “Nazareth Manifesto” in Luke 4:16-19 contains the gist of
Jesus’ mission statement which He stated in terms of bringing “good
news to the poor”, proclaiming “release to the captives”, “recovery of
sight to the blind”, “to let the oppressed go free” and “to proclaim the
acceptable year of the Lord”. In short. His mission was to “emancipate”
the “poor”, the “captives”, the “blind” and the “oppressed”.

Those who are “lost” in society through unfriendly, oppressive, and
unjust structure must be searched out and they must be released (set
free or emancipate). In order to do it the oppressive structures have to be
attacked and demolished. The forces that hold them captive must first be
broken down. If these structures are left untouched it will continue to
enslave others. Social and economic exploitation, religious and cultural
suppression, etc. must be challenged so as to create an atmosphere of
emancipation and equality.

Jesus stresses the importance of seeking the lost ones in many of
His parables (Matt 18:10-14; Luke 15: 3-10). This is the same thing what
Jesus talks about in John 10:10 when He says, “I came that they may
have life, and have it abundantly”. The “life” that Jesus is talking about is
“eternal life” which, in John, refers to the quality of life. This “life” is not only
a reality in the future but it is experienced here and now as well.

2. Building Basileia-Ekklesia of Emancipation Involves Care and
Discipline within the Community

Jesus foresaw that within the emancipated community of believers
there will be problems of indiscipline and improper conduct. That is why
He outlined how to deal with indiscipline and the erring members within
the ekklesia of God (Matt 18:15-20). This passage is often seen as a
guideline for Church leaders on disciplinary action. However, the passage
is mainly concerned not about punishment of the erring member but with
attempts to rescue a member of the community whose sin has put him/her
in danger.1

The passage clearly spells out what is to be addressed: “sin” of a
member not the person. While a clear separation between the person
and the sin s/he has committed, what is to be dealt with is primarily the
“sin” or “wrongdoing” of the person. The erring or sinning member has to
be shown “love” but her/his “sin” has to be rectified. That is why, enough
care and counselling has to be given first so that s/he is led to repentance.
Similarly, when a member of the community sees another member
committing sin, s/he is not supposed to ignore the fault of the person but
to confront her/him so that s/he does not go on committing the same fault
again. This is the communitarian aspect which Jesus wanted His followers
to follow. Anyone’s failing or standing has a communitarian aspect.

If the erring member is confronted once but does not repent then in
the presence of “one or two witnesses” s/he must be confronted again (cf.
Deut 19:15). The presence of “witnesses” does not mean that the offender
is put on trial but it is to convince her/him to listen. If that recourse also fails
then the matter has to be reported to the “church” (i.e., the congregation).
Again the purpose is not to adjudicate the case but to give pastoral care
for the erring one. If all this fails to convince her/him, only as a last resort,
an “action” must be taken against her/him: to treat her/him “as a Gentile
and a tax-collector” (v. 17). The meaning of this verse and the following
verses is disputed but they suggest a kind of disciplinary action against
the erring members if s/he repeatedly refuses to listen and be changed.

Thus, according to Jesus, problems of indiscipline are prone to arise
within the community. But “love” is the method with which such members
are to be confronted about her/his fault. Proper guidance and care is to be
offered. But if the erring member does not listen then they can be
treated as an “outsider”.

3. Building Basileia-Ekklesia of Emancipation Involves Justice and
Equality for All

In the Ekklesia of God, everyone is to be regarded and treated as
equal. Men and women, rich and poor, all are to be administered justice
and basic rights. The issue of justice and equality implies giving importance
to the neglected ones and those who are denied of their rights.

In the parable of the unjust judge and the widow (Luke 18:1-8) Jesus
makes this point vividly clear. During the time of Jesus, and also ours
today, widows are one of the groups of neglected people whose dignity
and rights are often taken for granted. In the parable, there is someone
who does injustice to the widow. This person must have been stronger
and more influential than her. Taking advantage of the superior status this
person was doing something wrong to the widow. To add insult to injury,
there is also an unjust judge who “neither feared God nor had respect for
people” (v. 2). The combination of the stronger “opponent” and an “unjust
judge” heightens the misery for the widow. The judge is meant to administer
“justice” to the widow for being a widow does not disqualify her from getting justice.

The judge stands in the parable both as a negative as well as positive character. He is “able” to help the widow and there is an “opportunity” opened for him to do that but at first he refuses to rescue her from her dire situation. Justice is needed by those to whom justice is denied. The corrupt and fraudulent people will not knock at the door of a judge seeking justice. But here he is unwilling to do his duty justly. But upon the unceasing, unswerving persistence of the widow, at last he relents and administer justice to her.

Superiority complex, judgmental attitude and arrogant holier-than-thou mentality is detrimental to building a community of emancipated people (Luke 18:9-14). The greatest barrier for realizing the vision of Jesus in creating an ekklesia of emancipation lies in the mind, the attitude that controls one’s interaction and dealing with the others. Unless everyone counts “others better than oneself,” unless everyone learns to respect and accept each other with humility (cf. John 13), building a community of equals will remain a distant dream.

Similarly, in the Ekklesia of God, the helpless and disempowered people are to be administered justice. It is only through justice that they can be emancipated. Only when they are emancipated then only they can be counted as equal to the others. Thus administration of justice to whom justice is denied and humility are essential elements in building a Basileia-ekklesia of emancipation.

4. Building Basileia-Ekklesia of Emancipation is to Care for the Poor

For Jesus, the danger of wealth lies in the selfish use of wealth without sharing with the poor and needy. Jesus time and again reiterated in many of His teachings, particularly through the parables, that the only proper use of wealth is in the care of the poor (cf. Luke 18:18-30 // Mark 10:17-31; Matt 19:16-30; Luke 16:19-31; Luke 12:13-21, etc.). Since God has a special interest in the poor and the needy those rich people who do not share their possessions with the poor stand against God.

In the teachings of Jesus, the rich stand as agents of God. They are blessed by God with riches who in turn must share them with the poor. Thus they are considered as “stewards” of God’s resources in the welfare of the poor. Therefore, unless the rich take up the cause of the poor and help them overcome their poverty and suffering then building a community of emancipation cannot be realized. As long as the poor remain poor then the ekklesia of God cannot be considered as a community of emancipation and equals.

Since the rich and the poor are in the same body and just as one member’s suffering affects the whole of the body, so also the ekklesia of God. Thus to build up the Basileia-ekklesia of emancipation requires the rich to care for the poor.

4. Building Basileia-Ekklesia of Emancipation Involves Equal Participation

If the ekklesia of believers is to be called an assembly of equals then it must open the door for everyone in which all are accepted without any prejudice. Those who are considered worthless and insignificant must be willingly accepted into it (Luke 19:1-10). Since God is not a respector of status, race, or sex, His will is that everyone finds free and direct entry into His “house” (the church).

Not only accepting everyone but all should be given equal opportunity to participate in it (Luke 19:11-27). All must be given fair chance to contribute to the well-being of the community.

End Notes

One important aspect was that the Israelites were told by God not to store anything beyond what they needed for the day. They were to collect an omer of manna each for five days in a week and on the sixth day double of that amount, the additional omer for the Sabbath that comes the next day. If anyone stored anything extra on the first five days, it became rotten or maggoty but the manna that was to be kept for the sabbath use was preserved by being cooked and baked beforehand (Exod 16:4-5, 16-30).

Through the “manna” God preserved and sustained the Israelites for forty years till they entered the promised land. To receive and to be fed by manna they required to do nothing. It was a free gift from God. But God clearly told them not to be greedy because God’s economic principle is based on “providing the need daily.”

2. “Manna Economy” of Jesus

The provision of manna to the Israelites in the desert becomes the basis of teaching concept of economy. Time and again He told His disciples not to be worried about what to eat, drink or wear (cf. Matt 6:25; Luke 12:22). Just as God sustained the Israelites in the desert with manna, Jesus says that God will provide their everyday need. Jesus clearly differentiates “need” from “want”. He does not speak about “whatever you want” rather He talks about God providing “whatever you need for the day”.

2.1. The Role of “Mind”

In the “manna economy”, Jesus deals with the mental state of mind from which greed and contentment arises. Jesus uses the Greek word “merimnão” which refers to the mental attitude of a person vis-à-vis riches or poverty. Jesus refers to “peaceful state of mind” when He talks about “do not be anxious about your life” (Matt 6:25). Economy for Jesus involves this mental state of want of contentment. A peaceful mind is one which is set on God, whose priority is God not material things and so such mind is a contented mind. But from an anxious mind comes greed because it is set on the material things of the world, not God.

2.2. First Thing First

Setting the priority right is an important starting point in Jesus’ economic principle. Disciples are told to prioritise the primary from the secondary. Jesus tells them to put God first in their life and “all these things shall be given to you as well” (Matt 6:33; Luke 12:31). The point here is, if God gives “life” and sustains it then He can be trusted for the food, clothing and shelter. Choosing God is to choose life and whatever is needed for
Understanding the Jesus Movement in the Gospel Traditions

He taught His disciples to say while praying, “Give us this day our daily bread” (Matt 6:11). Dependence on God and relying on Him for sustenance is the crux of the matter because once they learn to depend on God for their sustenance they will not be worried about what to eat or drink or wear tomorrow. Thus, in Jesus’ “manna economy” there is an emphasis on “one day at a time”.

God knows their need and provide them accordingly. In the miracle of feeding of the 4000 (Mark 8:1-10; Matt 15:13-39), the crowd were hungry (need) but had nothing to eat (Mark 8:1-2). Jesus knew that they were hungry and He had “compassion on the crowd” (Mark 8:2) and He was concerned about their life (“they will faint on the way”, Mark 8:3). “Seven loaves” and “few small fish” were not going to satisfy their hunger. But Jesus “took” the seven loaves, “gave thanks”, “broke them” and “gave them” to the disciples so also He did to the fish. They all had enough to their satisfaction (Mark 8:8) and also gathered “seven baskets” of left over pieces. He fed them from nothing and from nowhere He provided them enough food to satisfy their hunger. In like manner, God sustains them even if they do not ask for or earn it for themselves because God cares for their life.

2.3. It is About “Need” Not “Want”

Jesus’ “manna economy” is concerned with “need” not “want”. He does not promise that God will provide all the wants but what is needed. The basic necessities of life is the foundation of sustenance and everything else are appendages. God is concerned about life since He created them. Therefore, God sustains life by providing what is needed for survival.

In order to make this point clear, Jesus appeals to nature and invites humans to observe the reality of His words. The “birds of the air” or the “lilies of the field” do not work but they are fed everyday with what they need. They do not store up anything for tomorrow and yet they do not go hungry any day. Whether sunny day or rainy day, whether hot or cold, they are provided with their need in order to survive because God takes care of them. Likewise, at sunset they peacefully go to sleep without being worried about what they will eat tomorrow. Humans are to learn its lessons from them. For God, they are more precious and valuable than the birds of the air or the lilies of the field (Matt 6:26). If God feeds, gives and sustains the “less valuable” lives then they must know and trust God that He will give “much more” to them than He gives to the birds or the lilies (Matt 6:30).

2.4. Jesus’ “Manna Economy” Deals with the “Daily” Need

Jesus deals with the everyday needs of humans. He states that what is needed for each day will be provided by God to them. “Do not worry for tomorrow” (Matt 6:34) because, just like the birds of the air which “neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them” (Matt 6:26), God will sustain them each day. This conforms to what life will automatically come in place.

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11

Empire of Caesar and the Ekklesia of God

“Empire of Caesar” is a symbolic term used to refer to the authorities of this world. In other words, “Empire of Caesar” will include any repressive force that stand against the “Ekklesia of God”, including the demonic power and the tyrannical state. The ruling authorities, be they civil or political, quite often seem to stand against the “ekklesia of God”. That is why, history of the Christian Church is sometimes called a “history of persecution and suffering”.

Beginning with Jesus, Christians have been facing and confronting the might of the “Empire of Caesar” and many have faced martyrdom at their hands. During the earliest Church history, Christians faced persecutions under the Roman Emperors Nero, Domitian, Decius, etc. and such confrontations between the “Empire of Caesar” and the “Ekklesia of God” can be found throughout the more than 2000 years of its existence.

1. The Indian Scenario

India is known for non-violence (Ahimsa) and toleration. Religious freedom is enshrined in the Constitution of India. There is no “state religion” as such in India. The state or the government is not supposed to interfere in the religious affairs of any religious community as long as they do not create law and order problem. Thus, neutrality of the state in religious affairs of any religion is enshrined in the Constitution.

However, the state machinery is sometimes hijacked by the majority, dominant religious groups and combining themselves and their religious beliefs, practices, and philosophy with the political powers, the religious harmony and toleration, for which India is known for, is quite often disturbed. Those dominant, aggressive, intolerant, majority religious groups consider other minority religions like Islam and Christianity as “foreign” religions and hence they question the Muslims and the Christians’ rights and freedom to practice their religion in India.

The Sangh Parivar (SP) represents such intolerant religious groups in India who try to make India a “united Hindu Bharat” (Akhand Bharat and Hindu Rashtra) and in order to achieve that goal they resort to violence against religious minority groups. The SP consists of RSS-BJP-VHP-BD combine which adhere to Hindutva ideology. Moreover, they combine themselves with the “Empire of Caesar” who misuse and abuse the powers vested on them by supporting the violent acts of the majority religious community against minority religious communities. Thus, we see a deadly combination of religion and politics in India today which become the source of problem and suffering for the “Ekklesia of God”.

2. Sangh Parivar’s Allegations Against Indian Christians

With their allegiance to establish a strong Hindu nation the Hindutvawadis have created a “us-versus-them” attitude thereby sowing seeds of suspicion and hatred among the people. Quite often the “Ekklesia of God” has become poor victim of this divisive attitude because they are always at the receiving end of their “hate campaign”. The tirades against Christians are many and diverse some of which are discussed in brief below.

2.1. They Question the Indian Christians’ Identity

The SP views religious minorities as non-nationals and non-citizens. In the ideology of Hindutva all non-Hindu communities, which include Christians, are foreigners because, though they may consider India as their Fatherland, they do not consider it as their Holyland.

Thus, unless they “accept their Hindu roots” and that they “have the blood of Rama and Krishna” in their veins they will be regarded and treated as foreigners in their homeland.

2.2. They Question their Patriotism

There is a “minority bashing” in the form of questioning their patriotism by the SP. It is closely associated with the question of identity because in their reasoning anybody who does not regard India both as his/her Fatherland and Holyland is unpatriotic. They allege that conversion compromises patriotism of the convert and is tantamount to allegiance to alien nationhood. Under their scheme of things, loyalty to a foreign institution, even a Church
or a missionary, creates “extra-territorial” loyalty inimical to the country’s national interest. There is also a fear psychosis from which springs the doubt that Christians might one day demand a separate state.  

2.3. Allegations of Forced Conversions

One of the major allegations of the SP against Christians in India is that they are engaged in forced conversions of the Hindus. The issue of conversion is not only a religious question but has a clear political dimension in India today. Christians are accused of using foreign funds to indulge in forcible conversions. They allege that Christians lure the poor through material and financial help. Preaching and free distribution of Gospel tracts and Bibles are all viewed as attempts to convert the Hindus to Christianity and hence such practices suppressed. Through these conversion works Christians make the converts both un patriotic and anti-national. Thus, their mission of re-converting “fooled” Hindus (Shuddhi) to the Hindu-fold constitutes their main strategy for consolidating Hindu domination.  

2.4. Foreignness of the Indian Church

In his address at an exclusive RSS affair on the Vijayadashmi function in Delhi, K. S. Sudarshan “exhorted” the Indian Christians to formulate and organize a sarkari (indigenous) church. He asked them to pursue a path of “Indianizing” itself and becoming one with the “mainstream” of the Indian (i.e., Hindu) culture. He said, “It is advisable to have a totally Indian church like the one in China and all foreign churches and missionaries should be asked by the government to pack up and go.”

It implies that there is a clear concept in the SP that the Church should be subservient to the state. The state must direct and regulate Church’s activities. It also calls upon the Christians to sever ties with outside Church, particularly the Pope. It is possible by way of “having Ram and Krishna as their heroes and Diwali and Holi as their festivals.”

3. Jesus and the “Empire of Caesar”

The relation between “Empire of Caesar” and the “Ekklesia of God” was a recurrent issue among the Jews during Jesus’ time. Since the Jews were under the Roman rule, they were required to pay several taxes to the Romans. Hence, the Gospels say that Jesus was confronted with the tricky and politically sensitive question whether to pay taxes to the Caesar or not.

3.1. Who is the Greatest - “Caesar” or “God”?  

We read in the Synoptic Gospels about the encounter of Jesus with “some Pharisees and some Herodians” who questioned Him whether they could pay taxes to the Caesar or not (Mark 12:13-17; // Matt 22:15-22; Luke 20:20-26). The issue of paying taxes to the Romans through the client kings in Palestine was a constant and lively concern for the Jews. Many Jews opposed the Roman hegemony and legitimacy of collecting taxes from them.  

Having asked for a coin Jesus answered, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” We discern a duality in this answer, as Abraham Philip writes, “the State is nothing final”; but “it has the right to demand what is necessary to its existence – but not more.”

Jesus’ answer may be understood in terms of advocating two equally important kingdoms, one sovereign kingdom, or two kingdoms in hierarchical order: God first, then Caesar. Jesus seems to mean here that there is a legitimate and necessary, though limited, place for “Empire of Caesar” and its rulers. Jesus is denouncing the Zealots and Zealotism who tried to confront the Roman Empire by means of violent resistance.

It does not, however, suggests that Jesus endorsed Caesar or his rule, nor does it suggest anything like a doctrine of two separate but equal kingdoms. What Jesus means here is that only God is sovereign. Though the “Empire of Caesar” has its own usefulness, it is temporal and limited and subservient to God’s sovereign authority. This is the point John makes when he ironically shows Jesus being “crowned”, clothed with “royal robes” and His subjects adoring Him as “King of the Jews” (19:2-3). Similarly, John shows that Jesus is the “true” and “rightful” King in an ironical fashion when Pilate put up a placard above His head on the cross with the inscription “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews” (19:19).

He does not even say that the “Ekklesia of God” are to obey God by means of obeying Caesar. Therefore, though the demand of the taxes by the state is genuine and necessary it is both temporal and subordinate to God. Jesus may be said of making a critical distinction between Caesar and God by advocating supremacy of God. Thus, “Jesus allows the paying of the tax, but by his distinction between God and Caesar he implicitly denies the claim to divine supremacy for the emperor that the coin bears.”

His words were used later on by the “Ekklesia of God” to resist the repressive and tyrannical designs of the “Empire of Caesar” when it demanded worship of the Caesar from the “Ekklesia of God.”

3.2. The “Empire of Caesar” Opposes the “Ekklesia of God”

Throughout the life and ministry of Jesus, the Jewish authorities and their religious leaders oppose Him. They observe Him (Mark 3:2), test Him (Luke 10:25), question Him (Luke 5:21) and try to destroy Him (Mark 3:6).
Their opposition comes to a climax when Jesus is arrested, tried, condemned and sentenced to be crucified (Mark 14-15; Matt 26-27; Luke 22-23; John 18-19). Of all the Gospels, John's account of the arrest, trial and crucifixion of Jesus emphasizes the conflict between the “Empire of Caesar” and Jesus. Right from His arrest there is a direct confrontation between Jesus and the rulers. When the rulers led by Judas come to arrest Him, Jesus reveals who He is (“I am”). After He is arrested the Jewish rulers try to find a crime in Him in order to kill Him. Therefore, He is tried before them and a face to face confrontation between Jesus and rulers ensues.

The role of the Jewish rulers in the crucifixion of Jesus is interestingly juxtaposed along with that of the Roman political power. During the trial Jesus is accused of “dishonouring” the high priest. This is an issue about “authority”. The rulers of the Jews think that they are higher and greater than Jesus and so they expect Jesus not to insult their high priest. They expect that Jesus should respect him. Not only that, but they wrongfully accuse Jesus of a grave religious crime — blasphemy (Mark 14:64).

Then Jesus comes face to face with the majestic power of the Roman Empire when He is brought before the Roman governor, Pilate. Pilate is representing the power and authority of the Caesar. Therefore, the first confrontation between them is centred on the “kingship” (John 18:33-38). The “legitimacy”, or for that matter “illegitimacy”, of Pilate to judge is the central theme of this pericope because Jesus is the rightful king and so Pilate is not a legitimate arbitrator.

As the governor, Pilate’s primary duty is to administer justice to a wrongfully accused person, in this case, the one standing before him, Jesus. Pilate knows that he is vested with “power to release” and “power to crucify” a person (John 19:10). Also he is fully convinced that Jesus is “innocent” (“I find no crime in him” – 19:4). However, the tyranny of the “Empire of Caesars” is that it can misuse and abuse its power to wrongfully condemn and kill innocent people for its vested interests. Therefore, Pilate misuses his power by handing the innocent Jesus to be crucified.

3.3. The Temporal Nature of the “Empire of Caesar”

Jesus not only talked about the temporariness and transitory aspect of the “Empire of Caesar” but in and through His actions He brought the beginning of the end of it. The Gospels present Jesus as standing in a warfare. He is at the centre of a cosmic conflict between good and evil, just and unjust, God and Satan. Jesus’ life and ministry is set with in this conflict against the demonic powers and through many of His miracles He brought about the downfall of the “kingdom” or “house” of Beelzebul, “the prince of demons” (Matt 12:24; cf. Mark 3:20-27).

Jesus’ miracles are set against the powers of the demons. During the time of Jesus, sickness and disease or any form of suffering was considered acts of the demons. From such perspective, the healing miracles of Jesus are acts against the power of the demons. By healing the sick, cleansing the lepers, raising the dead, etc., Jesus’ acts show that Satan is losing the battle to Jesus. Jesus is the victor from the beginning because He is winning over Satan, albeit little by little. Thus, Satan’s downfall has begun and his final defeat is imminent.

Of particular importance is, therefore, those miracles of Jesus which involved casting out of the demons (exorcisms) because it presents Jesus in direct confrontation with the demons. The power of Jesus is set against the power of the demons. But before we come to His acts of casting out of demons, the synoptics introduce Jesus to us, that just after He was declared as “God’s beloved Son” (cf. Matt 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22), as wrestling with Satan in the wilderness. Jesus is tempted “by the devil” for “forty days and forty nights” (Matt 4:2) but Jesus overcomes him. Thus, the ministry of Jesus which He is going to embark is clearly introduced to us that it will involve a fight against the devil and that Jesus will be the victor.

There are numerous occasions in which Jesus released persons possessed by the demons by casting them out (Mark 1:21-28 // Luke 4:31-37; Mark 5: 1-20 // Matt 8:28-34; Luke 8:26-39; Mark 9:14-29 // Matt 17:14-21; Luke 9:37-43; etc.). Mark’s story of Jesus begins with an exorcism (1:21-28) through which Mark heightens the point that the end of Satan’s rule has begun. By rebuking the demons and casting them out Jesus exercises His supremacy over the demons. However powerful and active demons were, they no longer could stand before Jesus, the supreme ruler. The reign of Satan over humans inflicting miseries and suffering is about to end because they are “cast out” from their territories (body of the demon possessed persons). The rule and kingdom of Satan is coming to an end because it was meant only for a time being. It was only transitory, passing, fleeting and momentary even if it was a great one.

3.4. Impotency and Subservience of “Empire of Caesar”

Though powerful and dynamic, the “Empire of Caesar” is only for a time being. It is passing away day by day, slowly, losing its territory inch by inch as the “Basileia of God” grows day by day, becoming bigger and bigger just like the “mustard seed” till it becomes the “greatest of shrubs” (Matt 13:31-32).

Satan and his rule (“empire”) is rendered impotent because the true “King” and His “empire” has come. This is the time for Satan to “beg” the
"King" to spare him (Mark 5:10, 12). Satan is overpowered, he is losing his kingdom, he has no place to hide. However, this is not the final defeat of Satan. Though he is losing his power, he is still active but his end has begun which will culminate when he is bound up and thrown into the unquenchable fire. His final end has not yet come but the fact is that he is losing his kingdom and power to Jesus. That is what exorcisms of Jesus mean.

4. Implication for the “Ekklesia of God” in India

In normal circumstances, when the “Empire of Caesar” does not demand “the things of God” or impinge on the place of God in the lives of the Christians, Christians should respect and give due honour to the “Empire of Caesar”. They should cooperate with it in all noble causes. They should abstain and resist from all unlawful means even when they are accused and blamed unjustly. In such normal situations, Christians must discharge duties and responsibilities of a dutiful citizen.

However, in times when the “Empire of Caesar” try to usurp God’s place or demand absolute and unquestioned loyalty to its tyrannical policies and actions, then the “Ekklesia of God” will have no choice but to say “no” to such oppressive governments or rulers. When the “Empire of Caesar” crosses its boundary and overstep into God’s premises in the lives of the Christians, they will have no choice but to resist and disobey them. It is so because their absolute loyalty belongs to “God” not the “Caesar” and that their loyalty to God limits their allegiance to the “Caesar”. They cannot expunge the importance of the “Empire of Caesar” in normal circumstances but when “Caesar” demands which belongs to God, then the “Ekklesia of God” has to stand up against him.

End Notes

1 For the danger and opposition which Jesus faced during His lifetime, see above “Confrontations of Jesus”.


3 For a detail study on this issue, see Imsenperong, Menjiwapong Jamir, & Walotemjen, Mapping the Context, esp., Walotemjen, “Religious Freedom and Christians in India Since 1947: A Historical Appraisal,” 162-188.

4 Madhav Sadasiv Golwalkar, We or Our Nationhood Defined (Nagpur: Bharath Publications, 1939), 47-48. Similarly, Abhas Chatterjee writes, “…there is a difference between being a part of a nation and the citizen of a state. A person may not be a part of a nation although he may be a citizen of its state, and it is such a person who is truly characterized as a minority. Indeed this is the correct concept of minority.” See Abhas Chatterjee, The Concept of Hindu Nation (New Delhi: Voice of India, 1995), 25.


8 The then RSS Chief, K. S. Sudarshan, alleged both on and off that the Churches in North East India are supporting the insurgents and that they “actually” are involved in insurgency. Cf. The Times of India, October 3, 2000; The Hindu, October 16, 2000. But he prove his allegations because the Churches in North East India do not abet insurgency rather they are telling the “nation workers” to forsake arms and violence. Likewise, the ceasefire between the Government of India and National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Issac-Muivah) [NSCN-IM] which is in its fifteenth year was possible because of the pressure and tireless initiative from the Church on the Naga leaders to come to the negotiating table and thereby seek a permanent solution to more than half-century old Indo-Naga problem. Thus I wonder whether Sudarshan was either generalizing some unrelated events happened in some parts of NEI or was making some unfounded allegations to denigrate the Church.

9 A good perspective and analytical study on Shuddhi may be found in Santanu K. Patro, “Conversion, Sudhiti and Adivasi Identity,” Religion and Society 50/3 (September 2005): 11-24.

10 The Times of India, October 3, 2000.


12 On the practice and nature of the taxes to the Romans, see “Economic circumstances but when “Caesar” demands which belongs to God, then the “Ekklesia of God” has to stand up against him.


14 For these differing interpretations see Arnold T. Monera, “The Christian’s Relationship to the State according to the New Testament: Conformity or Non-Conformity?” AJT 19/1 (April 2005): 114-117.


16 V. J. John, “The Role of the State in Jesus’ View: A Synoptic Perspective,” BTF 36/1 (June 2004): 5. Likewise “In the ancient Roman world Jesus’ words set a limit on the legitimacy of the state, putting God above the state and distinct from it.”


Modular Exegesis from the Gospels

1. General Guidelines for Exegesis from the Gospels

Exegeting the Gospels seems to be a daunting task. But once proper principles of exegesis are understood and followed exegeting the Gospels is a rewarding exercise. Applying newer interpretative methods or reading the Gospels from new approaches or perspectives is recommended. Therefore, every exegete can follow her/his own choice of method/criticism. However, the primary task of exegesis is to discover what the text “meant” and to bring out what it will “mean” for now. Therefore, the exegete functions as the “bridge” between the text and the context. So her/his role becomes extremely important in order to let the Gospels speak relevantly to the present context.

Apart from the authorship and date of writing of each Gospel, exegete must first do a detail study on the background of each Gospel. This will include the following:

(i) Determine each Gospel’s literary features
(ii) Determine the locality involved in each of the Gospels (to whom was it written or the community from which it originated)
(iii) Identify the Sitz im Leben (i.e., the Life Setting or the situation of the author and the readers including issues, problems, etc. that they were facing)
(iv) Determine the purpose of writing
(v) Get a general idea of the theological perspective of each Gospel


The Gospel itself is anonymous and contains no accurate information which would enable us to identify its author. But traditionally it is believed that he was Luke, the ‘beloved physician’ (cf. Col 4:14; 2 Tim 4:11; Phlm 24) and a companion of Paul. That he wrote for an urban church

What we can gather from the Gospel itself about its author is that he is interested in the Gentiles and the marginalized groups of people suggesting that he was a Gentile. However, he bases his story of Jesus in the OT, even though he does not quote the OT extensively as Matt does, his Gospel is saturated with OT terms, concepts and figures which shows Luke's Jewishness.

2.2. Sources and Composition of Luke

Luke does not claim to be an eyewitness and confesses that he is only a compiler, claiming simply the credit of having done his best to verify the facts which he narrates. Luke’s preface (1:1-4) suggests that the Gospel is addressed to a certain Theophilus, the identity of this “God lover” is unknown to us; and we are not even sure whether he was an individual or a symbol. Verse 1 states that he is neither the first nor the only one to write down the things because “many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events”. Do “many” mean the other canonical Gospels? Here, most of the scholars agree that Luke is expressing his reliance on Mark as his source. Again, he says that what he attempts to do is “to set down an orderly account” which made the earlier scholars to come to a conclusion that Luke was a serious historian. In v. 2, Luke states that he bases upon the tradition of “those who from the very beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word.” This verse indicates that he himself is not an eyewitness (“those who”) but what he is about to set out is genuine and authentic because the “eyewitnesses and servants of the word” who have been from the beginning of Jesus’ public activity are his sources. Thus, upon the basis of the tradition of the eyewitnesses, “many” already before Luke have undertaken to give a description of the “things” which “have been accomplished among us”. With this, Luke points to the facts associated with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus which were concluded with the resurrection and which yet continued working in the “preaching of the kingdom of God” and in the “teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Apart from what Luke says in the Prologue, Luke is believed to have made use of the Gospel of Mark and Q as basic sources in the writing of the Gospel. The Greek of the Prologue is said to be imitation of classical style that many have detected a strong influence of the LXX, for the suggestion that Luke was a Gentile convert to Judaism. But there are materials which are composed by Luke himself. Therefore, he mixes the materials taken from Mark and Q with his own compositions.

2.3. Date of Writing Luke

The Gospel itself was apparently written sometime after the fall of Jerusalem in A.D.70, since Luke 19:41-44; 21:20-24 show knowledge of that event. Most scholars, therefore, generally date Luke sometime between AD 80-100. Moreover, if Luke had used Mark which was written c. A.D. 65-70, then a general dating of A.D. 75-85 may be assigned to Luke because taking Luke too late a period of the first century A.D. may not be plausible.

2.4. Sitz im Leben of Luke

The Sitz im Leben of Luke can be inferred from his community concerns that we can surmise from his Gospel.

(i) The Problems of Parousia

Hans Conzelmann identified the pivotal problem facing the evangelist as the historical delay of the parousia. To him, Jesus and the early Christians expected the parousia to occur very soon certainly within their own generation. Therefore, Luke seeks to eradicate the expectation of an imminent end by posting a prolonged and divinely-ordained “Age of the Church.”

(ii) False Teaching

C.H. Talbert argues that the major purpose of Luke-Acts is to provide a defense against false teaching in the Church. The Gnostic system was based on an extreme dualism that projected a Docetic view of Christ. The Gnostic teachers described Christ as a spiritual being who did not actually suffer or die.

(iii) Tribulation

The tribulation that Luke’s community experienced was related to the Jews’ disastrous war with Rome where the people of God were humiliated and their Temple was destroyed and the subsequent years marked increased animosity between the Jews and the Christians with Christians mostly becoming the victims.

(iv) Jews and Gentiles

Luke’s community is certain that they faced the question of how Gentile Christianity relates to Judaism. According to Robert Maddox there is a sustained development of the theme “Israel and the Gentiles” in Luke-Acts which was a pressing concern for Luke and his community challenging the legitimacy of Gentile Christians. The question quite simply was, “who
are the true people of God.”

**(v) Controversies**

**(a) Internal Controversies**

Internally Luke engages in polemic against Jewish Christians who seek to apply overly strict entrance requirements to those who want to join reconstituted Israel. These Jewish Christians are the “Pharisees” of the Gospel, who object to Jesus’ eating habits and associating with sinners and tax-collectors. Against them Luke develops his view of who are the children of Abraham (13:10-17/ 19:1-10).

**(b) External Controversies**

Externally, the problem Luke’s community faced are those of harassment, primarily from local Jewish Synagogues leaders (21:11-19), the problems of Peter, John, Stephen, Barnabas and Paul in Acts. As the sermons of Peter, Stephen and Paul further indicate, these problems involve the interpretation of scripture, especially how Jesus is the fulfillment God’s promise and such scripture interpretation is no small concern for mission to Jews.

**(vi) Social and Economic Issues**

Luke’s community consisted of both Jews and Gentiles, men and women, rich and poor. There were frictions within arising from this social and economic plurality. Therefore, Luke has an emphasis on “universal” significance of Jesus. Men and women, Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor are to treat each other as co-sharers and participants in the great salvific plan of God. The “Church” is to be an inclusive community.

**2.5. Purpose of Writing**

Luke does not provide any explicit purpose for his writing. But taking the entire perspective of Luke-Acts, Hans Conzelmann suggests that Luke divides time or history into three epochs—time of Israel, time of Jesus and the time of the Church. According to him, Luke and his Church found themselves in the last epoch. As such, Luke sees the Church that has come to stay in the world. Therefore proposed purposes hinge on these main points:

**(i) An Apology for the Christians**

During the time Luke was written, Christianity was regarded as an “illegitimate” religion. In order to correct that misplaced perception Luke wrote to “defend” (i.e., apology) Christianity and argue that it is not a disloyal or an anti-social group capable of disturbing the Pax Romana but a legitimate fulfillment of Israel’s ancient faith. The accusation on which Jesus was handed over to be crucified by the Roman Governor Pilate was on the political charge of treason (cf. Luke 23:2). But Luke affirms the “innocence” of Jesus throughout the Passion Narrative that climaxes on the Centurion’s declaration that Jesus is “innocent”, (23:47). Therefore, Luke attempts to show that just as its founder (Jesus) Christianity is politically harmless to the Empire nor Christians are anti-socals.

**(ii) A Political Apology for the Romans**

At just the opposite of the above point is that Luke wanted to “defend” the Romans before the Christians. Christians doubted the fairness of the Romans and blamed them for the death of Jesus. Therefore, Luke wanted to tell them that the Romans are not a threat to Christianity since they have been sympathetic to Jesus.

**(iii) A Call to Revolution**

Andre Trocme has suggested that Luke presents Jesus as an instigator of revolution. He sees Jesus as one who tries to revive the ancient Jewish custom of “Jubilee,” where the proclamation of a Jubilee year would allow the land be remitted, slaves would be released and capital would be redistributed as in the OT text (Lev 25; Exod 21:2-6; 23:10-12; and Deut 15:1-18; 31:9-13).

**(iv) A Plea for Peace**

Bringing Jesus’ “table fellowship” to the fore, J. Massyngbaerde Ford proposed that Luke’s purpose was to show that Jesus was a non-violent person who not only taught it but practised it himself. He focusses on the frequent references to Jesus as one who eats with enemies and outcasts (5:29; 15:1-2; 19:1-10), thereby admitting those people who were normally ostracized into a covenantal relationship with himself.

**(v) To Provide a Sociological Legitimation of Full Fellowship for Gentiles**

According to R.E. Brown, Luke’s intended purpose was to assure the Gentiles that their acceptance of Jesus was no accident or aberration but part of God’s plan reaching back to the creation, a plan that ultimately includes the conversion of the whole Roman world (which Luke will show in Acts).


**(i) Wider/General Context: Jesus’ Public Ministry in Galilee (4:14-9:50)**

**(ii) Immediate/Narrower Context: Jesus’ Rejection at Nazareth (4:16-30)**
Verse 16:
Right after His temptation by the devil (4:1-13), Jesus returns to Nazareth, His home town where He spent His childhood. As a devout Jew would, Jesus goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath to worship. In the history of Israel, synagogues emerged during the exilic period where the scattered Jews (the Diaspora Jews) worshipped because they could not go every Sabbath to the temple in Jerusalem. Synagogue worship consisted of the recitation of the Shema (cf. Deut 6:4-9), a prayer, readings from the Torah and the Nevi’im (Prophets), an exposition on the passages read and a blessing by a priest. So when Jesus is in synagogue, He is invited to read from the Prophetic books.

During the synagogue worship it was a general practice to “stand” while reading from the scriptures but to “sit down” while delivering the exposition (cf. vv. 20-21) and so conforming to that Jesus “stood up to read” when He was invited by the ruling elder of the synagogue.

The combination of “sabbath” and “custom” heightens Luke’s emphasis on the faithfulness and respect of Jesus to Jewish worship practices. Since He is the Jewish expected Messiah He conforms to their religious practices by going to synagogue worship every Sabbath.

Verse 17:
The reading that was assigned to Jesus was from the Nevi’im. It is suggested that the reader was free to choose the passage from the Prophets while the Torah was read through over a period of three years. But it is more evident that this passage was assigned for that sabbath day’s reading and the significance of the combination of the passage and the reader should be that this Isaianic prophecy’s fulfilment has arrived when Jesus stands to read it. When the “scroll” (the book) of the Prophet Isaiah was handed to Him by the synagogue attendant (cf. v. 20), He opened the passage where the following words were written. During this time there was no chapter or verse numbers assigned to the Bible and hence only “the place” is indicated.

Verse 18:
A major portion of this passage is from Isaiah 61:1-2 in the LXX. LXX is the Greek translation of the OT and among the Diaspora Jews this Greek translation was mostly used. An unmistakable emphasis of this verse is that these words written by Prophet Isaiah in the long ago is now fulfilled in Jesus as He will say it in later verses (cf. v. 21). Some of major Lukan themes are introduced in this verse: (i) empowerment by the Spirit; (ii) reversal of fortune for the social and economically disadvantaged people; (iii) holistic healing of body and spirit. There is also an emphasis on “me” and “release” in this verse making “release” as the main message of Jesus. This emphasis on “release” theme will be repeated in v. 19 also where the concept of “Jubilee” is contained. Thus Luke combines Isaiah with the book of Leviticus chapter 25 where Jubilee legislation is outlined. This combination drives home Luke’s perspective of Jesus’ mission as centred in “release” theme.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me”. The reader can quickly connect it with the baptism of Jesus event when the “Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form” (3:22). Isaiah had spoken about anointing of someone upon whom the Spirit of God would rest. Jesus is that “anointed” one, i.e., the Messiah and so the Isaianic Messianic prophecy is fulfilled by Jesus “proclaiming” it through His reading.

“To preach good news to the poor…proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed”. The “poor” here is a general term to include those who are economically poor, socially disadvantaged, politically powerless, etc. Some scholars, like Joel B. Green, argue that the three groups of people mentioned after it (captives, blind, oppressed) constitute the poor in this passage.

The “poor”, “captives”, “blind” and “oppressed” are the focus of Jesus’ Messianic mission. Jesus is about to bring about a “reversal of fortune” for them (cf. 1:46-55). In this Messianic age that He inaugurates, those who have been marginalized and pushed to oblivion will be brought to the centre, those who have been in chains will be set free, the hungry will be fed with good things, the lame will walk and the blind will see. The Jews looked for that day to dawn and it is now here, working and operating, in the reality of Jesus. The disadvantaged and those who did not find favour are entering into a new phase of life.

Verse 19:
Luke quotes only till the first part of verse 2 of Isaiah 61. What he omitted is also significant because Isa 61:2b talks about “vengeance of God”. Luke may be thinking that the “year of the Lord’s favour” and the day of God’s vengeance are mutually exclusive. “The year of Lord’s favour” is the original reading in Hebrew which refers to the Messianic age.

The combination of “release” theme and “the year of the Lord’s favour” brings out the Jubilee concept of Lev 25. According to Lev 25:10, the year of Jubilee is “the year of release.” Every fiftieth year the slaves were to be set free, properties to be returned to the original owners, debts would be
cancelled. Luke presents Jesus’ opening address at Nazareth on that important day “Sabbath” and from the “synagogue” as an announcement of the final Jubilee, the new era of salvation, the breaking-in of God’s kingdom.

This passage is aptly called as the “Nazareth Manifesto” because what He announced from the synagogue at Nazareth is what Jesus will do throughout His ministry. His mission of release will involve conflict with the Satanic forces by which He will release those bound by Satan (cf. Luke 13:16). He will break the oppressive social, cultural and religious traditions in order to set free who are enslaved by them. Thus this passage functions as the proclamatic announcement of Jesus’ program.

End Notes

1 A good and practical guide book on Gospel exegesis is Scot McKnight, *Interpreting the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Baker, 2002).
PART

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