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KNOWING
GOD
THROUGH
the OLD
TESTAMENT

THREE VOLUMES IN ONE



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CHAPTER ONE

JESUS *and the* OLD TESTAMENT STORY



Judging from the selection of readings in an average Christmas service, in the consciousness of the average Christian the New Testament begins at Matthew 1:18, “This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about. . . .” A natural enough assumption, we might agree, since Christianity began with the birth of Jesus and this verse proposes to tell us how it happened. What more do you need at Christmas?

If the average Christian pauses between the Christmas hymns to wonder what the previous seventeen verses are all about, his or her curiosity is probably offset by relief that at least they weren’t included in the readings! And yet those verses are there, presumably because that is how Matthew wanted to begin his Gospel, and also how the minds that shaped the order of the canonical books wanted to begin what we call the New Testament. So we need to respect those intentions and ask why it is that Matthew will not allow us to join in the adoration of the Magi until we have ploughed through his list of “begettings.” Why can’t we just get on with the story?

Because, says Matthew, you won’t understand that story—the one I am about to tell you—unless you see it in the light of a much longer story that goes back for many centuries but leads up to the Jesus you want to know about. And that longer story is the history of the Hebrew Bible, or what

Christians came to call the Old Testament. It is the story that Matthew “tells” in the form of a schematized genealogy—the ancestry of the Messiah.

His opening verse sums up the whole story: Jesus, who is the Messiah, was the son of David and the son of Abraham. These two names then become the key markers for the three main sections of his story:

- from Abraham to David;
- from David to the Babylonian exile;
- from the exile to Jesus himself.

For any Jew who knew his Scriptures (and Matthew is usually reckoned to have been writing primarily for Jewish Christians), every name recalled stories, events, periods of history and memories of their national past. It was a long story, but Matthew compresses it into seventeen verses just as Jesus could later on compress it into a single parable about a vineyard and its tenant farmers.

What Matthew is saying to us by beginning in this way is that we will only understand Jesus properly if we see him in the light of this story, which he completes and brings to its climax. So when we turn the page from the Old to the New Testament, we find a link between the two that is more important than the attention we usually give it. It is a central historical interface binding together the two great acts of God’s drama of salvation. *The Old Testament tells the story that Jesus completes.*

This means not only that we need to look at Jesus in the light of the history of the Old Testament, but also that he sheds light backward on it. You understand and appreciate a journey in the light of its destination. And certainly as you journey through the history of the Old Testament it makes a difference to know that it leads to Jesus and that he gives meaning to it. We shall look at that in more depth after we have reviewed that journey in the next section. First let us note several things as regards Jesus himself that Matthew wishes us to understand from his chosen means of opening his story.

Jesus was a real Jew. In Jewish society genealogies were an important way of establishing your right to belong within the community of God’s people. First Chronicles 1–9 and Ezra 2 and 8 are examples of this. Your ancestry was your identity and your status. Jesus, then, was not just “a man.” He was a particular person born within a living culture. His background, ancestry and roots were shaped and influenced, as all his contemporaries

were, by the history and fortunes of his people. We need to keep this in mind, because it often happens that we can talk and think (and sing) about Jesus in such general and universal terms that he becomes virtually abstract—a kind of identikit human being. The Gospels bind us to the particularity of Jesus, and Matthew anchors him in the history of the Jewish nation.

There are (and always have been) those who do not like this Jewishness of Jesus, for a wide variety of reasons. Yet it is the very first fact about Jesus that the New Testament presents to us, and Matthew goes on to underline it in countless ways in the rest of his Gospel. And as we shall see throughout this book, it is this very Jewishness of Jesus and his deep roots in his Hebrew Scriptures that provide us with the most essential key to understanding who he was, why he came and what he taught.

Jesus was a real man. Jesus was “the son of Abraham.” When Abram first makes his appearance in the Old Testament story in Genesis 12, the stage is already well set and populated. Genesis 10 portrays a world of nations—a slice of geographical and political reality. It is a world of real human beings, which we would have recognized if we’d been there—not some mythological utopia full of heroes and monsters. This is the human world whose sinful arrogance is described in the story of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11. And this is the world within which, and for which, God called Abram as the starting point of his vast project of redemption for humanity.

The main point of God’s promise to Abram was not merely that he would have a son and then descendants who would be especially blessed by God. God also promised that through the people of Abram God would bring blessing to *all nations* of the earth. So although Abraham (as his name was changed to, in the light of this promise regarding the nations) stands at the head of the particular nation of Old Testament Israel and their unique history, there is a universal scope and perspective to him and them: one nation for the sake of all nations.

So when Matthew announces Jesus as the Messiah, the son of Abraham, it means not only that he belongs to that particular people (a real Jew, as we have just seen), but also that he belongs to a people whose very reason for existence was to bring blessing to the rest of humanity. Jesus shared the mission of Israel, and indeed, as the Messiah he had come to make it a reality at last. A particular man, but with a universal significance.

At several points in the most Jewish of all four Gospels, Matthew shows his interest in the universal significance of Jesus for foreign nations beyond the boundaries of Israel. It emerges for the first time here in the opening genealogy in an unexpected and easily overlooked feature. In his long list of fathers, Matthew includes just *four mothers*, all in Matthew 1:3-6: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba. It may be that one reason for Matthew including them is that there were question marks and irregularities in their marriages, which may be Matthew's way of showing that there was scriptural precedent even for the "irregularity" of Jesus' birth from an unmarried mother. But probably more significant is the other thing they all have in common. They were all, from a Jewish point of view, foreigners. Tamar and Rahab were Canaanites (Gen 38; Josh 2); Ruth was a Moabitess (Ruth 1); Bathsheba was the wife of Uriah, a Hittite, so probably a Hittite herself (2 Sam 1). The implication of Jesus being the heir of Abraham and his universal promise is underlined: Jesus the Jew, and the Jewish Messiah, had Gentile blood!

Jesus was the son of David. Matthew states at the outset what he will develop and demonstrate through his Gospel: that Jesus was the expected Messiah of the royal line of David with the rightful claim to the title "King of the Jews." He establishes this further by tracing Jesus' descent through the royal line of kings descended from David who ruled over Judah (Mt 1:6-11). Probably this represents an "official" genealogy, whereas Luke (Lk 3:23-38) has recorded Jesus' actual biological parentage (or rather that of Joseph, his legal but not biological father). The two lists are not contradictory but rather trace two lines through the same "family tree" from David to Jesus.

Much more was involved in asserting that Jesus was the Davidic Messiah than mere physical ancestry. We shall look at the implications in chapters three and four. They expected that when the true son of David would arrive, God himself would intervene to establish his reign. It would mean the rule of God's justice, liberation for the oppressed, the restoration of peace among humankind and in nature itself. Furthermore, the mission of the Messiah was also connected to the ingathering of the nations. The universal scope of being the son of Abraham was not canceled out by the particular identity of being the son of David. In fact, in Old Testament expectation there was a link between the two. It would be through the son of *David* that the promise to *Abraham* himself would be fulfilled.

Psalm 72 is a good illustration of this. It is a prayer on behalf of the Davidic king, with the heading “Of Solomon.” As well as looking forward to prosperity and justice, it includes this hope and expectation:

May his name endure forever;
 may it continue as long as the sun.
 Then all nations will be blessed through him,
 and they will call him blessed. (Ps 72:17)

This is a very clear echo of the personal and universal promise of God to Abraham in Genesis 12:2-3. (Compare also Ps 2:7-8; Is 55:3-5.)

Jesus is the end of the time of preparation. At the end of his genealogy, Matthew 1:17, Matthew makes an observation about it before he moves on to the birth of Jesus: “Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Messiah.”

Matthew is very fond of threes and sevens in his presentation of material in his Gospel. Both were symbolic numbers for completeness or perfection. Three double-sevens is pretty complete! His purpose is not merely statistical or just a matter of a historical curiosity. From that point of view his observation is not strictly accurate, since at several places in the genealogy biological generations are skipped over (as was quite common in Old Testament genealogy). Rather he is being deliberately schematic, with a theological intention. He is pointing out that Old Testament history falls into three approximately equal spans of time between the critical events:

from the foundational covenant with Abraham to the establishing of the monarch under David;

from David to the destruction and loss of the monarchy in the Babylonian exile; and

from the exile to the coming of the Messiah himself who alone could occupy the throne of David.

Jesus is thus “the end of the line” as far as the Old Testament story goes. It has run its completed course in preparation for him, and now its goal and climax has been reached.

The Old Testament is full of future hope. It looks beyond itself to an expected end. This forward movement, or eschatological thrust (from

Greek *eschaton*, “ultimate event” or “final conclusion”) is a fundamental part of the faith of Israel. It was grounded in their experience and concept of God himself. God was constantly active within history for a definite purpose, working toward his desired goal for the earth and humanity. Just as Matthew has summarized that history in the form of his genealogy, so his concluding observation in verse 17 points out that it is a history whose purpose is now achieved. The preparation is complete. The Messiah has come. In that sense, Jesus is the end. The same note is echoed throughout the Gospel in the urgency of Jesus’ preaching about the kingdom of God. “The time is fulfilled; the kingdom of God is at hand.”

Jesus is also a new beginning. Matthew’s Gospel (and the New Testament itself) opens with the words, “An account of the *genesis* of Jesus, the Messiah . . .” (my translation). A Jewish reader would immediately be reminded of Genesis 2:4 and Genesis 5:1, where exactly the same expression is used in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. The same word in the plural (*geneseis*, “origins,” “generations”) is used several more times in the book of Genesis to introduce genealogies and narratives, or to conclude them and mark off important divisions in the book.

So the use of the word *genesis* here, by a careful author like Matthew, is fairly certainly deliberate. With the echo of the book of Genesis we are meant to realize that the arrival of Jesus the Messiah marks a new beginning, indeed a new creation. God is doing his “new thing.” Good news indeed. Jesus is not only (looking back) the end of the beginning; he is also (looking forward) the beginning of the end.

So much of significance is contained within Matthew’s opening seventeen verses. In its own way, it is rather like the prologue of John’s Gospel, pointing out dimensions of the significance of Jesus before introducing him in the flesh. We see that Jesus had a very particular context in Jewish history, and yet that he also has the universal significance that was attached to that history ever since the promise to Abraham. We see him as the messianic heir of the line of David. We see him as the end and also the beginning. Only with such understanding of the meaning of the story so far can we proceed to a full appreciation of the gospel story itself.

Returning, however, to our average Christian in a Christmas service, probably the succession of names in Matthew’s genealogy will not make her quite so aware of the outline of Old Testament history as it would have done

for Matthew's original readers. So at this point it may be helpful to step back and very briefly review the Old Testament story, following the three broad divisions that Matthew observes.

THE STORY SO FAR

From Abraham to David.

(1) *The problem.* Matthew begins with Abraham, at the point of God's promise from which Israel took its existence. Luke begins further back with Adam. And indeed we can only understand Abraham himself in the light of what goes before. Genesis 1–11 poses the question to which the rest of the Bible, from Genesis 12 to Revelation 22, is the answer.

Having created the earth and human beings to dwell with him upon it, God witnessed the rebellion of the human race against his love and authority. The earlier stories portray this at the level of individual and family life. The later ones go on to show how the whole of human society is enmeshed in a growing web of corruption and violence, which even the judgment of the flood did not eradicate from human life. The climax of this "prehistory" is reached with the story of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11. At the end of that story we find the effects of sin have reached a "global" scale, with humanity scattered in division and confusion across the face of the earth, an earth still under the curse of God. Is there any hope for the human race in such a condition? Can the nations of the earth ever be restored to the blessing and favor of God?

(2) *Election.* God's answer was a seventy-five-year-old man. To that man and his childless and elderly wife, God promised a son. And through that son, he promised a nation, which, in contrast to the nations since Babel, would be blessed by God. And through that nation, he promised blessing to all the nations.

No wonder Abraham and Sarah both laughed on different occasions, especially as they neared their century and God kept renewing the promise in spite of it becoming ever more remote. But the promise was kept. The laughter turned into Isaac ("he laughs"), and the family that was to become a great nation began to take shape and increase. So important was this choice that it formed part of the identity of the God of the Bible thereafter. He is known, and indeed chooses to be known, as "The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." That description means he is the God of

promise and fulfillment, and the God whose purpose ultimately embraced all nations.

This choice of Abraham also defined the identity of the people of Israel. Who were they? The chosen people, yes, but chosen, as Moses reminded them deflatingly and often, not because of their numerical greatness or moral superiority, but only because God had loved and chosen Abraham for his own redemptive purpose (Deut 7:7-8; 9:4-6).

(3) *Redemption*. Having migrated to Egypt as guests in a time of famine, the descendants of Abraham ended up as slaves—an oppressed ethnic minority in a hostile land. The book of Exodus vividly describes how they were exploited. Then it goes on to an even more vivid description of how God liberated them, through Moses. In the process of this great story of deliverance, God acquires a new name alongside this fresh dimension of his character: “Yahweh,” the God who acts out of faithfulness to his promise in liberating justice for the oppressed. The exodus thus becomes the primary model of what redemption means in the Bible and gives substance to what an Israelite would have meant by calling God “Redeemer.”

(4) *Covenant*. Three months after the exodus, God at last has Israel to himself, at the foot of Mount Sinai. There, through Moses, God gave them his law, including the Ten Commandments, and entered into a covenant with them as a nation. He would be their God and they would be his people, in a relationship of sovereignty and blessing on the one hand, and loyalty and obedience on the other.

It is important to see that this covenant was based on what God had already done for them (as they had just recently seen, Ex 19:4-6). God’s grace and redemptive action came first. Their obedience to the law and covenant was to be a grateful response, and in order to enable them to be what God wanted them to be as his people in the midst of the nations. We shall explore the meaning of this in chapter five.

(5) *Inheritance*. The generation of the exodus, through their own failure, unbelief and rebellion, perished in the wilderness. It was the next generation who took possession of the Promised Land, fulfilling the purpose of the exodus liberation. Under the leadership of Joshua, the Israelites gained strategic control of the land. But there followed a lengthy process of settlement in which the tribes struggled—sometimes in cooperation, and sometimes in competition—to possess fully the land allotted to them.

During the centuries of the period of the judges there was much disunity caused by internal strife and external pressures. Alongside this went chronic disloyalty to the faith of Yahweh, though it was never lost altogether, and was sustained, like the people themselves, by the varied ministries and victories of the figures called “judges,” culminating in the great Samuel.

The pressures eventually led to the demand for monarchy (1 Sam 8–12). This was interpreted by Samuel as a rejection of God’s own rule over his people, especially since it was motivated by a desire to be like the other nations when it was precisely the vocation of Israel to be different. God, however, elevated the sinful desires of the people into a vehicle for his own purpose, and after the failure of Saul, David established the monarchy firmly and became its glorious model.

Possibly the most important achievement of David was that he at last gave to Israel complete and unified control over the whole of the land that had been promised to Abraham. Up to then it had been fragmentarily occupied by loosely federated tribes, under constant attack and invasion from their enemies. David defeated those enemies systematically, giving Israel “rest from their enemies round about,” and established secure borders for the nation.

So there is a kind of natural historical arc from Abraham to David. With David the covenant with Abraham had come to a measure of fulfillment: Abraham’s offspring had become a great nation; they had taken possession of the land promised to Abraham; they were living in a special relationship of blessing and protection under Yahweh.

But then, as often happens in the Old Testament, no sooner has the promise “come to rest,” so to speak, than it takes off again in a renewed form as history moves forward (we shall look at this characteristic of the Old Testament in the next chapter). And so, in a personal covenant with David, God tied his purpose for Israel to his promise to the house of David himself. As in the covenant with Abraham, the promise to David included a son and heir, a great name and a special relationship (2 Sam 7). So then, with this new royal dimension, the story of God’s people moves forward to its next phase.

From David to the exile.

(1) *Division of the kingdoms.* Solomon glorified and consolidated the empire that David had built, and built the temple his father had desired and planned. That temple then became the focal point of God’s presence with

his people for the next half-millennium, until it was destroyed along with Jerusalem at the time of the exile in 587 B.C.

Solomon also introduced Israel to foreign trade, foreign culture, foreign wealth and foreign influences. The golden age of Solomon's wealth and wisdom, however, had its dark side in the increasing burden of the cost of an empire—a burden that fell on the ordinary population. Samuel had warned the Israelites when they asked for a king that having a king would eventually mean forced labor, taxation, conscription and confiscation (1 Sam 8:10-18). Solomon's later reign proved all these things painfully true. All of this was totally contrary to the authentic Israelite tradition of covenant equality and freedom, and it produced increasing discontent among the people, especially in the northern tribes, who seemed to suffer more than the royal tribe of Judah.

When Rehoboam, Solomon's son, refused the people's request and his elders' advice to lighten the load and instead deliberately chose the way of oppression and exploitation as state policy, the discontent boiled over into rebellion. Led by Jeroboam, the ten northern tribes seceded from the house of David and formed a rival kingdom, taking the name of Israel, leaving Rehoboam and his Davidic successors with the remnant—the kingdom of Judah. The date was in the second half of the tenth century B.C., about 931 B.C. From then on the story of Israel is one of the divided kingdoms, Israel in the north and Judah in the south.

(2) *The ninth century B.C.* The northern kingdom of Israel, as with many states founded by revolution, went through a period of instability, with successive coups d'état after the death of Jeroboam and four kings in twenty-five years.

Eventually in the ninth century B.C., Omri established a dynasty and built up the political and military strength of the country. This was sustained by his son Ahab, whose wife Jezebel had been chosen for him as a marriage alliance with powerful Phoenicia, the maritime trading nation to the north of Israel. Jezebel's influence, however, was more than political and economic. She set about converting her adoptive kingdom to the religion of her native Tyre. She imposed the cult of Baal and systematically tried to extinguish the worship of Yahweh.

This produced a crisis. God called Elijah to be his prophet to the northern kingdom of Israel in the mid-ninth century. Elijah courageously

brought about a (temporary) revival and reconversion of the people to their ancestral faith through the judgment of drought followed by the fiery climax of Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18). Elijah also addressed the anger of God against the economic and social evil that was threatening the material structure of Israel's faith, as typified in Ahab and Jezebel's treatment of Naboth (1 Kings 21). Elijah was followed by Elisha, whose long ministry lasted throughout the rest of the ninth century and influenced both national and international politics.

In the southern kingdom of Judah, the ninth century was a quieter affair. With its established capital, court, bureaucracy and dynasty, Judah proved much more stable than the northern state. The first fifty years saw the reigns of only two kings: Asa and Jehoshaphat. Both were strong and comparatively godly and preserved the faith of Yahweh. Jehoshaphat also introduced a major judicial reform.

The second half of the ninth century saw an attempt by Athaliah, of the house of Omri, who had been married to Jehoshaphat's son Jehoram (as another of Omri's marriage alliances), to capture the throne of David for the house of Israel after her husband's death. Her reign only lasted five years, however, before she was removed in a counterrevolution and the Davidic succession was restored in the person of seven-year-old Joash.

(3) *The eighth century B.C.* Meanwhile, in northern Israel, the dynasty of Omri had been overthrown in a bloody revolution led by Jehu, a fanatical Yahwist who considered it his mission to remove all traces of Baal, his prophets and his worshipers, by fair means or foul—mostly foul. His blood purge weakened the kingdom and lost him his allies. But by the second quarter of the eighth century his great-grandson, Jeroboam II, restored Israel to a degree of political, military and material prosperity that it had not seen since the days of Solomon.

But, as in the days of Solomon, the prosperity was not enjoyed by all. Underneath the upper and external extravagance, and in spite of the thriving and popular religious cult, lay an increasing poverty gap and a world of exploitation and oppression. There were economic problems of debt and bondage, corruption of the markets and the courts, and the nation was divided between rich and poor. God sent prophets to express his anger at the situation.

Amos and Hosea both prophesied in the northern kingdom of Israel in the mid- to late-eighth century. Amos fiercely denounced the social

injustices that he observed on all sides, defending the poor and exploited as “the righteous” (i.e., those with right on their side in the situation), and attacking the wealthy, luxury-loving class, especially in Samaria, as “the wicked.” This was a total and very surprising reversal of popular religious understanding of the day. At the same time Amos claimed that the thriving religious practices at Bethel and Gilgal were not only *not* pleasing in the sight of God as the people believed but actually stank in his nostrils. The rampant injustice and oppression in the nation was not only a complete betrayal of all their history as God’s covenant people (a history Amos recounts accusingly), but also turned their pretended worship into a mockery and an abomination.

Hosea, through the bitter experience of his own marriage to an unfaithful and adulterous wife, saw more of the internal spiritual reality of the people’s condition. He saw the syncretistic Baal worship with the sexual perversions that went along with it, including ritual prostitution. So he accused the people of being infected with a “spirit of prostitution.” Amos had predicted that the kingdom would be destroyed and king and people exiled. It must have seemed laughable in the prosperous days of Jeroboam II, but within twenty-five years of his death, it happened and Hosea probably witnessed it.

By the middle of the eighth century B.C., Assyria had become the dominant world power and was rapidly expanding westward to the Palestinian states. After several rebellions, Israel was attacked by Assyria in 725 B.C. Samaria was besieged and eventually fell in 721 B.C. The bulk of the Israelite population (the ten northern tribes) was deported and scattered throughout other parts of Assyria’s empire, while populations of foreigners from other parts were brought into Israel’s territories. In this act of Assyria—an example of its policy of imperial subjugation—lies the origins of the mixed race of “Samaritans.” So the northern kingdom of Israel ceased to exist. Its territory became nothing more than a province under the paw of the Assyrian lion—a paw now poised and threatening very close to Judah.

In Judah, the eighth century began, as in Israel, with half a century of prosperity and stability, mainly under the strong king Uzziah. His successor Jotham was also a good king, but all was not well among the people who, according to the chronicler “continued their corrupt practices” (2 Chron

27:2). Apparently the same social and economic evils had penetrated Judah as were blatant in Israel. This provides the background for the ministries of two great eighth-century prophets in Judah—Isaiah and Micah—who began during the reign of Jotham.

The Assyrian threat loomed over Judah also in the last third of the eighth century. King Ahaz, in 735 B.C., in an attempt to protect himself from threatened invasions from Israel and Syria, appealed to Assyria for assistance against these more local enemies. The Assyrians readily came “to help.” They first smashed Syria, Israel and Philistia, and then turned to demand of Judah a heavy tribute for the favor. Ahaz’s action, which had been directly opposed by Isaiah, proved politically and religiously disastrous, since Judah became virtually a vassal state of Assyria and was forced to absorb much of its religious practices as well.

Ahaz’s successor, Hezekiah, reversed that policy. He linked major religious reforms to a renewed bid for freedom from Assyrian domination. His rebellion brought Assyrian invasions of devastating force, and indeed he surrendered and paid up. But Jerusalem itself was remarkably delivered, in fulfillment of a prophetic encouragement from Isaiah. But instead of producing national repentance and return to Yahweh and the demands of the covenant, as preached by Isaiah, this miraculous deliverance only made the people complacent. They began to think that Jerusalem and its temple were indestructible. God would never, ever, allow them to be destroyed. But they were wrong. Terribly wrong.

(4) *The seventh century B.C.* The seventh century in Judah was like a seesaw. The reforming, anti-Assyrian policies of Hezekiah were completely reversed by Manasseh. His long, half-century reign became a time of unprecedented apostasy, religious decay, corruption and a return even to ancient Canaanite practices long abominated and forbidden in Israel, such as child sacrifice. His reign was violent, oppressive and pagan (compare 2 Kings 21 and 2 Chron 33), and as far as can be seen, no voice of prophecy penetrated the darkness.

His grandson Josiah, however (Amon the son only reigned two years), brought in yet another reversal of state policy. Josiah both resisted Assyria and reformed Judah’s religion. In fact the reformation of Josiah, lasting about a decade from 629 B.C. and including the discovery of a book of the law (probably Deuteronomy) during repairs to the temple, was the most

thorough and severe in its effects of any in Judah's history. Jeremiah, who was only slightly younger than Josiah, was called to be a prophet in the early flush of Josiah's reformation. But Jeremiah saw that its effects were largely external and didn't purge the idolatry from the hearts of the people or the corruption from their hands.

In the passion of his youth, Jeremiah denounced the religious, moral and social evils of Jerusalem society, from top to bottom. But he also appealed movingly for repentance, believing that God's threatened judgment could thereby be averted. As Jeremiah's ministry wore on into his middle age, God told Jeremiah that the people had become so hardened in their rebellion that he should stop even praying for them. From then on, Jeremiah foretold nothing but calamity for his own generation at the hands of their enemies. Their disbelief turned to outrage when he predicted even the destruction of the very temple itself, against the popular mythology which, since Isaiah's day, believed it to be safe forever under Yahweh's protection, like Jerusalem itself. He suffered arrest, beatings and imprisonment for so unpopular a message. Unpopular, but accurate.

In the later seventh century the weakening Assyrian empire quite rapidly collapsed and was replaced by the resurgent power of Babylon under an energetic commander, Nebuchadnezzar. Irritated by repeated rebellions in Judah, which after the death of Josiah in 609 B.C. was ruled by a succession of weak and vacillating kings, Nebuchadnezzar finally besieged Jerusalem in 588 B.C. Jerusalem was captured in 587 B.C. and the exile began. The destruction was total: the city, the temple and everything in them went up in smoke. The bulk of the population, except for the poorest in the land, were carried off in captivity to Babylon. The unthinkable had happened. God's people were evicted from God's land. The exile had begun and engulfed a whole generation. The monarchy was ended. The exile of Jehoiachin ("Jeconiah") and his brother Zedekiah, the last two kings of Judah, brings to an end the second section of Matthew's genealogy.

(5) *Some lessons of history.* We saw some of the important features of the first period of Israel's history (Abraham to David). It showed the nature of Yahweh as a God of faithfulness to covenant promise and of liberating justice for the oppressed. It also showed the nature of God's people (Old Testament Israel). They were called into existence for the sake of God's redemptive purpose for all the nations. They experienced God's redeeming

grace. They lived in covenant relationship with him, in the inheritance of the land he had given to them.

The central section (from David to the exile) also had its vital lessons, which the historical books and the books of the prophets made clear.

One affirmation was that Yahweh, the God of Israel, was in sovereign control of world history—not merely the affairs of Israel. The prophets had asserted this with incredible boldness. They looked out on the vast empires that impinged on the life of Israel and at times appeared to threaten its existence, and regarded them as mere sticks and tools in the hands of Yahweh, the God of little, divided Israel. Those who edited the historical books of Israel, from Joshua to Kings, did so most probably during the exile itself, when Israel was in captivity to one of those empires. Yet they continued to make the same affirmation of faith: Yahweh has done this. God is still in control, as he always has been.

A second vital truth that permeates this period is the moral character and demand of Yahweh. The God who acted for justice at the exodus remained committed to maintaining it among his own people. The law had expressed this commitment constitutionally. The prophets gave it voice directly, each to his contemporary generation and context. God's moral concern is not only individual (though the masses of individual stories show that it certainly does claim every individual) but also social. God evaluates the moral health of society as a whole, from international treaties to market economies, from military strategy to local court procedures, from national politics to the local harvest. This dimension of the message of the Old Testament would reverberate from Matthew's list of kings, since so many of them heard the unforgettable rhetoric of the great prophets of the monarchy period.

A third unmistakable dimension of this era was the realization that God did not want external religious rituals without practical social justice. This was all the more surprising in the light of the strong Pentateuchal tradition that ascribed the religion of Israel—its festivals, sacrifices and priesthood—to the gift and commandment of Yahweh himself. Of course, even in the law itself the essential covenant requirements of loyalty and obedience had come before the detailed sacrificial regulations. And since the days of Samuel there had been the awareness that “to obey is better than sacrifice” (1 Sam 15:22). Nevertheless there was still something radically shocking

when Amos and Isaiah told the people that Yahweh hated and despised their worship, and was fed up and sickened by the very sacrifices they thought he wanted. Jeremiah told them that they could mix up all their rituals the wrong way around for all that God cared (Amos 5:21-24; Is 1:11-16; Jer 7:21-26). God will not be worshiped and cannot be known apart from commitment to righteousness and justice, faithfulness and love, the things that define God's own character and are his delight (Jer 9:23-24; 22:15-17).

All three of these prominent features of the message of the Old Testament in the period of the monarchy are to be found in the teaching of Jesus, son of David: the sovereignty (kingship) of God, the essentially moral demand of God's rule and the priority of practical obedience over all religious observances. In these, as in so many ways as we shall see, especially in chapter five, Jesus recaptured and amplified the authentic voice of the Scriptures.

From the exile to the Messiah.

(1) *The exile.* The exile lasted fifty years (that is, from 587 B.C. to the first return of some Jews to Jerusalem in 538 B.C.). The period from the destruction of the temple to the completion of its rebuilding was approximately seventy years.

It is remarkable that Israel and its faith survived at all. That they did survive was largely due to the message of the prophets—particularly of Jeremiah up to, and of Ezekiel after, the fall of Jerusalem. They consistently interpreted the terrifying events as the judgment of Yahweh, punishment for the persistently evil ways of his people. From that perspective, the exile could be seen as a punishment that was *logical* (it showed God's consistency in terms of his covenant threats as well as his promises). But it was a judgment that was also *limited* (so there could be hope for the future). Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel foretold a return to the land and a restoration of the relationship between God and his people. Jeremiah portrayed it in terms of a new covenant (Jer 31:31-34). Ezekiel had visions of nothing short of national resurrection (Ezek 37), with reunified tribes of Israel living once again in God's land, surrounding God's temple and enjoying God's presence (Ezek 40-48).

Nevertheless, by the later years of the exile it seemed that many had abandoned hope. The Israelites accused Yahweh of having forgotten and forsaken them (e.g., Is 40:27; 49:14)—a rich irony in view of the fact that it was they who for centuries had treated him that way! Into this lethargic

despair came the message of Isaiah 40–55 addressing the exiles. At a time when all they could see was the threatening rise of yet another empire (the Persians), these chapters of the book of Isaiah called on them to lift up their eyes and hearts once more to see their God on the move, bringing liberation at last.

The ringing affirmation of Isaiah 40–55 is that Yahweh is not only still the sovereign Lord of all creation and all history (and is utterly, uniquely so), but also that he is about to act again on behalf of his oppressed people with a deliverance that will recall the original exodus but dwarf it in significance. The clouds the people so much dread—the sudden rise of Cyrus, ruler of the new, expanding Persian Empire—would burst in blessings on their head. Babylon would be destroyed and they would be released, free to return to Jerusalem, which, sings the prophet, was already exulting in joy at the sight of God leading his captives home.

In the midst of all this directly historical prediction, the prophet also perceives the true ministry and mission of Israel as the servant of God, destined to bring his blessing to all nations—a destiny in which they are manifestly failing. The task will be accomplished, however, through a true Servant of Yahweh, whose mission of justice, teaching, suffering, death and vindication will ultimately bring God’s salvation to the ends of the earth. The *particular* story of tiny Israel and the *universal* purposes of God are again linked together.

(2) *The restoration.* The historical predictions were fulfilled. Cyrus defeated Babylon in 539 B.C. and granted freedom to the captive peoples of the Babylonian empire to take up their gods and go home—under his “supervision,” of course. In 538 B.C. the first return of some of the exiled Jews began. They were a tiny community facing enormous problems. Jerusalem and Judah were in ruins after half a century of neglect. They experienced intense opposition and a campaign of political and physical obstruction from the Samaritans. Their early harvests were disappointing, creating further problems. Not surprisingly, after a start was made and the foundations laid, work on the rebuilding of the temple was soon neglected. However, as a result of the encouragement of two of the postexilic prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, it was eventually completed in 515 B.C.

Throughout this period Judah had no independence, of course. It formed just a small subprovince of the vast Persian Empire, which stretched from

the shore of the Aegean Sea to the borders of India and lasted for two centuries. In the fifth century it appears that disillusionment and depression set in again, partly as a result of the apparent failure of the hopes raised by Haggai and Zechariah. And this led to a growing laxity in religious and moral life. This was challenged by the last of the Old Testament prophets, Malachi, probably about the middle of the fifth century. He was concerned about the slovenliness of the sacrifices, the spread of divorce and the widespread failure of the people to honor God in practical life.

The same kind of situation was addressed a little later by Ezra and Nehemiah, whose terms of office overlapped somewhat in Jerusalem. Ezra's achievement was the teaching of the law and the reordering of the community around it, consolidated by a ceremony of covenant renewal. Nehemiah's achievements included the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, giving its inhabitants not only physical safety but also a sense of unity and dignity. As the officially appointed Persian governor, Nehemiah was able to give the needed political patronage and authority to the reforms of Ezra, as well as engaging in some social and economic reforms of his own.

(3) *The intertestamental period.* The canonical history of the Old Testament comes to an end in the mid-fifth century with Malachi, Ezra and Nehemiah. But of course, the Jewish community went on, as does Matthew's genealogy. The Jews lived through two more changes of imperial power before Christ.

Twice during the early fifth century Persia tried, and failed, to conquer the Greek mainland and spread its power to Europe. It was heroically beaten back by the Spartans and Athenians—who then fell to fighting with each other. Not until the mid-fourth century were the Greek states forced into unity by the power of Macedon, which then turned its attention east to the wealth of the Persian Empire just across the Aegean Sea. Under Alexander the Great, Greek armies sliced through the Persian Empire like a knife through butter, with amazing speed. The whole vast area once ruled by Persia, including Judah, then came under Greek rule. This was the beginning of the “Hellenistic” (Greek) era, when the Greek language and culture spread throughout the whole Near East and Middle Eastern world.

After the premature death of Alexander in 323 B.C., his empire was split up among his generals. Ptolemy established a dynasty in Egypt, and for more or less the whole of the third century, Palestine and the Jews were under the

political control of the Ptolemies. From about 200 B.C. onward, however, control of Palestine passed into the hands of the Seleucid kings of Syria, who ruled from Antioch over the northern part of the old Alexandrian empire. Their rule was much more aggressively Greek, and Jews faced increasing pressure to conform religiously and culturally to Hellenism. Those who refused faced persecution. The supreme insult was when Antiochus Epiphanes IV in 167 B.C. set up a statue of Zeus, the supreme god of Greek mythology, in the temple itself.

This sacrilege sparked off a major revolt when Jews under the leadership of Judas Maccabeus took up arms. It ended with a successful struggle for independence, climaxing in the cleansing of the temple in 164 B.C. For the next century, the Jews more or less governed themselves under the leadership of the Hasmonean priestly dynasty. This lasted until the power of Greece was replaced by that of Rome, which had been gradually expanding its sphere of influence throughout the whole Mediterranean basin during the second and first centuries B.C. In 63 B.C. Roman legions under Pompey (also, but less deservedly than Alexander, known as “the Great”) entered Palestine. Thus began the long period of Roman supremacy over the Jews. And so it was that, when the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus decided that he wanted a census of the whole Roman Empire so that he could get maximum taxes from all the subject populations, a virgin from Nazareth gave birth to her firstborn son in Bethlehem of Judea, the city of David, and brought Matthew’s genealogy to an end.

Two features of this intertestamental period are worth noting in view of their influence on the world into which Jesus arrived. The first was an increasing devotion to the law, the Torah. This became the supreme mark of faithful Jews. It eventually developed into a somewhat fanatical cause, supported by a systematic building of a whole structure of theology and exposition and application around the law itself. There were professional experts, called scribes, involved in this. There were also lay movements devoted to wholehearted obedience to the law—such as the Pharisees. We may be tempted to dismiss all this as legalism. Doubtless it tended in that direction, and Jesus, with his unique insight and authority, exposed some of the failure and misguidedness of his contemporary devotees of the law and tradition. But we should also be aware of the positive and worthy motives that lay behind this emphasis on keeping God’s law. Had not the exile,

the greatest catastrophe in their history, been the direct judgment of God on the failure of his people precisely to keep his law? Was that not also the message of the great prophets? Surely then they should learn the lesson of history and make every effort to live as God required? In that way they would not only avoid a repetition of such judgment but also hasten the day when God would finally deliver them from their present enemies. The pursuit of holiness was serious and purposeful. It was a total social program—not just a fringe of hyperreligious piety.

The second feature was the upsurge of apocalyptic, messianic hope. As persecution continued and as the nation experienced martyrdoms and great suffering, it began to hope for a final, climactic intervention by God himself, as the prophets had foretold. God would establish his kingdom forever by destroying his (and Israel's) enemies. He would vindicate and uplift the righteous oppressed and put an end to their suffering. In varied ways these hopes included the expectation of a coming figure who would bring about this intervention of God and lead the people. These expectations were not all linked together or attached to one single figure. They included terms like messiah (anointed one), son of man, a new David, the return of Elijah, or the Prophet, the branch, etc. We shall look at some of these in chapters three and four. The coming of this figure would herald the end of the present age, the arrival of the kingdom of God, the restoration of Israel and the judgment of the wicked.

So just imagine the stirring of hearts and quickening of pulses in Jewish homes and communities when, into this mixture of aspirations and hopes, dropped the message of John the Baptist, and then of Jesus himself: “The time is fulfilled! [what you have been waiting for as something future is now here and present]; the kingdom of God is at hand! [God is now acting to establish his reign in the midst of you]; so repent and believe the good news [urgent action is required of you now].”

Light on the story. This, then, is the story that Matthew condenses into seventeen verses of genealogy, the story that leads up to Jesus the Messiah, the story that he completes. It is the story from which Jesus acquired his identity and mission. It is also the story to which he gave significance and authority. The very form of the genealogy shows the direct continuity between the Old Testament and Jesus himself. This continuity is based on the action of God. The God who is manifestly involved in the events

described in the second half of Matthew 1 was also active in the events implied in the first half. In Jesus, God brought to completion what he himself had prepared for. This means that it is Jesus who gives meaning and validity to the events of Israel's Old Testament history. So when we accept the claims of this chapter about Jesus (that he is indeed the promised Messiah, that he was conceived by the Holy Spirit of God, that he is uniquely God's Son, that in him the saving God has truly come among us), we also accept the claim that the same chapter makes about the history that leads up to him—the Old Testament.

It is important to remember that we are still talking about *history* here, and not only about *promises* being fulfilled (which is the subject of the next chapter). We know that, as Paul put it, all the promises of God “are ‘Yes’ in Christ” (2 Cor 1:20). But in a sense all the acts of God are “yes” in Christ also. For the Old Testament is much more than a promise box full of blessed predictions about Jesus. It is primarily a story—the story of the acts of God in human history out of which those promises arose. The promises only make sense in relation to that history.

If we think of the Old Testament only in terms of promises that are fulfilled, we may fall into the trap of regarding the historical content of the Old Testament as of little value in itself. If it is all “fulfilled,” is it worth anything now? Now that we have the “reality” of Christ, do we need to pay any attention to the “shadows” (as the author of Hebrews puts it, Heb 8:5)? But the events of the Old Testament story were themselves reality—sometimes life-and-death reality—for those who lived through them. And through them there was a real relationship between God and his people, and a real revelation of God to his people, and through them to us. It is the same God. The God who in these last days has spoken to us by his Son (as the author of Hebrews puts it, Heb 1:2), also and truly spoke through the prophets. And those prophets were rooted in the earthy specifics of their own historical contexts. They spoke into history, and their words come to us out of that history. We cannot, must not, simply throw that history away, like a discarded ticket when you reach your destination at the end of a journey.

Light on the old. When we look at events in the history of the Old Testament, then, with these points in mind, it has several effects. First of all, we must affirm whatever significance a particular event had in terms of Israel's own experience of God and faith in him. “What it meant for Israel”

does not just evaporate in a haze of spiritualization when we reach the New Testament. Second, however, we may legitimately see in the Old Testament event additional levels of significance in the light of the end of the story—that is, in the light of Christ. And third, the Old Testament event may provide levels of significance to our full understanding of all that Christ was and said and did.

Take for example that foundational event in Israel's history—the exodus. The event itself and the lengthy texts that describe it leave no doubt that God is characterized by care for the oppressed and is motivated to action for justice on their behalf. So prominent is this aspect of the significance of the story in the Hebrew Bible that it became permanently definitive of the nature of Yahweh, Israel's God. The exodus also defined what Israel meant by the terms *redemption* and *salvation*. That dimension of the exodus event remains true, as a permanently valid part of God's revelation, after the coming of Christ. His coming in no way alters or removes the truth of the Old Testament story in itself and in its meaning for Israel—namely, that God is concerned for the poor and suffering and desires justice for the exploited. On the contrary, it underlines and endorses it. What the Old Testament saw in that event remains true.

Looking back on the event, however, in the light of the fullness of God's redemptive achievement in Jesus Christ, we can see that even the original exodus was not merely concerned with the political, economic and social aspects of Israel's predicament. There was also a level of spiritual oppression in Israel's subjection to the gods of Egypt. "Let my people go *that they may worship/serve me*" was God's demand on Pharaoh. And the explicit purpose of the deliverance was that they would *know* Yahweh in the grace of redemption and covenant relationship. So the exodus, for all the comprehensiveness of what it achieved for Israel, points beyond itself to a greater need for deliverance from the totality of evil and restoration to relationship with God than it achieved by itself. Such a deliverance was accomplished by Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection. It was the reality of that accomplishment that Moses and Elijah discussed with him on the mount of transfiguration, as, in Luke's words, they talked about "the exodus he would accomplish in Jerusalem" (Lk 9:31, my translation). And indeed when the Hebrew prophets themselves looked hopefully into the future, they pictured God's final and complete salvation in terms of a new and greater

exodus, as a result of which salvation would reach to the ends of the earth. So, when we look back on the original historical exodus in the light of the end of the story in Christ, it is filled with rich significance in view of what it points to.

Light on the new. But it is equally important to look at the other end of the story, the achievement of Christ, in the light of all that the exodus was as an act of God's redemption, as it is understood in the Old Testament. The New Testament affirms that the gospel of the cross and resurrection of Christ is God's complete answer to the totality of evil and all its effects within his creation. But it is the Old Testament that shows us the nature and extent of sin and evil—primarily in the narratives of Genesis 4–11, and then also in the history of Israel and the nations, such as their oppression in the first chapters of Exodus. It shows us that while evil has its origins outside the human race, human beings are morally accountable to God for our own sin. It shows us that sin and evil have a corporate as well as an individual dimension, that is, they affect and shape the patterns of social life within which we live, as well as the personal lives we lead. It shows us that sin and evil affect history itself through inescapable cause and effect and a kind of cumulative process through the generations of humanity. It shows us that there is no area of life on earth in which we are free from the influence of our own sin and the sin of others. In short, the Old Testament portrays to us a very big problem to which there needs to be a very big answer, if there is one at all.

Now, in the New Testament, of course, as Christians we believe we see God's big and final answer to the problem. But in the Old Testament God had already begun to sketch in the dimensions of his answer through successive acts of redemption in history, with the exodus as the prime model. Here we come back to the importance of treating the Old Testament as real history. Christians tend to say something like "the Old Testament is a foreshadowing of Jesus Christ." Carefully explained, this is true. But it can lead to the prejudice that dispenses with the Old Testament itself as little more than shadows, or a kind of children's picture book, of no significance in itself but only for what it foreshadowed. And then we can spiritualize and individualize our interpretation of the work of Christ in such a way that it loses all touch with the earlier dimensions of God's first works of redemption in the history of Israel.

But the exodus was *real* redemption. It was a real act of the living God, for real people who were in real slavery, and it really liberated them. They were liberated from political oppression as an immigrant community into independent nation status. They were liberated from economic exploitation as a slave labor force into the freedom and sufficiency of a land of their own. They were liberated from social violation of basic human rights as a victimized ethnic minority into an unprecedented opportunity to create a new kind of community based on equality and social justice. They were liberated from spiritual bondage to Pharaoh and the other gods of Egypt into undeniable knowledge of and covenant relationship with the living God.

Such was the meaning and scope of redemption in the Hebrew Bible. The very word *redemption* took its substantial meaning from this event. Ask any Israelite what he meant by saying that YHWH their God was a Redeemer, or that he himself was redeemed, and he (or she, if you had asked the likes of Deborah or Hannah) would have told you this story of the exodus and said, “That is what redemption is. That is how I know I belong to a redeemed people.”

That is exactly what some of the psalms do. They celebrate redemption by telling this story. They knew the scale of the problem, and they had experienced the scale of God’s answer.

Now of course, the exodus was not yet God’s last word or act in redemption. Yes, a greater “exodus” and a complete redemption still lay in their future. But within the limits of history and revelation up to that point, the exodus was a real act of the Redeemer God, and it demonstrated unmistakably the comprehensive scale and scope of his redemptive purpose. The exodus was *God’s* idea of redemption. How big, then, is our “New Testament gospel”? It should not fall short of, or be narrower than, its Old Testament foundation, for God is the same God and his ultimate purpose is the same.

This means that it is inadequate also merely to explain it like this (this is how I was taught as young Christian): “In the exodus, God rescued Israel from bondage to Pharaoh, and through the cross God rescues me from bondage to sin.” That is true, of course. But the mighty act of the exodus was more than just a parable to illustrate personal salvation. Furthermore, the nature of the bondage is not quite so parallel as that. Gloriously it is

true that the cross breaks the bondage of my personal sin and releases me from its effects. But the exodus was a release from bondage to the *sin of others*. The Israelites were in Egypt and in slavery, but not because of their own sins or God's judgment. Their sufferings were the direct result of the oppression, cruelty, exploitation and victimization of the Egyptians. They were suffering most from the sin of others. Their liberation therefore was a release from bondage, not to their own sin, but to the evil of others who had enslaved them.

This is not for a moment to imply that the Israelites were not themselves also sinners. They were as much in need of God's mercy and grace as the rest of the human race. The subsequent story of their behavior in the wilderness proved that beyond a doubt, just as that story also proved God's infinite patience and forgiving grace toward their sinful and rebellious ways. The sacrificial system, indeed, was designed precisely to cope with the reality of sin on the part of the people of God and to provide a means of atoning for it. The point here is that atonement and forgiveness for one's own sin is not what the exodus redemption was about. It was rather a *deliverance from an external evil* and the suffering and injustice it caused, by means of a shattering defeat of the evil power and an irrevocable breaking of its hold over Israel, in all the dimensions mentioned above—political, economic, social and spiritual.

If, then, God's climactic work of redemption through the cross transcends, but also embodies and includes, the scope of all his redemptive activity as previously laid bare in Old Testament history, our gospel must include the exodus model of liberation, as well as the sacrificial model of atonement, or the restoration model of God's forgiving grace (as after the exile). The New Testament does, in fact, affirm the death and resurrection of Jesus as a cosmic victory over all authorities and powers "in heaven and on earth." At the cross Jesus defeated all the evil forces that bind and enslave human beings, corrupt and distort human life, and warp, pollute and frustrate the very creation itself. That victory is an essential part of the biblical "good news." And applying that victory to every dimension of human life on earth is the task of Christian mission.

So then we can see that when we take Old Testament history seriously in relation to its completion in Jesus Christ, a two-way process is at work, yielding a double benefit in our understanding of the whole Bible. On the

one hand, we are able to see the full significance of the Old Testament story in the light of where it leads—the climactic achievement of Christ; on the other hand, we are able to appreciate the full dimensions of what God did through Christ in the light of his historical declarations and demonstrations of intent in the Old Testament.

We have concentrated on the exodus so far. But the same principles could be applied to other major dimensions of Israel's story, such as the land—the story of its promise, gift and inheritance, and all the theology, laws, institutions and ethical imperatives that surrounded it.

The story of the monarchy, with the accompanying ministry and message of the prophets, would be equally illuminating, handled in both directions, as we have tried to do.

Matthew's opening genealogy, then, points us to one major way for us as Christians to take account of the Hebrew Bible in relation to Jesus and the New Testament, and that is as story—the story, with a multidimensional relevance culminating in the story of Jesus himself. Taken together, both Testaments record the history of God's saving work for humanity. *Salvation history* is a term that has been used by many scholars to refer to this, and some would regard it as the primary point of continuity or relationship between the two testaments of the Christian Bible. As with most scholarly positions, this has been argued over, but it does seem unquestionable that history is one important aspect of the link between Old and New, and that Matthew's genealogy, with all its explicit and implicit levels of meaning, points to this very clearly.

A UNIQUE STORY

We have used the expression “salvation history” about the Old Testament. This affirms that in the history of Israel, God was acting for salvation in a way that was not true elsewhere. Now this claim is an embarrassment for some. Not everyone likes the idea of one single chosen people of God enjoying a unique history of salvation, over against all the rest of the nations who seem to get a rather poor deal on the whole. Surely, some people say, if we believe in one God who is and always has been the one universal God of all humanity, then we need to see all the varied histories of different nations and cultures as being also part of his work on the earth. And can those extrabiblical histories not also function as valid preparations for the fullness

of his saving work in Jesus Christ? Obviously, the history of the Old Testament represents *one* way to Jesus—the history of his own people. But, it is said, we need not stress that particular history as far as other peoples are concerned who do not stand within the stream of the Judeo-Christian historical heritage. Rather, we should look within worldwide history for other preparatory routes to the knowledge of the gospel of Christ. When taken to the logical conclusion, this train of thought leads to the view that we may in fact dispense with the Old Testament (at least as far as any canonical authority is concerned) for people who have their own religious and cultural history and scriptural traditions. What are we to say to such arguments?

Clearly, if we believe that the Christian church has been right all through the ages to hold on to the Hebrew Scriptures of the Old Testament as a vital and integral part of the canon of Christian Scripture, then we must say something about this problem of the relationship between *Israel's* history, or salvation history, and the rest of *human* history. Otherwise we might as well go on pretending that the New Testament really does start at Matthew 1:18 and forget all that Matthew was trying to tell us in his unique prologue. But, as we shall see, if we were to throw away the Old Testament, we would lose most of the meaning of Jesus himself. For the uniqueness of Jesus is built on the foundation of the uniqueness of the story that prepared the way for him to come.

Unfortunately, this is a link that is not often preserved in the current debate about the relationship between Christianity and other faiths. Many discussions about the significance of Jesus Christ within the context of world religions virtually cut him off from his historical and scriptural roots. People speak of Jesus as if he were the founder of a new religion. Now, of course, if by that is meant merely that Christianity has historically become a separate religion from Judaism, that may be superficially true. But certainly Jesus had no intention of starting another “religion” as such. He came to fulfill the faith of Israel. Who Jesus was and what he had come to do were both already long prepared for through God's dealings with the people Jesus belonged to. We really must understand the distinctive claims of the Hebrew Scriptures if we are to get our understanding of Christ's uniqueness straight also.

A universal goal. The proper place to begin our discussion of this issue is to repeat a point made earlier: the Old Testament itself quite clearly

intends us to see Israel's history not as an end in itself or for the sake of Israel alone, but rather for the sake of the rest of the nations of humanity. The order of the biblical story itself makes this clear. Just as the New Testament withholds our introduction to Jesus until we have been reminded of what went before, so the Old Testament brings Israel on stage (in the loins of Abraham) in Genesis 12, only after an extensive introduction to the dilemma of the whole human race. Genesis 1–11 is entirely occupied with humanity as a whole, the world of all nations, and with the apparently insoluble problem of their corporate evil. So the story of *Israel*, which begins at chapter 12, is actually God's answer to the problem of *humanity*. All God's dealings with Israel in particular are to be seen as the pursuit of God's unfinished business with all nations. Old Testament Israel existed for the sake of all nations.

This, as we have seen, was the explicit purpose of God's covenant promise to Abraham, first expressed in Genesis 12:3 and repeated several times throughout the book: "All peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

It is then echoed in many various ways in other parts of the Old Testament. At Mount Sinai, for example, at the very point where God is impressing on Israel their unique identity and role in the midst of the nations, he leaves no doubt that he is far from being a minor local deity or even your average national god. The scope of his concern and his sovereignty is universal: "the whole earth is mine" (Ex 19:5). He had already tried, with less success, to establish the same point with Pharaoh, whose resistance afforded the opportunity for a display of God's power and a proclamation of his name "in all the earth." The purpose of the plagues and the liberation to follow was:

so you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth . . .
that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth . . .
so that you may know that the earth is the LORD's. (Ex 9:14, 16, 29)

The same universal dimension of Israel's role is alluded to by the prophets at times. Jeremiah, for example, looking back nostalgically to Israel's comparative faithfulness to God in the wilderness (compared, that is, with their apostasy in his own day), says:

Israel was holy to the LORD,
the firstfruits of his harvest. (Jer 2:3)

What harvest? Presumably his harvest among the nations. Israel was not the sum and limit of God's interest, precious though it was, as the context emphasizes. It was rather the firstfruits that guaranteed a much larger ingathering. Later the same prophet envisages what would happen if only Israel could be brought to true repentance:

and if in a truthful, just and righteous way
you swear, "As surely as the LORD lives,"
then the nations will invoke blessings by him
and in him they will boast. (Jer 4:2)

This is not only an echo of the universal promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:3, but also of its expansion in Genesis 18:18-19, where God says:

Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.

God's promise—the blessing of all nations—is here linked to the ethical demand on Abraham's descendants. They were to be a community committed to the way of Yahweh—namely, to righteousness and justice. Only in that way could their mission of being a blessing to the nations be fulfilled. Jeremiah picks up this condition to the promise and builds it into his plea for genuine repentance. If Israel would only come back to living as it was created to, with social life and public worship both grounded in "truth, justice and righteousness," then God could get on with his wider and greater purpose—blessing the rest of humanity. Jeremiah, who had been called to be a "prophet to the nations" (not merely Israel), was aware of the universal dimension of his mission. Much more was at stake concerning whether Israel would or would not change its ways than the fate of Israel alone. Israel's response to God had implications for the rest of the world.

So we need to keep this perspective in our minds at all times when reading the Old Testament and its very particular history. It is like keeping a wide-angle lens viewpoint alongside the more close-up picture. Israel's history is a *particular means for a universal goal*. So we should not be tempted to give in to the accusation that by holding on to the Old Testament and its history as vitally and indispensably linked to the New

Testament (as Matthew's genealogy requires us to), we are somehow being narrow and exclusivist in our theology or our attitudes. Quite the opposite is the case. The rest of the world was not absent from the mind and purpose of God in all his dealings with Old Testament Israel. Indeed, to borrow a not unfamiliar phrase from John's Gospel: God so loved the *world* that he chose *Israel*.

A unique experience. Having made the point above, it still has to be maintained that according to the Old Testament, no other nation experienced what Israel did of the grace and power of God. God's action in and through Israel was unique. The story of election, redemption, covenant and inheritance, outlined in the historical survey above, was a story shared by no other people.

Now this does *not* mean that God was in no way active in the histories of other peoples. The Old Testament explicitly asserts that he was, and we shall look at that below. It *does* mean that only in Israel did God work within the terms of a covenant of redemption, initiated and sustained by his saving grace. Deuteronomy presents the events of Israel's previous history as unparalleled in all of time and space.

Ask now about the former days, long before your time, from the day God created human beings on the earth; ask from one end of the heavens to the other. Has anything so great as this ever happened, or has anything like it ever been heard of? Has any other people heard the voice of God speaking out of fire, as you have, and lived? Has any god ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation, by testings, by signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, or by great and awesome deeds, like all the things the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes? . . . Because he loved your ancestors and chose their descendants after them, he brought you out of Egypt by his Presence and his great strength, to drive out before you nations greater and stronger than you and to bring you into their land to give it to you for your inheritance, as it is today. (Deut 4:32-34, 37-38)

This passage includes all four elements of the redemptive history referred to above: election, redemption, covenant and inheritance. The passage then goes on to draw a theological implication, namely, that the uniqueness of Israel's historical experience points to the uniqueness of Yahweh himself as God: "You were shown these things so that you might know that the LORD is God; besides him there is no other" (Deut 4:35).

Thus the revelation of the character of God and the nature of his redeeming work for humanity are bound together with the history of Israel. Israel's uniqueness is tied to God's uniqueness. To put it simply, God did things in and for Israel that he did not do in the history of any other nation. And that was how Israel knew that Yahweh alone was the true God.

This uniqueness of Israel's historical experience, however, was because of its special role and function in the world. It was to facilitate God's promise of blessing to the nations. It was to be his priesthood in the midst of the nations (Ex 19:6)—representing him to the rest of humankind and being the means of bringing the nations to saving knowledge of the living God. To fulfill that destiny it was to be a holy nation (different from the rest), characterized by walking in the way of Yahweh in justice and righteousness (as we saw in Gen 18:19). That is why the text from Deuteronomy above draws out not only a *theological* implication about God but also a *moral* implication about what is required of Israel in the light of their unique experience: "Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other. Keep his decrees and commands, which I am giving you today, so that it may go well with you" (Deut 4:39-40).

So Israel's unique historical experience was not a ticket to a cozy state of privileged favoritism. Rather it laid upon the people a missionary task and a moral responsibility. If they failed in these, then in a sense they fell back to the level of any other nation. They stood, like all nations and all humanity, before the bar of God's judgment, and their history by itself gave them no guaranteed protection.

Amos was a prophet who perceived very clearly how Israel's unique history, like a double-edged sword, cut both ways. He recounts the critical stages of Israel's redemptive history from the exodus, through the wilderness, victoriously into the land, up to the rise of the prophets. But he uses it not in order to congratulate Israel on its blessings and privilege but as a stark contrast to its present behavior. By rampant injustice and social corruption it was denying all that its history was meant to have made it. Its unique experience of God's salvation thus exposed it to even more severe penalty for their rebellion (Amos 2:6-16; 3:2).

So Amos predicted the unthinkable: Israel would be destroyed and its land left deserted. But surely, his hearers must have protested, God cannot

treat his own people so! Are we not those whom he brought up out of Egypt? Yes indeed, came the reply. But so what, if you have reduced your moral standards of social life to the lowest common denominator of the rest of humanity? Your history by itself gives you neither excuse nor protection.

“Are not you Israelites the same to me as the Cushites?”

declares the LORD.

“Did I not bring Israel up from Egypt, the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?” (Amos 9:7)

This devastating word must have rocked Israel to the core, even more than the fierce words of destructive doom that surround it on both sides. What? Israel, the same to God as remote foreigners on the very edge of the known world (Cush was roughly Sudan/Ethiopia)?! God, as sovereign in the movements of Israel’s traditional enemies as of Israel itself?! Precisely, says God through Amos, if by your disobedience you forfeit all that your own history entitled and prepared you for.

We ought to be careful in handling this verse not to make it say more than it does. It has been used by some scholars to argue that other nations stood on a level with Israel in God’s sight and that he had been *savingly* active in their history also. This then can be used as part of an argument for various forms of religious universalism or pluralism. But Amos did not say that other nations were like Israel but that Israel had become like them, in God’s sight, because of their sinfulness and his imminent judgment.

Similarly, the fact that Amos affirms the sovereignty of Yahweh over the national histories of other peoples—including their “exoduses” and migrations—cannot mean that he believed that God had “redeemed” those nations through those events, or that they stood in the same covenant relationship with God as Israel did. Such a view flatly contradicts what Amos himself had very emphatically stated a few chapters earlier:

Hear this word, people of Israel, the word the LORD has spoken against you—
against the whole family I brought up out of Egypt:

“You only have I chosen
of all the families of the earth;
therefore I will punish you
for all your sins.” (Amos 3:1-2)

God had indeed chosen Israel and made a covenant relationship with it. As far as *that* is concerned, the text says, Israel alone had experienced it, whatever God may have done in the histories of other peoples. But as the verse also says in its last line, with that brilliant twist of the unexpected so characteristic of the rhetorical skill of Amos, this very uniqueness was no comfortable privilege but the reason why they were facing God's judgment.

So then, the Old Testament clearly teaches that Israel's history was unique. It is the history of the redemptive acts of God in his dealings with a people in covenant relationship with himself. Amos's unambiguous affirmation of it in 3:1-2 is even sharper when we notice that he knew that Yahweh the God of Israel *was* certainly active in the histories of other nations and was also morally sovereign over the activities of all nations (Amos 1:2-2:3).

To remember and stress this truth about Israel (that it was unique) does not take away from the other truth, namely, that God's purpose was ultimately universal in scope. Israel existed only because of God's desire to redeem people from every nation. But in his sovereign freedom God chose to do so by *this* particular and historical means. The tension between the universal goal and the particular means is found throughout the Bible and cannot be reduced to either pole alone. What it comes down to is that, while God has every nation in view in his redemptive purpose, in no other nation did he act as he did in Israel, for the sake of the nations. That was its uniqueness, which can be seen to be both exclusive (in the sense that no other nation experienced what it did of God's revelation and redemption) and inclusive (in the sense that it was created, called and set in the midst of the nations for the sake of ultimately bringing salvation to the nations).

Now when we consider Jesus in the light of this, the vitally important fact is that the New Testament presents him to us as the *Messiah*, Jesus the *Christ*. And the Messiah "was" Israel. That is, the Messiah was Israel representatively and personified. The Messiah was the completion of all that Israel had been put in the world for (i.e., God's self-revelation and his work of human redemption). For this reason, Jesus shares in the uniqueness of Israel. What God had been doing *through no other nation* he now completed *through no other person* than the Messiah Jesus.

The paradox is that precisely through the narrowing down of his redemptive work to the unique particularity of the single man, Jesus, God

opened the way to offering his redemptive grace to all nations. Israel was unique because God had a universal goal through it. Jesus embodied that uniqueness and achieved that universal goal. As the Messiah of Israel he could be the Savior of the world. Or as Paul reflected, going further back, by fulfilling God's purpose in choosing Abraham, Jesus became a second Adam, the head of a new humanity (Rom 4–5; Gal 3).

ISRAEL AND OTHER STORIES

God in control of all history. Although the history of Old Testament Israel is the unique story of God's saving acts, the Bible also clearly affirms that Yahweh was in control of the histories of all other peoples as well. Sometimes this was a control exercised in direct relationship to how those other nations impinged on Israel. But in other cases it was not directly so. The migration of the Philistines from the Aegean, or of the Syrians from northern Mesopotamia, had no connection with the Israelites at the time; however, says Amos 9:7, it was Yahweh who "brought them up." And whoever the Emites were, or the Horites, or the Avites, not to mention the dreaded Zamzummites, they had nothing to do with the Israelites! Yet their movements and destinies were under the disposition of Yahweh just as much as Israel's own historic migration, according to some fascinating bits of ancient geography and history in Deuteronomy 2:10-12, 20-23.

Mostly, however, it is the case that other nations are said to be under Yahweh's control in relation to how their history interacts with Israel's. That is to say, God fits them into his purpose for his own people Israel—sometimes for Israel's benefit, sometimes as agents of God's punishment on his own people. But then, God's purpose for Israel was ultimately the blessing and redemption of humanity as a whole. So it can be said that God's activity in the history of other nations also fits into that wider redemptive purpose.

In other words, we can make a theological distinction, but not a complete separation, between the history of Israel and other histories. Salvation history is real history. It must be seen as having happened within the flow of universal world history, all of which was under God's control. It is not some kind of extraterrestrial, sacred or religious history, just because "it's in the Bible."

Some examples of God's activity in the historical affairs of nations other than Israel will help to illustrate this point. Some of these have been touched on already.

- Egypt** God's activity there had the whole world in view (Ex 9:13-16).
- Assyria** The dominant world power for a century and a half, but to the prophetic eye, a mere stick in the hands of Yahweh (Is 10:5-19).
- Babylon** Jeremiah owed much of his unpopularity in later life precisely to his conviction that Nebuchadnezzar had been raised up by Yahweh and entrusted with world dominion. He even went so far as to call him "my servant" (Jer 27:5-7). Habbakuk was dumbfounded by the same revelation (Hab 1). According to the book of Daniel, this interpretation of current events was relayed even to Nebuchadnezzar himself (Dan 2:37-38; 4:17, 25, 32).
- Persia** The central theme of Isaiah 40–48 was that the most burning topic of international alarm of the day—the sudden rise of Cyrus, king of the united Medes and Persians—was directly the work of Israel's God and no other. Such was God's involvement with the unwitting Cyrus that he could scandalize his own people by referring to him as "my shepherd" and "my anointed one" and by picturing him as led by God's own hand in all his victories (Is 44:28–45:13).

The saving acts of God within or on behalf of Israel, then, most certainly did not take place in sterile, vacuum-sealed isolation, but within the turbulent crosscurrents of international politics and the historical rise and fall of empires whose destinies Yahweh himself controlled.

The nations share in Israel's history. In the Old Testament it often seems as if the nations are the intended audience of what God is actually doing in Israel. They are presented almost as the spectators of the drama he is engaged in with his people. The nations will tremble, sings Moses, when they hear what Yahweh has done to the Egyptians on behalf of his people (Ex 15:14-16). But, on the other hand, what would the Egyptians think of Yahweh if he were to turn and destroy his rebellious people, as he threatened to do (Ex 32:11-12)? Moses' intercession on their behalf at the

time of the golden calf incident made much of God's reputation among the nations.

God had put Israel on an open stage. So if Israel would keep the laws God had given it, its national life would be so conspicuously righteous that other nations would notice and ask questions about its laws and its God (Deut 4:6-8). But on the other hand, if it failed to do so and if God then kept his threat and acted in judgment upon his own people, destroying his own city, land and temple, then the nations would ask why such an incredible thing could have happened. The answer was ready in advance (Deut 29:22-28).

But even if that judgment was fully deserved, such a state of affairs was a disgrace to God's own name. So when God acted to restore his people to their land, that too was for the purpose of reinstating his reputation among the nations (Ezek 36:16-23).

More than this, however, there is in some of the psalms a sense that the history of Israel is in some way actually available for the nations to appropriate for themselves. In the psalms celebrating the kingship of Yahweh, the nations (plural) or the whole earth are repeatedly called on to rejoice and praise God for his mighty acts in Israel. Read, for example, Psalms 47; 96:1-3; 98:1-3. Now if Israel's salvation history (which is referred to in these psalms as the "marvelous deeds," "righteous acts," etc., of Yahweh) is to be a cause of *rejoicing* among the nations, then it must be that they in some sense benefit from it, or are included within the scope of its purpose, even though they have not personally experienced it.

How this could be so remains a mystery in the Old Testament. Indeed, I sometimes wonder what went on in the mind of the Israelites when they wrote some of the amazingly universal words in the Psalms. What did they think when they sang words like:

Clap your hands, *all you nations*;
 shout to God with cries of joy.
 For the LORD Most High is awesome,
 the great King over all the earth.
 He subdued nations under *us*,
 peoples under our feet.
 He chose our inheritance for us,
 the pride of Jacob, whom he loved. (Ps 47:1-4, my italics)

or this:

Sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD, *all the earth*.
Sing to the LORD, praise his name;
proclaim his salvation day after day.
Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous deeds among all peoples. (Ps 96:1-3, my italics)

For the Israelites, Yahweh's *name, salvation, glory and marvelous deeds* meant only one thing—the incomparable history of his own people and everything that God had done for them. Yet in this hymn they are heartily inviting all nations, all peoples, all the earth no less, to join in the celebration and proclamation of those unique events. Mysterious as it may be, this universal and inclusive element in the worship of Israel is unmistakably there. And it is very important to set it alongside the call for exclusive worship and loyalty to Yahweh alone, and the abhorrence of the religious practices of other nations, especially their idolatry, which is denounced in these very same psalms. Israel was to worship Yahweh only. But Yahweh was not God of Israel only. He was to be worshiped as the God of all nations and the whole earth.

The nations share in Israel's future. The Old Testament, however, goes further in its program for the nations than casting them in the role of spectators, even clapping spectators. Psalm 47, which is really quite breathtaking in its vista, moves the nations out of the audience in verse 1, right onto the center of the stage in verse 9:

God reigns over the nations;
God is seated on his holy throne.
The nobles of the nations assemble
as the people of the God of Abraham,
for the kings of the earth belong to God;
he is greatly exalted. (Ps 47:8-9, my italics)

The nations before God's throne are there not behind the people of God, nor even just alongside them, but *as the people of the God of Abraham*—the God whose promise to Abraham had the nations in mind from the beginning. It must have stretched the imagination of the Israelites when they sang such psalms as to when and how the words they had just sung

could ever be a reality. Yet there they are, to be sung with enthusiastic faith and hope.

The prophets stretched the imagination even further. Amos, in the same chapter that we read his devastating likening of Israel to the other nations because of their sin and its deserved doom, speaks of a future restoration of the house of David, such that it will include “nations that bear my name” (Amos 9:11-12). This indeed is the very passage quoted by James as scriptural authority for the inclusion of the Gentiles in the young Christian church (Acts 15:13-19). We shall look at the significance of that event in chapter four.

James could easily have chosen several other prophetic texts to support his understanding of the event. Isaiah 19, for example, concludes with an amazing vision of both Egypt and Assyria gathering to worship God alongside Israel, being blessed by God and becoming a blessing on the earth. They will be transformed from enemies into “my people” by a process of healing and restoration, which has deliberate echoes of the very exodus itself. A saving exodus for the Egyptians?! (Is 19:19-25).

Jeremiah holds out to the nations the same hope, in virtually the same terms that he had held out to his own people. They stand under God’s judgment, and he will punish them for what they do to Israel, but for those nations also repentance could be the road to restoration—and inclusion:

After I uproot them [the nations], I will again have compassion and will bring each of them back to their own inheritance and their own country. And if they learn well the ways of my people and swear by my name, saying, “As surely as the LORD lives” [notice the echo of 4:2]—even as they once taught my people to swear by Baal—then they will be established *among my people*. (Jer 12:15-16, my italics)

The link between belonging to the people of God and acknowledging the name of Yahweh as the one true and living God is even more clearly forged in a beautiful picture of the conversion of outsiders as the result of the outpouring of God’s spirit and blessing, like fertilizing, life-giving water, in Isaiah 44:5 (my italics):

Some will say, “I belong to *the LORD*”;
 others will call themselves by the name of *Jacob*;
 still others will write on their hand, “*The LORD’s*,”
 and will take the name *Israel*.

The same prophet moves far beyond this individual picture to a climactic vision of the saving work of God extending to all nations on earth. The same saving, liberating justice that God had shown on Israel's behalf will be activated for the nations:

Listen to me, my people;
hear me, my nation:
Instruction will go out from me;
my justice will become a light to the nations.
My righteousness draws near speedily,
my salvation is on the way,
and my arm will bring justice to the nations. (Is 51:4-5)

God is the speaker in that passage, but the mission is elsewhere committed to the servant of Yahweh, who, in the power of the Spirit, "will bring justice to the nations" and establish "justice on earth" (Is 42:1, 4).

In view of his mission, which God lays upon him,

I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,
that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth. (Is 49:6)

The appeal can go out universally:

Turn to me and be saved,
all you ends of the earth. (Is 45:22)

In chapter four we shall look at how these particular texts and the figure of the servant of the Lord are taken up into the identity and mission of Jesus.

This, then, is the "end of the story" to which the Old Testament points but which is never reached within its pages, and indeed still awaits us. The eschatological future hope of Israel saw its own history ultimately flowing into the universal history of the nations, in order that people from all nations could be granted salvation and included within the people of God.

This confluence was achieved, as we have seen, without abandoning the uniqueness of the history of Israel as a history of saving acts of God unparalleled in any other history, but equally without denying the activity and interest of God within all human history. On the contrary, the eschatological vision sees the achievements of the nations being brought into the new age and new creation. The economic and cultural history of the nations, coming as it does within the creation mandate to all humanity to

use and steward the resources of the earth, is seen eventually to flow into the substance of the people of God. Isaiah 23:18, for example, after the declaration of historical judgment on the economic oppressions of Tyre, foresees all the profits of the great trading empire as ultimately destined for the people of God. Haggai 2:6-9 envisages the wealth of the nations returning to its rightful owner—the Lord himself, in his temple. This expectation is endorsed in the vision of Revelation 21:24. In other words, human history “beyond” salvation history, the history of the rest of humanity who live by God’s grace on the face of God’s earth, also has its meaning and value and will ultimately contribute in some way to the glory of the kingdom of God as he rules over his redeemed humanity in the new creation.

A unique history, then, with universal effects. This is where the story that underlies Matthew’s genealogy leads. We shall look further at the theme of the ingathering of the nations in chapter four, but it is fitting to conclude this chapter by noticing how Paul, so conscious of his unique mission to the nations, binds together the two dimensions of history.

It had indeed been a “mystery” (to use Paul’s own word) all through the ages of Old Testament Israel as to *how* God could bring about for Abraham what he had promised him—namely, blessing for all nations. But Paul saw very clearly how that mystery had been revealed through the tremendous achievement of God in Christ. He saw that it was paradoxically through the narrowing down of God’s redemptive acts to the unique particularity of one single man—the Messiah, Jesus—that God had opened the way to the universal offering of the grace of his gospel to all nations. In Galatians 3 and Ephesians 2–3, Paul explains that what the Gentiles had not had before (because it was at that time limited to the nation of Israel) is now available to them in the Messiah (and nowhere else—either for them or for the Jews). The great Old Testament hope that the nations would come to be part of Israel is then already being fulfilled through Jesus the Messiah.

But in Romans 9–11, Paul wrestles with the fact that it is happening in an unexpected and (from his own point of view as a Jew) undesirable way. The majority of his contemporary Jews had in fact rejected Jesus as Messiah. But as a result of that rejection, the Gentile nations were being “grafted in.” However, the Gentiles did not constitute a separate “olive tree.” For Paul there was only one people of God—then, now or ever. No, the Gentiles

were being grafted into the original stock. In other words, as in the Old Testament worship and prophecy, the nations were now participating in the saving work of God, which he had initiated through the history of Israel. These were Gentiles from every conceivable background. But they now shared the root and sap of Israel's sonship, glory, covenants, law, temple worship, promises, patriarchs—and . . . “the human ancestry of the Messiah” (Rom 9:5). The Gentile Christian, therefore, is a person of two histories: on the one hand, his or her own national and cultural background, ancestry and heritage, which as we have seen is by no means to be despised, and on the other hand, his or her new spiritual, “ingrafted” history—that of God's people descended from Abraham, which the Christian inherits through inclusion in Christ.

So ultimately the Christian believer singing hymns at Christmas and the Israelite believer singing psalms in the temple are as much brothers and sisters in the Messiah as the rest of the church congregation is brothers and sisters in Christ. The genealogy of Jesus conceals a story that led up to Jesus but that, as Luke also perceived, led up to a new beginning with him (Acts 1:1). The story goes on, until the promise to Abraham will finally be fulfilled, in a great multitude from every nation, tribe, people and language. That is the goal of all history, as it was of Israel's history. And in the church of the Messiah that goal is already being brought about in anticipation: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28).

One people, one story. The fact is that whether we read Matthew 1:1-17 in our Christmas service or not, that story of Old Testament Israel is our story as much as it is the story of Jesus. For through him, we have come to be the spiritual descendants of Abraham. “If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal 3:29).

CHAPTER 1 QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

1. Many people ignore or skip over Matthew 1:1-17 as a boring genealogy. How would you explain to someone else why it is important?
2. Read Psalm 96. How is Israel's story of God's salvation something that the other nations of the world would benefit from and therefore rejoice in?

3. Select ten Old Testament texts that would give an outline of the Old Testament story, showing how it leads up to Christ. This should consist mainly of texts that describe significant events (such as creation, fall, call of Abraham, exodus and so on), and not just texts containing promises or predictions. Give a one- or two-sentence explanation of why you selected each of the ten Old Testament passages.
4. Study Psalms 105–107. Make notes connecting the different events that are mentioned in those psalms to the historical texts in the Old Testament that first described them. What is the overall message of those psalms, and why do you think Israel thought so much about its own history and included it in worship? What does Psalm 107 finally promise?
5. Study the transfiguration of Jesus in Luke 9:28-36 and make appropriate connections to the Old Testament. Explain why it was Moses and Elijah who came to talk with Jesus. Explain what Luke meant when he said that they were talking about “the exodus” that Jesus would accomplish in Jerusalem (v. 31).

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