



**IN THE
FULLNESS OF TIME**

(Gospels and Acts - An Introduction)

FR. T. J. JOSHUA.

DIVYA BODHANAM SERIES
GROWING IN THE WISDOM OF GOD

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UNIT I

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW TESTAMENT

LESSON 1

THE RELATION BETWEEN THE NEW TESTAMENT AND THE OLD TESTAMENT

—New Testament impossible without Old Testament

—Meaning of "Testament"

*—How the New Testament Writers made use of
the Old Testament*

A friend of mine once remarked, "The Old Testament? I never read it; I read only the New". There may be many others who share this view. They may ask, "Isn't the Old Testament the Scripture of the Jewish nation which deals with the Law and its observance? What is its relevance for believers in Christ?". Under these circumstances it is absolutely necessary to understand the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament.

"The New Testament is hidden in the Old Testament. In the New Testament the Old Testament becomes illuminated". This Statement by Augustine is very relevant and meaningful, and in it we can see the relation between the two testaments. A good knowledge of the Old Testament is absolutely essential for a proper study of the New Testament since the Old Testament events and doctrines find their fulfilment in the New Testament.

Testament

Though we are familiar with the expression Old Testament and New Testament, sometimes they can be confused. The Hebrew word "Berith" means 'Covenant', and its Latin equivalent is 'Testamentum'. From this word, we get the English 'testament.' By Testaments we mean the Old and the New Covenants, Contracts or Agreements. On Mount Sinai Yahweh made a covenant with Israel (Exod. Ch. 19, 24), while Jesus makes a covenant with the Church on Calvary (Mark 14:24). In the Old Testament there is a reference to the covenant to be made in the future, "The time is coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah" (Jer. 31:31). This is fulfilled in Christ; hence St. Paul says, "God has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant" (2 Cor. 3:6).

We can hardly overlook the many differences between the Old and New Testaments, but their similarities and cohesion attract us and we get the feeling that they are two parts of the same book.

(a) Both Deal With The Same God

The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is the same God who speaks through Jesus in the New Testament. The God who created the universe, delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt and who spoke through the prophets, is the same one who accomplished salvation through Jesus Christ. "For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). The same God, who in former times spoke to our forefathers "...in these last days has spoken to us by a Son" (Heb. 1:2).

(b) Both Testaments Deal With A Chosen Nation

The Old Testament deals with Israel, the people of God—their origin and history, victories and defeats and their ultimate aspirations. They are commissioned by God to carry on His mission in the world. Similarly in the New Testament the Christian Church is the 'nation' chosen by God. It is the New Israel, the continuation and fulfilment of the Old Israel. The new

community centred on Jesus Christ is God's specially chosen people and a holy nation (Ex. 19:6, compare with 1 Pet 2:9). They are commissioned to continue God's work of salvation in the world.

(c) Old Testament Events Are Examples And Models of New Testament Events

Many events in the life of Jesus Christ and in the experience of the Christian Church can be seen as symbols and signs in the Old Testament. Jesus Christ's return from Egypt as a child subsequent to Joseph's dream that Herod had died, his fast for 40 days in the desert and subsequent temptations, are all, according to the gospel writers, similar to experiences found in the history of Israel.

(d) The Old Testament Finds Its Fulfilment In The New Testament

Many prophecies and Psalms of the Old Testament are fulfilled in the New Testament and almost all the New Testament writers share such an outlook towards the Old Testament. Throughout the gospel of St. Mathew we find Old Testament passages scattered to prove that almost every event in the life of Jesus is a fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy. This can be seen in other gospels as well, though not so predominantly as in St. Mathew.

In the Epistles, Paul justifies and confirms his ideas. eg. Paul establishes that justification by faith is not a new doctrine introduced by him, but something already exemplified in the life of Abraham. He proves this by quoting Genesis 15:6 (See Rom.ch.4)

The New Testament writers often quote from the Old Testament, not to display their knowledge, but to establish that the Christian Church is not something that emerged overnight. It came into existence as a result of a well-thought out and well-planned preparation on the part of God. The Old Testament is a long preparation for the New Testament, and the hopes and aspirations expressed in it bear fruit in the life and activities of Jesus Christ as narrated by the New Testament.

EXERCISE :

- (1) Find out the Old Testament quotations in the gospel of St. Mathew.
- (2) Which events in the life of Christ are pointed out as a fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy ?
- (3) "The Old Testament is the scripture of Jesus. We in India should adopt in its place the sublime ideas of the Vedas and the Upanishads." Comment on this view of some Indian Christian thinkers.

LESSON 2

THE HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND

—*Greco-Roman Cultural Background.*

—*In what period and background did the Christian Church emerge ?*

—*In what way did this background influence the Christian church and its writings ?*

—*A view of the politics, religion, culture and philosophy of this period.*

The most important factor that determines the growth of a plant is the nature of the soil and its surroundings. Similarly, it is necessary to find out in what type of surroundings the Christian Church grew and how it influenced the New Testament. In the previous lesson we learned that the roots of the New Testament are embedded in the Old Testament. But these roots reached further down into the Greco-Roman world and its cultural milieu. Hence we should learn the special features of that world.

(1) Peaceful Political Atmosphere

The Roman Empire which reigned supreme during the New Testament period was very extensive, mighty and well-organised. After 200 years of bloodshed and violence, peace and order came during the reign of Augustus, and from 27 B C onwards a stable government existed. It was a strong administrative structure in which the whole Empire consisting of most of western Europe, North Africa, Turkey and Palestine, was divided into several provinces. Rome as the centre, exercised control over the provinces by appointing governors and other Roman representatives.

The stability and control of this large and widespread empire was dependant on certain factors. An excellent system of communication, by land and sea, was developed, and the phrase "all roads lead to Rome" was coined. Although Greek was used mainly in the Eastern Empire, and Latin prevailed in the West, the majority of people spoke a "Common Greek" to facilitate communication throughout the Empire, and freely exchange ideas and philosophies. Finally, Roman Law, famous even today helped to establish a sound legal system and bring about justice and peace

(2) Social Inequalities

In spite of political unity and a stable government, there was a great deal of social inequality. Rome's conquest threw up a society based on slavery, where the slave was more often than not, a tool, treated like an animal, with no rights whatsoever as an individual. There was a great number of poor people whose wages were insufficient to allow them a decent living. On top of this, the tax levied by Rome was unbearable.

(3) A Diversity of Religions

Though there was unity in political life, there was a great deal of diversity in the religious field. Especially among the uneducated there were a diversity of gods, and temples of various gods existing side by side. Worship of the emperor became popular and temples sprouted all over the empire dedicated to one Emperor or the other. **Mystery Religions :** Mystery Religions and cults sprang up, mainly in the Eastern countries, but being popular, spread rapidly

all over the empire. They were begun by the Greeks as they meditated on the gods and showed their exploits through drama, hoping to thus share in the experience of the Gods—thus, the cults of Isis, Mithra, Dionysius, Orphic and Osiris mushroomed, centred around the worship of one particular god. They all had a strange initiation ceremony. Often the devotee hoped to die, resurrect and become immortal like the god he worshipped. Most of these religions were austere against worldly pleasures and held promise of a divine ecstasy to their followers. The nascent Church found them a great challenge, and to its credit, the Church used some of their ideas to spread its message.

Gnosticism

Gnosticism originated in the first century and grew directly out of the mystery religions. According to the gnostics, salvation could only be attained through 'Gnosis' or wisdom—bot not the wisdom of rational thought or scientific analysis, rather, wisdom arising out of a mystery cult, obtainable only to a few "chosen". They also attached a great deal of importance to philosophic discussion and ascetic life. It became very popular and a serious threat to Christianity in the second century. Most New Testament writers condemn it, and Paul reveals his Christology when he uses "Gnosis" with a Christian relevance.

(4) A World of Diverse Philosophies

Simultaneously many systems of philosophy were prevalent which aimed at fulfilling man's aspirations and his spirit of enquiry. This was an attraction for the intellectuals. The influence of Socrates and Plato who lived in the fifth century B. C. had not waned. It was generally felt that the basis of the visible world was the invisible world of ideas. They also held the reality of the world to come.

Stoicism

Stoicism emerged and became influential in the fourth century B. C. According to it the good life is a life lived in union with the universe. God is a force pervading throughout the universe and in Him we live, move and have our being. In moral teaching, stoicism comes very close to Jewish religious thought.

Epicureanism

It also originated in the fourth century B. C. Its noteworthy features are a concern with the world and an outlook of morality. The origin of the universe is believed to have resulted from the tension of the atom. Hence the world and man came into being by accident; there is no place for God. The aim of the Epicurean philosophy of life is to follow one's natural inclinations. Happiness and joy are to be accepted, and pain is to be rejected. Real joy comes from practising real goodness. Never give the conscience an opportunity to accuse you. In spite of all these, Epicurean philosophy finally drifted into the enjoyment of worldly pleasures.

The strong undercurrent of the above-mentioned theories and philosophies was widely felt in the Greco-Roman world of the first century. Their mixed thoughts and outlook were too strong to be ignored.

EXERCISE

1. Compare the religio-cultural setting of the Greco-Roman world in the first century and that of present day India. What similarities and differences do you notice?
2. From what philosophies is the Indian Christian Church facing challenges?
3. If the early church absorbed many things from Greek culture and philosophy, why not the Indian church follow the same example? Discuss in what way this can be done.

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LESSON 3

JEWISH HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

—History Just before the first Christian century.

—In what way has the historical background influenced the gospel and the Christian church ?

The Christian Church gives a very important place to history. The Church believes in a God who controls, works in, and guides history. The Christ-event is a historical one. To understand this we must know the historical background preceding it. In the first century the people of Israel were struggling under a foreign yoke and eagerly awaited the coming of a God-sent Messiah.

Under Foreign Rule

Israel had a long history of foreign domination. In the second century B. C. the Syrians, under the cruel Antiochus Epiphanes (175-157 B. C.) overran the city of Jerusalem. He methodically tried to wipe out the Jewish religion and culture and replace it with a Greek one. His diabolical methods led to a revolt among the Jewish nationalists who organised a guerilla type of warfare from the mountains of Judea under the able leadership of Mattathias. In 165 B C he did succeed in defeating the Syrians and regaining the Temple. After his death his sons Judas and Simon, who called themselves Maccabees took over the leadership with fluctuating fortunes. It was during the tenure of John that the Pharisees and Sadducees came into existence, the former rabidly against the Maccabees, while the latter supported them, and were given the high Priest's position for this support. The Romans already in Syria, were invited to intervene, and thus, in 65 B. C. they entered Palestine which was in a state of civil war.

An Appraisal of the Maccabean revolution is appropriate here:

1. The Political freedom of Israel could be preserved for a short while.
2. There was economic and political progress during this period.
3. The people were brought about to a sense of duty to their country
4. The city of Jerusalem was made secure.
5. The faith of their fathers was preserved by resisting the onslaught of pagan religions.
6. Worship and sacrifices in the Temple, which were stopped were restored.
7. Some fervent religious groups emerged.
8. Certain psalms were composed during the period; for example Ps. 78, 83, 85, etc.
9. The new idea of martyrdom for the faith was generally accepted.
10. Coins were issued bearing the Maccabean name and seal.

Roman Domination (63 B C - 66 A D)

The Jews who enjoyed a certain measure of freedom under the Maccabees, once again drifted into another foreign domination. This lasted for a century. The Romans were very efficient administrators. They strengthened the Roman control by appointing regional administrators. Antipater was an Edomite who embraced the Jewish religion. With the support of the Romans he became the ruler of Judea. His son was the notorious Herod I. He became the ruler of the whole of Palestine. In 37 B. C. he was appointed administrator and he became King in 30 B. C.

It was this King Herod (The Great) who was ruler over Palestine at the time of the birth of Jesus Christ. An efficient ruler, he nevertheless did much to promote Greek and Roman culture among the Jews. Before his death he divided his kingdom

among his three sons. Archelaus became ruler of Judea, Antipas, of Galilee and Perea, Philip of Iturea and Triconiah.

Archelaus (4 B. C. - 6 A. D.)

He surpassed his father in cruelty and wickedness, mercilessly putting to death all his enemies. Highpriests were appointed and dismissed according to his whims. The influential families conspired against him and sent representations to the Emperor in Rome to dethrone him. (Luke 19:22-27 Examine the parable in this context). At last Augustus banished him to France and appointed a Roman procurator in his place.

Antipas

In the gospels he is called 'Tetrarch' (Matt. 14:1). He would do anything to keep his position secure (Luke 13:31). Jesus refers to him as "that fox".

It was he who issued order to kill John the Baptist after Salome's dance. He married the daughter of King Aretus, but divorced her and took his brother's wife Herodias instead. This led to a quarrel with King Aretus and finally to his own down-fall, as the Emperor banished him to Gaul, (modern France) where he died.

Philip (4 B C to 34 A D)

He was a better ruler than the other two. He rebuilt the ancient city of Pania and named it Caesarea Philippi, to please the Emperor (Matt. 16:12, Mark. 8:21). When he died in 34 A. D., his Kingdom was annexed to the Roman province of Syria.

We know of two other rulers belonging to the Herod family. They are Agrippa I and Agrippa II. Agrippa I persecuted Christians (Acts 12). He was a staunch Jew and earned the respect of the Pharisees. It was with Agrippa II that Paul entered into a discussion (Acts 25, 26).

Roman Procurators

We have seen how Judea was brought under the rule of Procurators. Pontius Pilate was the fifth Procurator. The Procurators.

were mostly power-crazy. They often had like Pilate, a great hatred and contempt towards the Jews which was reciprocal.

From 66 A. D. the Jews, under the leadership of the extreme Zealots, waged open war against the Romans. As the Jews lacked man-power and organisational ability, they incurred heavy losses in the war. In 70 A. D. Titus, son of Vespasian, completely destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple was burnt down. The prophecy of Jesus that "one stone will not stand on another" was fulfilled. Nero's successors Trajan and Hadrian also cruelly persecuted and scattered the remnant of the Jews till the Jewish people lost their home-land, and their Temple. They had to emigrate to different parts of the world till in 1948 the state of Israel was formed as a homeland for the Jews by taking land from the Arab nations, which is the root of the West Asia problem today.

EXERCISE

1. Evaluate the gains made by the Jewish nation from the Maccabean Revolution.
2. What lessons do the tragic experiences of the Israelite nation teach us?

LESSON 4

RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND OF THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL

—*Doctrines of the Jewish Religion*

—*Temple and Worship*

—*Sects and groups in the Jewish Religion*

In the previous lesson we have seen the historical background of the Jews. In this lesson their religious customs and observances are described. Such a study is essential to understand many references in the teachings of Jesus and the exhortations of the apostles.

After the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, more knowledge is available about the Jewish religion of the first century and its religious customs. The Mishnas of the Jewish Rabbis and the Talmuds throw much light on this subject.

1 DOCTRINES

First we shall examine their basic beliefs :

(a) Monotheism

Belief in one God was very strong. After the captivity the Jews completely discarded idols and discovered a God who attaches great importance to moral principles. They emphasised His purity, and His righteousness. Because of God's incomprehensibility and holiness they never pronounced the name "Yahweh". The transcendent and inaccessible brilliant God made his presence felt in the world and its people through his Shekinah or glory.

(b) God's own people

There is a special relationship between God and Israel. They were miraculously delivered from Egypt, then God entered into

a covenant with them at Mt. Sinai. Hence Israel felt they were God's own people.

(c) The place of the Law

The relation between Yahweh and Israel is maintained through Torah or the Law. They believed that the Torah existed even before the creation of the earth. When the Torah was given great importance, a group of people called Sopherim (Scribes) rose up to teach and interpret the Law. The Law consists not only in the written form, but also the oral traditions, transmitted from generation to generation. The Pharisees considered both equally important and binding. The importance of the Synagogues consisted in the fact that they were centres to recite and teach the Law.

(d) Hope for the Messiah

Israel believed in a God who acted in history, in the God who delivered them from Egypt. Hence when they were suffering under foreign rule, they expected that God would send them a liberator, a Messiah who would deliver Israel from all her problems and establish God's Kingship while keeping the people in purity and obedience. Their hope about the Messiah was that he would be a great leader like Moses or a great King like David. Some thought that he would come in a supernatural manner from the clouds.

The people asked John the Baptist whether he was the messiah because the hope of the Messiah was very strong among them. The large majority of the people could not accept Jesus as the Messiah because his character and conduct were contrary to their expectation. Jesus was gentle, meek and humble, not the powerful, all-conquering hero they expected.

(e) Resurrection

In the O. T. there are not many references about life after death. There are indications in some parts that there is a continuation of life even after death (Psalms 16, 17, 49, 73; Job 14: 13-15; 19:25-29). But this will be a pale shadowy and inactive existence in 'Sheol'.

Yet during times of persecution (like the period of the Maccabees) they began to think seriously about the state of those who laid down their lives for defending the faith. A clearer conception regarding the immortality of individuals arose. As a result of all these, belief in bodily resurrection and final judgment became popular.

The thought about bodily resurrection strengthened during the time of the Maccabees (Dan. 12:2). At the time of our Lord the Pharisees believed in Resurrection while the Sadducees denied it (Mt. 22:23-33, Acts 23:6).

2 THE TEMPLE AT JERUSALEM

From the time of the Prophets, Ezra and Nehemiah the centrality of the Temple was recognised. What was its importance? The glory of God (shekinah) resided there. If God's presence was concentrated any where in the world, surely it was in the Temple, in the Holy of Holies. God granted absolution to His own people on condition that they offer sacrifices and penance.

The Jewish religion believed that on certain special occasions God would miraculously appear and work for them. They observed festivals to remember such events in the past. For example, they observed Passover to remember the liberation from Egypt; Pentecost (Festival of weeks) to remember the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai and the Festival of the Tabernacles (Sukoth) to remember their dwelling in tabernacles while they were in the desert. The Feast of Purim and the Feast of Dedication were also celebrated in this way. Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) was a day of fasting, repentance and sacrifice by which they hoped to get reconciled with God.

Besides the Temple of Jerusalem there were synagogues which served as centres for worship. The origin of the synagogues was probably during the captivity in Babylon (587 B. C.). In the Temple the main ceremony consisted of offering sacrifices, but in the synagogues the main features were the reading of scripture and study of the Law.

3 PARTIES IN THE JEWISH RELIGION

The Jewish religious life was centred around the Law, The Temple, Festivals and Synagogues. The Jews' attitude to these made them form different parties, eg. faith in the Law itself made them belong to different groups :

(a) Am Haarez (the people of the land)

They formed the large majority who had neither zeal nor interest in religious observances and so the religious leaders had contempt for them. They were also called "Sinners" together, with the tax-collectors. Yet they were "the lost sheep of Israel" whom Jesus Christ loved and moved with during his ministry.

(b) Pharisees

This word means "Separated" or "Set apart". In the previous chapter we have noted their origins. They gave the highest place to the Law which reveals the will of God. For them the oral traditions that grew were as important as the written part of the Law. They genuinely tried to interpret the Law according to the needs of the times. They believed in the resurrection of the dead, existence of angels and spirits, and also in the freedom of man. The gospels give a rather unsympathetic picture of them but does not reveal their real nature.

(c) Sadducees

'Sadducees' might have come from the word 'Sadok.' They belonged to the order of priesthood. Their origin was probably in the second half of the second century B.C. They were often opposed to the Pharisees. As they were involved in the affairs of the temple and the ministry there, they kept themselves aloof from the common people.

They accepted only the written part of the Law, and rejected the oral traditions in toto. The reason for this was clear — the Sadducees enjoyed financial and social security. So they were self-complacent and wanted no change. Hence they accepted only the unchanging written part of the Law and rejected the lively and relevant oral tradition. They did not accept the re-

surrection of the dead. When there was scope for enjoyment and consolation in this world, there was no place or need for believing in another. They believed neither in angels or spirits. They taught that men by themselves should try to find solutions to their problems. They tolerated and actively aided the Roman domination in order to maintain the status-quo.

(d) The Essenes

They were a group of ascetics who lived in the desert on the western coast of the Dead Sea. Though we get some information about them from the writings of Philo and Josephus, historians of that periods, more information was available after the recent discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947. Scholars hold the view that the Qumran monks and the Essenes belong to the same community.

The attitude of the Essenes towards the Law was more serious even than that of the Pharisees, and this might be the reason that made them go in for an ascetic life in the desert. They held everything in common and stressed on manual labour. By their correct study and observance of the Law, they hoped that they would be prepared for the coming of the Messiah. This community and their ideas and ideals have exerted a great influence on Christianity and the N. T. Besides these sects and parties there were a set of extremists called Zealots. There were also supporters of the family of Herod, called Herodians. These have been briefly mentioned in the Gospels.

EXERCISE

1) To what extent have the doctrines of Israel in the 1st century emerged in the NT and in the Christian Church?

2) If it was their attitude towards the Law that divided the Jewish people, how has the attitude to the Bible divided the Christians into different groups today?

LESSON 5

GEOGRAPHY OF ISRAEL

—Where is Israel? What kind of country is it?

—Understand the places in their relation to gospel-events

—Climate

(Note: It would be helpful to keep a map of the land while reading this lesson.)

The gospels describe the activities of Jesus Christ. In them there are a number of geographical references about cities, roads, mountains, lakes, ocean and rivers. It is necessary to understand their location and nature to know more about the Gospel narratives.

NAMES OF ISRAEL

Israel is known by several names :-

Canaan

Canaan is the most ancient name, and was derived from the name of the early inhabitants.

Palestine

Palestine: This name with which we are more familiar, was given by the Greeks calling it 'the land of the Philistines.'

Israel

Israel: It is commonly known in the Bible by this name and it is also the modern name in use today. The meaning of Israel is "the land of Israelites", "God's own people". In the Bible it is also called the "land of milk and honey" and the 'promised land.'

Holy Land

It is called the 'Holy Land' because it has religious associations for Jews, Christians and Muslims.

WHERE IS ISRAEL ?

The land of Israel lies at the cross-roads of three continents, Europe, Asia and Africa. Today it is surrounded by Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Egypt. This important geographical location has affected the destiny of the country to a very great extent. "The city of Jerusalem I have set among the nations, with other countries around her" (Ezek 5:5). Generally speaking the boundaries of the land are Dan in the north, Beersheba in the south, the Mediterranean sea in the west and Bashan in the east. The area consists of about 15000 sq. km. Its length is 217 k.m., the greatest width (at the southern end) is 150 k.m. and the least width (north) is 67 k.m. Transjordan on the eastern bank of Jordan was at one time inhabited by Jews. Even when the two parts are taken together Palestine is smaller than Kerala State.

PHYSICAL FEATURES

Israel, the land of mountains and valleys, was formed as a result of many complicated geological convulsions and changes in pre-historic times.

According to its physical features Israel can be divided into four parts :

(1) The coastal plain

This is the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. It has no uniform width. This includes three regions : The Phoenician, Sharon and Philistine plains. Some port-cities are also located here : Joppa, near modern Tel Aviv, Lydda Ramlay, Tyre, Sidon. Mount Carmel is between the Phoenician and Sharon plains.

(2) Central Mountainous Region

This is on the eastern side of the plains. This is a region covered with hills and pasture lands. Three regions viz. Judea, Samaria and Galilee are situated here. The climate of this region is pleasant. At the southern tip is the Negeb desert with a dry climate.

(3) Jordan Valley

This valley extends from Lebanon valley in the north to the Gulf of Aqaba in the south. It has a length of more than 580 k.m. This valley has a width of 3 to 5 kilometres. The valley was formed as a result of convulsions in the interior of the earth. This is the lowest region on the face of the earth. The Jordan river flows southwards through the middle of the valley in a zig-zag manner. The river Jordan rises from the foot of Mt. Hermon and reaches the Hula lake which is marshy. From there it flows south and reaches the sea of Galilee. From the southern tip it flows again and falls into the Dead Sea.

(4) Mountains on the opposite side of Jordan

The fourth region is Trans Jordan. In the Bible it is usually called "the regions beyond Jordan", that is, the regions to the east of river Jordan. This is partly fertile and partly dry plateau. The special features of this place are a mild climate, cool winds from the west and more rain than western Jordan. Here there are many grass-lands and fertile fields. The ancient countries of Moab and North Gilead were situated in this region. The important river in this region is the Yarmuk. The land north to this is called Bashan in the Old Testament.

ROMAN PROVINCES

The Romans divided Israel into four provinces (1) Judea (2) Samaria (3) Galilee (4) Perea.

(1) Judea.

This is situated in the south. It is full of high hills and low valleys which are fertile. The slopes of mountains are useful as pasture-lands for sheep and cattle. The important cities are Jerusalem (which was the capital), Jericho, Bethlehem, Hebron and Beersheba. The route to the Suez, Sinai and Aquaba passes through Beersheba. The cave of Machphela (where the tombs of the patriarchs are situated) is in Hebron, though now a Muslim mosque is found on the site. The town of Bethlehem and the valley near it have great natural beauty. The city of Jerusalem is 10 k.ms. north of Bethlehem. Jerusalem which has witnessed

so many historic events is sacred to Jews, Christians and Muslims alike.

(2) Samaria

Samaria is a highland. Three ancient centres of pilgrimage are situated here viz. Bethel, Shiloh and Shechem (modern Nablus). This high-land appears wider and more fertile as we go to the north. The twin mountains of Ebal and Gerizim are in Samaria. Shechem is between these two. The ancient "Well of Jacob" is found here. The city of Samaria (modern Shomron) was the capital of the northern Kingdom of Israel. Its remains now stand as mute witnesses to many historical events.

(3) Galilee

Galilee is at the extreme north of Israel. It has some lovely mountains eg. Gilboa, Tabor, Carmel and Hebron. The important routes to Damascus in the north and Pella in the east connect Galilee with other places, and make it of strategic importance.

In Galilee mountain ranges and plains are found one after another and the climate is pleasant. Galilee is a place specially blessed by nature and hence it is thickly populated and prosperous. Several towns arose on the coast of the lake of Galilee. The fresh-water lake is known by the names Galilee, Tiberius and Gennasareth. It has a length of 21 km., a width of 13 km. and lies 686 feet below sea level. Because of variations in atmospheric pressure, storms, even now occur suddenly and unexpectedly.

CLIMATE

The climate of Israel is as diverse as its physical features. While the Hermon region in the north is freezing with cold, the Negeb desert in the south is in scorching heat. When occasional snow falls in Jerusalem, Jericho (23 km. to the east) enjoys a temperate climate.

Generally speaking there is a dry season from the middle of June to the middle of September in Israel when the sky is clear and cloudless. The frost and the humidity of the morning do a lot of good to the plants and trees. The vine grows abundantly

in this climate. Harvest is at the first stage of summer. The sea-breeze which blows inland to the east, moderates the heat. The temperature will be highest in the middle of June and dry season is upto the middle of September when a hot wind comes from the southern desert. When you see the south wind blowing, you say "there will be scorching heat" and it happens" (Luke 12:55).

October begins the rainy season and the cold follows it. At least once a week there will be strong cyclonic winds followed by good weather. When the wind blows from the west the rising and the setting of the sun can be very beautiful (Read Matt. 16:2-3).

After winter, by March-April, spring makes its appearance, the plants and trees which are bare of leaves in winter show a new life, with green leaves and buds sprouting all over. It is then that the Easter celebration comes with its message of new life. During this time throughout Palestine, beautiful, fresh flowers will be blooming on the plants and trees, and the land of Jesus's birth appears like a heavenly garden.

EXERCISE

1. Draw a map of Israel. Mark the important provinces, cities, lakes etc.
2. Find out how far the physical features of Israel affected the history and outlook of life of the people.
3. Find references in the Gospels to the climate of Israel.
4. "Israel is a land of diversity". Discuss how far this statement is true, regarding its geography and climate.

LESSON 6

THE FORMATION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

—We can understand the historical background of each book by learning the historical growth of the New Testament.

—The New Testament is formed by the Church for the Church.

—How did the Holy Spirit work through the codification of the New Testament to get over false teachings and maintain an authentic faith ?

What did Jesus Christ and the apostles have as Scripture? Only the existing Old Testament. How did the Gospels and the other New Testament books come into being? This study is useful in so many ways. Because it can help us to know the relation between the church and the Bible and explain the statement that the Bible consists of "books written by the church for the church".

The Letters of Paul are the first books to be written in the New Testament. They were not written in the hope or intention that they would be regarded as scriptures. Paul was prompted to write these because of the problems and needs that arose in the churches which he had founded and to which he was related, which now faced the problems of disunity and divisions raised by false teachings and false customs. But as they are written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit they became relevant to any nation at any time. Each of his letters was written to a church or one individual. It was after the time of the Apostle that they were collected together. By the time Peter wrote his second letter, Paul's letters had become popular. See 2 Pet 3:15.

The Gospels : How were they formed ?

In the early stages, nobody ventured to put the gospel truths into a written form. There were many reasons for this :

1. The apostles and other evangelists preferred evangelism by speech to written-evangelism. They might have felt this to be the command of the Lord (Matt 28:18, 2 John verse 12.)

2. As they hoped that the second coming of the Lord (Parousia) would happen imminently, they never felt the need to leave any written record.

Thus, the gospel spread orally for the first three decades after Jesus, lifetime. The eyewitnesses faithfully told the people what Jesus had said and done (1 John 1:1-2). The church knew the good news 'by hearing' the apostles teach (Acts 2:42). Later evangelists performed this duty in regional churches (Eph 4:11). Thus the gospel-traditions spread in the church through verbal teaching. This is clear when Luke says "following the traditions handed down to us by the original eyewitnesses and servants of the gospel" (Luke 1:2). Paul also states that gospel tradition was handed down by verbal means (1 Cor 15:3). Those who read the gospels carefully can understand that the oral style exceeds the written style, and conversational sentence structure predominates here.

Much research has been done on this oral tradition, and it is obvious that the gospel written, adapted the words and actions of Jesus to suit the times and places (a house "built on rock" in stormy Palastine was common place). This is one reason why the same teaching can be seen in different gospels in different forms or contexts.

The circumstances leading to the writing of the Gospels

The period of the apostles who were eyewitnesses to Jesus' ministry was passing quickly, and the chances of hearing them decreased alarmingly; only then an urge came to keep a written record. It was also a fact that when the church grew and spread to many regions, it was not possible for the apostles and their co-workers to be present everywhere-the written word could travel much faster. They came to realise that the Second Coming was not as imminent as they expected. These were the main factors that ultimately lead to the Gospels being written as memories of the apostles, as articles of the belief of the community, and aids to the study of religious doctrines.

By the end of the first century, the letters of St. Paul, the four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, other letters and the book of Revelation were written (some scholars feel that certain books were written only in the second century). But they were not put together in the form of the book we see today. It was recognised as Scripture only later.

The New Testament Canon

During the second century, in addition to the New Testament books generally accepted, certain other books also became popular. Most of them were written by heretics to spread their own doctrines. Thus, two types of books were in circulation, one written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and the other containing false and personal teachings. This produced a lot of confusion among the believers. It must be remembered that at that time the term 'Scripture' meant only the Old Testament books. Yet in the worshipping community the Gospels and the letters of Paul were read and gradually the church considered them also as valuable as the Old Testament books.

The New Testament canon was formed to check the activities of the heretics. The example of the Jewish Old Testament influenced the Christian Church which wanted to have a set of authoritative books just as the Jewish Church had its Old Testament books.

The Greek word 'canon' means literally 'measuring rod'. Figuratively it may mean 'norm' or 'standard'. The New Testament canon ultimately determined which were the authoritative books containing the basic teachings.

Three main norms were followed for inclusion in the New Testament canon :

1. The book should have long record of being used in public worship.
2. The contents of the book should be spiritually profitable for the readers and it should also agree to the true doctrines.
3. The authenticity of the book—it should be written either by the apostles themselves or their close followers.

The four Gospels conformed to these norms and so they were accepted. In the same way thirteen letters of Paul also were included in the canon. The other New Testament books got recognition only later in stages. Yet they were also finally accepted. This was on the supposition that their authors had close connection with the apostles.

The Letter to the Hebrews, James, Jude, Revelation, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, these 9 books received universal recognition only very late. Among these the history of two books, Revelation and Hebrews is noteworthy. Though the letter to the Hebrews was recognised early by the Eastern Churches it was recognised by the Western Church only by the end of the fourth century. The book of Revelation got recognition early in the Western Church but the Eastern Church ignored it. Though the Byzantine Orthodox Churches later gave it recognition, the Oriental Orthodox Churches have not yet given it formal recognition.

When the historical enquiries were being carried on, Marcion, a heretic, published a list of the New Testament books for the first time (mid. 2nd century). He completely rejected the Old Testament, instead he chose Luke's Gospel and ten letters of Paul, often making changes in the text to establish his teachings. It may be after Marcion that the Church decided to give equal importance to the New Testament, because they were forced to publish an official list of books acceptable. The ancient writings discovered by Muratori in Italy in the 18th century may have been the official canon of the Church in Rome in the 2nd century. Most of the Church Fathers have given lists of New Testament books acceptable to their tradition and they have not all agreed.

In the encyclical letter issued by Athanasius of Alexandria in AD 365 a New Testament canon was described in which were 27 books. Though the Ecumenical Synods have not made any pronouncement about the canon of the Bible, a list formulated by the Carthage Council of the Western Church (in 397 AD) contained the 27 books that comprise the New Testament today.

EXERCISE

1. How can the relation between the Church and the Bible be defined ?
2. What insight can we get from the historical study of the composition of the New Testament about our attitude to the Bible ?
3. "The Bible is God's Word". What is meant by this statement ?

UNIT II

SYNOPTIC GOSPELS AND THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

LESSON I

APOSTOLIC PROCLAMATION

—The Gospels were formed out of the apostolic proclamation.

—The fundamental faith of the Christian Church is contained in the apostolic proclamation.

The origin of the Christian church is in the Jewish church of the first century. In the early stages there were no external differences between them. They worshipped together in the Temple and synagogues bound by a common language and culture, celebrating the same festivals. But there was one thing which separated the apostles from the Jews. That was their conviction about Jesus as the Messiah, and the awareness of His abiding presence with them.

The convictions about Jesus did not emerge from intellectual knowledge or psychological analysis. It was something that the spirit of God revealed and something they experienced in their lives which they proclaimed courageously before the world. The nature of their proclamation can be found in the pages of the New Testament.

Examine the following passages

1. Corin. 15:1-11, Acts 2:14-36, 3:12-16; 4:8-12, 10:34-43, 1 Peter 1:10-12; 2:2-24. In these we can see the essence of Christian faith, and the content of the Christian proclamation.

EXERCISE

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The contents of the Apostolic proclamation can be summarised as follows :

(1) Jesus Christ came into history as the fulfilment of prophecies. He is the fulfilment of the will and purpose of God as revealed in the Old Testament, at the same time, it is the beginning of a new era. Jesus Christ opens a new horizon for the purpose and will of God and makes a new creation. "The age to come", hoped for by the Jews, is realised in Jesus.

(2) Jesus Christ has a unique place in the inauguration and emergence of the new age. He is the Son of God, the Messiah, the Son of David. In Him all things find fulfilment.

(3) When we speak of Jesus Christ we refer to his ministry in this world. He went through villages, and towns teaching and healing in the most simple manner.

(4) Greater emphasis is often given to the passion of Jesus. The Cross was not something that happened by accident, it was included in the overall purpose and plan of God. God has revealed the passion of Jesus through the tribulations of the "Suffering Servant of God" (Isa. 53) and other prophecies.

(5) Jesus not only suffered according to the scripture but also resurrected according to the scripture (1 Cor 15:3). The apostles strongly proclaimed this fact. This is the basis of faith of the New Testament.

(6) By His passion and resurrection Jesus was taken up to the "right hand" of God. That is, he was appointed as one having authority and lordship over all. He is the nucleus and power-centre of the new creation.

(7) God sent His Holy Spirit upon the small community of those born in Jesus Christ. Hence they had a new power and a new aim. This new community (the church) is the people of God, the new Israel.

(8) Absolution and reconciliation are available to this new Israel.

(9) Lord Jesus Christ who is now sitting at the right hand of God will come again to judge the world. Thus the new age and the new creation which he inaugurated will come to its completion.

All these facts may not have been included in every sermon that evangelists preached, but most of them were unfolded, giving emphasis to the back-ground and surroundings of the hearers. This proclamation was called 'Kerygma' in Greek and 'Korususo' in Syriac (before the reading of the Gospel during Holy Qurbana in the introductory words, the priests says 'life giving proclamation').

The above mentioned facts are only a skeleton of the apostolic Kerygma. It has to be given flesh if it is to become a lively message suitable for our time. This is possible because of the activity and grace of the Holy Spirit. The Kerygma (proclamation) was not in any way foreign to the church's life and its experience in the Spirit and should be seen in the background of the whole ministry of the church- healing, teaching, absolving and so on. The apostolic church proclaimed Christ's life, death resurrection etc., not as events in the past but as present day realities which get immersed in life and transform and guide it. The Christ-event is meaningful and unique to those who abide in Jesus.

Proclamation is not the mere unfolding of past events, it is holding aloft of their meaning and relevance. It is then that it becomes the real 'kerygma'. Proclamation becomes strong and bright when the Christ-event is understood in the background of God's purpose and plan and when the transformation it makes in one's life is revealed.

EXERCISE

1. We find that a great place is given to proclamation in the New Testament. What is its place in our church? What are its shortcomings today? How can they be remedied? Give suggestions.
2. What should be the basic factors of proclamation?
3. Examine the Sermons of Peter and Paul in the Acts of the Apostles and find out which are the important subjects dealt with.

LESSON 2

THE GOSPELS

—What is Gospel ?

—Are there four gospels ?

—Similarities and differences between the gospels

—Synoptic gospels

In the previous lesson we have seen what is meant by apostolic proclamation (Kerygma). The gospel is evolved from the apostolic Kerygma. It is not a mere biography, nor is it the unfolding of a story, nor a memoir, but a combination of all these are found in the gospels.

'Gospel' comes from the Greek word 'Evangelion' which means 'good news.' It contains the good news, meant for the whole of mankind, that Jesus Christ is the Son of God (Rom. 1:1-2) by whose work the whole world is saved.

In the early stages the gospel was spread orally. The Gospel in the written form made its appearance only 35 years or so after Christ. The reasons for this are described in the previous chapter. By the end of the first century four gospels became popular. Yet to say "four gospels" is not really correct. There is only one gospel and that is about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. But in these four gospels we see four outlooks or four view points. These have taken shape from the different traditions which have been adapted according to the changes in time and place. The living traditions of the church are behind the writings of the gospels. Each writer understands his own environment and needs, he then evaluates and analyzes the traditional facts and unfolds them after codifying them.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE GOSPELS

Although the essential form and message of the gospels are the same, there are obvious differences between them.

What comes first to our notice is the difference between the first three gospels (called the synoptic gospels) and the gospel according to John. We shall describe them here.

1. The ministry of Jesus

In the synoptic gospels Jesus has a ministry lasting only one year. But in John it runs to three years because he describes Jesus participating in three Passovers and visiting Jerusalem several times.

2. Difference in Teaching

In the synoptic gospels we see sharp statements and lively parables. Conversely, in John, the sermons are long and complex and there are no parables. The subjects dealt with are also different while the synoptic gospels give emphasis to the Kingdom of God, John highlights who Jesus is, and what is His relation to the Father.

3. Miracles and Signs

Miracles and heroic deeds lie scattered throughout the synoptic gospels. John chooses only seven of them and describes them as 'signs'. Through these he explains truths regarding the personality of Jesus Christ the saviour, Christ the Living Bread, Christ the Light of the World.

PROBLEMS RAISED BY THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

The first three gospels are called Synoptic Gospels because they are so similar that they can be arranged into a synopsis, a book in which corresponding passages from different gospels are arranged in parallel columns. Their similarities and mutual relationship are sure to attract students of the gospels because they give rise to the synoptic problem.

1. Similarities

(a) Contents : Out of the 661 verses in Mark, 606 are found in Mathew and 302 are found in Luke. Hence Mark's gospel is contained in the other two.

(b) **Common form** : The three gospels describe the ministry of Jesus in the same manner and in the same sequence. eg. Baptism, fasting in the desert, public ministry in Galilee, journey to Jerusalem, passion, death and resurrection.

(c) **Word-by-word agreement** : This can be clearly seen only when we read in the original Greek. The same event is described in the same words and in the same style. eg. In Mark 2:10. Matt 9:6, Luke 5:24, the three passages have the same sentence structure and style.

2. Differences

The differences between the gospels deserve more to be studied than the similarities. Differences exist in the description of Jesus, baptism, temptation transfiguration, as well as in the order of presentation. For example, Mathew and Luke do not give the second and third temptations in the same order.

Each evangelist has added some portion not found in the others, this is especially so in the case of Luke. The stories relating to the birth of Jesus are different in Mathew and Luke. Mark has not accepted these. There are many instances like this.

The following problems are raised :

1. Why are there so many similarities and differences between the gospels, and why they are more pronounced in the gospels of Mathew and Luke. ?

2. How did each of the Evangelists get some special parts of their own ?

Basically, similarities and differences are natural since the gospel was propagated in an unwritten (oral) form. When each evangelist accepted something from the common tradition there was similarity, and when they accepted different traditions there were bound to be differences.

The Two-Source Theory

In the light of a detailed study, scholars conclude that both Mathew and Luke depend on Mark's gospel for their own compo-

sition. Though some feel that Mathew's gospel is the earliest and that Mark's is only a summary of it, as a result of more recent scientific study all accept that Mark's is the earliest gospel.

In Mark the teachings of Jesus are comparatively fewer. In Mathew and Luke we have longer passages containing teachings, and there is much similarity between them. From this it can be inferred that both these evangelists had access to a written form, this document has not yet been found. German scholars call it 'Quelle' (short form "Q") which means "Source", and a large majority of scholars accept this theory. It is generally felt that St Mark's gospel and "Q" are the two important sources drawn upon by Mathew and Luke.

The Four-Source Theory

The two-source theory was not enough to explain all matters. Mathew and Luke have their own special passages which are unique. What was the source for these ? It has been argued that Mathew had a special source, and so did Luke, thus, giving rise to the Four-Source Theory.

None of these theories can be said to satisfactorily answer the problems raised. Form criticism, Redaction criticism and a searching study of the oral traditions behind the gospels are in progress, which hopes to offer a better insight into the aims of the Evangelists.

EXERCISE

1. What are the similarities and differences between the synoptic Gospels and John's Gospel ?

2. What are the similarities and differences between the first three gospels ?

3. What is the synoptic problem? Give the most satisfactory explanation for it.

PLACE AND DATE OF WRITING

The prevalent opinion is that it was written before 70 AD (the year of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans) and after the martyrdom of Peter. This was probably written in Rome around 65 AD for non-Jewish Christians, and this can be inferred from the fact that detailed explanations are provided for Jewish traditions (7:3-4; 14:12; 15:42). Besides, the influence of Latin words shows that it is written for Romans.

A I M

The author tries to console Christian brothers enduring persecution and also to stress the importance of suffering in Christian life. Mark argues the Cross is not a failure, describing the passion of Christ in great detail. The Cross reveals the love of God since Jesus gave his life as a ransom for many, fulfilling the holy will of the Father. The resurrection of Jesus thus reveals the ultimate triumph of God.

SPECIAL FEATURES OF THE GOSPEL

1. Mark's descriptions are simple and picturesque. They have got the clarity of an eyewitness's account. Jesus takes children in his arms (9:36, 10:13-16). He makes the crowd sit down in ranks by hundreds and by fifties (6:40). He was in the stein asleep on a cushion (4:38).

2. Mark has succeeded in picturing the moods and thoughts of Jesus. He has given some Aramaic words with explanations:

Eg. Thalitha Cumi (Get up, my child) 5:4.

Ephatha (Be opened) 7:34, Corban (offering) 7:11, Abba (Father) 14:36.

Eli Eli lema sabachthani (My God My God why hast thou forsaken me) 15:34.

These show that the mother-tongue of the author who was born and brought up in Palestine was Aramaic. Some Latin words are also found here and there, technical words which were well known to the Roman readers. Eg. dinoro, legion, centurion etc.

LESSON 3

ST. MARK'S GOSPEL

—Author, Circumstances under which written-Aim-

—Special features of the evangelist and theological outlook.

We have seen that Mark is generally accepted as the gospel written earliest. Yet in the book there is no indication of the author. But in 14:51 a picture is given of an anonymous young man in the garden of Gethsemane who escaped naked. Some scholars think it is autobiographical of Mark.

MARK

In the New Testament we have several references about Mark. (Acts 12:12-25; 13:5, 15; 15:36, Col. 4:1; Philm. 24; 2 Tim. 4:11). He is the son of Mary who owns a house in Jerusalem. (It was in this house that Jesus and his disciples used to gather together). He was a relative of Barnabas, Paul's companion in his first missionary journey, later his companion during his imprisonment in Rome, and beloved follower of Peter. There is a tradition that he is the founder of the Church in Alexandria where the Coptic Church claims the throne of Mark.

It is universally believed that this Mark is the author of the gospel. From what Papias has written, it is generally agreed upon that:-

1. Mark was Peter's companion and interpreter.
2. The basis for Mark's gospel are the sermons he heard from Peter.
3. Mark did not write things in the proper order in which they occurred. Other Church-Fathers also hold the opinion that Mark wrote the gospel after the martyrdom of Peter (Justin Martyr, Ireneus, Jerome). Internal evidence and external traditions prove that Mark is the author who, though was not an apostle, was given so much recognition because of his connection with Peter.

3. No attempt is made to hide the defects and the human-ness of the apostles; on the other hand they are introduced honestly eg. 4:40, 5:31, 6:49 9:19, 14:27-31. The changes made by Mathew are note-worthy. The sons of Zebadee approach Jesus and ask for favour in Mark's Gospel. Mathew has made it as the request of their mother.

THEOLOGY OF MARK

Son of God

From beginning to end Mark upholds the belief of the Church that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the Messiah. As a teacher Jesus taught, unlike the doctors of the law, with authority (1:21). He had power even over the Law (7:1-13). The Son of Man is sovereign even over the Sabbath (2:27,28). Jesus exercised the right of forgiving sins which was only invested in God (2:5-12). He claimed power over evil spirits and exorcised them (3:19-27).

Son of Man

Although Jesus was the Messiah, he hid the Messianic secret by assuming the title 'Son of Man'. This is the equivalent of the Aramaic word "Barnasha" which means simply "man". Ezekiel is called son of man (Ezek 2:2, 3:24). In the book of Daniel 'Son of Man' is the symbol of the people of Israel (7:13-14). Isaiah pictures him as the suffering servant of God (Isaiah 52:13, 53:12), and this has considerably influenced the New Testament writers (Is.53:3-6). This picture of vicarious suffering they saw meaningful only in Jesus. On certain occasions he exercised power over forces of nature (4:35-41; 6:45-52) which are those of God alone in the Old Testament. Through these Jesus affirms he is the real Son of God and the promised Messiah. The gospel begins with the words, "the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1:1). The Voice heard at the time of baptism affirms the truth that he is the Son of God. On Calvary the centurion at the foot of the Cross testifies "Truly this man was the Son of God (15:39).

Then why was it that the heads of the Jewish religion did not recognise him as the promised Messiah? Jesus was rejected not only by the politically minded Sadducees and Herodians but

also by the spiritually minded Pharisees; a problem which even now perplexes many people. In his gospel Mark tries to answer this question. The hearts of the religious leaders hardened and their mind became cold: so they could not understand reality and accept the challenge raised by Jesus. Mark points out that Jesus was a stumbling block for them, because he rejected the request to prove his Messiahship by showing signs.

When Jesus is described as the Son of Man in Mark's gospel, two facts about him are revealed:-

(a) Jesus who emptied himself, assumed the nature of servant and offered his life in service and suffering (8:31; 9:11, 10:33,14:21).

(b) He is the authoritative and glorious Christ who comes at the end of the world to judge men (8:38; 13:26-27; 14:62).

These two apparently contradictory ideas are combined by Jesus in the title 'Son of Man.'

Christ—Model of Suffering

In Mark's gospel special emphasis is given to the sufferings of Christ and its climax is the Cross. At the time of the composition of this gospel, suffering and tribulation were inseparable ingredients of every Christian's life. Peter and Paul had to accept martyrdom. Through the gospel Mark gives the call to take up the Cross and follow Jesus.

EXERCISE

1. What are the features of Mark's gospel which specially attract you?
2. Mark introduces Jesus as both Son of God and Son of Man. What is the need of holding aloft the real manhood of Jesus?
3. Is Jesus a stumbling block to the heads of non-Christian religions in India in the same way as he was to the Jewish leaders? Why do they reject Christ?

LESSON 4

ST. MATHEW'S GOSPEL : "A CHURCH GOSPEL"

—*Author and Circumstances of Writing.*

—*Aims of the author.*

—*Theology of the Author.*

We have seen the aims of Mark's gospel and the circumstances under which it was written. Different circumstances and different aims are behind the composition of Mathew's gospel which is written combining parts taken from Mark's gospel, the document called Q, and traditions the author collected. The author's special theological bias is clearly seen in the selection and in the introduction of facts.

MATHEW

Mathew (surname Levi) was a tax collector and one of the twelve apostles of Jesus (Luke 5:27, Mk 2:14). The following statement of Papias is the basis of this tradition that Mathew wrote the gospel: "Mathew collected "sayings" in the Hebrew (i. e. Aramaic) language and each one translated them as best as he could." Ireneus who lived in the second century agreed with this view.

No scholar today thinks that the gospel of Mathew is a Greek translation of the above mentioned Aramaic gospel because Mathew's gospel hasn't got the idiom and style of a book translated from another language.

Besides that, this gospel contains a lot of words which are used in the Greek language alone. From all this we can conclude that it has been written on the basis of Mathew's Aramaic gospel, its Greek translation, and other documents. But who wrote it is as yet unknown. This can be called Mathew's gospel as it claims the traditions of Mathew.

CIRCUMSTANCES OF WRITING

The circumstances behind this gospel are those prevailing in Syria and Palestine two decades after the writing of Mark's gospel. In 70 AD the Temple of Jerusalem was destroyed. Among the Jews the influence of the Pharisees increased. Their hypocrisy and very strict observances distracted them from true religion, giving too much importance on observances and neglecting compassion and love. They rejected the promised Messiah. They presented a serious challenge to the Christian Church.

There was a growing view in the church that after Christ, the Law and the Prophets held sacred till then, were irrelevant. The false prophets (Matt 7:15) who claimed to prophesy and exorcise evil spirits, also created problems. Under these circumstances the writer did two things. First he criticised the Pharisaic religion and pointed out its dangers. Secondly he stated that Jesus Christ came not to destroy the Law but to fulfil it (Mat 5:18).

In the gospel the condition of the church seems to be growing and expanding, and from this we can conclude that the gospel was written in Syria between 80 AD and 90 AD for Greek-speaking Jewish Christians.

AIMS OF THIS GOSPEL

1. To establish the relation between the Jewish religion and Jesus Christ, and thus prove that the Law and the prophets find their fulfilment in Jesus.
2. To prove that the Christian Church is the new Israel, and a new Moses can be seen in Jesus. In the context of the destruction of the Temple, new worship instead of the temple worship is possible in the Christian Church.
3. To show that the teachings of Jesus Christ are more sublime and authoritative than the Old Testament teachings.
4. The writer of the gospel has certain ecclesiastical interests. As false ideas regarding the foundation of the church are prevalent he wants to reveal its true nature and purpose.

5. There was the "apologetic motive", to give answers to so many questions that had arisen among believers and nonbelievers. eg. Why did Jesus receive baptism from John? Was not the body of Jesus Christ removed from the tomb by the apostles? There were also some scandalous rumours relating to the Virgin birth of Jesus. The evangelist took a special interest in giving answers to all these questions.

THE THEOLOGY OF THE AUTHOR

Christ is the fulfilment of the Old Testament, the Messiah promised by God: He is the one hoped for by the fathers and the prophets, but the Jewish leaders rejected him. Christ is the liberator of mankind in the same way as Moses was the liberator of Israel from Pharaoh. Mathew introduces Jesus as a parallel to Moses, at the same time greater than Moses. On the mountain Moses gave Law to Israel. Jesus, the new Moses, gave them exhortations on the mountain. But he was not a go-between like Moses. "You have heard it told to your forefathers, but I tell you", Jesus used to repeat this authoritatively whenever he issued commands. Moses gave his teachings in five books. The New Moses also gives his teachings in five parts :

1. Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-7)
2. Missionary Exhortation (Chapter 10)
3. Parables about the Kingdom of God (chapter 13)
4. Church discipline (chapter 18)
5. Eschatological exhortation (chapter 24-25)

All events in the life of Jesus, great and small, are proved to be a fulfilment of prophecy. For this the Old Testament is quoted 41 times, with the explanation "to fulfil what was prophesied." Thus the evangelist, with the witness of scripture, establishes that Jesus is the real Messiah and that the Old Testament finds fulfilment in him.

A KING DESCENDED FROM DAVID

Jesus is really the Messiah because he is the promised descendant of King David. He is the liberator of Israel, the ad-

ministrator of justice, and protector of peace. He is believed to be born in the family of David (Jer 23:5, Isa 11:2, Micah 5:1). Thus Jesus was descendant of David (1:1, 16) and was born in Bethlehem, the town of David (2:1). During his public ministry many people called him "Son of David" (9:27, 12:33; 15:23). When Pilate asked Jesus "Are you the King of the Jews", he replied "I am" (27:11). He is a King, but his Kingdom is not of this world. He preached and taught about the Kingdom of Heaven which cannot be destroyed. He was the ruler of that Kingdom. "Full authority in heaven and on earth has been committed to me" (28:16-20).

THE CHURCH THE NEW ISRAEL

This gospel is called the ecclesiastical gospel or Church gospel. The Greek word 'ecclesia' which means Church is found only in this gospel (16:18; 18:17). The maximum number of lessons for our Sunday worship are taken from this gospel. This Gospel was proved very useful in providing instruction for catechumens.

As the first step to the establishment of the Church as the New Israel, Jesus chose 12 men as his disciples (10:1-4), reminiscent of the 12 tribes of Israel. Jesus commissions them to proclaim the Kingdom of God. "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (28:19). The church is committed to do this duty even today.

At Caesarea Philippi Jesus said to Peter: "You are Peter (the Rock) and on this rock I will build my church and the powers of death shall never prevail against it" (16:18). This verse has many interpretations. One of them being the supremacy of Peter, but the most acceptable is that the church is built on the rock-like faith confessed by Peter. Church discipline is also described in this Gospel. "If he will not listen to the Church, you must then treat him as you would a pagan or a tax-collector" (18:17).

The spiritual centre of the Church is Christ. Christ who is Emmanuel (God with us) is always present in the Church. "For where two or three are met in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (18:20). "Lo, I am with you always, to the end of time" (28:20). The glory and the excellence of the Church consist in

its being the community where Jesus lives. The creative power of the Church is the living Christ.

EXERCISE

1. Find out the occasions in Mathew's gospel where quotations are made from the Old Testament. Using a concordance find out the references. See whether any change has been made.
2. What are the aims of the evangelist in writing this gospel? How can the church fulfil them?
3. On the basis of the theology regarding the church, what are the matters to which the church of today should give attention?

LESSON 5

ST. LUKE'S GOSPEL

UNIVERSAL MESSAGE OF SALVATION

—*Common Statement about the gospel*

—*Author, place and time of writing*

—*Special Features*

—*Theology*

Mark, in the background of persecution, introduced Jesus as the model for suffering. Mathew, in the background of Jewish Christian dialogue, introduced Jesus as the expected Messiah and as the fulfilment of the Old Testament. Luke sees Jesus as the Saviour of the world. This gospel, splendid in its simplicity and literary excellence does not stand alone. Its second part—the Acts of the Apostles—should be studied only with this; only

then can we get an idea of the evangelist's insights and aims. The introductory verses of the gospel reveal this (1:1-4). The author introduces the gospel after examining all the documents, sources and facts available, accepting some and rejecting others. Who is this author?

LUKE

There are both internal and external evidences to prove that Luke is the author of the gospel.

1. If we compare this gospel and the Acts, we shall come to the conclusion that both are written by the same person. The language and the style of narration of the two books strengthen this view.

2. If we examine the second part of the Acts (chapters 16-28) we find the plural pronoun "We" is used in several places. (16:10-17; 20:5-21; 27:1-28:16). If these passages are taken from the jottings in his diary, he must be a companion of Paul in his missionary journey. At last he went with Paul to Rome and stayed with him the possibilities are for this person to be Luke. Paul in his prison letter sends greeting from "Luke the beloved physician" (Col 4:14; Philem. 24).

3. In both these volumes scholars find the use of medical terms. Peter's mother-in-law was in the grip of a "high fever" (4:38). In the description of the leper it is said that 'he was covered with leprosy (5:12). He softens the criticism against doctors (8:43 compare with Mk 5:26). Yet such expressions are found in the writings of non-medical men of the time and need not prove the author was a doctor.

The tradition from the second century is that the author is Luke. In the Muratorian canon (Second century) the gospel is called the work of Luke. Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Tertullian and others are also of the same opinion. This tradition has held its own to this day.

There are only three references about Luke in the New Testament (Col. 4:14; Philem. 24, 2.Tim. 4:11). From these and other traditions we learn the following about him: He was by birth a pagan

(the only pagan among the evangelists); by profession a doctor; by conversion, a Christian. He was a friend and co-worker of Paul.

PLACE AND TIME OF WRITING

According to tradition, the gospel was written in Caesarea around 85 AD. The author has surely seen Mark's gospel and made use of it, besides, many documents were available (Luke 1:1-4) to the author to compile this work.

AIM OF THE AUTHOR

The aim is to give an objective description to the "most excellent Theophilus, of the life and teaching of Christ.

Who was this Theophilus? He may have been a Roman noble man of high social status. Luke is writing not only for him, but for cultured people who are interested in the new "way". He uses a language and style which they can understand. Hence Aramaic words are left out and Greek equivalents are given. Jesus is not introduced as the fulfilment of prophecy, hence quotations from the Old Testament are very few. The main purpose of Luke was to give real Christology to those who have come from paganism.

SPECIAL FEATURES

According to tradition Luke is an artist who spent his spare time, painting. At any rate, he is a gifted artist who could draw beautiful pictures with words. We shall examine some special features of the book:-

1. Social vision

His attitude to wealth and wealthy people is specially noteworthy. He is a strong spokesman for social justice. eg. "Blessed are the poor in spirit" in Mathew's gospel becomes "Blessed are you poor" (Matt 5:3; Luke 6:20). Several parables highlight the evil of wealth in the gospel (16:1-31). Luke encourages alms-giving, "Sell your possessions and give in charity (12:33). Luke had a clearer financial outlook than others.

2. Compassion of Jesus to sinners and the downtrodden

There are several parables illustrating God's love and mercy, eg: The parable of the prodigal son (15:11-32), the parable of the Pharisee and the publican (18:9-14), the parable of the good Samaritan (10:30-36). Jesus had special consideration for those who were generally considered to be degraded and outcast. He grants forgiveness to the sinful woman who wet his feet with tears of contrition (7:37-50); Jesus receives the hospitality of Zachaeus, the tax collector hated by his community (19:1-10); He promises paradise to the penitent thief (23:43).

The Jews treated the Samaritans as untouchables and hated them, but Jesus had a special affection for them. He did not curse the Samaritan village that boycotted him (9:55). The grateful Samaritan is a pointer to the ungrateful Jews (17:18). The doubts of the Scribe are removed through the story of the Samaritan (10:25-37).

3. Interest in the welfare of women

During Jesus time women had no place in society. The women's liberation movement of today will accept Luke as one of their great spokesmen.

There were several women among the followers of Jesus. Luke described saintly women like Mary, Elizabeth, and Hannah (8:3). Only Luke describes the close friendship of Jesus with the sisters, Mary and Martha. Again in his gospel there are three women who directly experienced the compassion of Jesus. (7:11, 7:37, 13:11). The main characters of certain parables are also women (15: 8 and 18:3). The daughters of Jerusalem lament over the sufferings of Jesus and some women accompany Jesus to the Cross (23:27).

4. The importance of Prayer

Luke several times gives the picture of Jesus praying alone. We see Jesus praying just before baptism (3:2), before choosing the twelve apostles, (6:12), before the Transfiguration (9:29), in the garden of Gethsemane (22:42) and on the cross (23:40).

Luke gives three beautiful parables about prayer (a) the tax-collector and the Pharisee (18:10-14) (b) the unjust Judge and the widow (18: 2-8) (c) the friend who knocks at midnight (11:5-10).

Thanksgiving and praise are also parts of prayer. Luke alone describes the four songs (1) Song of Mary (1:46-55) (2) Song of Zachariah (1:68-79) (3) Song of Simeon (2:29-32) (4) Song of angels. (2:14).

5. Gospel of the Holy spirit

By giving emphasis to the work of the Holy Spirit, Luke reveals the importance of the Holy Spirit in the life of Jesus. The Holy Spirit worked among those who waited for the coming of the Saviour (1:42, 1:67-79) and among those who recognised him when he came (2:25). Luke sees the Holy Spirit as the supreme gift of God (11:43).

6. Universal appeal of the gospel

Jesus is the Saviour not only of Israel but of all people (2:29-32). This truth is clear from the beginning to the end. Holding the infant Jesus in his hands Simon sees "a light for revelation to the gentiles". Repentance and forgiveness of sins are to be preached to all nations in the name of Jesus (24:47). We need not be surprised at Luke's seeing a universal relevance for the gospel because he himself has come to Christian faith from paganism.

1. Theology of Luke : We have seen above the emphasis on the gentiles in this gospel. Luke is visualising the doctrine of universal salvation. The Acts of the Apostles begins with the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, the opposite of the experience at Babel (Genesis 11), where because of man's arrogance, language became confused and the community scattered. But when the Holy Spirit was received at Pentecost, the experience of unity and mutual fellowship came about. In his second volume (Acts) Luke makes this very clear-the gospel should reach Jerusalem, Judea and to the end of the world.

2. Eschatology of Luke : Along with the other Evangelists, Luke also believes that the history of the world finally culminates

through the history of Christ who has redeemed it. But he makes some changes to the eschatological views of Mark. He does not emphasise the view that it is imminent (The message "The Kingdom is at hand" in Mark, is dropped in Luke). In fact he gives a warning to those who feel the time is imminent (21:8 and 10:11).

The eschatological faith of the earlier gospels has been changed by Luke. Since the second coming was delayed, Luke paid more attention to Church history, highlighting the Church's mission and its place in history.

EXERCISE

1. What are the ways in which the gospel of Luke is different from those of Mathew and Mark ?
2. How far is Luke's picture of the Holy Spirit helpful for the renewal of the Church ?
3. How can we plan a doctrine of social justice from the two books of Luke ? (Luke and Acts).
4. What are the features which attracted you most in Luke's Gospel ?

LESSON 6

**ACTS OF THE APOSTLES
FIRST HISTORY OF THE CHURCH**

—*About the name of the book.*

—*Importance of the book.*

—*Aim of writing the book.*

—*Contents.*

—*Theology.*

If the gospels contain the teachings and actions of Jesus, the Acts of the Apostles contains the teachings and activities of the Apostles and their co-workers. This book begins as a continuation of Luke's Gospel, as we saw in Lesson 5. The gospel ends with the ascension of the Risen Christ, while the Acts describes what Jesus did through the Apostles after Ascension. The book does not describe the acts of all the Apostles, that was not the author's intention. The first part describes the acts of Peter, and the second part, those of Paul.

Luke was a historian and at the same time, a theologian. This book can be evaluated only on that basis. Luke, who carefully used original sources in the writing of the gospel, follows the same method in Acts also, though it is difficult to find out what the original sources were. Some feel that notes from a diary containing Paul's travels might have been used. In the first part (The Gospel), the facts and traditions obtained from the church centres Jerusalem, Caesarea, and Antioch might have been used. Luke has visited these centres and stayed there.

IMPORTANCE

The letters of the Apostles can be rightly understood only by studying them in the context of the Acts of the Apostles. We also

get an accurate study of the early church from the Acts of the Apostles, and so it can be called the first work of Church history. This book reveals not only the origin, growth and structure of the Church, but also its social and spiritual state. The history of the system of ordination and the sacramental rites deserve much importance.

AIM

1. The basic aim of the Acts, is to depict the growth of the apostolic Church. Here we can see how the christian church which began as a small community in Jerusalem, got over the boundaries of race and class, and spread over the Empire, even to Rome, the capital." "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will bear witness for me in Jerusalem and all over Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (1:8). This book reveals how far this promise could be fulfilled, and ends with a picture of the uninterrupted preaching of the Kingdom of God and the spread of the gospel.

2. The Church's growth among the gentiles was of special interest to Luke who was himself a gentile; hence he gives more emphasis to the missionary work among the gentiles. The conversion and baptism of the first gentile family of Cornelius is described in detail (Acts 10). This incident is discussed in the Jerusalem Conference. The conversion of Paul, is described thrice (Chapters 9, 22, 26), highlighting God's call to Paul to preach the gospel among the gentiles.

3. The Church had to face much persecution and suffering from the Romans. It was therefore necessary to prove that the members of the church were neither rebels nor enemies of the government. Luke tries to do that through this book. He argues that the Church maintained friendly relations with Roman rulers. For example: the incidents at Corinth (18:12-23) and at Ephesus (19:35-41).

4. It is clear that Luke is interested in highlighting Paul, the apostle of the Gentiles. He goes to great lengths to show that Paul is in no way inferior to Peter : Paul worked the same kinds of miracles as Peter had done ; just as Peter reprimands Simon the magician, Paul reprimands Elimas and punishes him. If Peter

brings back to life the dead Tabitha, Paul gives life to Eutyches (20:10).

HISTORY OF DEVELOPMENT

We have seen that this book contains the history of the development of the early Church. By examining the contents, we can understand how the Church expanded from Jerusalem.

1. Jerusalem Church : (1:1—6:7)

The beginning of the Church is in Jerusalem. Here we can see the Church waiting for the gift of the Holy Spirit on the Pentecost. After receiving the gift, the Apostles strongly bear witness to Christ. The history of the Jerusalem Church closes with its surmounting opposition and challenges. "The word of God now spread more and more widely; the number of disciples in Jerusalem went on increasing rapidly and very many of the priests adhered to the faith" (6:7).

2. The Church spreads to Judea and Samaria : (6:8-9:31)

The story of Stephen is very important since it prepares the background for the coming of Paul, the apostle of the gentiles. God's actions cannot be contained in the Mosaic Law or in the temple at Jerusalem. The Christian Church is the new Israel and Stephen visualises a universal church. Because of this he was martyred. But the subsequent persecution paved the way for the growth and expansion of the church, since it expands to Judea and Samaria. The conversion and entry into the church of Paul are historic events.

The second part ends thus: "Meanwhile the Church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it was multiplied" (9:31).

3. Church at Antioch : (9:32-12:24)

This marks a new stage in the growth of the church. Admitting gentiles into the church was matter of much hesitation, but Peter received the necessary guidance from a heavenly vision and Cornelius and his family were baptised and admitted.

The scattered believers founded the Antiochian church. Antioch was a great centre of the pagan world which may be why missionary effort of Paul starts from there and is proved successful. This part ends with the statement; "But the word of God grew and multiplied" (12:24).

4. Church in Asia Minor (Modern Turkey) (12:25-16:5)

Paul carried on his work under the direction of the Holy Spirit. He went to many pagan centres in Asia Minor and established churches there. The church expanded to the island of Cyprus and to the towns in Pisidia and Lycaonia. Paul and his fellow-workers admitted gentiles into the church without circumcising them, since it was alien to their culture.

This brought about a crisis. An opinion arose that it was not right to admit gentiles into the church without circumcision. The Apostles assembled in Jerusalem under the leadership of James to decide the matter. After much discussion they came to a unanimous decision under the guidance of the Holy Spirit—the gentiles need not undergo circumcision. It was enough if they observed certain other moral and ritual laws. This decision raised the Christian Church from the position of an "appendix" of the Jewish religion to that of a universal church.

With new awakening and enthusiasm Paul carried on his mission. "And so day by day the congregations grew stronger in faith and increased in numbers" (16:5).

5. Church in Europe : (16:6-19:20)

With renewed spiritual vigour, Paul entered Europe and established churches at important and famous cities like Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth and Athens. There were obstacles but he overcame them. The word spread and the church expanded. Luke gives these remarks in conclusion. "So the word of the Lord grew and prevailed mightily" (19:20).

6. Gospel in Rome : (19:21—28:31)

Now we enter the sixth stage of the expansion. In this stage there are many dramatic and adventurous incidents, especially

the uproar at Ephesus. Paul made up his mind to visit Macedonia and Achaia and then go to Jerusalem and he said, "After I have been there I must see Rome also" (19:21).

Following his Master's example, Paul with a determination reached Jerusalem where he was imprisoned as the result of conspiracy by his enemies. He is then sent to Rome where he continues to preach with vigour. The curtain on Luke's revelation of history falls with the message that the gospel knows no obstacles.

THEOLOGY

Luke was not merely a historian, he was a theologian with views of his own:—

1. Work of the Holy Spirit

In Mathew's gospel the Risen Christ promises, "I am with you always to the end of time" (Matt. 28:20). Luke's version is that the presence of the Risen Christ will be through the Holy Spirit. Just as Christ's ministry began from the fullness of the Spirit, the ministry of the church should also begin with the fullness of the Spirit.

Some scholars call this book a "Gospel of the Holy Spirit" By the power of the Spirit real witnessing took place in the church. It is the gift of the Spirit that gives them the courage to embrace martyrdom. Paul and Barnabas were chosen and sent by the Holy Spirit and their work was controlled and led by the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit that enables the church to make important decisions. (15:28). The Holy Spirit is neither a power nor a force, He is a personality who can decide, lead, control and punish. All the power and inspiration of the church are based on the work of the Holy Spirit.

2. Eschatology

When Luke understood that there was delay for the second coming, he wanted to convert the time before the coming, to a time of activity for the church. During the interim period, he felt the church should bear witness to all nations. The power for discharging this duty could be obtained from the Holy Spirit.

It is because of the above-mentioned outlook that Luke gives great importance to the mission of the church and to the discharging of its duties.

3. The place of Jerusalem.

In the gospel and in the Acts, Luke gives a very important Place to Jerusalem. The Christ-event happens only when he reaches Jerusalem, urged on by his Father. In the same way the Apostles should wait at Jerusalem for the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Church in Jerusalem then grows, controlled by the apostolic group. The first council of the Apostles is also held there. But time robbed the city of its importance among the great Sees.

EXERCISE

1. In the Acts we see a Church growing because of the work of the Holy Spirit. How will you evaluate the "Charismatic Movement" of today in the light of this ?
2. Analyse the Sermons in this book and reveal their essential points.
3. Show the ways in which the Acts of the Apostles throw light on the church life of today ?