

# ***A Case for Christ-Lent 2010***

## **Jesus as Expected One**

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**Digging Deeper (Questions are on the last page)**

***A Case for Christ-Lent 2010: Jesus as Expected One***

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### **Background Notes**

**Key Scripture Texts:** Luke 3:1-6, 21-38; 4:14-21.

### **Introduction to the Lenten Series**

Throughout most of its history, the Christian church has looked at the story of Jesus as an annual and repeatable experience. Christians, in some communions, follow something called the liturgical calendar which cycles through the great events in the life of Jesus and the Church. Most recently we celebrated Advent and Christmas — two distinct dimensions to the arrival of Jesus in the world as a human being. In addition to these are Epiphany, Lent and Pentecost. When we are walking through these periods of the Christian calendar, we deal with something called "sacred time" because it places emphasis on the great deeds of God convergent on Jesus Christ. But then, connecting these sacred occasions are spans known as "ordinary time" when we live out the meaning and rest in the power of Christ's special achievements for our salvation. Ordinary time reminds us that we have work to do, relying on the grace of God to do it. Even though it's not Advent or Lent, we still must live out the life of the Spirit, making progress in our world on behalf of God's coming kingdom. The "Our Father" seeks God's "will done on earth as in heaven," and so the heavenly experiences of the great feasts — Lent being one of them — must find their way into the earthly life of the everyday world.

The liturgical calendar is not a piece of legalistic structure which binds us against our wills to follow a certain path through time. Instead, celebrating the great feasts liberates us from the bondage to ordinary time, rejuvenating our spiritual lives and focusing our attention on "heavenly things" so that we can be truly of "earthly good." For us, such special times of holy remembrance concentrate our minds and hearts on the deeper meaning of Jesus Christ. Having just come through the Advent-Christmas-Epiphany cycle (November 29-December 24, December 25-January 5, January 6), we reflected on the incarnation of Jesus as a real human being, "born of the Virgin Mary." Various aspects of his Advent and its meaning to us come under the spotlight and receive close attention. Ending this sequence of sacred time is Epiphany which welcomes the Magi who arrive in Bethlehem guided by the light of the star, and with their coming we see a foreshadowing of God's future calling the Gentiles to become part of His people.

In some senses, Epiphany ("the showing, making known, revealing") casts its light forward across ordinary time from January 7<sup>th</sup> until the traditional Ash Wednesday when the Lent begins. During this period we are called upon to live "in light of" the incarnate Jesus, whose "radiant beams" mark the "dawn of redeeming grace."

The day is now observed as a time of focusing on the mission of the church in reaching others by "showing" Jesus as the Savior of all people. It is also a time of focusing on Christian brotherhood and fellowship, especially in healing the divisions of prejudice and bigotry that we all too often create between God's children<sup>1</sup>.

With the arrival of Ash Wednesday (February 17, 2010), we return to the earthly ministry of Jesus which climaxes with his death and resurrection, the epitome of the Gospel.

...the seventh Wednesday before Easter Sunday, is the first day of the Season of Lent. Its name comes from the ancient practice of placing ashes on worshippers' heads or foreheads as a sign of humility before God, a symbol of mourning and sorrow at the death that sin brings into the world. It not only prefigures the mourning at the death

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<sup>1</sup> Dennis Bratcher, *The Voice*, [www.crivoice.org](http://www.crivoice.org).

of Jesus, but also places the worshipper in a position to realize the consequences of sin. Ash Wednesday is a somber day of reflection on what needs to change in our lives if we are to be fully Christian.

In the early church, ashes were not offered to everyone but were only used to mark the forehead of worshippers who had made public confession of sin and sought to be restored to the fellowship of the community at the Easter celebration. However, over the years others began to show their humility and identification with the penitents by asking that they, too, be marked as sinners. Finally, the imposition of ashes was extended to the whole congregation in services similar to those that are now observed in many Christian churches on Ash Wednesday. Ashes became symbolic of that attitude of penitence reflected in the Lord's prayer: "forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us" (Luke 11:4, NRSV).<sup>2</sup>

This weekend marks the first Sunday in Lent, the beginning of a journey with the earthly Jesus on his way to fulfill his Father's will at the cross — and beyond.

The season of Lent has not been well observed in much of evangelical Christianity, largely because it was associated with "high church" liturgical worship that some churches were eager to reject. However, much of the background of evangelical Christianity, for example the heritage of John Wesley, was very "high church." Many of the churches that had originally rejected more formal and deliberate liturgy are now recovering aspects of a larger Christian tradition as a means to refocus on spirituality in a culture that is increasingly secular.

Originating in the fourth century of the church, the season of Lent spans 40 weekdays beginning on Ash Wednesday and climaxing during Holy Week with Holy Thursday (Maundy Thursday), Good Friday, and concluding Saturday before Easter. Originally, Lent was the time of preparation for those who were to be baptized, a time of concentrated study and prayer before their baptism at the Easter Vigil, the celebration of the Resurrection of the Lord early on Easter Sunday. But since these new members were to be received into a living community of Faith, the entire community was called to preparation. Also, this was the time when those who had been separated from the Church would prepare to rejoin the community.

Today, Lent is marked by a time of prayer and preparation to celebrate Easter. Since Sundays celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, the six Sundays that occur during Lent are not counted as part of the 40 days of Lent, and are referred to as the *Sundays in Lent*. The number 40 is connected with many biblical events, but especially with the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness preparing for His ministry by facing the temptations that could lead him to abandon his mission and calling. Christians today use this period of time for introspection, self examination, and repentance. This season of the year is equal only to the Season of Advent in importance in the Christian year, and is part of the second major grouping of Christian festivals and sacred time that includes Holy Week, Easter, and Pentecost.

Lent has traditionally been marked by penitential prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Some churches today still observe a rigid schedule of fasting on certain days during Lent, especially the giving up of meat, alcohol, sweets, and other types of food. Other traditions do not place as great an emphasis on fasting, but focus on charitable deeds, especially helping those in physical need with food and clothing, or simply the giving of money to charities. Most Christian churches that observe Lent at all focus on it as a time of prayer, especially penance, repenting for failures and sin as a way to focus on the need for God's grace. It is really a preparation to celebrate God's marvelous redemption at Easter, and the resurrected life that we live, and hope for, as Christians.<sup>3</sup>

Keeping Lent (or any of the holy feasts) requires us to take history seriously. We intend to do just that during our worship services this year. Our chosen theme is *A Case for Christ*. Readers of these *Background Notes* may be familiar with Lee Strobel's book, *The Case for Christ*. Copies will be available throughout the Lenten season. At the center of that book is the belief that Jesus Christ lived in *real history* and so the events of his life and the claims we make about him can be *investigated*. It is possible to look for *evidence* in the best sense of that word because Jesus occupied space and time within the human society of the Eastern Mediterranean during the First Century C.E. Strobel's work is a collection of personal conversations between the writer and eminent

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

thinkers in select fields of biblical, historical, literary, philosophical, psychological medical and scientific scholarship. Scarcely a single relevant discipline is missing from this impressive "panel." When someone considers the relationship of a human being to history, a host of factors come into play, and these various fields allow us to see Jesus and the evidence for his life through a sober and intelligent lens. What better way to honor the person of Jesus, leading up to his death and resurrection, than to acknowledge the evidence for his historical presence in the world.

If Jesus is an historical character, then we ought to be able to study, research, and write about flesh-and-blood realities in his life. In point of fact, the Bible soberly and carefully presents Jesus in those terms. But while Jesus is a human being, located in space and time, he transcends those limitations as well, as we shall see in this series. Geographically situating Jesus in Nazareth of the Galilee means that he lived in the household of Joseph and Mary, was known by his neighbors, and attended his local Jewish synagogue. Our *record* of these facts is corroborated within the Four Gospels (internal evidence), and it is in them we have the greatest amount of detail (see the first three chapters of *The Case*). In addition, historical sources outside of the Bible give ample support to the *existence of Jesus and his movement* (external evidence) (chapter 4), as does archaeology (chapter 5). Although in recent decades, some, like the *Jesus Seminar*, have tried to "color code" the Gospels, suggesting that much of what we find there simply reflects the "faith" of the early church but not the historical Jesus, there are substantial counter-arguments which sustain our claim that the Jesus we read about in the Gospels *is the Jesus of history and faith* (chapter 6).

Perhaps there is no stronger critic of the *Seminar* who has written on this topic than N. T. Wright, Anglican Bishop of Durham, the courageous voice for orthodoxy in the British Isles. He has written extensively on the topic<sup>4</sup>, making the very solid point that what we know of Jesus, taken in its entirety from the Gospels, squares quite nicely with what we know of life and times in the first century C.E. No one in recent times as done more to locate Jesus credibly within the fabric of human history than Wright. In one of his essays he writes:

I have tried to show that when we study Jesus as a figure within first-century history we emerge with a better grounding for our Christian faith than we do if we ignore history in case it threaten that faith...

I have argued that the historical quest for Jesus is necessary for the health of the church. I grieve that in the church both in England and in America there seem to be so few, in a church otherwise so well educated in so many spheres, with more educational resources and helps than ever before, who are prepared to give the time and attention to these questions that they deserve...

...All our historical study must be done in and for the church in its mission to the world...It is because we believe we are called to be the people of God for the world that we must take the full historical task with full and utter seriousness. Study all the evidence; think through all the arguments...[B]eing a Quester is simply the same thing as being a disciple. It means taking up the cross and following wherever Jesus leads. And the good and the bad news is that only when we do that will we show that we have truly understood the history. Only when we do that will people take our arguments, whether historical or theological, seriously. Don't be afraid of the Quest...<sup>5</sup>

The reader is directed to Wright's *Simply Christian* (Harper Collins, 2006) for an overview of the key events and themes which marked the history of Israel and Jesus' place within it.<sup>6</sup>

Through Lent, therefore, we re-live genuine history — the history of Jesus of Nazareth, the One 1) expected by the Hebrew Scriptures; 2) revealed as the Son of God; 3) incarnate as Son of Man; 4) teacher of God's subversive wisdom; 5) expression of redefined love; 6) servant King; 7) resurrected in a transformed humanity.

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<sup>4</sup> Among his works are: *Jesus and the People of God*, Fortress Press, 1992; *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Fortress Press, 1996; *The Meaning of Jesus* (with Marcus Borg from the *Jesus Seminar*), Harper Collins, 1998. An excellent video series is *Jesus the New Way* in which Wright takes his audience on a breath-taking journey through the first century, noting the major historical movements and the place of Jesus among them.

<sup>5</sup> N. T. Wright, "Jesus and the Quest," *The Truth About Jesus*, Eerdmans, 1998, pp. 23-25.

<sup>6</sup> See pp. 71-119.

Each week we will explore one of these crucial dimensions of Jesus. We make *a case for Christ* not only through rational argument but also through the evidentiary witness of Jesus within the context of human history. What we gain from this study is a deeper devotion to the Jesus who shares with us in a common yet transformed humanity. He is both the Jesus of faith *and the Jesus of history*. For us there is no ultimate division of these otherwise contending claims. The Jesus in whom we place supreme confidence to bring us into God's new world is the same Jesus who left his indelible mark on the landscape of first century Israel, and whose words and deeds echo still in the evidence behind. Scripture, history, and the associated sciences used to study them do not stutter in making their claim on our minds and hearts.

### **Introduction to this Week's Topic**

Each Gospel writer made a case for Christ. Let there be no doubt: the four Gospels are not disinterested accounts of a Jewish man who lived approximately thirty-three years within the borders of the Jewish provinces of the Roman Empire. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John each had "a personal interest" in this Jesus. They were, each of them, believers in him. His life was an integral part of theirs, though in unique and nuanced ways. No two accounts read alike, though they occasionally share common material and tell the same stories. However, they applied their literary skills in shaping and fitting traditional material into the scope of their respective works. At times they seem to borrow from each other. In other sections they offer information none of the others seemed to know, or at least chose not to write about. What we have is a four-fold Gospel, distinct facets of the same majestic gemstone.

Why did they shape their material in such distinctive ways? Part of the answer lies in their audiences who, no doubt, asked a myriad of questions about this Jesus, and through the Gospels each writer attempted to offer an answer based on reliable sources and eyewitness accounts. Furthermore, God's choice of each writer led to works reflective of personality, style, passion, and understanding. While all writers affirmed the essential truths about Jesus, they worked out the details with a craft best suited to themselves. Jesus impacted each one differently, and out of reverence to him, they put down in words the "Good News" (the meaning of "Gospel", *euaggelion*) about him. For example, Matthew was clearly impacted by the close connections between the Old Testament Scriptures and the life and work of Jesus. Repeatedly we read the words about Scripture being "fulfilled" in the coming of Jesus (Matthew 1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:14, 35; 21:4; 26:54, 56; 27:9).

### **The Story of Israel: What History Tells Us**

If ever a nation had "Great Expectations," it was Israel. Israel's story comprises more than half of our Bibles, consisting of what we call the "Old Testament," otherwise known as the Hebrew Bible, the Jewish *Tenak* (Torah, Prophets and Writings). When the New Testament refers to the Scriptures being fulfilled, that means the Old Testament, since the New was still in the process of being written. What we discover in this week's study is "that what happened in Jesus of Nazareth was the very climax of the long story of Israel."<sup>7</sup> Within that story were all sorts of promises made by Yahweh, Israel's God, about what He intended to do *for* and *through* Israel. His long-standing project was to bring universal history (and with it, the history of the universe!) to completion. From the beginning, God purposed a world pregnant with future possibilities, but, for the present, not quite finished. The scope of Genesis 1-2 stretches into the distant past but also into the far-flung future, telling us where it all began and then promising that one day it would all be completed.

Israel's Scriptures contained all sort of clues to what the future would look like and what God would do in it. The clause, "I will," appears throughout, and reveals God's intentions about the future. Some of that future would be marked by conflict and adversity: "I will put enmity between you and the woman...." He told the Serpent (Genesis 3:15). "I will blot out man whom I have created" (Genesis 6:7). "I will bring a flood of waters on the earth to destroy..." (Genesis 6:17). But then, to a single human being, Noah, come words of

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<sup>7</sup> Wright, *Simply Christian*, p. 71.

future hope: "I will establish my covenant with you..." (Genesis 6:18; 9:15-16). Humankind as a whole lived under a perpetual covenant which was powered by those words, "I will." Yahweh was the God of the "I will," and even the meaning of the Hebrew name for God suggests that the One who *is* and *was*, also *will be*. Yahweh is the God of the covenant — His sacred oath and promise issued to His people, seeking their obedience and honor — and trust (faith).

The faithfulness of God kept Israel trusting. But at times it was immensely difficult to do so. Through the lives of sometimes tormented human beings, God kept the holy promise alive:

1. Abraham and Sarah, the aged couple who waited a lifetime for Isaac, the son of promise.
2. Jacob wrestled with God in search of a blessing which he failed to achieve on his own through cunning and deception.
3. Joseph lived the conflicted life of favored son and hated brother before ending up a servant, then a prisoner in Egypt.
4. Israel suffered at the hands of Pharaoh's taskmasters before deliverance came at the hand of Moses — the Exodus into the wilderness where former slaves learned the hard lessons of trusting God.

And so the history unfolds. Israel battles the pagans for possession of the promised land, while yielding to the pagan culture and its idolatry. Surrounded by hostile nations and original people groups, God's people lived out the cycle of sin, judgment, deliverance, and peace. Then came the kings — good and bad, godly and wicked. And a grand Temple build by King Solomon, a wonder of the ancient world. But the dream was fleeting because the vision was not obeyed.

In time, Israel fell into the hands of mighty empires: Assyria, Egypt, Syria and then Babylon. Civil war tore the nation apart (931 B.C.E.), and later ten tribal groups receded into the crevices of the fertile crescent (722), while the remaining kingdom of Judah went into exile in Babylon, the Temple in ruins (586). "By the waters of Babylon," wrote an unknown Hebrew poet, "we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps; for there our captors asked us for song...How can we sing the songs of Yahweh in a foreign land?" (Psalm 137:1-4). Yet, somehow, amidst the despair and deep disappointment, the poet managed to hear God speaking: "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you" (137:5-6).

This unwavering belief that God would not forget, that the Yahweh who said "I will..." would not leave His people in exile — these anchors of the soul kept Israel from total deconstruction. Time and time again we hear the words of 137:7, "Remember, O Yahweh...."

Babylon fell. The prophets of Israel had predicted it would, like the devil himself cast out of heaven (Isaiah 14:3-23). Read in its entirety, this oracle against the ancient Empire ruled by men like Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar proved true, as did all of the oracles in Isaiah 13-24 against the enemies of Israel. As it turned out, Israel had friends among the nations also, and this was by God's faithful appointment. Determined to "restore the fortunes" of His people, Yahweh raised up the Empire of Persia, along with the Medes, who defeated Babylon.

<sup>24</sup> Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, who formed you from the womb: "I am the LORD, who made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself, <sup>25</sup> who frustrates the signs of liars and makes fools of diviners, who turns wise men back and makes their knowledge foolish, <sup>26</sup> who confirms the word of his servant and fulfills the counsel of his messengers, who says of Jerusalem, 'She shall be inhabited,' and of the cities of Judah, 'They shall be built, and I will raise up their ruins'; <sup>27</sup> who says to the deep, 'Be dry; I will dry up your rivers'; <sup>28</sup> who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose'; saying of Jerusalem, 'She shall be built,' and of the temple, 'Your foundation shall be laid'" (Isaiah 44:24-28).

"I will raise up..." are heartening words to an exiled people. Who acts as God's agent in this process of recovery? His name is "Cyrus," a historical king of the Persian Empire who, in 538 B.C.E., opened the door for the remnant people of Israel to return to their land, rebuild their Temple and establish once more their beloved city of Jerusalem. Hope returns at last. In time, all that God promised took place, though often through "many

dangers, toils and snares." Not everyone in the Ancient Near East wanted a flourishing state of Israel rising from the ruins in Canaan. Neighboring countries and foreign residents grew suspicious and spread false reports about what Israel was planning, and some of these reports reached the Persian palace (see Ezra 4-6). Eventually the opposition relented, thanks to the decree of the Persian king, Darius.

When the Temple was finally restored, a dedication ceremony followed. However, a certain sadness pervaded the atmosphere of this celebration: tears were mixed with shouts of joy. Something seemed to be missing. Remembering their own history, the Jewish people envisioned Solomon dedicating the first Temple — an event marked by the arrival of God's glory. 2 Chronicles preserves the scene:

1 As soon as Solomon finished his prayer, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple. <sup>2</sup> And the priests could not enter the house of the LORD, because the glory of the LORD filled the LORD's house. <sup>3</sup> When all the people of Israel saw the fire come down and the glory of the LORD on the temple, they bowed down with their faces to the ground on the pavement and worshiped and gave thanks to the LORD, saying, "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever" (2 Chronicles 7:1-3).

But after the exile, in the Second Temple, there was no glory, no fire, and no filling of the Temple. The glory of God which the prophet Ezekiel had once seen *leave the Temple* (see Ezekiel 10), had not yet returned.

Waiting for the return of Yahweh to Zion: this was the great expectation of Israel. His return was quite necessary in order for all the promises made to Abraham (Genesis 12:2-3) to be fulfilled. Among those blessings was a promise that Yahweh would use Israel to bring blessing to the whole world. Something extremely important was suppose to happen to all of God's world, not just to Israel. We might speak of this simply as "the hope of Israel." For Jewish people living between 538 B.C.E. and 33 C.E. (the period leading up to the appearance of Jesus) that hope clustered around 1) a king chosen by God (see Psalm 72:1-4); 2) the Temple where God's presence lived; 3) Torah were God's word and His ways were discerned; 4) World-wide restoration: the new creation. A number of key passages echo this "cluster of hope" (Isaiah 2:2-4; 11:1-9; 55:1, 3-5, 12-13; 65:17-18, 25).<sup>8</sup>

But Yahweh had not returned to Zion, and shortly, things began to go seriously wrong with the people returned from exile. After Persia yielded to the rising Greek Empire under Alexander the Great, a new culture began to shape the known world. Whereas the Persians were willing to allow the restored peoples freedom of worship and local administration, the Greeks had other ideas. They, too, wanted a "new world order," but one which mirrored Alexander's dream of an eclectic culture which borrowed the best ideas from every other culture and then shared the composite results with the whole world. This dream took the form of a movement known as *Hellenization*. Although Alexander died before seeing it worked out in his Empire, the seeds remained and took root. Fundamentally, Hellenization challenged the idea that any single nation had a monopoly on civilization. Of course, observant Jews would take issue with any attempt to "Hellenize" their faith, something paramount to compromise with paganism.

But matters grew worse in the East. When Alexander died, his Empire was divided (for administrative purposes) among his generals. Two hugely important figures arose from this group: Ptolemy (Egypt) and the Seleucids (Syria). Where did this leave the little kingdom of Judah — remnant Israel? Of course, a single glance at an ancient map of the Middle East gives the answer: right between them, like a buffer zone across which the two kingdoms might fight their battles to dominate the region. Using symbolic language, the prophet Daniel tells the story in chapter 11 of his book. At one point in this conflict, the ruler of the Seleucids, a man named Antiochus (IV) Epiphanes, determined to force Hellenization on the Jewish people.

The offshoot of this attempt was a rebellion led by the famous sons of the priest, Mattathias, among whom, Judas Maccabaeus ("The Hammer") was the leader. Running a guerilla operation out of the hills north of Jerusalem, he enjoyed military success fighting the Syrians, climaxing with a major victory in 164 B.C.E., throwing his opponents out of Israel and restoring the Temple to its proper worship of Yahweh. His entry into

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<sup>8</sup> Wright discusses these in *Simply Christian*, pp. 80-86.

Jerusalem, riding a donkey and hailed with palm branches by the citizens, became fixed in the collective memory of Israel. We can hardly miss the parallels during the life of Jesus.

Still, Israel had no king. Eventually the Maccabees became part of the government of Israel, and, along with other bright and clever politicians, expanded the borders of the nation to nearly equal those of Solomon's kingdom. But the rulers were not scions of the house of David, but largely from the priestly clans. Power struggles, compromises with the pagans, nepotism and corruption darkened the Hasmonean Kingdom of Judah (as it was called). A parade of famous persons made their way through several successive "dynasties:" Judas, Jonathan, Simon, Hyrcanus, Aristobulus — to name a few of these illustrious leaders. None of them were kings.

The dream lingered in the hearts of some that one day, a son of David would sit on his throne, and all of the hopeful expectations cast in the vision of the prophets would come to pass. Then came the Romans. Inquisitive Pompey, one of the Roman consuls, captured Jerusalem in 63 B.C.E., bringing to an end nearly 100 years of Jewish independence. He had been told that the Jews worshipped a god who had no statue or likeness in the Jerusalem Temple, and so he took a look to satisfy his curiosity. Years later, this same Roman was assassinated when he was fleeing to Egypt, prompting a non-biblical Jewish writer to feel sweet justice:

I had not long to wait before God showed me the insolent one slain on the mountains of Egypt, esteemed less than the least, on land and sea, his body tossed this way and that on the billows with much insolence, with none to bury him, since he rejected God with dishonor (Psalm of Solomon 2:30-32).

With the rise of the Romans, the political balance shifted within Israel. Soon, the Romans appointed their preferred ruler, a man named Antipater whom Julius Caesar made a tax-free Roman citizen with the title, "Procurator of Judaea." "He was allowed to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Judaea's tribute was reduced, and a number of other concessions were made to the Jews."<sup>9</sup> His sons, Phasael and Herod jointly ruled as tetrarchs. But a series of assassinations, starting with Caesar himself and reaching to Antipater (44-43 B.C.E.), upset the ruling order. The ensuing turmoil led to unrest on the eastern frontier with the kingdom of Parthia. Unchecked by the Romans, the Parthians put Antigonus (part of the previous ruling family) on the throne in Jerusalem as priest-king. Phasael and Herod were at risk, and soon Phasael was killed, while Herod fled to Rome.

While in Rome, Herod received the support of Antony and Octavian who declared him "King of the Jews" (40 B.C.E.). Emboldened by his new-found authority, Herod returned to Israel, and, by 37 B.C.E. had defeated the Parthians and eventually recaptured Jerusalem. His reign lasted 33 years, ending in 4 B.C.E. Once again Israel had a king. But not from David's throne. They had a priesthood, but one under the thumb of a puppet king. Would the dream survive?

A number of significant movements grew in importance during this period, among them the famous schools of the Pharisees and Sadducees. The former divided into right and left wings (Shammaites, Hillelites, respectively, ca. 10 B.C.E.), and they developed systems of biblical interpretations which resulted eventually in large volumes of important writings: Talmud and Mishnah. Largely a lay-led movement of scholars, the Pharisees ran the synagogue schools and occupied places on the ruling body in Jerusalem, the Sanhedrin. By contemporary standards, they were progressives. By contrast, the Sadducees were "old school," and found comfortable places among the wealthy and the powerful. They had affinities to the ruling High Priest who was appointed by the political authorities. He could not wear his vestments except by explicit permission of Herod (while he lived), and later of the Roman procurators.

Some in Israel saw the fallacy and blasphemy of this whole power arrangement. Herod was not a son of David, but a descendent of the wicked Edomites — a man who had the favor of Rome. Still, Herod cast more than a few bread crumbs toward the religious leadership. His crowning achievement in Jerusalem was the refurbishing

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<sup>9</sup> F.F. Bruce, *New Testament History*, Anchor Books, 1972 [originally published in England, Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1969], p. 13.

and virtual re-building of the Second Temple, making it among the wonders of the world. The Jews had mixed feelings about this man, and yet they could not help but support him. After all, he had defeated the Parthians, reclaimed the holy city, and now rebuilt the Temple. What more could a beleaguered nation asked of its king? How important is genealogy when you have glory?

It mattered a great deal to certain groups within Israel who found Herod's shenanigans without excuse. One of these groups moved east, out of Jerusalem, and formed a communal encampment by the Dead Sea. Josephus refers to them as the Essenes, and they seemed to bear resemblance to those Jews responsible for the famous scrolls found at Qumran in 1947 — the Qumran Community. These pious Jews viewed the Jerusalem establishment as corrupt and wicked, unworthy to lead the people of God. They especially rejected the order of the priesthood which they believed came from the wrong family. Only the family of Zadok could engender the priesthood, and the present order was not from Zadok. The Qumran community fastened their hopes on someone they called "The Teacher of Righteousness" who would be a rightful and reliable guide who had remarkable personal qualities, as well as strong leadership ability. He was responsible for the migration to Qumran, where a remnant of Israel, bound together by a new covenant, would live "in the desert" where they might hear "the voice of one crying, prepare the way of Yahweh; make straight in the desert a highway for our God" (Isaiah 40:3). Governed by a scroll known as *The Rule of the Community*, they lived by a strict discipline, studying the Scriptures, keeping the Torah, restoring a proper priesthood, and led by the Teacher of Righteousness. They also practiced extensive water rituals, as evidenced by the objects left behind for archaeologists to study.

The Qumran community anticipated a coming war in which the "sons of light" and the "sons of darkness" would battle for an ultimate victory which would lead to the restoration of God's true people in Israel, ruled from Jerusalem, and worshipping in a purified and properly staffed Temple. What we know about these devout Jews has been preserved in their writings, named with abbreviations below:

*The Manual of Discipline* or *The Rule* (1QS)

*Order of Warfare* (1QM)

*Thanksgiving Hymns* (1QH)

They offer solid evidence for the existence of the Community, its life and thought. Besides these works, are the commentaries on various biblical texts, such as:

*Habakkuk Commentary* (1QpHab)

But among the most valuable documents are manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible, significantly older than those currently used in 1947. The most famous is:

*The Isaiah Scroll* (1QIs<sup>a</sup> and 1QIs<sup>b</sup>).

With the exception of Esther, all of the Old Testament books are represented in whole or in part in the Qumran collection.

One final Jewish movement of importance in the years leading up the appearance of Jesus were the Zealots. The idea of religious "zeal" (Hebrew: *qinnē'*) has a long a venerable history in Israel. Faced with dire crises provoked by wicked leaders, holy men rose up to defend the honor of Yahweh, some at the edge of the sword. Surely the sons of Mattathias (the Maccabees) could be counted among them. With the rise of Roman power and the evident corruption of Israel's holy institutions by Jewish compromisers, Zealots took matters into their own hands, often attacking Roman soldiers as they journeyed through narrow mountain passes — easy targets for the Zealots' famous "daggers." One nickname for the Zealots was the "Sicarii," or "carriers of the dagger" which was hidden beneath their garments. Some scholars believe that Judas Iscariot was really "Judas one of the Sicarii." Another disciple was Simon Zelotes, also a likely candidate. Of course, these identifications do not prove present membership in the movement, but they may suggest the range of adherents who eventually joined the Jesus movement — adherents who longed for the triumph of Israel and the fulfillment of God's promises.

## Preparing the Way to See Salvation: Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, <sup>2</sup> during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. <sup>3</sup> And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>4</sup> As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. <sup>5</sup> Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, <sup>6</sup> and all flesh shall see the salvation of God'" (Luke 3:1-6).

Luke wrote more of the New Testament than any other writer, including Paul. His Greek is the most polished and stylistic than any other writer. And he was not a Jew but a Gentile. He was also quite serious about his work, giving his readers a concisely worded introduction explaining how he went about his task:

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, <sup>2</sup> just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, <sup>3</sup> it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, <sup>4</sup> that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught (Luke 1:1-4).

All sorts of words jump out of the text which reinforce Luke's claim to accuracy: narrative, eyewitnesses, followed all things closely, orderly account, and certainty — to list a few. In addition he discloses that *other writers* were also compilers of information, and that he is joining them in this endeavor.

What were these "things that have been accomplished among us"? Luke would reiterate the content of his work in yet a second volume, known as *The Acts of the Apostles*:

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, <sup>2</sup> until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. <sup>3</sup> To them he presented himself alive after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God (Acts 1:1-3).

We can now see that Luke's first volume, *Luke*, is about "all that Jesus began to do and teach," and that it records events which reach their climax in Jesus' resurrection — an event established historically "by many proofs." From our previous studies (see the *Acts* series: *WhatIf*) come some general observations about the importance of Luke's writings:

1. The writer acknowledges the existence of other written compilations relative to Jesus, and attests that they were based on eyewitness accounts and on the actual involvement of their compilers *also* as "ministers of the word."
2. When Luke says "the things that have been accomplished among us," he is using the sort of language found in use by ancient historians when describing "events which have taken place." The Greek term used here is *pragmata*: that which has been *done*. More than this, however, he uses words which imply "fulfillment" and not just "happening." That is, God had promised these events in the past and they have come to completion ("been accomplished", *plērophoreō*, perfect participle) more recently through the life of Jesus. Historians distinguish between *what happened* and *what was going on*. Luke was interested in both.
3. Words like "closely" and "orderly" suggest the *care* with which Luke carried out his writing task. Like ancient historians, he knew that history influences what people do *in the present* and is not merely a record of what happened *in the past*. If that is true, then only accurate historical information should comprise the work that Luke was compiling.
4. Luke writes for a very *personal audience*, and he obviously knows this person he calls "Theophilus," though we know nothing more about him for certain. Scholars believe, based on the way Luke addresses Theophilus, that he had some social standing in his own community. Moreover, based on what we know of other ancient writers, a man like Theophilus may have been Luke's *patron* during the course of his composition of *Luke-Acts*. That is, Theophilus paid for Luke's travel and other expenses incurred in the research and development of his works. By underwriting the work, this patron was also making a huge contribution to the rest of the Christian community and the world, including ourselves who read it some

2000 years later. By a simple act of financial stewardship, Theophilus wielded his own *influence* through Luke and to the world.

5. Nor was Theophilus a mere spectator, curiously seeking information on the "Christians." Luke uses a Greek word which is the basis for our English term "catechism" to describe how Theophilus has been "taught" (*katēcheō*, in the aorist passive form). The manner in which Luke *influences* his patron is grounded in the actual, historical events which took place and not on hearsay or rumor (see also 2 Peter 1:16 for the firm commitment to accuracy and eyewitness testimony). What Theophilus comes to believe about Jesus is based on a firm foundation. Thanks to Luke, his faith is a grounded faith, a reasoned faith, as ours should be.

Let us turn to this week's first reading (Luke 3:1-6).

Notice how the writer *dates his material*, locating the events in real history:

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, <sup>2</sup> during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

Here's how the history might work: Based on Luke's use of the Syro-Macedonian calendar John the Baptist began his ministry between October 20, 27 and October 9, 28. This was the "fifteenth year of Tiberius (14-37 C.E.)." John began his ministry after the arrival of Pontius Pilate (26-36 C.E.), by the fall of 27. John baptized Jesus soon thereafter, and the traditional date of January 6 is here used. This date is supported by an understanding of Luke's usage of Jesus being "about thirty years" old at that time, and the thirty years are exact by the Jewish or Syro-Macedonian calendars.<sup>10</sup>

The question of Luke's skill as an historian is much debated.<sup>11</sup> These *Notes* are not the place to re-play the discussions, pro and con. However, with regard to the passage before us, the names of persons and their synchronization with each other leave little doubt that Luke is standing on solid chronological ground when he introduces his narrative. He correctly uses terms like "tetrarch," a common title for "petty princes" rather than full-fledged kings.<sup>12</sup> In this he correctly depicts the situation with Herod the Great's sons after his death in 4 B.C.E. To varying degrees they "succeeded" him, but with limited geographical assignments and under the careful scrutiny of Rome. Notice how Luke begins his account by dating it in terms of the Caesar's reign, and then, in a subsidiary fashion, writes about the other rulers. At the same time, he names some, such as Herod Antipas (4 B.C.E. – 39 C.E.) of Galilee and Pontius Pilate, who will play key roles in both the life of John the Baptizer and of Jesus. Nor can we miss the adjunct reference to Annas (6-15 C.E.) and Caiaphas (18-36 C.E.), High Priests who played crucial roles in the trial of Jesus.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> In the later version of the Syro-Macedonian calendar the new year began with the month Hyperberetaios, which was permanently aligned with October 1 of the Julian calendar. See J. Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, Princeton Univ. Press, 1964, 61-69, 259; H. W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*, Zondervan, 1977, 31-32; Josephus, *Ant.* XVIII 4:6 and 6:10; *Wars* II 9:6; Suetonius, *Tiberius* 73:1; Tacitus, *Annals* 1:5; "Chronology of the New Testament," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopædia*, 646; F. Madden, *History of Jewish Coinage*, Argonaut, 1864, rev. 1967, 23; A. E. Samuel, *Greek and Roman Chronology*, Oscar Beck, 1972, 268.

<sup>11</sup> See I.H. Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian*, Zondervan, 1970, pp. 53-76.

<sup>12</sup> John Nolland, *Luke*, Volume 35A, in the Word Biblical Commentary, Word Books, 1989, p. 139.

<sup>13</sup> In addition, Luke mentions Philip (4 B.C.E.-34 C.E.) and Lysanias. This latter figure had been somewhat of a mystery to historians. Abilene was to the north of Galilee and Iturea, between the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon range of mountains, west of Damascus. For many years, the only known Lysanias was one who had been executed in 36 BC - sixty years before the date given by Luke. Skeptical scholars mocked Luke's historical inaccuracy. But now two Greek inscriptions from Abila, northwest of Damascus, have been found, which prove there was a "Lysanias the ruler" between the years 14 and 29 C.E. There is an inscription of a temple in Abila "for the salvation of the Lords Imperial, by a freedman of Lysanias the ruler." "Lords Imperial" was a technical title given jointly to the emperor Tiberius and his mother Livia, widow of Augustus, so this inscription must have been made between 14 C.E., when Tiberius became emperor, and 29 C.E., when Livia died.

Put simply, Luke locates the events which follow in the stream of real history where identifiable historical figures interact with the key characters in his story. His approach invites us to take him seriously, historically speaking, as he reveals to the reader "the account of the things that have been fulfilled among us..."

Mentioning the two High Priests, Annas and Caiaphas, immediately prior to John son of Zechariah ("the Baptizer") is intentional on Luke's part. Zechariah was himself a priest, as Luke's told his readers at the outset of his Gospel:

<sup>5</sup> In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. <sup>6</sup> And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. <sup>7</sup> But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years. <sup>8</sup> Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, <sup>9</sup> according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. <sup>10</sup> And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. <sup>11</sup> And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense (Luke 1:5-11).

The key phrases are:

1. "a priest named Zechariah"
2. "division of Abijah"
3. "wife from the daughters of Aaron"
4. "serving as a priest before God"
5. "righteous before God, walking blamelessly..."
6. "his division was on duty"
7. "custom of the priesthood"
8. "chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense"

Luke makes every effort to establish the ancestry of John as belonging to the devout priestly families. He also gives us information about how the priests served the Temple. During the Second Temple period, the twenty-four priestly divisions served in the temple at Jerusalem in a rotation system. A list of priestly divisions can be found in 1 Chronicles 24:7-18. The priests themselves lived not only in Jerusalem but also in other settlements in the land of Israel. When it was "time for the division to go up [to Jerusalem]" (*Mishnah*, Ta'anit 4:2), the priests left their homes, went up to Jerusalem for a week, and afterwards returned to their homes in Judea or Galilee. Abijah was the eighth priestly division. The priestly rotation began in the Hebrew month of Nissan (mid-March to mid-April), and therefore the division of Abijah would have served at the end of Iyyar (mid-April to mid-May) and again at the end of Marheshvan (mid-October to mid-November).

Since separatist movements, like the Essenes (Qumran community) questioned the legitimacy of the Jerusalem priesthood, it is interesting to see how Luke documents the devoutness of Zechariah and his family, perhaps to show that not all the priests were bad, and that John himself came from a righteous priestly household in which both parents were descendents of Aaron. John will be the one chosen by God to introduce Jesus to Israel, and, says Luke, John's credentials are without blemish. As the angel announced John's birth to his father:

..."Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. <sup>14</sup> And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, <sup>15</sup> for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. <sup>16</sup> And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, <sup>17</sup> and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared" (Luke 1:13-17).

Because John has such an important role in introducing Jesus to Israel, Luke makes sure we know the historical context, including the dates, when this crucial event took place. This was common practice in the Old Testament when key prophets arose in Israel as evidenced in Isaiah 6:1; Jeremiah 1:2; Ezekiel 1:1-3; Haggai 1:1; Zechariah 1:1. After all, the prophet is the vehicle for "the word of God to come" to Israel. This arrival of the *hrēma theou* marks a new beginning and the commencement of a new epoch in the life of God's people. John's character is authenticated by his priestly birth and by his receipt of the divine word of God. While he

may have appeared spontaneously as an itinerant prophet at the banks of the Jordan River "in the desert," Luke clarifies his essential roots within the sacred priesthood of Israel and as one bearing the holy word of Yahweh. The idea of the word "coming on" or "coming to" is also an Old Testament idea (Numbers 24:2; Judges 3:10; 1 Samuel 19:23-24).

Locating John's ministry "in the wilderness" is strategic. We know from Luke 1:80 that he spent time there "until he appeared publicly to Israel." This reference has stirred up much discussion, especially in light of the discovery of the Qumran community near the Dead Sea and in the vicinity of John's ministry. Was John the Baptizer an Essence and one-time participant in the Qumran sect? In particular, similarities between John and the Qumran movement regarding their baptisms, their self-identification with Isaiah 40:3 and their apocalyptic rhetoric, have drawn some scholars to the conclusion that John may have at one time had direct contact with the Essenes.

However, there does exist an explicit reference to John the Baptist in Josephus' *Antiquities*.

But to some Jews the destruction of Herod's army seemed to be divine vengeance, and certainly a just vengeance, for his treatment of John, surnamed the Baptist. For Herod had put him to death, though he was a good man and had exhorted (keleuonta) the Jews to lead righteous lives (areten epaskousin), to practice justice towards their fellows and piety towards God (ta pros allelous dikaiosune kai pros ton theon eusebeia chromenois), and so doing to join in baptism. In his view this was a necessary preliminary if baptism was to be acceptable to God. They must not employ it to gain pardon for whatever sins they committed, but as a consecration of the body (hagneia tou somatos) implying that the soul was already thoroughly cleansed by righteousness.<sup>14</sup>

Although he often accommodates his language to Hellenistic thought in his description of Jewish theological beliefs, Josephus seems to give an accurate description of the content of John's message. Probably only John's alleged distinction between the cleansing of the "soul" and the "body" is so Hellenized as to need paraphrasing into more Semitic expression. Josephus makes *four* points about John's message.

- John exhorted Jews to begin to live righteous lives towards one another and towards God. In other words, John preached the necessity of what Jews referred to as repentance (teshuvah), the turning from sin to obedience to the Law.
- John required that those who responded to his exhortation to undergo an immersion in water (baptism).
- John insisted that the cleansing of the "soul" resulted from the repentance and not from baptism. As indicated, this manner of expression is Josephus' accommodation to his non-Jewish readership. What he means by the "cleansing of the soul" is the forgiveness of sins, which he insisted was conditional upon repentance and not baptism.
- John's interpretation of the baptism that he required Jews to undergo was that it was a "consecration of the body," seeing that the "soul" was already cleansed by means of repentance. Probably, by the "consecration of the body," Josephus is referring to ritual washing. If so, in his view, John offered the possibility of both forgiveness and ritual purity.

In contrast to the gospels, Josephus' description of John's message lacks an eschatological (end-time) dimension. Nothing is said about a imminent judgment or of John's role as precursor to the one greater than he, whose sandals he is not worthy to untie, and one who will baptize with the spirit of holiness. Either not everyone in the first century—including Josephus—viewed John the Baptist as an eschatological figure or, more probably, Josephus suppressed this dimension of John's message. Any reference to John the Baptist as preacher of eschatological judgment and as precursor of an eschatological figure who would bring judgment would have been detrimental to Josephus' aim of portraying Jews as good citizens of the Roman empire in light of the recent Jewish revolt, which ended in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.

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<sup>14</sup> *Antiquities*, 18.116-118.

John is, therefore, a figure known to at least one Jewish historian and who may have had some connection to a similar movement (Qumran) located near his ministry site. What does his ministry look like, and how does it dovetail with the subsequent work of Jesus of Nazareth? John's ministry unfolded in "all the country around the Jordan" (*pasan tēn perichōron tou Iordanou*). The same expression appears in Genesis 13:10, in the *Septuagint* (Greek) Old Testament, where it refers to wilderness areas which *have water*, and thus capable of sustaining life and a population. John is an *not* a desert monk, isolated from Israel, seeking a mystical experience with God. Rather, he is more like Israel on the banks of the Jordan, encamped after forty years of wilderness sojourn, awaiting the word from Yahweh that the time has come to enter Canaan, the land of promise. What lies between the wilderness and Canaan is none other than the Jordan River. The river acts as a spiritual boundary through which Israel must pass before God finally fulfills the promise and *satisfies the expectation*.

In many ways, a drama is being played out by the banks of the Jordan in which John re-enacts the ancient story of Israel *after a long period of wilderness existence*, waiting in expectation for Joshua to give the command and lead the people to the other side and into the promised land. Coincidentally, John's role is limited to *preparing the way of the Lord*, while it will fall to Jesus — whose name is really *Joshua (Yeshua)* — at last to bring Israel home. But the Canaan to which they are summoned is not the physical land of Israel in which they have lived nearly five hundred years since returning from the Exile. Instead, they are symbolically re-living the ancient story so that they might find a "better country" to which Jesus will soon bring them. Having fixed their expectations on the old Israel and its land, Jesus will now offer them the hope that "the meek will *inherit the earth*" — a designation pointing to more than a piece of real estate along the eastern coast of the Mediterranean.

In a moving text, written sometime before 70 C.E., a Christian writer with a firm grasp of Israel's history wrote:

<sup>13</sup> These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. <sup>14</sup> For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. <sup>15</sup> If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. <sup>16</sup> But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city (Hebrews 11:13-16).

Phrases like "things promised," "greeting them from afar," and "desire a better country" all echo with expectation that at some time in the future, God would bring them into a "land" which was a "better country," a "city" which God "has prepared for them." When the people gathered by the Jordan and heard the message of John the Baptizer, they were witnessing the fulfillment of these things which their forefathers had expected, "from afar," but which they were about to see fulfilled in their own time.

Baptism is not original with the Christian faith or the New Testament. What John was doing which earned him the nickname "the Baptizer,"<sup>15</sup> was engaged in a form of water ritual well-known within the priestly service of Israel. Such "washings" or "lustrations" were already part of Jewish life.

1. Full dipping or immersion of the body in water was called *t'bilāh* which happened in a tub called a *miqwāh*. This was done both in mainstream Judaism and at the Qumran community<sup>16</sup>. The reasons for Jewish baptism were commonly: 1) conversion to Judaism (proselyte baptism); 2) cleansing from bodily discharges, both normal and abnormal; 3) contact with death (e.g. touching a carcass).
2. Washing of objects or parts of the body. This was done 1) periodically throughout the day; 2) at meals; 3) as part of sacred feasts (Passover); 4) part of worship (at the Blessing).

Associated with these water rituals was the idea of "purity," and the removal of defilement caused by contact with unclean things or persons.

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<sup>15</sup> Traditionally, the Christian church has called him "John the Baptist." The underlying Greek designation for John is *baptistēs* based on the verb form *baptizō*, and literally meaning "one who baptizes," thus our preferred rendering, "John the Baptizer." The problem of the word "Baptist" is that it has associations with the Christian denomination of the same name. He lived too early to be a Baptist, but he certainly was a Baptizer!

<sup>16</sup> See *The Qumran Baptism and John the Baptist's Baptism*, by Leonard F. Badia, University Press of America, 1980, for one treatment of this topic.

Another significance of ritual washings for purity's sake has to do with *preparation for contact with the sacred*. In anticipation of performing sacred acts, a person cleanses himself from impurity. Entering the realm of the sacred has importance for the work of John the Baptizer. He proclaimed the coming of the Lord — the most sacred event of all, and required that his audience be ritually pure in expectation of the Lord's arrival. That is why, as Luke tells us, the baptism was "of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Like the great prophets of Israel's past, John calls the people back from their alienation and rebellion relative to Yahweh. They are asked to focus their lives on God and His will, placing full confidence in Him and turning away from whatever displeases Him.<sup>17</sup>

We pause to reflect on the significance of this for our Lenten observance. One vital purpose of keeping the feasts of sacred time, is to examine ourselves in a focused and concentrated fashion, looking for ways to more perfectly surrender ourselves to Jesus Christ in the service of His kingdom. While we do not literally stand on the banks of the Jordan, we do stand before critical turning points in our lives, and Lent offers us opportunity to translate those experiences into something meaningful.

What is repentance? At times in church history the idea of repentance was translated as "do penance," and had to do with acts of contrition performed in the confessional which ensured forgiveness of sins. The Reformers (Luther, Calvin, etc.) rejected the "works" model of the confessional and turned rather to its place as a form of pastoral care and counsel. They were closer, in this regard, to the biblical idea contained in the Greek word *metanoia* which pertains to fundamental "change" of our whole being in relationship to God and each other.

The historian Josephus in his former life, was a commander in the Jewish army of resistance during the war of 66-73 C.E. against Rome. Early on he knew that the effort was doomed, and so, after surrendering his armies to the Roman occupation, he turned to his soldiers and his countrymen, and told them to "repent" (using the same Greek word), by which he meant, they should set aside "their agendas" and accept the one he was proposing, namely lay down your arms and find ways to end the war peacefully. This use of "repent" is significant, for it underscores the idea that "to repent" means to set aside our own agendas and take up the agenda of God. After all, if God is coming (and that's what John claimed was about to happen), doesn't it make sense to take up "His cause", and not try to make Him adopt ours?

Those were difficult words for John's audience to hear. John was asking them to think about things in radically different ways. And there could be no more radical re-thinking of things than accepting what Jesus, who was about to appear, would ask them to be and do. Old Testament texts like Nehemiah 9:1-3 describe a whole nation taking such a moral inventory. In our case, sifting through the rubbish heap of the past, we discard habits and actions, the failed products of our bad decisions. In repentance, we also refuse to be held captive by the false perceptions we have of ourselves, including the demeaning ones absorbed from the ill-considered opinions of others.

In response to repentance is the promise of God's forgiveness. This was no small expectation! A whole nation had come to believe that its sinful past changed them in their present Exile. God's blessing had been withheld and his promise deferred because their "sins separated them from God," as Isaiah had once told them:

Behold, Yahweh's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear; <sup>2</sup> but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear (Isaiah 59:1-2).

Those are harsh words, but for many in Israel during John's time they were a daily reality. Something needed to change (repentance) in order for forgiveness to come. The prophet Daniel while still in Babylonian Exile had prayed to God for just such forgiveness (Daniel 9) in hope that God would respond. His closing words were:

<sup>18</sup> O my God, incline your ear and hear. Open your eyes and see our desolations, and the city that is called by your name. For we do not present our pleas before you because of our righteousness, but because of your great mercy (Daniel 9:18).

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<sup>17</sup> E. Wurthwein, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Volume 4, pp. 984-986.

For Luke, the historical event of John's arrival at the banks of the Jordan, sometime in 28 C.E., had everything to do with preparing a nation for God's arrival. The basis for these events was rooted in Isaiah 40:3-5, a text which Luke quotes at this point in our reading. History was embodying the fulfillment of the ancient Scriptures which the pious in Israel had been reading for sometime. Certain elements of this prophecy take center-stage:

1. "A voice calling." The use of "voice" (Greek: *phonē*; Hebrew: *qōl*) derives its significance from Jewish belief that God's word had fallen silent and the gift of prophecy had ceased. To cope with this absence of "the word," a sort of "divination" arose in some Jewish circles which appealed to something called "the daughter of the voice" (*bath-kol*) which made possible the hearing of "oracles." The force of this phrase is a kind of "echo," but not the voice itself.<sup>18</sup> This is a divine revelation distinctly inferior to the Biblical view. For even in the Biblical passages where mention is made of the voice from heaven, all that is really essential to the revelation is already present, at least in principle, without the audible voice. When the prophet tells of "a voice" he is not limiting himself to an echo, but is announcing the very word of God which breaks the silence.
2. "in the desert (wilderness)." No doubt this reminds the audience of their wilderness sojourn when Moses led the people from Egypt. To be "in the wilderness" means to be free from Egypt and on the road to Canaan, the land of promise. It also means that place of ultimate dependency on God's provision and care. Negatively, the wilderness reveals the frailty, doubt, and sin of a people not yet ready for receiving the promise or fighting the battle for Canaan. Later, before Jesus begins his public ministry, he will face the Tempter in the wilderness where the forty days will prove his identity as God's Messiah and Son. John brings Israel into this place to strip away all human support, reveal human weakness, and cast them on the mercy of God. Wilderness is preparation for the coming kingdom of God.
3. "Prepare the way for the Lord." Among the large themes present in the literature of Judaism contemporary with John and Jesus is *the return of Yahweh to Zion*. God is coming, and we must be ready to receive Him. The crooked, the potholes, the obstacles must give way to the straightened, level and open highway "of our God." This preparation (from the Greek verb *hetoimazō*, "make, get ready, provide, make arrangements") is framed in terms of a decisive and time-sensitive event (the aorist tense). Classical usage of this word has a tinge of "zeal" about it, such that the preparations are made *in earnest*, sparing no expense or sacrifice. The underlying Hebrew verb in Isaiah 40:3 is *pānāh*. The basic meaning is "to turn," but here it may assume a number of nuances. For example, "to turn towards" a direction (Deuteronomy 2:3); a person (Jeremiah 50:16); a thing (Exodus 16:10). It may mean "to turn back" (Joshua 8:20); "to turn from" (Genesis 18:22); "to turn around" (Exodus 2:12); "to look for, expect" (Haggai 1:9); "to pay attention to, consider" (Job 6:28). Israel must turn its attention to the road down which Yahweh will soon walk on His return to Zion.
4. "All mankind will see God's salvation." Oddly, the call for preparation is not about Israel alone. What is about to happen will impact the whole world. That is why such urgency is required and such attention must be paid. The original promise of God to Abraham involved a chosen people *through whom God would bless the whole world*. There's nothing selfish or private about the coming of God to His people. What must happen is that the world might finally see God after having lived in the darkness. Israel's task is to make Him known. John's part in all of this is to introduce to Israel the One who will reveal God to the world.

How will God be revealed? The text of Isaiah, which Luke cites, places the emphasis on what God *does for the world* and for Israel: He comes to save them both. Salvation sounds especially religious in nature, but to the ancients the underlying idea was "to deliver" or "bring the victory." The name of the Coming One would be "Jesus" or *Yeshua* which means "the Savior" or "He Who Saves." Luke, in an earlier passage, records the prayer of aged Simeon who dedicated the infant Jesus in the Temple:

<sup>29</sup> "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; <sup>30</sup> for my eyes have seen your salvation <sup>31</sup> that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, <sup>32</sup> a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel" (Luke 2:29-32).

By seeing Jesus, Simeon was seeing God's salvation.

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<sup>18</sup> See James Orr, M.A., D.D. General Editor. "Definition for 'BATH KOL'". *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 1915.

## What Did John Tell Israel: Summary

Between Luke 3:6 and 3:21, where we now pick up the reading, is Luke's account of John's preaching. A few remarks about that will serve to introduce our next reading. What does John tell Israel in order to prepare them for the coming of God to Zion? By way of summary, here's what Luke narrates in 3:7-20:

1. He calls them a brood of snakes who stand in need of fundamental change in their lives, else they will be swept up in what he calls the "coming wrath." What does he mean? While it's tempting to think of the word "wrath" (*orgē*) in terms of "going to hell when you die," that would have been completely off the map to his audience. Everybody knew that a crisis was brewing in Israel, and that the nation faced tough choices if they were to avoid calamity. The dissident groups within Israel, as well as the more radical traditional sects, like the Pharisees, were polarizing the nation in ways that resembled a revolutionary movement. Rome would not like the results. The "live-and-let-live" crowd, such as the Sadducees or the High Priests, did little to assuage the simmering embers. If anything, they tended to add fuel to the fire by acting in ways that seemed to betray Israel to their Gentile overlords, the Romans.
2. When John speaks of snakes and coming wrath, he uses language which implies the revolutionary spirit as well as collusion with paganism. Both groups have it wrong, he seems to be saying, and only a complete change of agendas can avert what's about to overtake Israel. He rejects all claims to human ancestry and throws the full emphasis on repentance and fruitfulness. Don't rest on your laurels, he is telling them. Make a fresh start, and don't be fooled by either the Zealots or the Traditionalists who both have it wrong.
3. When asked for positive guidance ("what shall we do then?"), John counsels fundamental ethical change which cuts across all social and ethnic lines (ordinary people, tax collectors, soldiers, etc.). He tells them in clear terms, Start living like the holy people of God once again.
4. His words and manner of speaking so impact the crowds that they suspect he might be the Messiah, God's promised one. Hearing John's words by the Jordan in the wilderness and so close to Qumran, some no doubt thought about what they had been taught about Messiah. John seemed to fit the pattern they expected.
5. But John rejects the linkage. He tells them that the Christ will 1) be more powerful than he; 2) baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire, not water; 3) gather repentant Israel like wheat into the barn; 4) judge unrepentant Israel with fire. By contrast, he, John, is doing none of these things.
6. "Good News" is Luke's phrase which connects the preaching of John with that of Jesus. Ancient Israel had heard about "Good News" in the words of the prophets:

<sup>9</sup> Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!" <sup>10</sup> Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. <sup>11</sup> He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young (Isaiah 40:9-11).

<sup>7</sup> How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns" (Isaiah 52:7).

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; <sup>2</sup> to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor (Isaiah 61:1-2).

7. But John is preaching to a whole nation and not only to individuals. That is why his message turns to the shenanigans of Herod Antipas the tetrarch who ruled Galilee. The Herods, since the days of Herod the Great who died in 4 B.C.E., had enjoyed a measure of support within Israel, though not among the radical groups. It's amazing what a nation will tolerate if sufficient perks benefit them. Herod the Great built the Temple and arranged for tax relief from time to time. Though not a true descendent of David, he somehow managed to gain sufficient support to stay in power without provoking a revolution. His private life was not as praiseworthy as his public. Nor did he keep himself free from pagan compromise. At his death, his sons came to power but not with the same skill or support. Herod Antipas had violated Israel's laws concerning divorce and remarriage, as well as insult other ethical principles. John took him to task for this. And, as Luke tells us, it cost him his freedom and ultimately his life (Luke 9:7ff).

## Revealing Jesus to Israel: Luke 3:21-22

<sup>21</sup> Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, <sup>22</sup> and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:21-22).

We come now to John's role in introducing Jesus to Israel. Unlike the other three Gospels, Luke does not offer details on Jesus' baptism. Instead, he connects the baptism of "all the people" (*hapanta ton laon*) with the baptism of Jesus in an almost matter-of-fact fashion. He describes the past-tense nature of Jesus' baptism with the expression "Jesus also *had been* baptized..." using the aorist tense. Luke shows Jesus as *being identified with all the people* in his baptism. It might strike us as unusual that a baptismal rite intended to symbolize repentance and forgiveness of sin should involve someone who was "without sin" (Hebrews 4:15; John 8:46; 1 Peter 1:19). Why was Jesus baptized? That question is not addressed in Luke's Gospel. Were we to examine the other Gospels, the question does come up:

<sup>14</sup> John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" <sup>15</sup> But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented (Matthew 3:14-15).

The notion of "fulfill" is essential to the coming of Jesus. He came not to destroy Torah but to fulfill it:

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. <sup>18</sup> For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished (Matthew 5:17-18).

"Righteousness" is what God is trying to achieve through His people Israel. They are suppose to be the means for "putting the world to rights." John and Jesus are God's plan to effect this righteousness. By identifying with Israel in their sinfulness, Jesus takes the first steps toward what will be the fulfillment of salvation on the cross: he will "bear our sins in his body" there:

<sup>24</sup> He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed (1 Peter 2:24).

Notice how our ability to "live to righteousness" depends on Jesus bearing our sins in his body; his wounds lead to our healing.

Luke's account focuses on the simple act of Jesus identifying with "all the people," and so he keeps his narrative concise without the details. However, he does offer one crucial piece of information about Jesus after his baptism: "...and [he] was praying." The Greek word for "praying" is *proseuchomai*, used here as a present participle — indicating a continuous process. A certain *expectancy* fills the narrative: the praying of Jesus draws a clear separation between his baptism and what happens next. Jesus waits for God to act, and his prayer looks forward to a decisive event about to happen. Baptism and prayer taken together point to Jesus' discovery and acceptance of his vocation. Much has been written about whether Jesus knew the full extent of his identity as God's Son and Israel's Messiah prior to this event. Certain hints appear at his visit to the Temple with his parents when he speaks of needing to be "in my Father's house" (Luke 2:49). From that point forward he had been "subject" to his parents and showed the familiar signs of normal growth and development:

<sup>51</sup> And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them. And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart. <sup>52</sup> And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man (Luke 2:51-52).

In this state of prayerfulness, the heavens are "opened." The Greek verb is *anoigō*. When applied to "heaven," 1) something descends from it (Matt. 3:16; Luke 3:21; John 1:51-52; Acts 10:11), or 2) something is said to be seen there (Acts 7:56; Rev. 4:1ff; 11:19; 19:11). Opening heaven also implies access or entrance to the holy place of God. Jewish readers would recall the experience of Jacob's "ladder" which extended from heaven to earth and on which angels were both descending and ascending (Genesis 28:12). In Hebrew literature the opening of heaven had apocalyptic implications (Ezekiel 1:1; *Apoc. Bar.* 22:1; *T. Levi* 2:6; 18:6-7; *T. Judah* 24:2; Daniel 7:13; *4 Ezra* 13:3). The relationship between heaven and earth is not spatial in these texts, for the reality of heaven is no farther away from human beings than the mere "opening" of a door or window (see Malachi 3:10). The immediate consequence of heaven's opening up is the "descent" of the Holy Spirit. The

idea that God rips open the heavens "and comes down" appears in Isaiah 64:1 and comes in the form of a plea that this would one day happen.

The use of "dove" imagery for the Spirit is unique in the New Testament. When the word appears in the Hebrew Bible it has to do with Israel, and it is not especially complimentary or hopeful (Isaiah 38:14; Hosea 7:11). Following the flood, a dove is sent out three times (Genesis 8) and returns twice, finally with signs of life in its beak. The role is that of a sign that the floodwaters have receded and the earth is being restored. The *Song of Songs* uses the image within a romantic picture of the two lovers (2:14; 5:2; 6:9). Of these other examples, the post-flood usage shares common themes with the present reading. We have water as a background (flood, Jordan River), and the idea of restoration after judgment fits the general context of John's preaching (see above). To Noah, the dove was a sign of the new world emerging after judgment. Jesus is God's agent of restoration, and the dove appears to confirm that as a sign. Baptism and the flood appear together in the context of 1 Peter 3:20-21 where judgment and salvation take place sequentially. On the occasion of the flood, the heavens were opened so that watery judgment might fall (Genesis 7:11). Consistent with these related images, Luke narrates events surrounding Jesus' baptism which speak of similar realities.

The role of the Spirit in the Old Testament is mentioned early: Genesis 1:2 where the Spirit "hovers" over the functionless deep waters preparing to implement the divine words of creation which follow. Jesus, at his baptism, awaits the Spirit's arrival and the promise of New Creation to follow. Furthermore, the book of Isaiah looks forward to the coming of God's chosen servant ("the servant of Yahweh") in the power and under the influence of the Spirit:

Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations (Isaiah 42:1; 61:1ff).

Of importance to Luke is the next element in his narrative: literally, "a voice from heaven there was." We have written earlier about the "daughter of the voice," being a temporary remedy for God's 500 year-long silence. But this is no substitute voice: we actually have the voice of God speaking concerning Jesus. Opening heaven allows the Spirit to descend on Jesus; opening heaven allows the voice of God to be heard. The Old Testament on occasion records "a voice from heaven" (Deuteronomy 4:36; Daniel 4:31; 2 Samuel 22:14; Psalm 18:13; 68:33; Jeremiah 10:13; 51:16). The New Testament uses "voice from heaven" language: 1) in conjunction with the baptism of Jesus (Matthew 3:17; Mark 1:11; here); 2) in response to a prayer of Jesus (John 12:28); 3) to Peter concerning the salvation of the Gentiles (Acts 11:9); 4) transfiguration of Jesus (2 Peter 1:17-18; Matthew 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35); 5) revelation from God within the highly charged apocalyptic context of *Revelation* (10:4; 11:12, 15; 12:10; 14:2, 13; 18:4; 19:1).

The phrase "voice from heaven" is a concise way of saying that God is speaking! And what does He say? The words constitute a royal announcement about the person of Jesus. What the voice says is spoken directly to Jesus, addressed in the second person singular: "You are" (*su ei*). Here are words revealing personal identity and, at the same time, making a kingly declaration: "My Son, the Beloved; in you I choose (or take pleasure, delight)" (*ho huios mou ho agapētos, en soi eudokēsa*).

1. "You are" is the firm declaration of Jesus' identity and the assurance that Jesus indeed has the Messianic consciousness. Perhaps the prayer of Jesus reached toward this awareness, and now God has honored Jesus' request.
2. "My Son, the Beloved" finds parallels in the Old Testament, especially in those contexts where God is installing His king on Zion. Specifically, the following passages support this connection:

I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you (Psalm 2:7).

<sup>13</sup> I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from him who was before you, <sup>14</sup> but I will confirm him in my house and in my kingdom forever, and his throne shall be established forever (1 Chronicles 17:13-14).

He shall build a house for my name. He shall be my son, and I will be his father, and I will establish his royal throne in Israel forever (1 Chronicles 22:10).

From Hebrews 1:5ff we find additional evidence that the New Testament uses term "Son" as a title, not only of Jesus' divinity but also of his royal kingship. Indeed, when *Chronicles* says that that God will "not take my steadfast love from him," he is using language virtually identical to "the beloved" in our present reading. The voice from heaven is God's royal decree that God's King, Jesus, has arrived and is about to launch His great kingdom project — the kingdom of God.

3. Reference to God being "pleased" with Jesus suffers from an imperfect translation. Better rendered as "I choose," the term (from the Greek *eudokeō*) implies that Jesus is God's choice to be Israel's (and the world's) favored King. Some other passages confirm this translation (1 Peter 2:4, 6; ). To be chosen by God also means that Jesus is the basis for choosing Israel once more and points to the theology of "election." Effectively, God chooses His people "in Jesus," and Jesus becomes God's agent for the choice of the world. A number of passages support God's choice of human beings because of His choice of Jesus (Romans 11:5; Romans 16:13; Ephesians 1:4; 1 Corinthians 1:27-28; 12:18; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; James 2:5). Election is not arbitrary or aristocratic but wholly a matter of grace, and it is pre-figured by God's choice of Jesus.

### **Earthly and Heavenly Lineage: Luke 3:23-33**

Jesus, when he began his ministry, was about thirty years of age, being the son (as was supposed) of Joseph ... the son of Enos, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God (Luke 3:23).

Luke's strategy in placing the genealogy of Jesus at this juncture is nothing shy of brilliant, as we shall see. A few comments about that genealogy are in order. We have excerpted the entire family tree, placing the opening and closing lines in our quotation.

The age of Jesus at the onset of his ministry, thirty years, offers the reader some sense of timing for subsequent events. We have already discussed the chronological issues involved in dating the events surrounding Luke's account, noting his historical references in Luke 3:1. However, the reference to thirty years also connects this passage with some Old Testament material about the age of those who begin priestly service in Israel. This is evidenced from the following example:

The LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, <sup>2</sup> "Take a census of the sons of Kohath from among the sons of Levi, by their clans and their fathers' houses, <sup>3</sup> from thirty years old up to fifty years old, all who can come on duty, to do the work in the tent of meeting (Numbers 4:1-3, 23, 30, 35, 39, 43, 47; 1 Chronicles 23:3).

Additionally, David became king when he was thirty years old (2 Samuel 5:4), no doubt of some interest to those looking for parallels between David and his "greater son," Jesus the Messiah.

The brief comments by Luke about Jesus' age quickly yields to more pressing matters, namely, "whose son is Jesus?" The text reads: "being a son, as assumed, of Joseph of Heli (Eli)..." (*ōn huios, hōs enomizeto, Iōsēph tou Eli*). If the reader of Luke's Gospel has been paying attention, he will recall the early chapters in which Mary receives the announcement of Gabriel concerning the manner of Jesus' conception (1:26-38). The information, on that occasion, came in a private communication to Mary. What the angel told Mary about Jesus included the following:

1. He will be great
2. Called Son of the Most High
3. Given throne of his father David
4. Holy Spirit coming on Mary with the power of the Most High
5. The child born will be called holy, Son of God.

At the baptism of Jesus, the voice affirmed the role of Jesus as the royal Son, Beloved and Chosen by God. Whose son? Clearly, the Holy Spirit superintends a process in the womb of Mary which results in the conception and birth of Jesus: he who will be called holy, Son of God. Luke gets us as close as was theologically possible, at that early time and place, to the idea of Jesus as fully God and fully human. What happens in the womb of Mary reaches fulfillment at the baptism with the confirmation of the voice from

heaven. The Holy Spirit is present on both occasions: once to arrange the conception of Jesus; again to confirm his Sonship.

But then Luke, by some feat of literary genius, decides to drop into his narrative a special kind of genealogy. Known as an "ascending" genealogy, this family tree works from the most recent person backwards (or, upwards, thus, "ascending"), stopping at the ancestor who provides significance to the last descendent. Unlike Matthew who uses a descending genealogy, starting with Abraham and ending with Jesus, Luke works upwards to Adam, the representative human who stands for the whole human race. In so doing, Luke declares that Jesus is, in fact, a son of Adam and therefore a fully human being who shares in "flesh and blood" with all of humanity (see Hebrews 2:14). This is consistent with the baptism of Jesus in which he identified with all of Israel so that he might one day restore their humanity. He doesn't stop with Adam, however, but climbs the ladder of the generations one more rung until he can say with joy, "son of God"! And that is, of course, the identity he wishes to affirm, and the underlying reason he chooses this form of genealogy. In and through the human genealogy of Jesus, Luke affirms both the human and the kingly-divine identities of Jesus.

### **Jesus Introduces Himself (Luke 4:14-21)**

<sup>14</sup> And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and a report about him went out through all the surrounding country. <sup>15</sup> And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all. <sup>16</sup> And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. <sup>17</sup> And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, <sup>18</sup> "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, <sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." <sup>20</sup> And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. <sup>21</sup> And he began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:14-21).

We have chosen a portion of a longer account of Jesus' synagogue participation in his hometown of Nazareth. The whole passage (4:16-30) is sometimes called "the Nazareth Inaugural"<sup>19</sup> because it marks the first major address of Jesus in Luke, and also because it introduces the main themes which thread their way throughout the rest of the Gospel. Moreover, it presents Jesus as the fulfillment of a major Messianic prophecy in the Old Testament. Luke offers this account as evidence of Jesus' identity and a validation of his ministry, his ongoing contribution to the *case for Christ*.

In this passage we get a glimpse of what synagogue services and preaching looked like in Second Temple Judaism. As a member of the worshipping community, Jesus stands to read the prophetic text of the day. By the first century, the readings from the Torah were already shaped into a lectionary cycle with a prominent place given to the public reading of Scripture in worship. If Fitzmyer is correct, the Isaiah scroll was handed to Jesus, unrolled to the place in Isaiah assigned for that Sabbath day.<sup>20</sup> This makes the event quite remarkable, since Jesus finds in the assigned reading the precise occasion for his public ministry! After reading the Scripture, he sits down, the usual protocol for a teacher, and then offers his interpretation to the congregation.

What does Jesus read? The text is a combination of Isaiah 61:1-2 with insertions from Isaiah 58:6. Scholars have noted that the text Luke quotes from is the Septuagint (the Greek Old Testament), the version of choice for Greek-speaking Jews and God-fearing Gentiles and proselytes. Because the text is written in first-person language ("...me...", several times), it offers Jesus an effortless transition to the "sermon" which follows — one

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<sup>19</sup> Besides the commentaries, several journal articles offer helpful insights into this reading: Gail R. O'Day, "'Today this word is fulfilled in your hearing': A Scriptural Hermeneutic of Biblical Authority, *Word & World*, Volume 26, Number 4, Fall, 2006, pp. 357-364; Hugh Anderson, "Broadening Horizons: The Rejection at Nazareth Pericope of Luke 4:16-30 in Light of Recent Critical Trends," *Interpretation*, 18, no. 3, July 1964, pp. 259-275; David Hill, "The Rejection of Jesus at Nazareth (Luke iv 16-30)," *Novum Testamentum*, 13, no.3, July 1991, pp. 161-180; T. Vaughan Walker, "Luke 4:16-30," *Review and Expositor*, 85, no.2, Spring 1988, pp. 321-324; John C. Poirier, "Jesus as an Elijahic Figure," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 71, no. 2, April 2009, pp. 349-363.

<sup>20</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, Anchor Bible 28, Doubleday, 1981, p. 531.

in which he immediately applies the Scripture to himself. The text is written about Jesus, but more importantly it is cast as an autobiographical statement as if Jesus himself were speaking from the text to the assembled congregation. How can this be? How can an ancient Scripture, written centuries before, contain a first-person account of someone who now stands before those who just heard him read it? The author of Scripture is present among them and reading his own material!

What does the reading from Isaiah, in its amalgamated form, actual tell us about the one who is speaking?

1. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me." Luke has already described the conception of Jesus as the work of the Holy Spirit (1:35), narrated the descent of the Spirit at his baptism (3:22), written about Jesus "led by the Spirit" into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil (4:1), and told us of his empowerment by the Spirit when he began his ministry (4:14). Therefore, the first major assertion of the prophecy has already been confirmed by the evidence offered by Luke up to this point. Luke will continue to refer to the Spirit (10:21; 11:13; 12:12).
2. "Anointed to preach Good News to the poor." Good News (or Gospel) is found throughout Luke's Gospel (1:19; 2:10; 3:18; here; 4:43; 7:22; 8:1; 9:6; 16:16; 20:1), and continues to be seen in *Acts* (8:12, 25, 35, 40; 10:36; 13:32; 14:7, 21, 15; 15:7; 16:10; 20:24). The concept of the "pious poor" as recipients of God's coming salvation — the Good News — is a major idea in the New Testament and at the Qumran community.<sup>21</sup> One of the notable signs of the Messiah (Hebrew for "anointed One") was his evident concern for the poor and the amelioration of their condition. In Luke's account of Jesus' "Sermon on the Plain," we hear Jesus proclaim, "Blessed are you the poor, for yours in the kingdom of heaven" (6:20). The use of the second person "you" is Luke's special framing of the sermon, making it sound more like a personal address from Jesus to his audience. This is consistent with the personal tone of Isaiah's prophecy. When John the Baptizer sends word to Jesus from prison, inquiring if he really is the Messiah, he hears back from Jesus that the Good News for the poor is one of the definitive signs that he is (7:22)! Jesus tells his followers to invite the poor to their feasts (14:13, 21), along with other needy persons in Israel (crippled, lame, blind). The parable of Lazarus and the rich man is the story of a poor man ill-used in this life but rewarded in the next (16:20, 22). The rich are commanded to sell their possessions and share with the poor (18:22; 19:8). The poor widow is honored by Jesus, as she tosses her copper coins in the Temple treasury (21:2-3).
3. "Freedom for prisoners." Commentators note that the ministry of Jesus in casting out demons, setting them free from their spiritual bondage, is part of the fulfillment of this prophecy (4:41; 8:2, 27, 30, 33, 35, 38; 9:1, 49; 10:17; 11:15, 18-20; 13:32).
4. "Sight for the blind." Luke's Gospel includes accounts of Jesus healing the blind (7:21-22; 18:35), and encourages the continuing help for those without sight (14:13, 21).
5. "Release the oppressed." See "Freedom for prisoners" above.
6. "Proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." The Greek of this expression literally says, "year of the Lord acceptable." The word *dekton* has to do with something that has been favorably received, in this case, by the Lord. The emphasis is on the divine will and purpose to bring salvation to Israel through the person of the Messiah ("anointed One"). The word "year" does not refer to a literal year, but instead introduces an era or age — the Messianic Age. Jesus comes to make a royal announcement: God's will and purpose for Israel (and the world) is at last reaching its grand climax, and he, Jesus, is the one through whom that Messianic Age arrives. Scripture often speaks about the coming of Jesus "at the right time" (Romans 5:6), or "in the fullness of time" (Galatians 4:4). This is identical in meaning to the expression "the kingdom of God (heaven) is at hand" (Matthew 4:17; 26:18; Mark 1:15).

What is striking about the quotations from Isaiah is where they end. In point of fact, Isaiah 61:1-2 continues with the words, "and of the day of vengeance..." Luke does not incorporate that portion, and it is likely that Jesus omitted it as well. During his earthly ministry the judgment of God was deferred (and would be for 40 more years) so that the plan of salvation might be put into effect and offered to Israel (and the world). What we

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<sup>21</sup> Leander E. Keck, "The Poor among the Saints in Jewish Christianity and Qumran," *ZNTW*, Volume 57, Issue 1-2, 1966, pp. 54-78.

have in the reading of this text is not a wooden replay of Scripture by Jesus but a dynamic and generative application of the biblical material to the fresh situation occasioned by Jesus arrival on the scene.

Luke dramatizes the next series of events in the synagogue, as Jesus carefully rolls up the scroll, gives it back to the attendant, and then takes his proper teaching posture by sitting down. The audience waits spell-bound while each of these actions takes place, and Luke allows his reader-audience to witness each of these gestures. We wait, also! What happens next is introduced with the words "he began" (from *archō*), alerting the readers that Jesus will have more to say. Indeed that is the thrust of his ministry: *Jesus had more to say than what was written in the ancient texts*. Those Scriptures serve as signs pointing to the coming of Jesus, but their *meaning and true significance* would rest with the words of Jesus himself who would eventually explain "in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27, 32, 45).

Jesus "begins" with the word "Today" (*sēmeron*) which attracts a certain urgency to what he says. Scripture becomes contemporary when Jesus explains it. "Today" highlights the immediacy and temporal specificity of the interpretation of Scripture in the context of the worshipping congregation. Jesus will not merely replay the text in his sermon, but he will recreate the text for the present moment. The audience need no longer wait for the fulfillment of the text, for that period of expectation was at its end. Whatever Isaiah 61:1-2 and 58:6 might have previously meant to an earlier audience or to the learned rabbis who commented on them, all of that changed when Jesus spoke the word "Today." The sermon Jesus proceeds to give his audience is not nostalgia conjuring up the "good old days," but a fresh promise proclaimed Today.

The fulfillment, Jesus tells the congregation, is "in your hearing," and, as such, did not exist as an interpretation of this Scripture before Jesus spoke these words. All previous understandings are swept aside to make room for newly created meaning made possible by Jesus who sat before them. The speaking Jesus and the listening community combine to create this new meaning and fulfillment. Luke uses the perfect tense of the Greek verb for "fulfill" (*plēroō*), a tense which is completed in the present but with continuing results and ongoing significance. What Scripture once said, what Jesus now says, and the listening audience collectively produce an experience that is both authoritative and generative. "Is fulfilled" tells us that something has *happened* in the present which brings new meaning to the older text.

The evidence provided by this fulfillment is that something is happening to *the audience*, to *them*. They are about to see and hear what the Scripture once merely asserted. Good News will happen to the poor, the blind, and the imprisoned. The world around them would need to change, and Jesus would make that happen. Scripture *acquires authority* in the moment of fulfillment through the words and deeds of Jesus. "The worshipping congregation experiences the authority of Scripture in the present moment of proclamation by the way in which Scripture comes to fulfillment in the speaking and in their hearing."<sup>22</sup> Jesus does not say, "Yesterday, these words were fulfilled," as if he and the congregation stood as spectators admiring the past works of God. That would not be revelation for them, and it certainly would not be fulfillment!

What Jesus lays before his audience has future implications, and the opportunity to "test" the truthfulness of his words. He sets no limit to "Today" — it is not a literal 24-hour day, but an epoch of unfolding significance. The announcement "Today" has predictive power for it challenges the audience to watch the Good News do its saving work through the life and words of Jesus.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

John the Baptizer frames the narrative of this first Sunday in Lent. He is "the voice," and he attracts a listening audience who pass through the waters of baptism in expectation that Egypt might be left far behind and that Canaan is just on the horizon. The drama of those days climax with the ministry of Jesus in Galilee, as Jesus eventually makes his way to the synagogue of his childhood and startles those who know him with Good News.

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<sup>22</sup> O'Day, *op. cit.*, p. 362.

Coming home is not easy for a prophet. As Luke further narrates in chapter 4, those who admire his "gracious words" soon take offence at the heavy dose of reality he serves up. "Isn't this Joseph's son?" It seems like an innocent enough question, but coiled inside it is the ordinariness of hometown life which has grown accustomed to things as they have always been. If he is Joseph's son, then he can be nothing more — folks won't allow it. If what he tells them is true, and if a prophet like Elijah or Elisha is truly in their midst, he surely hasn't come to pat them on the backs or canvass like a politician seeking higher office. Prophets are uncomfortable to be around. It's one thing to hear Jesus read the Prophets at synagogue service, but quite another to embody the prophet's message and challenge the hometown crowd with the prophetic word.

The closing sections of Luke 4 (verses 22-30, which you are encouraged to read) shudder with thunderous words. Jesus doesn't trust their compliments, and that's hard enough. He presses the case by citing the proverb often quoted to would-be prophets to simply "mind your own business" ("physician heal yourself"). Worse, he compares his townsfolk to ancient Israel during the evil days of king Ahab when the prophets Elijah and Elisha took to task the hypocrisy of the royals. "How dare he say those nasty things about *us*! After all, didn't we help raise him in this synagogue? That's ingratitude for you! Now he acts so pious and 'holier-than-thou.' Jesus talks about lepers and widows and pagans. He actually implies that they were more favored than we are."

Unable to handle the implications of what it meant for Jesus to become the man for "Today," they threaten to kill him. Here we see intimations of the grand drama which will bring him to Calvary and the cross. "They rose up and drove him out of the town...to the brow of the hill...to throw him down" (4:29). But his time had not yet come, though the events of his life would bring him perilously close from time to time (John 7:6, 8). Lent reminds us that time is God's to command, and that we ought to let go of the reins, especially during the days of the sacred feasts, and allow God's larger story to envelop our own. We discover that doing that is no easier than for Jesus' townsfolk to hear their young son challenge their cherished understandings about where they stood in the flow of time. Hearing the word "today" is a bit like a child hearing the parent say, "Time to go" when staying and playing with friends seems so much more enjoyable.

"Time to go...Today these words are fulfilled." Who will Jesus be for us? The man with gracious words? Joseph's son? The annoying preacher who should heal himself? Or the outrageous prophet we are determined to throw over the cliff? Lent is a time to take stock of how we will respond to Jesus when he comes home to us.

Glory to God! Amen.

**Digger Deeper: A Case for Christ-Lent 2010: Jesus as Expected One**  
(Bob Brown)

To gain a deeper understanding of *A Case for Christ-Lent 2010: Jesus as Expected One*, carefully read the selected passages below. To aid you in your study, we invite you to visit the website <http://notes.chicagofirstnaz.org>, or pick up a copy of the *Background Notes* at the **Information** desk, or from your ABF leader. Now consider the following questions, as you ask the Lord to teach you.

1. The New Testament frequently cites Old Testament expectations which were fulfilled by the coming of Jesus. Matthew's Gospel contains many of these (Matthew 1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:14, 35; 21:4; 26:54, 56; 27:9). Read each of these examples and indicate what was *expected* and how it was *fulfilled*.
2. According to Isaiah 44:24-28, how does God confirm His word and fulfill His message?
3. What evidence do we have that Luke was a careful historian (see Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1-3)? How is this evident from this week's reading from Luke 3:1-2?
4. How is John the Baptizer tied into the history and culture of Israel (see Luke 1:5-11)?
5. In what ways is the ancient story of Israel moving forward beyond the original expectations (see Hebrews 11:13-16)?
6. Carefully read Luke 3:1-6. How did John begin his ministry and what connection did it have to the prophecies of the Old Testament (compare Isaiah 40:3-5)? What expectations are fulfilled in John's coming? Why is the wilderness (desert) an appropriate place for Israel to make a fresh start? How does baptism fit into the desert experience? (Hint: think about the geographical placement of the Jordan River).
7. "Expectation" has to do with "Good News." Discuss this phrase in light of the following Old Testament texts: Isaiah 40:9-11; 52:7; 61:1-2.
8. What signs accompanied the baptism of Jesus, and in what sense were they evidences for his identity (Luke 3:21-22)? See if you can explain the symbol of the "dove." What is the significance of the "heavens opening"? Compare Matt. 3:16; Luke 3:21; John 1:51-52; Acts 10:11; Acts 7:56; Rev. 4:1ff; 11:19; 19:11.
9. To whom is the "voice" addressed, and what does this tell us about Jesus' own awareness of his identity? Compare Isaiah 42:1; Psalm 2:7; 1 Chronicles 17:13-14; 22:10.
10. Why does Luke incorporate 3:23-33 at this point in the text? Where does Luke's genealogy of Jesus begin and where does it end? How does it answer the question, "whose son is Jesus?"
11. Under what circumstances does Jesus introduce himself in Luke 4:14-21? Where does this happen? Why is this setting significant?
12. How important is Scripture in Jesus' introduction of himself (see Isaiah 61:1-2; Isaiah 58:6, which compare with the reading in Luke 4:18-19)? What aspects of Jesus' earthly work are confirmed in these Old Testament texts? How might this be seen as "evidence" to those who heard him?
13. What important claim does Jesus make in Luke 4:21? How should people react to this claim?
14. Read the sequel in 4:22-30. How do the tone of Jesus words and the mood of the audience change? To what do you attribute this shift? What does this tell us about what Jesus will face in the future?
15. What important Lenten applications can we take away from this week's readings?