

CHAPTER 1

TORAH AND FORMER PROPHETS

The Old Testament comprises thirty-nine books of various styles and contents. Long-standing Hebrew tradition divides the Old Testament into three portions: the Pentateuch (the *Torah*, or the Law), the Prophets (*Nebi'im*), and the Writings (*Ketubim*). The second division, the Prophets, can be further divided into the Former Prophets (books of accounts about prophets and kings) and the Latter Prophets (collections of oracular sayings by prophets). The Torah and the Former Prophets can easily be read as a connected narrative giving the history of God's people from the Creation to the Fall of Jerusalem; this chapter will survey these books, and the next chapter will address the Latter Prophets and the Writings.

Though one may read the books from Genesis to II Kings as a connected history (in a colloquial sense of the word “history”), they nonetheless include a wide variety of literary styles. While the later portions of the Former Prophets approximate plain historical writing in its ancient mode, the Torah and the earlier portions of the Former Prophets include folkloric explanations of where the world comes from and why it goes the ways it does. The heart of the Torah is an elaborate collection of rules for the Judaic way of life; even these vary in style among themselves. Throw in the odd song, riddle, geographic excursus, and readers can recognize the vast difference between the Torah and Prophets (on one hand) and a history textbook (on the other).

Most readers will be familiar with the stories from the first chapters of Genesis. The creation of the world (Gen 1:1-2:4a), the creation of the first two human beings and their disobedience (2:4b-3:24), Cain's murder of Abel (4:1-16), the story of Noah's ark (6:5-9:29), and the Tower of Babel (11:1-9) have entered the common cultural repertoire. These are interspersed with genealogical lists that purport to connect the main characters of the Genesis narratives with the subsequent generations that will found the people of Israel.

After the story of the Tower of Babel, Genesis takes a different turn, following the life of a single extended family. In Gen. 12:1-3, God singles out Abram, a resident of Babylon, and calls him to relocate to an undefined region where God will give him and his wife Sarai children, and where God will assign their family an everlasting inheritance. From this point on, the Bible focuses on this family and their lineage, a family that will eventually be named after Abram's grandson Jacob, who earns the new name “Israel” after a mysterious late-night wrestling match. Genesis follows Abram and Sarai's travels, the birth of their son Isaac and their re-naming to Abraham (“father of a multitude”) and Sarah (“Princess”); Isaac's betrothal and marriage to Rebekah; the birth of their twins Esau and Jacob, of whom God chooses Jacob (the younger twin) to inherit the Abrahamic promise; Jacob's courtship and his marriages to Leah and Rachel; and his transformation to “Israel” (“he struggles with God”), whose twelve sons (led by the eleventh son, Joseph) prepare for the traditional twelve tribes of Israel.

After Genesis establishes the people of Israel as a cultural unit, the Book of Exodus narrates their captivity in Egypt and their liberation, under the guidance of Moses. Israel's dramatic escape through the Red Sea climaxes in a two-line song that many regard as the

most ancient literary unit in the Bible, the Song of Miriam (Ex 15:21). As the people make their way in the wilderness of Sinai, Moses relays to them God's commandments for their future way of living. These are summed up in the Ten Commandments (Ex 20:2-17, Dt 5:6-21), and are spelled out at length in the laws enumerated in the second part of Exodus and in Leviticus.

The laws themselves take many forms. Some present simple prohibitions or positive injunctions for everyday life. Other laws concern the ritual life of the community: liturgical observances and the personal conduct requisite for participating in Israel's liturgical life. Other laws present difficult cases, and explain the appropriate judgments for those cases. Tradition counts the number of laws as 613 – perhaps more than most Christians would wish to live by, but considerably simpler than the U.S. Tax Code or even local zoning regulations.

The Torah ends with the death of Moses on the far side of the Jordan River, before Israel finally enters the Land promised to Abraham in Genesis 17. Joshua, Moses' successor, leads the people into the Land in the book that bears his name. Though the narration becomes increasingly history-like as Israel begins its pattern of conquests and land-division, few if any of the events that the conquest narratives describe can be identified directly with incidents that we can verify from archaeology or other ancient sources (in fact, a prominent body of scholars suggests that the entire narrative, from the people's captivity in Egypt to the defeat and exile and re-occupation of Judah, itself constitutes a fictionalized national epic).

The motif of conquest and distribution of land continues from the book of Joshua into Judges, where the tribes have begun to settle into the Land. In Judges, the Old Testament describes the people living as twelve more-or-less autonomous tribal groups that come together mainly to fight their common enemies. The fluidity of this political system protected the people from domination by any one tribe or leader, but lacked the effective integration that might establish these communities as a single nation. Thus the Book of Judges laments, "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (17:6, 21:25), leading to such outrages as the murder of the unnamed concubine, described in the last chapters of Judges.

In the books of Samuel and Kings, Israel makes the transition from tribal confederation to full-fledged nationhood. I Samuel narrates the end of the period of Judges, and the calling of Saul to be king. God's prophet Samuel warns the people that kingship would be a bad arrangement; with acute political analysis, he warns that the king will only take the people's sons to fight wars, and their daughters to serve the royal household, the people's land to feed the courtiers, and the people's harvest and goods as taxes. The subsequent history of the kingship confirmed Samuel's prophecy. Even within the reign of Saul, the king began to disregard God's commands and act out of his own sense of statesmanship.

When Saul proves unsuitable as king, God instructs Samuel to find another more satisfactory leader for the people. Samuel follows God's commands and seeks out the sons of Jesse, among whom God had indicated that he would find a king. When Samuel sees the youngest of Jesse's sons, David, God selects him as the successor-to-be. In the interval, David becomes a soldier of fortune, sometimes leading his band of mercenaries against Israel's enemies, sometimes working on behalf of Israel's enemies. He and his troops offer protection to the people of the region in exchange for food and material support.

All this while, Saul has sunk into deeper and deeper despair. Though at first he loved and trusted David, to the point of arranging David's marriage to Saul's daughter Michal, the

younger man's military successes and popular support alienate Saul from David. When Saul and his son Jonathan fall in battle against the Philistines, David assumes command of the armies of Israel and is recognized as king.

Though David stands in the Bible's records as the prototypical good king – he captured the city of the Jebusites, renamed it Jerusalem, and established his capital there, and he seems to have extended the territory of the people of Israel to the north and east – his reign is not unproblematic. His proclivity to accumulate wives and concubines complicates his family politics. He takes Bathsheba, a married woman, so that he might have her sexually. When she becomes pregnant, David arranges the murder of her husband, Uriah the Hittite. The prophet Nathan conveys to David God's anger at this high-handed conduct; Bathsheba's child dies at birth, and David's reign concludes with one tragedy after another. One of his sons, Amnon, rapes Tamar, one of his daughters; another son, Absalom, starts a rebellion against him. A rival claimant to the throne tries to displace David in the aftermath of Absalom's rebellion. In David's old age, his son Adonijah prematurely declares himself to be king. As one of his last acts, David confirms that he wants Bathsheba's son Solomon to inherit the throne (1 Kgs 1).

Solomon has taken on a great reputation for wisdom; in a well-known scene, God appears to Solomon in a dream and offers him anything he might ask for. Solomon humbly asks only an understanding mind, which pleases God so much that God gives him understanding and great riches and power also. Solomon's wisdom was not, however, immediately apparent in his statesmanship; while he built a splendid temple for the Lord in Jerusalem, he also built palaces and fortresses, and did not pay his foreign debts in full. He married many foreign wives, whom he permitted to establish shrines for their gods. Indeed, he even joined them in worshipping these gods. He formed a centralized bureaucracy in Jerusalem, to the discontent of his subjects in outlying regions. In all these policies, Solomon showed himself less than fully wise, and set the stage for his successors' unhappy reigns.

Solomon's son Rehoboam took the throne at his father's death, and moved rapidly to increase taxes to support even greater luxury at the court. Ten of the tribal regions refused to pay the additional assessments, and withdrew from the kingdom. From then on, the tribes of the north formed a kingdom called "Israel," based in Shechem (eventually at Samaria), with worship centers in Bethel and Dan. The southern kingdom, representing only the tribes of Benjamin and Judah, was known as "Judah" during the period of the divided kingdoms.

The Bible records the kings of Israel as an unbroken chain of idolaters and tyrants, more because the northern kingdom had rebelled against the Davidic king and refused to worship in Jerusalem, than because of any intrinsic immorality. By the same token, the kings of Judah – though they often seem to have tolerated idolatry and general malfeasance – receive a more positive evaluation because of their Davidic ancestry and their support of the Jerusalem temple.

After a series of border conflicts with various rival kingdoms, Israel was conquered in 722 BCE by Assyrian armies under Sargon. The kingdom of Judah endured another 135 years, sometimes as a vassal state to Egypt, sometimes vassal to Babylon, but was decisively conquered by Babylonian invaders under Nebuchadnezzar in 587. Here 2 Kings ends, and with it the books of the Former Prophets. The rightful king of Judah, Jehoiachin, endured decades in a Babylonian prison, finally being released by Nebuchadnezzar's successor Evil Merodach; but the nobles of Judah would not be permitted to return to Jerusalem until 538.

CHAPTER 2

THE LATTER PROPHETS AND THE WRITINGS

{A preliminary note: readers sometimes confuse the noun, “prophecy” (pronounced PRO-fuh-see), with the verb “prophesy” (pronounced PRO-fuh-sigh) or, in the past tense, “prophesied” (PRO-fuh – sighed). You can tell the difference by the “c” in the noun, the “s” in the verb. There is no such verb as “prophesize.”}

The Bible records the beginnings of prophecy as far back as the reign of Saul (of whom two distinct stories narrate an ecstatic possession that gave rise to the saying, “Is Saul also among the prophets?”). Nathan served as the court prophet to David, and subsequent kings seem to have had veritable colleges of prophets. These prophets functioned to some extent as civil servants, with the unsurprising result that kings felt that the prophet’s job was to tell them good news. At that point, some venturesome souls dared to proclaim a message contrary to the official message of the court prophets.

While everyday language associates “prophets” and “prophecy” with inexplicable knowledge of distant future events, the Old Testament prophets more often emphasized events within immediate prospect. Their holy inspiration most often involved a divine understanding of the inevitable outcome of patterns presently at work in Israel and Judah. The prophet often lists a long catalogue of offenses against God, then details the consequences of those sins. The point of the prophet in the ancient world was to serve as something like an editorial-page writer or media pundit – except that he (or she) was working in a medium of very limited circulation.

Studies of the prophets typically distinguish early prophets from classical (or pre-exilic, that is, “before the people of Judah were taken to Babylon in exile”) prophecy, and post-exilic (“after the people returned from Babylon to Judah”) prophecy. The early prophets show up in the books of Samuel and Kings – Samuel was himself a prophet, of course, and such other early figures as Nathan, David’s prophet, and Elijah and Elisha are the better-known “early” prophets. These men seem to have divined God’s will either by ecstatic experience or by a divinatory device of some kind (either the “ephod” or the “Urim and Thummim”; we can’t be quite sure what these were). The Old Testament remembers them less through their own words than through stories told about them; one might say that they are characters, rather than being themselves poets.

With the beginnings of classical prophecy, the prophets are remembered for their prophecies, rather than for their role in a broader story. In the Book of Amos, which is probably the earliest work of classical prophecy, we encounter only one relatively short narrative portion; the remainder of the book contains oracles ascribed to Amos. These may have been preserved by Amos himself (rather unlikely) or by a group of followers (more likely); the Old Testament refers many times to a group it calls “the sons of the prophets” (NRSV: “the company of the prophets”), who may have been supporters who backed the prophet and recorded his oracles. With Amos, however, the relative prominence of narration, however, fades in favor of direct quotation of the oracles themselves.

The classical pre-exilic prophets include not only Amos, but also Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. (Prophets were not only men: Deborah, from the Book of Judges, was a prophetess; King Hezekiah and his courtiers consult Huldah the prophetess to determine the authenticity of a scroll of the Torah; and Isaiah refers to his wife as a prophetess.) Amos and Hosea prophesied against the northern kingdom, Israel, and its schismatic worship centers in Bethel and Shechem/Samaria; the others prophesied after the fall of Israel in 722 BCE, and took the demise of the northern kingdom as a warning sign to Judah in the south. In each case, the rulers and leading citizens were violating the spirit of righteousness that animates the Torah. They were mixing worship of the God of Israel with idolatry; they were exploiting the poor for their own benefit; they were abandoning the covenant with God and taking the well-being of the state into their own hands. In all these ways, the ruling classes were leading Israel and Judah to devastation. Most of the pre-exilic oracles were delivered orally: they are reports of visions or auditory revelations. At times, however, the prophets enacted their prophecies with vivid demonstrations. Hosea was called to marry a prostitute and to remain faithful to her, to illustrate God's fidelity to wayward Judah; Isaiah ran through Jerusalem naked to illustrate God's intent to send Egyptian armies fleeing naked from Judah. In 587 BCE, the prophets' warnings proved sound: the Babylonians captured Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple and city walls, and led the king and social elite into exile in Babylon.

Before moving to the post-exilic prophets, we should wait for a moment with the prophets who preached during the time of the exile itself (thus clouding the neat categorization introduced above). Jeremiah began his prophetic work before the exile, and continued after the leaders of Judah were deported to Babylon. Ezekiel was among the deportees, and claims to have been called to prophesy after settling in Babylon (Eze 1:1), though scholars find a number of his oracles fit better into a pre-exilic setting (for instance, Ezekiel presents the death of his wife as a sign to Judah that God "will profane my sanctuary, the pride of your power, the delight of your eyes, and your heart's desire; and your sons and your daughters whom you left behind shall fall by the sword" (24:21), an improbable oracle if addressed to people whose temple had already been destroyed, whose children had already been massacred). Finally, the most beloved prophet of the exile is known as Second Isaiah (or "Deutero-Isaiah"), a prophet whose oracles are preserved with those in the book of Isaiah of Jerusalem. The oracles beginning in chapter 40, however, no longer fit the pre-exilic setting in which Isaiah prophesied; these are addressed to the community in exile, and they promise the exiles a joyful return to Judah. Among these oracles are the Servant Songs, which explain the suffering of Judah as an expiation for the sins of former ages; in Deutero-Isaiah, the Servant is probably a figure for the nation as a whole, though Christians recognized the Servant as a prefiguration of Christ and his ministry.

The post-exilic prophets show a marked difference in temper and style from the classical prophets. Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, Obadiah, and Joel, and various other prophets from the period show a consciousness of being copiers of the older tradition. The post-exilic prophets function less as social critics than as cheerleaders for the rebuilding of the nation. They pick up motifs from earlier prophets and embellish them or reuse them for different purposes. Where their forebears promised a saving return to the land, for instance, the post-exilic prophets observe that their return to Judah had not ushered in notable improvements in living conditions, so they take up the language of salvation and promise, and defer them to the indefinite future.

Prophetic literature shows certain common motifs. The most familiar, of course, is the formula that authenticates a prophetic oracle: “Thus says the Lord” (Jer 2:5, among hundreds of examples), or “The Word of the Lord came to. . .” (Hag 1:1, among others). Another is the alternation of indictment and punishment: “They have rejected the law of the Lord, and have not kept his statutes, but they have been led astray by the same lies after which their ancestors walked. So I will send a fire on Judah, and it shall devour the strongholds of Jerusalem” (Amos 2:4b-5). The prophets often present obscure visions or actions, then interpret them; the vision of the valley of dry bones provides a good example, which God explains to Ezekiel by observing, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’ Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people” (Ez 37:11-13).

Though they worked within conventions of the genre of prophetic expression, the ways that individual prophets used those conventions lends a distinctive tone to each of their collections of oracles. Though they prophesied in the name of God, claiming to report God’s very words, each prophet conveyed God’s point in way that fit his own personality (or, presumably, hers, though the tradition failed to preserve extensive oracles from any women prophets). This should nuance any simplistic equation of prophets’ oracles and the exact syllables of God’s inspiration; though the prophets responded to a divine provocation, though they reported a divine message, their own personalities and literary styles (and their editors’ personalities and styles) shaped that message decisively.

So also the question of prophet’s anticipation of specific events in the future should respect the limitations of human capacity as well as the limitless power of God. The prophets addressed people of their time, concerning affairs of their time; otherwise the message would have been unintelligible. Thus, we have no convincing sign that the prophets literally foresaw Jesus, his deeds and words and fate. At the same time, the tenor of God’s messages to the people of Israel and Judah certainly conveys much of what the followers of Jesus would recognize in his message and ministry. In this looser sense, then, the prophets can justifiably be said to have foretold the advent of Jesus – even if they would themselves have been surprised at the way those prophecies took shape.

The Writings constitute a relatively miscellaneous group of texts. We may lend some order to their diversity by treating them in generic groups. Some of the Writings clearly fall into the genre of wisdom literature; these include Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, and (among the deuterocanonical books) Sirach (or “Ecclesiasticus”) and the Wisdom of Solomon. Another group of the writings resemble novellas; these prosaic books include Ruth, Daniel (especially in the expanded version found in the Greek Old Testament), and Esther. Ezra and Nehemiah and 1 and 2 Chronicles present a version of historical writing. Most prominently, the lyrical literature of the Writings includes Lamentations, Job, the Song of Songs, and the Psalms.

The wisdom literature belongs to a much broader tradition of proverbial teaching. Several other texts from the Ancient Near East overlap with Proverbs, for instance, and much of the content of wisdom books can be compared directly with wisdom teachings from other eras and locations. The specifically theological content of wisdom literature tends to be less prominent than it is in prophetic literature (for instance). Despite the traditional attribution

of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Wisdom of Solomon to David's successor, these works are probably anonymous collections that were connected with Solomon by way of his reputation for outstanding wisdom.

The literary prose of the Writings also feature a light theological touch. The Book of Esther never even mentions God, and the Book of Ruth illustrates Naomi and Ruth's fidelity to the God of Israel without specifying that God intervenes on their behalf. Daniel, by contrast, foregrounds divine intervention at every turn. Though Christian tradition (following the Greek Old Testament) includes Daniel among the Prophets, Hebrew tradition assigns him to the Writings.

The narrative in the Books of Chronicles and Ezra and Nehemiah purports to cover the events of the kingdoms and of the return of Judah from its Babylonian exile, the historical reliability of these should not be taken at face value. Chronicles differs from corresponding narration in Samuel/Kings in ways that suggest a pronounced pro-monarchical interest, and the Chronicler commits several anachronisms. Ezra and Nehemiah, though they represent first person perspective in some passages, seem to have been transmitted in a somewhat jumbled form, and to share the regal/liturgical biases of the Chronicler.

The lyrical literature of the Old Testament includes some of the best-loved texts in the traditions of Judaism and Christianity. Though the Psalms come to mind immediately, the Song of Songs has enjoyed particular popularity in various periods. Job has long spoken to troubled hearts with its searching, cryptic exploration of human suffering (which at a number of passages provides points of contact with wisdom literature). Lamentations provides verses remembered from the Good Friday liturgy.

The Writings have made their deepest impression on the Christian tradition through the Psalter. The Psalms themselves probably originated as liturgical texts for worship at the Temple; once the form became established, however, psalms may have been composed for a number of different occasions. The most common type of psalm emphasizes the psalmist's suffering; these are called "lament psalms" (lament psalms sometimes incorporate an "oracle of salvation," an assurance that God has acted or will act to save the psalmist). "Thanksgiving psalms" express the psalmist's joy at the gifts God has given; "royal psalms" praise the king and pray for his well-being; "psalms of ascent" refer to pilgrimages to Jerusalem, "songs of Zion" praise the holy mountain, and "wisdom psalms" pick up emphases common in less poetic wisdom literature and present it in a psalmic context.

As prayers that provided the theological language and grammar of God's people, the psalms influenced the composition and diction of the New Testament and subsequent theological literature. The Psalter is (of course) the only book of the Bible reproduced in its entirety in the Book of Common Prayer. Monasteries and convents recited the Psalter daily, and the 150 psalms provide the reference point of the 150 Hail Marys of a full recitation of the Rosary. While some of the imprecatory psalms (psalms full of curses) may flummox us, the psalms as a whole address the widest range of emotions, including rage and desperation, and they provide an incomparable aid for prayer, for meditation, for deeper familiarity with the taproots of the Christian tradition, and for understanding many directions in which theology has grown.

CHAPTER 3

JESUS AND THE GOSPELS

Jesus comes on the scene hundreds of years after the latest of the books of the Hebrew Bible was written (some of the Apocrypha, Judaic texts written in Greek, were composed around Jesus' time). In the intervening years, the people of Israel, led by Judas Maccabeus, revolted against oppressive rule from an occupying empire based in Syria. They established an independent state with a hereditary monarchy in which Judas' family served both as king of the nation and as high priest of the restored and rededicated Temple in Jerusalem. This dynasty, known as the Hasmonean dynasty, persisted until Rome installed Herod the Great as King of Judea in 37 BCE. Herod's ascendancy, though, marked Israel's domination by Imperial Rome, for which Judea was now only a client state. Judeans paid taxes to Rome, obeyed Roman appointees, and made way for Roman legions.

In about 4 BCE, Herod the Great died, and Rome divided his kingdom among three of his sons. (Yes, this seems to imply that Jesus was born "before Christ," as we commonly say.) The son to whom Herod entrusted Judea was an abject failure as king, so the emperor appointed prefects (who reported directly to him) to govern this rebellious province. The best-known of these prefects was Pontius Pilate, a man with a reputation for cruelty and scorn toward the Judeans.

Matthew and Luke narrate a series of remarkable events surrounding Jesus' birth; Mark and John remain silent on these, as do all contemporary historical sources. Luke mentions Jesus' trip to the temple at his thirteenth birthday, but all four of the Gospels peg their narration of Jesus' ministry at his encounter with John the Baptist (who appears as a prophet like Elijah). John evidently baptized Jesus somewhat before the year 29 CE, when John was executed by Herod's son, Herod Antipas.

At this point, Jesus began his ministry of preaching, healing, exorcising, and teaching. He perpetuated John's message, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand!" He was said to have healed conditions as minor as a fever and as grave as death. He cast out many demons, having special success with demons who had been stronger than other exorcists. He taught people in parables, in explicit moral exhortation, in theological controversies with rival teachers, and in a way of life that embodied what he taught.

One year at Passover, he turned to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast with his friends. On arriving in Jerusalem, he was greeted by excited crowds. Perhaps because of the stir surrounding this visit, perhaps as a prudential gesture of self-preservation, quite possibly because Jesus sounded as though he was threatening the Temple itself, some of the Judean elite reported to the Roman prefect that Jesus disrupted the peace and claimed to be king. Pilate, having no compunction about a few summary executions if it would help keep the crowds calm, ordered Jesus crucified.

These are claims that most critical students of Jesus' story agree on. Beyond that, scholars differ in their assessments of Jesus, and the four Gospels differ, too. Matthew presents Jesus as a firmly Judaic teacher in continuity with his heritage – not as the founder of a new religion. Mark presents Jesus as an amazing wonder-worker, interspersing his mighty deeds

with puzzling sayings. Luke presents Jesus as a patient, powerful, wise prophet. John presents Jesus as the very presence of God on earth.

The four canonical Gospels involve a complicated history of copying and re-working, especially among Matthew, Mark, and Luke (called the “synoptic gospels,” “syn-optic” because one can learn a lot by *seeing* them *together*). The dominant agreement of New Testament scholars holds that Mark wrote first, and Matthew and Luke depend in differing ways on Mark. No one proposal for how this works out amounts to a definitive case, so we won’t assume any single theory of synoptic relationships in the following paragraphs.

First, then, Matthew narrates his Gospel as the culmination of Israel’s history. Jesus is born to a righteous man named Joseph, who has prophetic dreams (just as his eponymous forebear in the Old Testament did). Jesus was born of a virgin to fulfill an ancient prophecy (which, to be honest, probably doesn’t specify virginity in its original Hebrew). Like Moses, he is persecuted by a hostile ruler who massacres children, he spends time in exile, and returns to lead his people. Some readers even compare Jesus’ five long discourses in Matthew (the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-7), the Mission Discourse (10), the Parables Discourse (13), the Church discourse (18), and the Eschatological Discourse (24-25) with the Five Books of the Torah.

One of Jesus’ hallmark sayings in Matthew’s Gospel teaches that “not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished” (5:18) and that we are called to be perfect, even as God is perfect (5:47) – reaffirming the Torah as the revelation of God’s will for our lives. When he corrects the Law at all, he usually heightens the Law’s demands, as when he suggests that his followers not only forego adultery, but even the lustful desire that risks provoking adultery. Matthew’s Jesus argues ferociously with the scribes and the Pharisees, whose teachings resemble his own so closely that Jesus advises his followers to do whatever the Pharisees say, because they sit on Moses’ seat.

At the end of Matthew’s Gospel, the Judaic leaders who have served as Jesus’ foils all through the gospel conspire against him and hand him over to death. Though responsibility for crucifixion must land squarely on Pilate – crucifixion is a strictly Roman punishment, reserved for the most degraded of prisoners – the prefect manipulates the crowd into claiming the blame for Jesus’ death with the words which have wrought such horrific reverberations through history: “his blood be on us and on our children” (27:25). Even after Jesus’ death, his Pharisaic opponents worked together to stifle rumors of the resurrection. When Jesus sends his disciples out to spread the gospels, he reminds them to teach the gentiles to obey all that he had commanded (including that no one should relax even the least of the commandments).

Mark, by contrast, shows no abiding allegiance to Judaic traditions. Mark’s Jesus has come to burst the old wineskins with his authoritative presence and power. Mark’s picture of Jesus retains a connection to Judaism in the background, but Mark has to explain Judaic traditions and practices to his readers – suggesting that his readers don’t recognize the significance of Judaic culture on their own. Moreover, Mark’s heroic portrait of Jesus makes him into something more like a demi-god or a Hellenistic wonder-worker.

Notice, for instance, that Mark begins his gospel with John the Baptist’s preaching, with no genealogy connecting Jesus to a particular family line, nor with any stories about Jesus’ birth. Mark doesn’t highlight Jesus’ Judaic ancestry or divinely-promised incarnation the way that Matthew and Luke do. When Jesus heals the little girl at Mark 5:41, the narrator translates “*Talitha cumi*,” “which means, ‘Little girl, get up!’ ” He explains Pharisaic purity

customs in 7:3-4, translates another Aramaic healing command in 7:34, and translates the Aramaic quotation of Psalm 22 from the cross. Mark shows clear signs of mediating this thoroughly Judaic story to an audience that knows (and possibly cares) very little about Judaism, but is interested in Jesus for his own sake.

They have reason to be interested in Jesus because Mark presents him as a sort of Galilean superhero (like the popular Herakles/Hercules), wandering about the countryside committing spontaneous acts of dramatic deliverance from illness or demons. Mark's Jesus is less a talker and more a man of action. One would expect that such a mighty hero would be hard to stop, so Mark's Jesus goes out of his way to stipulate to his disciples that it was necessary that he suffer and die as part of his mission (a narrative element that Matthew and Luke preserve). The disciples don't pick up on this message; indeed, Mark presents the disciples as awful dunderheads (the interview at 8:14-21 just preceding Peter's Confession illustrates Jesus' exasperation at their slow-wittedness).

Finally, just as Mark lacks stories about Jesus' birth, he also leaves out any appearances of the Risen Jesus. (The passages that may appear in your Bibles at the end of Mark 16 are almost surely later additions, tacked on to supply what scribes perceived as a shocking omission.) Rather than spelling out Jesus' resurrection and providing specific scenes, Mark allows the power of Jesus' actions and teachings to imply what Jesus must have done and said after rising from death.

Like Mark, Luke hellenizes his picture of Jesus. While Mark tends to transplant Jesus from Judaic to Gentile worlds, though, Luke presents a Jesus who fits in both worlds, as though he were addressing readers in the Judaic diaspora. He begins with a grand Hellenistic preface, explicitly acknowledging that he was not a participant in Jesus' ministry, and claiming that he researched these matters critically, consulting written sources and eyewitness informants – and he, unlike any of the other evangelists, continues the story by writing a sequel to his Gospel: the Book of Acts.

Luke tells Jesus' story with more literary sophistication than the other evangelists; he orchestrates the characters and their words to effect a great deal of his teaching indirectly. He changes styles, beginning with the high-flown preface, then shifting to narrate the birth stories (that draw so heavily on Old Testament precursors) in a style reminiscent of the Greek Old Testament, then modulating into a more colloquial Greek style for the ministry of the adult Jesus. Though Matthew's Jesus tends to alternate long sections of deeds and long speeches, Luke intersperses action and discourse more evenly (and more realistically). The climactic literary gem of his Gospel is the story of disciples meeting the risen Jesus on the Emmaus road – a story that Luke sketches with exquisite irony, which he directs to powerful literary and theological effect.

Luke treats Jesus' Judaic neighbors and antagonists in an ambiguous light. Some Judaic characters are especially sympathetic, while others are hostile, and many are interested but perplexed by Jesus. While ultimately the key Judaic figures will plot against Jesus, Luke insists that Jesus is the Messiah of Israel; Luke firmly emphasizes the ways that the Old Testament prefigures Jesus' ministry, especially if one looks at the speeches in the Book of Acts, which rely heavily on proofs from prophecy. On the other hand, Luke's Jesus says that the Law and the Prophets *were* until John the Baptist, suggesting that their day is past. As the Gentiles show greater interest for the Gospel in Acts, the texture of this "newness" comes clearer and clearer – Israel's Messiah has come specifically "to bring light to those who sat in darkness and the shadow of death," the Gentiles.

John is markedly different from the other three gospels. John features no parables and no exorcisms. John's Jesus begins his ministry by stirring up a fuss in the temple, where the synoptic Jesus comes to the Temple only at the *end* of his ministry. John places a *positive* value on Jesus' miraculous signs, where the synoptics tend to look down on those who demanded signs from Jesus.

John begins, not with an infancy narrative, but with the familiar poetic passage that identifies Jesus as the Word, who is God incarnate, through whom everything was created. The explicit theological teaching, with its extraordinarily expansive estimate of Jesus' importance, stands apart from anything in the other gospels. Some critics find this prologue different enough from the rest of John's Gospel that they ascribe it to a different source altogether, added to John at a late stage in the composition of the gospel. They observe that John seems to have two different endings (20:30-31 and 21:24-25), and that at several points the narrator interrupts the narrative to offer an explanation; perhaps the source of this editorial voice added a snappier beginning and ending to an earlier version of John.

Through the middle of John, Jesus talks at great length, and talks often about himself (also in a way different from the synoptics, where Jesus is more apt to talk about "the Son of Man"). One of John's trademarks is Jesus' repeated use of the phrase, "I am. . .": "I am the bread of life, I am the good shepherd, I am the way," and so on. While the synoptic Jesus is reticent about his role and identity, John's Jesus can't wait to tell people about his intimacy with God the Father. This exalted self-presentation plays into the sharp conflicts between Jesus and his Judaic interlocutors in John; John treats "the Jews" (or "the Judeans," since John shows particular attention to questions of where people are from) as a homogeneous body of Jesus' enemies.

John brings Jesus' ministry to an end not with a eucharistic Last Supper, but with Jesus washing his disciples' feet and delivering another long speech. Jesus has said what he wants to about bread, body, and blood in chapter 6. Jesus goes to his death almost willingly, taunting Pilate in their encounters, and dying not with a cry of agony but with a serene, "It is finished."

Much more could be said about the individual characteristics of each gospel; suffice it hear to note that these really do constitute four distinct portraits of one figure. Three are relatively similar to one another; say, a Jesus painted by Raphael, a Caravaggio Jesus, and an El Greco Jesus – then a Picasso Jesus (or perhaps a Chagall, or a Matisse). No one of them will correspond precisely to "the real Jesus," not even Luke, with his professed interest in critical investigation. Taken together, they tell us about the ways that the earliest traditions about Jesus remembered him, and give a richer sense of his significance than we would have with any single account.

	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Historical Context	c. 80-90, written in Syria?	c. 64-69, written at Rome?	c. 80-100, location uncertain	c. 90
Key Elements in Christology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Son of David • New Moses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secret Messiah 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open but unrecognized Lord 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incarnate Word • “I am” sayings
Themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fulfillment of OT prophecies • imminent apocalypse • Church 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Passion and procession toward it 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New prophecies disclosing divine plan in history • forgiveness & healing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revelation of the Father • Believing in Jesus • Light vs. dark, flesh vs. spirit, us vs. them • importance of signs
Types of material	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Infancy Narrative (focusing on Joseph, magi) • miracles • exorcisms and healings • long discourses • parables • controversies • Last Supper • Passion & Resurrection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • miracles • exorcisms and healings • parables • controversies • Last Supper • Passion & <i>empty tomb</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Infancy Narrative (focusing on birth of John the Baptist, on Mary & shepherds) • miracles • exorcisms and healings • parables • controversies • Last Supper • Passion & Resurrection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • miracles • “I am” sayings • healings • extended narrative units (chapters 4, 9) • controversies • long discourses • Footwashing • Passion & Resurrection
Stance toward Judaism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jesus crowns Judaic hopes • Jesus rival of Pharisees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Judaism an unfamiliar background for hero Jesus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jesus extends and transforms Judaism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jesus and his followers opposed by (Judean) “Jews”
Traditional symbol	man/angel	lion	ox	eagle

Structure of the Synoptic Gospels

Matthew	Mark	Luke
Infancy Narrative <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Genealogy (1:1-17) • Infancy (1:18-2:23) 		Infancy Narrative <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prologue (1:1-4) • Birth of John (1:5-) • Infancy of Jesus
Ministry of John and Baptism of Jesus (3:1-	Ministry of John and Baptism of Jesus (1:1-12)	Ministry of John Genealogy Temptation
Beginning of Galilean Ministry <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calling of disciples • Sermon on the Mount (5-7) • Healings (8-9) • Missionary Discourse (10) • Controversies (11-12) • Parables Discourse (13:1-52) • Controversies, Healings, Miracles (13:53-16:12) 	Beginning of Galilean Ministry <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call, Miracles, Conflict (1:14-3:35) • Parables Discourse (4:1-34) • Healings, Miracles, Controversies (4:35-8:26) 	Beginning of Galilean Ministry <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preaching at Nazareth (4:14-30) • Call, teaching, miracles, controversy (5:1-6:16) • Sermon on the Plain (6:17-49) • Healings, parables, miracles (7:1-9:17)
Peter's Confession (16:13-20) Passion Prediction (16:21-28) Transfiguration (17:1-13)	Peter's Confession (8:27-30) Passion Prediction (8:31-9:1) Transfiguration (9:2-13)	Peter's Confession (9:18-20) Passion Prediction (9:21-27) Transfiguration (9:28-36)
Progress Toward Jerusalem <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healings, teachings, parables, controversies (17:14-20:34) • Congregational Life Discourse (18:1-35) • Teaching, Healing (19:1-20:34) • Triumphal Entry (21:1-11) • Parables, Controversies (21:12-22:46) • Apocalyptic Discourse (23:1-25:46) 	Progress Toward Jerusalem <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healings, Teaching, Controversies (9:14-12:44) • Triumphal Entry (11:1-11) • Apocalyptic Discourse (13:1-37) 	Progress Toward Jerusalem <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healing, teaching (9:37-50) • Luke's Travel Narrative (mostly unique Lukan material)* • Healing, teaching, parables (9:51-18:14) Luke resumes synoptic pattern <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parables, teachings (18:15-19:27) • Triumphal entry (19:28-44) • Teachings, parables (19:45-21:4) • Apocalyptic Discourse (21:5-36) • Teaching, Controversies (21:37-22:6)
Passion Narrative <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Last Supper and Arrest (25:17-26:56) • Hearings and Inquiries (26:57-27:26) • Abuse and Crucifixion (27:27-56) • Burial (27:57-66) 	Passion Narrative <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Last Supper and Arrest (14:1-52) • Hearings and Inquiries (14:53-15:15) • Abuse and Crucifixion (15:16-15:41) • Burial (15:42-47) 	Passion Narrative <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Last Supper and Arrest (22:7-22:53) • Denial and Abuse (22:54-65) • Hearings (22:66-23:25) • Way of Cross and Crucifixion (23:26-23:49) • Burial (23:50-56)

<p>Resurrection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Angel, Jesus appear to Mary and Mary (28:1-10) • Conspiracy with guards (28:11-15) • Appearance in Galilee (28:16-20) 	<p>Resurrection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Angelic message and empty tomb (16:1-8) 	<p>Resurrection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Angelic message to women, empty tomb (24:1-12) • Emmaus Road (24:13-35) • Appearance to Twelve (24:36-49) • Ascension (24:50-53)
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CHAPTER 4

PAUL'S (AND THE OTHER) LETTERS

Shortly after Jesus was raised from death, an opponent of Jesus' followers set out toward Damascus to locate and combat them. He writes later on that, on the road, Jesus was revealed to him (or "in him") along the way, and he joined the movement that he had intended to eradicate. Saul the persecutor had changed his mind, and on that road had become Paul the apostle (the Greek word for "emissary" or "envoy"). Shortly, even in Jerusalem word got out that "the one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy" (Gal 1:13).

Paul wandered from Damascus through Arabia (the area southeast of Jerusalem), visited Jerusalem and went on to Antioch, traveling all over Asia Minor (Turkey), the east coast of Greece, back to Jerusalem, and eventually on to Rome. He may have gone on to proclaim Jesus in Spain (as he hopes to in Romans). Eventually, he was executed by Nero; tradition says that he was beheaded.

Paul's travels sometimes brought him to a town for months, in one case for several years, but most often only for a few days. In that short interval he had to explain the basics of Christian faith and community life to hard-working people many of whom were unacquainted with the Bible (that is, the Old Testament), whose idea of a god was Hermes or Apollo, who may have thought that Judaism was a shameful cult for lazy people. If he had to do a lot of catch up work in his epistles, we ought not be surprised; the amazing thing in that so many of his communities developed lasting congregations. Likewise we ought not think Paul too bossy or impatient if he devotes much attention to setting his congregations straight. How firm a grasp of our traditions would we have with only a week's instruction? Paul did everything he could imagine to help congregations continue in the faith to which God had called them, praising and scolding, teaching and hinting, weeping and blessing and cursing – advising congregations that were spread out across distances that would take weeks or months to navigate.

One of his chief problems came in explaining the relation of this faith to Judaism (Galatians, Romans). On one hand, he must explain that God revealed the truth to and kept covenant with Abraham, Moses, and David; otherwise, how could anyone trust this God? A God who would make an everlasting covenant with Israel, then unilaterally change the terms of the covenant, might also change the promises made with those who were baptized into new life in Jesus. Paul had to emphasize that in these ways, Judaism was truly a way of living in God's grace. On the other hand, Paul had to explain why God's Son was crucified and rejected by the very people to whom God had given these covenants. If the prophets foretold Jesus, why did the people not respond? If the covenants promised salvation, why would God send his beloved Son to the most painful and degrading death known in antiquity?

Paul could not solve this dilemma perfectly. His answer involved affirming that the Torah is good and true – but that the Torah alone could not make people just, especially not gentiles. The Torah can teach what is good, but by setting in motion the distinction of good

and evil it opens up a sphere for the power of sin. Once we know the things we aren't allowed to do, we long to do them. We therefore need something more than the Torah to make us right. Thus Paul urges his male gentiles converts in Galatia not to seek the circumcision that would seal them as sons of Israel – that would mean turning their backs on the Christ who came to seek and save them. The rejection of Jesus' way by most Jews was not necessarily a sign of God's rejection of Israel – after all, God might graft back into the tree the branches that now are cut off, and “so all Israel shall be saved” (Rom 11:26).

Paul handles the problem of Jesus' death in a similar way. The crucifixion is either a necessary part of God's provision for saving humanity, or else salvation could have been wrought in a less cruel way. Since the cross must therefore be a necessary part of God's way, Paul reasons that the cross signifies the total desolation of Jesus, his total abandonment of his divine prerogatives. Because Jesus humbled himself utterly, accepting the most lowly of deaths, so the lowliest of us can now aspire to sharing Jesus' estate as exalted child of God. As the only Good One was put to death for sins he did not commit, now our sins are put to death on the cross and we are set free from sin to live in goodness. This may look foolish, but only to people who reckon that they already have things figured out. For those who are willing to acknowledge their limited understanding, who accept Jesus with thanks and praise, the cross seems not shameful but glorious.

These weren't all of Paul's problems. In congregations that weren't troubled by theological puzzles relative to Judaism, the positive significance of Jesus for right living wasn't quite clear. Some people seem to have thought that since Jesus had come to free them from their sins, nothing they did thereafter would count as a sin. “Hey, I've already been saved!” So they were somewhat careless about their ways. Others felt that, having had all their previous sins removed, they had to be extra sure never to sin again. So they adopted lifestyles intended to assure that they never even came *close* to sinning. Again, some felt that the Spirit that dwelt in their hearts enabled them to do anything, since the Law had been superseded by Christ. Some felt that really spiritual people could work miracles and speak in tongues, whereas people who didn't do these were probably less favored by God. And what, people wanted to know, about relatives who died before Jesus came back to save everyone?

Paul dealt with these problems by stressing that Jesus' resurrection had made new life in the Spirit available to all who turned to Jesus in faith, but that the Spirit made itself known in many different ways. Some people were good accountants in the Spirit, and some spoke in tongues. Some experienced a great liberation of the conscience, and some received the capacity to live in remarkable purity. But the point lay not in the extremes – the point was that the Spirit had been poured out on all, for the sake of the whole Body of Christ. Therefore, no part of the Body should behave in ways that damaged other parts (whether by offensive liberty or by holding too strict a standard of conduct). And the dead would be raised to new life even before those of us who are left alive, so don't worry about your friends and relatives.

None of these arguments flat-out solves the problems Paul is addressing, but they show a way of thinking about the problems that sets them in a more coherent context. Paul sees the gospel as the fundamental pattern in the whole tapestry of God's engagement with humanity. He thus treats these theological puzzles as elements in a greater complex whole. If the knot doesn't yield to immediate untangling, Paul settles for showing how the problem arises and what God will eventually do about it. He works within the horizons of his day, and

extends them in some ways (reasoning positively about gentiles, for instance) but not in others (as slaves, women, and gay and lesbian readers will be quick to notice).

Other letters from the apostolic period tackle different problems in different ways. Some letters seem to have been written on the model of Paul's letters, though he himself didn't write them (as though someone wrote JFK's second Inaugural Address, or Martin Luther King's response to the Rodney King incident). These letters generally aim toward integrating the early congregations in a common way of life and a common faith. In some respects, such letters seem to compromise the radical vigor of the first years of the movement. They urge believers to make a good impression, to keep on good terms with the world around them (as opposed to "not caring about a perishing world"); while we can read these as a concession to everyday life, they also make reasonable points about Christian living for people who aren't called to martyrdom, and their stress on community harmony, cooperation, and patience entail a subtle radicalism of their own.

Some letters concentrate on specific ethical teachings rather than more abstract doctrinal claims (James); others foreground their doctrinal interests; others are plainly addressed to distinct situations in congregational life, with little generally applicable content at all (2 and 3 John, and Paul's letter to Philemon). Hebrews weaves an elaborate theological account of Christ's relation to the Old Testament, with the ethical implications that go along with it. Revelation (that's "revelation," *singular* – this book narrates *one* revelation to John) comes to us in the form of a letter that narrates John's startling experience one day in worship. John urges his readers to remain true to the faith, no matter what suffering comes, for God would remain true to them and would redress all their suffering.

These letters pick up the concerns of the early generations of disciples, who were in many respects inventing on the fly (and "in the Spirit") what we now recognize as Christian life and theology. We can see many aspects in which the precise formulation of these concerns reflects conditions different from our own, and leaves unquestioned assumptions that many of us no longer hold. The ways that they worked through their specific concerns give many clues, however, for ways we can work through our own problems (even and especially when those concerns involve the teachings of the New Testament). By learning from their interpretive practice, their sense of how to preserve a tradition while adapting it to different circumstances, their refusal to allow particular vexations to deflect their love for God, we can avoid simply repeating the apostles' syllables in our different setting, while still growing in understanding of the ways we perpetuate their witness to the gospel.

CHAPTER 5

THEMES IN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

Readers often begin the Bible reckoning that it forms a single work, and they expect it to sustain particular themes and styles (as they would expect a novel or history book to do). If this impression falls away, it may yield to the opposite impression: that the Bible is utterly miscellaneous, with no unifying patterns at all, a hodge-podge of laws, hymns, legends, annals, sayings, poems, personal letters, and moral exhortation. Various Christians have held fast to both these ways of thinking about the Bible, but some of the most sensitive and devout readers have striven to read Scripture with respect both to the diversity it enshrines, and to the one God to whom it testifies, observing its imperious claim to point toward an absolute Truth, to an order that brings unexpected harmony to the apparently dissonant chords in the various instrumental parts.

The commonest, and probably the falsest, of the diversities of Scripture ascribes to the Old Testament a God of vengeance and wrath, but to the New Testament a God of love and salvation. Such a reading can only succeed by obscuring God's long-suffering patience and fidelity in the Old Testament, and the danger of falling athwart God's anger in the New (and, perhaps, by playing off the residual anti-Judaism which persistently threatens sound Christian theology). God shows both loving patience and perilous anger in Old *and* New Testaments (witness the theme of God's steadfast love in the Old Testament, and in the New Testament, the peril of being cast into the outer darkness, where there is wailing and gnashing of teeth). The Bible identifies God as desiring love and salvation for all people at all times – but this same God responds with grief and anger when humanity ignores God's will for peace and salvation, and the Bible describes the effects of God's disappointed justice vividly as torment and punishment. One may identify the point of these characterizations not so much in the specifics of the descriptions (“What,” in words of the old joke, “about those who have no teeth?”) but in the Bible's refusal to describe a God who doesn't care what humans do, who will not resolve the evils of the universe simply by pasting a universal happy ending onto the story.

The Bible recognizes the evils that afflict the world as a significant dimension of human experience. Both Old and New Testaments discuss the problem of evil, and both try to account for the prominence of misery in human life as something that God permits (or even determines), while protecting God from the charge of cruelty against powerless humanity. The New Testament sometimes resolves this dilemma by stipulating that every human sins, from Adam on, so that no one has grounds on which to complain. The Old Testament includes some voices that make a comparable argument (though without reference to Adam or other notions of original sin), but just as often the Old Testament simply grants the persistence of evil, and prays that God relieve the particular afflictions that are troubling people at the moment. Together, the testaments remind us that our understanding of God and God's providential ordering of creation will be only partial for the time being; indeed, our imperfect understanding is one of the evils with which we must go on struggling. At the same time, both testaments emphasize that God does not desire our suffering or frustration,

but always only our fullness and joy. God shares our misery in pain, and the New Testament even teaches that God willingly took human existence and experiences the most grievous agony imaginable to attain perfect solidarity with humanity, and thus to bring humanity to the full salvation of divine life.

The Bible as a whole also tends to concentrate God's saving will for humanity into the figure of a particular individual, someone anointed (a *mashiach*, "messiah" in Hebrew, *christos*, "Christ" in Greek, both of which mean "anointed one") by God on behalf of God's people. Sometimes that figure is a character within the Bible itself (Moses, or David, or Cyrus, and especially of course, Jesus); sometimes that figure appears as a somewhat obscure future persona (the Suffering Servant, the Son of Man, the Lamb). Christians have long read all the Old Testament descriptions of God's Anointed One as allusions to the coming Jesus, and all New Testament allusions to a future advent of God's Anointed as references to a *second* coming of Christ. Each of these references in its proper literary and historical context may fit a different, more specific character. One familiar example of prophetic foretelling appears in Isaiah 7, where Isaiah promises King Ahaz that "the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel." In Ahaz and Isaiah's context, that child might have been Hezekiah, Ahaz's son, or Meher-shalal-hash-baz, Isaiah's son; but St. Matthew and the church recognize in this verse a description of the birth of Jesus. One need neither reject the literal and historical sense of a passage nor adhere absolutely to the literal sense in order also to hear that passage describing God and God's ways. God has generously provided the church with a Bible whose hints and clues and resonances and echoes ring far beyond a simple identification of this expression with that historical person, or that symbolic phrase with this event (or theological topic). The messianic hope of the Old Testament retains a vigorous testimony to ways that the hopes of Israel remain unfulfilled by Jesus, even as the New Testament presents Jesus as the unexpected fulfillment of all the hopes of the Old Testament.

The question of hope, however, provides another motif whereby the Old and New Testaments can be brought into conversation. Certain strands of Old Testament theology articulate a sense that this earthly life exhausts the human possibility. Ecclesiastes observes that since everyone dies in the end, we should make the most of the time allotted us, and the Psalms frequently allude to the indifferent fate shared by all humanity in Sheol. At the same time, a voice in the Old Testament begins to offer a divergent view, that God cannot satisfactorily allow the bounds of human existence to begin and end with birth and death; something beyond death must rectify the injustices and sufferings that befall good people in a hard life. Thus the Old Testament opens the question of life after death, and proposes that such a phenomenon would give a sphere wherein God might bless the righteous who suffer, and requite those whose earthly prosperity and ease derived from exploitation and wrongdoing. In the New Testament, the question of continuing life resolves into the confidence that all people stand before God, to be recognized for their goodness or evil (though with the codicil that those who followed Jesus and his way will have been set free from the effects of their sin). In the New Testament, the hope of continuing life is no longer simply one option among several ways of thinking about humanity, but it becomes a central tenet of the gospel.

The constitution of Israel's common life in the presence of God comes to expression in Old Testament phrases that identify God, and God alone, as the King ("the Lord reigns!"). If God indeed rules all things, then any apparent lapse in God's providential ordering of circumstances must be temporary. Psalmist, prophets, visionaries all prayed earnestly that

God reveal the Divine Reign, that God make obvious what sometimes seems invisible. This hope, expressed in the verb “to reign,” finds its way into the New Testament as a noun, “kingdom” or “realm,” in John the Baptist’s and Jesus’ message that the Realm of God has drawn near, is in our very midst. Old and New Testament both affirm, in differing ways, that neither merely human agency nor blind chance determines our destinies. Instead, they insist, God reigns, and God’s Realm demonstrates qualities of justice, mercy, peace, and abundance that find only pale reflections in the most just, merciful, peaceful, and prosperous human communities. The pre-eminent Old Testament image for the promise of life without end, without suffering or evil, comes from the prophetic tradition’s description of God’s peaceable realm, wherein no creature will terrify or brutalize another, where no one will hurt or destroy; in the New Testament that image modulates to a heavenly life of consolation and restoration, where the river of the water of life nourishes the new Jerusalem.

While the offer of abundant life applies to all humanity, the Bible constantly reminds us that we receive that promise not by taking it for granted, but by orienting our lives by the promise to which we cling. If we hope for God’s love, we show our hope by demonstrating love for one another; if we trust God to bring us to fullness of life, we demonstrate our trust by not clinging to the material possessions of this world. In other words, we obey God not just because we have to (lest something bad happen), but primarily because our following in the ways that Jesus (and the Torah) teach us show our overriding commitment to the true way of life that God reveals to us. Our allegiance to God’s promises amounts to little if it entails only our wishing for a comfortable afterlife; we affirm our baptismal promises to live in God’s grace, to enter a relationship with God defined by mutual fidelity, by actually living as people faithful to the God who created us, who calls us, and who will in the end (we trust) bring us in safety to a new and limitless life.

The God of transcendent unity, whose loving grace and merciful justice surpass our capacities to imagine, is therefore also unique. God’s uniqueness forms the centerpiece of a creedal affirmation in the Old Testament, the daily prayer of Judaism: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one” (or “the Lord alone”; Deuteronomy 6:4). The same theme recurs throughout the New Testament, even as New Testament texts begin to identify Jesus with the unique God to whom the Old Testament attests. Though the precise definitions of Jesus’ divinity would await articulation by the great councils of the fourth and fifth centuries, the New Testament begins the process of unfolding Trinitarian theology with expressions that identify Jesus’ role in creation with God’s deeds recorded in Genesis, of identifying the Holy Spirit as Jesus’ own Spirit, and so on – culminating in the Great Commission of Matthew’s Gospel, which commands that Jesus’ followers baptize in the *name*, singular, of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.