

Who is this Jesus?

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Introduction

If somebody asks you “Who are you?”, you will probably give your name. You may also say where you live, and your place of origin if that is different. You may state your occupation, whether or not you are married, and how many children you have. All these are supposed to give information about you, but if you think about it, none of these may have much relevance to what you really are as a person.

In the same way, when these questions were asked about Jesus, they would give ‘Jesus’ as his human name. He was known as ‘Jesus of Nazareth’. He was also called ‘the carpenter’s son’ (Mt.13:55), something which did not fit in with the wisdom with which he taught in the synagogue in his own home town (Mt.13:55).

However, the disciples of Jesus followed him because of what he taught and of what they saw in him. When Jesus challenged them with the question “Who do you say I am?” it was Peter who spoke up, “You are the Christ (or Messiah, see ch 3), the Son of the living God” (Mt.16:16). These are two of the names or titles given to Jesus in the New Testament, all of which have their origins in the Old Testament. Each one tells us something about who Jesus is, what he came to do, and therefore what he can be to us and do for us. The Bible does not make philosophical statements as to the nature of Jesus, rather we find words used in everyday life, such as Son, Lord, Saviour.

It is important that we understand what these names mean, for some of them have different meanings now to what they had in Bible times. Faith in Christ is central to Christian belief, so it is important that we have a clear understanding as to who Jesus is.

In order to understand what these names meant to people living in New Testament times, we must look at the use of these words in the Old Testament, for that was the Bible of the first disciples. For example, the word ‘servant’ means different things to different people according to how they think servants should be treated, we must look at how the Jews were told to treat them. Then the name ‘Firstborn’ must be understood in the light of the Old Testament customs for a firstborn son.

Also, we need to see Jesus in the light of the teaching of the whole Bible. It is common for people to regard Jesus as the founder of Christianity in the same way that Buddha is the founder of Buddhism. Now it is true that Jesus is the central figure of Christian faith, but a brief look at his teaching will show that he made no claim to introduce a new religion, rather he was completing the revelation of God given in the Old Testament. In the ‘Sermon on the Mount’, he said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets (meaning the Old Testament teaching); I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them” (Mt.5:17). The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews told his Jewish readers, “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.” (Heb 1:1,2). The Old Testament is like the first part of a two-part story, you cannot understand fully either part on its own.

One link between the Old and New Testaments is the fact that Jesus’ coming is predicted in many different places in the Old Testament. There is no complete description of what Jesus would be like, or precise statement as to his nature. Rather, the predictions are made in terms of what he would do, and needs that he would meet. The commonest hope in people’s minds was that somebody should come and put to right various wrongs. We usually give the one title ‘Messiah’ to the person they were expecting, though different people had different ideas as to what sort of a person he would be and what he would do.

Introduction

There are many different predictions, many different descriptions of a Coming One, and the evidence suggests that, at the time of Jesus, they had not understood all the predictions. People had different needs, and they may not have believed that all these needs could be met by one person. So we can say that the different names represent different 'strands' running through the Old Testament which all meet in the person of Christ.

This book looks at some of the titles given to Jesus which originate in the Old Testament, and how they are applied in the New. This should help us understand who Jesus is and what he can do for us.

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The approach adopted in this book is to accept the different books as what they claim to be, a record of how God revealed himself in various ways. It also assumes that there is a unified message despite the variations in style of the different authors. Sometimes reference is made to views which are definitely contradictory to the Bible narrative. Otherwise, I have not made reference to the views of other people as that would make this book harder to read for the ordinary person. I do not claim to put forward the only possible interpretation of Bible teaching, I am simply stating my understanding of the biblical message.

Unless otherwise stated, all Bible quotations are from the New International Version.

Acknowledgements

Reference has been made to the following in writing this book@:

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ch.2 Son of God, Son of Man

Son of God

In Bible times, people did not have surnames, instead they were known by the name of their father; the same used to be true in England, which is why some surnames end in -son. Jesus called Peter "Simon son of John" in John 21:15, or "Simon son of Jonah" in Mt.16:17. But this custom did not just identify a person, it also was considered to say something about them, for people share some of the characteristics of their fathers. When Jesus was described as "the carpenter's son" by the people of Nazareth (Mt.13:55), it meant they could not believe that the son of a carpenter could be anybody special.

Idiomatic meaning of "son"

The phrase "son of ..." was not only used for the literal son of a person, it could have two other meanings. First it could refer to any special relationship which was as close as that of father to son. Secondly it could mean "having the nature of ...", just as sons are like their fathers. For example, the Old Testament expression "son of Belial" is used of a very evil person; we are not to take it literally and ask who Belial was. Then in Isa.5:1, the Hebrew words mean literally "a hill, son of oil", which is translated as "a fertile hillside".

In the New Testament, Jesus gave the name "Sons of Thunder" to James and John (Mk.3:17) to describe their fiery nature. In modern Arabic, a mother may call her child "son of a camel". She is not calling herself a camel, but is saying her child is like one. So when we say "Jesus is the Son of God" we do not mean that God took a wife who bore a son in the literal sense. To understand what this means, we must first look at where the phrase "son of God" occurs in the Old Testament.

Israel, the nation, as God's son.

The first time we read about a son of God in the Bible is when God told Pharaoh that the nation of Israel was his son, so he must let them go and worship him (Ex.4:22,23). Here the word 'son' is used to mean that the Jews were special to God, they had a relationship to him like that of father to son. Hosea also uses this phrase to refer to the Jewish nation, when, speaking for God, he says "out of Egypt I called my son" (Hos.11:1). He was telling them that they were special to God even though many of them were worshipping other gods.

This means that they could call God Father, as Moses says in Dt.32:6, "Is he not your Father, your Creator?" and in Isa. 63:16 we read "You, O LORD, are our Father". However, God is not often addressed as Father of the Jewish nation in the Old Testament, perhaps this is because they were not ready to understand that they could think of God in this intimate way; they first had to realise the holiness of God.

The king as son of God

The other example of where we find mention of a son of God in the Old Testament is in 2 Sam.7. Here we read that David wanted to build a temple, a house for God; but instead God promised David that he would build him a house, meaning that his son would succeed him as king. Then he said these words, "I will be his father and he shall be my son" (2 Sam.7:14). This future king would have the privilege of a relationship to God that can be described as that of father to son. The Old Testament kings had a special relationship to God because they ruled as God's representative. In Ps.89:26 the writer speaks of David the king calling out to God, "You are my Father", then God replies "I will also appoint him my firstborn" (v.27). Not only did David have the privilege of being called God's son, but the term 'firstborn' has the special significance of authority as is explained in chapter 8.

This helps us understand the words in Ps.2:7, "You are my Son, today I have become your Father". If we understand "my Son" to refer to a Jewish king, a descendant of

Son of God, Son of Man

David, the most obvious meaning of the psalm is that it was composed for a royal coronation. The word "today" would then be the day of his coronation when he entered into this special relationship with God. However this verse is quoted several times in the New Testament and applied to Christ. This is one example of where we sometimes find a passage in the Old Testament with two meanings, one referring to a situation at the time it was written, and another referring to something which was to happen in the future.

Jesus as Son of God in the Gospels.

When the angel Gabriel told Mary she would bear a son, he said of him "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David" (Lk.1:32). This could mean that her child would be called Son of God because he was to be a king of the Jews. However, the angel goes on to say that this son would not be conceived in the normal way, but as a result of a miraculous work of the Holy Spirit (v.35). Matthew also records how Joseph found out that Mary was pregnant, and immediately thought she had been unfaithful, until an angel of the Lord told him that "what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit" (Mt.1:20). So when on earth, Jesus could be called the Son of God because his biological origin was directly from God, not from Joseph or Mary.

The next reference to Jesus being the Son of God is in the account of his baptism. Mark and Luke both tell us that a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (Mk.1:11, Lk.3:23). These words come from three important Old Testament passages, and this helps us understand their significance. We have just seen that the phrase "You are my Son" occurs in Ps.2:7, speaking of a coming King. The phrase "whom I love" reminds us of God's words to Abraham telling him to offer up Isaac (Gen.22:2), "take your son, .. whom you love". The cost to God of sending his Son for us was infinitely greater than that to Abraham when he was willing to slay his only son. Also the phrase "with you I am well pleased" occurs in Isa.42:1, "Here is my servant, .. in whom I delight". The title 'Servant' is examined in chapter 7.

What we need to understand here is that the voice from heaven was God speaking to Jesus assuring him of his unique relationship as Son of God, that his love for him that was at least as great as that of Abraham for Isaac, and that he was to be both a Servant and a King. For if Jesus was truly man, he had a human brain, and God the Father spoke to Jesus through his human consciousness.

We meet similar words spoken at Christ's transfiguration, this time addressed to the three privileged disciples (Mt.17:5), "This is my Son, whom I love" with the added instruction "Listen to him!" Peter had just confessed in front of the other apostles "You are the Christ (Messiah), the Son of the living God" (Mt.16:16). Peter had to realise that this Messiah was not just human as many expected him to be, but divine.

Jesus' claim

In the Gospel of John, we read that Jesus frequently calls himself "the Son" and speaks of God as "my Father". He also said that God was working through him in a unique way, "the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing" (Jn.5:19). Also in Mt.11:27 we read that he claimed "No-one knows the Son except the Father, and no-one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." The Jews considered that by calling God his Father he was saying he was equal with God (Jn.5:18), and because they did not believe this, they thought he should be put to death; for to make such a claim falsely was the worst possible blasphemy. Sometimes Jesus used the phrase "God's Son", but never speaking directly about himself. For example when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he told his disciples that this sickness was "for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it" (Jn.11:4)

Son of God, Son of Man

By contrast, when Jesus met a person possessed of an "evil spirit", this spirit openly acknowledged Jesus to be the Son of God. For example, in Mk.3:11 we read that "Whenever the evil spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, 'You are the Son of God'". It was the demon inside the person who recognised the divine nature in Jesus, which shows that what the person was suffering from was not simply mental illness. But we then read that Jesus "gave them strict orders not to tell who he was" (v.12), Jesus wanted people to make up their own minds about him.

The only time Jesus admitted in public that he was "the Son of God" was at his trial. After trying for a long time to find a charge against Jesus that could stand up in court, the High Priest decided to force Jesus to answer, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God" (Mt.26:63). When Jesus admitted "Yes, it is as you say", they took this as blasphemy, for he was claiming to be divine. But then Jesus added "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One" (v.64), words which come from Ps.110:1. This gave himself the unique privilege of authority and power at God's right hand, which in their eyes was an even more outrageous claim.

When they took him to Pilate, it seems that at first they brought the charge that he was making himself out to be a king. But when Pilate decided there was no basis for this, they told him "he claimed to be the Son of God" (Jn.19:7). This made Pilate afraid, for to a Roman, it would mean that he had some sort of supernatural power.

Then when Jesus was on the cross, the Jewish leaders taunted him. "He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God'" (Mt.27:43). At least they remembered what he had said about himself, and convinced themselves that he was an impostor, for had he been what he claimed to be, God would surely have rescued him.

Early Christian Teaching

When the early Christians started talking about Jesus, one of the commonest descriptions they gave him was that he was the Son of God. We read that immediately after he was converted, Paul "began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God" (Acts 9:20). He wanted to share his new found faith that the Jesus he had once thought to be a blasphemer was in fact divine. To confess that "Jesus is the Son of God" must have been a way in which a person would announce that he had become a Christian, for in 1 Jn.4:15 we read, "If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God". Also, the Gospel of John was written so that the reader would come to believe that "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" (Jn.20:31); that was the message John wanted to convey to his readers.

The early Christians believed that the resurrection of Jesus was one of the proofs that he was the Son of God. When Paul preached at Antioch, he told his hearers (Acts 13:32,33), "What God promised our fathers he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm:

`You are my Son;
today I have become your Father'" (quoting Ps.2:7)

The day Jesus was raised was the day when he was publicly demonstrated to be the Son of God. Paul makes the same point in Rom.1:4 where he states that Jesus "through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God, by his resurrection from the dead". Jesus was condemned and executed, accused of blasphemy; but by raising Jesus, God was proving that he was who he claimed to be. Also, the emphasis in this verse is on the word "power". On earth, and in particular in his crucifixion, his human weakness was seen. But the resurrection was a declaration (or appointment) with power that he was divine.

Son of God, Son of Man

The main theme of the first part of the Epistle to the Hebrews is that Jesus is unique because he is called "the Son". In Old Testament days, God spoke by prophets, now he has "spoken to us by his Son" (Heb.1:2). He is superior to the angels, this is proved by quoting Ps.2:7 and 2 Sam.7:14 which have already been discussed.

The "Only Son"

Another New Testament description of Jesus is that he is God's "one and only Son" (K.J.V. "only begotten") which we find in Jn.1:14,18; 3:16,18; and 1 Jn.4:9. In Heb.11:17, the same expression is used of Isaac whom Abraham had been told to offer as a sacrifice. The equivalent Hebrew word, used in Gen.22:2, means 'solitary', and hence 'unique', and in Am.8:10 and Zech.12:10 it is used for an only son whose death is being mourned. To lose an only son was a particular tragedy because the son was the future breadwinner and the inheritor of the family property. So if this New Testament word is based on the Hebrew, it means 'somebody special'.

Because the same word is used for Isaac and Jesus, we can compare the sacrifice Abraham was being called to make with what God did by sending Jesus. Just as it was the greatest sacrifice for Abraham to give up Isaac to God because he was so unique, so we can appreciate the love God has for us in that he sent his "one and only Son" to bring us eternal life. We do not have to take the "begotten" of the K.J.V. literally for the same reason that we do not take "Son" in a literal sense. That is why the modern versions translate it differently.

Our present understanding of who Christ is

We have seen that we mean two things when we say Jesus is the Son of God. First, when he was a man on earth, he had a unique relationship to God the Father. But it also is a way of saying that Jesus is divine, of the same nature as God the Father. There are those who say that Jesus was a man who had a special relationship to God because he was wholly obedient to God's will, but was still human. To hold this view, they have to explain how the story of the Virgin Birth came to be accepted. For the story in Matthew clearly says that Joseph was not Jesus' father, so if we do not accept that Mary "was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit" (Mt.1:18), then Jesus was illegitimate. This was Joseph's first thought when he learnt that Mary had become pregnant (v.19).

The second point to be made is that, if Jesus was only human, his death was of no more significance than the death of any other man, and this contradicts all that the New Testament teaches about the connection between our forgiveness and the death of Christ. For there are so many passages which show that this was not an act of supreme dedication, but something God had planned from the beginning. Only One who combines both human and divine nature in one person can reunite sinful man with God.

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Sons of God

In the Old Testament, we sometimes read about "sons of God". In Job 1:6, 2:1, (K.J.V., the N.I.V. translates the word "angels"). In this story God shared his plans for the world with them, they were a "heavenly council". We are not told any more about them.

In Ps.29:1 and 89:6, a similar term is used, literally "sons of gods", and it is translated "mighty ones" and "heavenly beings" in the N.I.V. They are beings who are called upon to praise God. Spiritual beings in the Bible are given different names according to what they do. We may call them angels, but the normal word for angel literally means a 'messenger', these appeared to people with a specific message from God.

Son of God, Son of Man

Christians as sons of God

In the New Testament, Christians are called sons of God. This is a relationship into which we can enter by receiving Christ (Jn.1:12). It is also called being "born again" (Jn.3:3). Through the power of the Holy Spirit we can be brought into a special relationship with God which is like that of son to a father. But the difference between us being sons of God and Jesus being the Son of God is that for us, it is a relationship into which we can only enter by God's grace, whereas Jesus was always Son of God by nature.

Paul describes Christians as children who have been adopted by God. In those days a man who had no son of his own could adopt a son to inherit his property. "God sent his Son ... that we might receive the full rights (K.J.V. adoption) of sons" (Gal.4:4,5). This is why we can pray to God and say "Our Father", for it means we are God's children.

The writer to the Hebrews in ch.2:11,12 extends the metaphor to say that if we are sons of God, then we are Jesus' brothers. As proof of this he quotes Ps.22:22, "I will declare your name to my brothers", and goes on to say "He had to be made like his brothers in every way" so that he could help us when we are tempted (v.17). To be called "brothers of Jesus" is a privilege for which we should be humbly grateful.

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Son of Man

Old Testament Use

From what was said at the beginning of the chapter, 'son of man' could mean no more than 'like a man', or 'an ordinary man'. In several poetic passages, the term "man" and "son of man" are used in adjacent lines (e.g. Num.23:19 and Ps.8:4), which shows that "son of man" can be just a poetic way of referring to man's frail human nature. God often called the prophet Ezekiel "son of man", this could be to bring out the contrast between the humble prophet and the majestic God who was speaking to him. It could also be that Ezekiel represented the people, God was speaking through him to all the Jews. In the book of Ecclesiastes, the term "sons of men" is used to refer to man in his waywardness (e.g. 8:11, K.J.V.).

There is an important Old Testament passage where a similar phrase is used, Dan.7:13,14. Daniel has a vision of "one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven" who receives an eternal kingdom from "the Ancient of Days". The phrase "one like a son of man" is similar to the description of the other creatures that Daniel saw in his vision who are said to be "like" various animals. But because he was seen "coming with the clouds of heaven" it suggests that this person is more than human. He was seen to receive authority to rule over the whole world. For Daniel, this vision encouraged him to believe that, no matter what human empires rose and fell, God was going to set up his own kingdom which would supersede all earthly kingdoms. This is the main theme of the book of Daniel. The New Testament quotations of this verse are very important, for they help us to understand what "Son of Man" might have meant to people in Jesus' time.

The phrase "Son of Man" also occurs in books written after the Old Testament, but there is not sufficient evidence for us to say for certain that it was generally believed that this person was the expected "Messiah" (see chapter 3)

Jesus' use of the title

When Jesus spoke of himself as the "Son of Man", it could mean no more than that he was an ordinary man, just as it had meant when used of Ezekiel. By using it, he was fully

Son of God, Son of Man

identifying himself with those around. He told his disciples that he was setting them an example, he "did not come to be served, but to serve" (Mk.10:45).

Jesus also spoke of himself as Son of Man when he was talking to Jewish teachers, claiming the right to say what man could and could not do. "The Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" (Mk.2:10). Also "the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath" (Mk.2:28), meaning that he had the right to say what could or could not be done on the Sabbath. Because he is Son of Man he will be able to judge men fairly, for he said "he (God) has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man" (Jn.5:27). It is the title he used of himself in the four times that he predicted his death to the disciples (Mk.8:31, 9:31, 10:33, 14:21), as Son of Man he was to die for our sins.

He also used it when he spoke of what we call 'The Second Coming': the event we can look forward to is when the Son of Man comes "in clouds with great power and glory" and the elect will be gathered from the ends of the earth (Mk.13:26,27). This is clearly a quotation from Dan.7:13,14, he was claiming to fulfil what Daniel saw in his vision.

Jesus quoted from the same verse at his trial, after accepting the title 'Son of God': "In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Mt.26:64). Jesus was saying he is both Son of God and Son of Man.

Thus to speak of himself as 'Son of Man' was convenient for Jesus. For to the casual onlooker, it would not mean that he was anybody special. But for those with a knowledge of the Old Testament, and faith to believe, Jesus was more than an ordinary man, he was the one who would fulfil the vision that Daniel had. For us, it shows that Jesus fully identified himself with us, but also in his humanity was all that we should be.

'Son of Man' in the rest of the New Testament

When Stephen was put on trial accused of speaking against the Temple and the Jewish law, at the end of a long speech he had a vision of Jesus in heaven and he cried out, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:56). This enraged the Jews and in a frenzy they stoned him for what they considered to be blasphemy. For he was claiming that the One whom they had crucified, who used to call himself "Son of Man", was in the place of honour with God.

Twice in the book of Revelation, we read that John saw in a vision one "like a son of man", first among the churches (1:13), and then seated on a cloud to harvest the earth (14:14); this latter is clearly another quotation of Dn.7:13. Before the promised kingdom can be fully established, the Son of Man will judge all who oppose God's purposes.

But was unlikely that the early Christians would normally call Jesus Son of Man for at that time, they did not doubt his humanity, it was his deity which had to be asserted.

Representative Man

In Heb.2:6-9, we find that a quotation from Ps.8:4-6 which speaks of "the son of man" is applied to Jesus. The psalm refers to God's original command to Adam to "rule over .. every living creature" (Gen.1:28). In the psalm, "son of man" represents the whole human race, we all have the responsibility of taking care of the world God made. But because the writer of Hebrews applies the words to Christ, it means he is Representative Man. Man has sinned, we do not control the Creation in the way that God intended, but part of Jesus' mission is to succeed where we have failed. He has not only done for us what we could not do for ourselves in providing salvation; he also fulfils our true destiny, which we can also fulfil as we submit to him.

Son of God, Son of Man

Paul makes a similar comparison between Christ and Adam in Rm.5:12-21. Because Adam is the founder of the human race, his sin affected all. But Christ's obedience can bring salvation to all because he is the founder of the new race of the redeemed. The same thought comes in 1 Cor.15:22, "As in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive". After Adam had sinned, they were turned out of the Garden and could not eat of the Tree of Life, they were cut off from the life which only comes from God. But Jesus' resurrection guarantees the resurrection of those who receive his forgiveness and eternal life. Then in v.45, of that chapter, Christ is called the "Last Adam". He is the last because there will be no more new beginnings. He is also the "man from heaven" (v.48,49), we are all like Adam while on earth, but when Christians are resurrected, their new bodies will be like that of the risen Christ.

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One day, Jesus challenged the Jewish teachers with a question about the Messiah they were expecting, "Whose son is he?" (Mt.22:42). Jesus wanted to know what they believed about the origin of this Messiah. The answer is given in Rm.1:3,4. As to his human nature, he "was a descendant of David"; but he has been "declared with power to be the Son of God, by his resurrection from the dead". The title "Son of God" speaks of Jesus' deity, and "Son of Man" of his humanity. Jesus has a unique relationship with God the Father because he is divine. But he became man so that we can enter into a close relationship with God. He also showed us what we should achieve as human beings. In that respect he is the example we should seek to follow by his grace.

We may not be able to understand how Jesus can be both human and divine, but the language of the Bible enables us to state truths in simple terms. It took the early church about 300 years to work out an acceptable formula for the nature of Christ. Unfortunately, the creeds they proposed contain words such as "person" and "substance" which have changed their meaning since then. If we want to explain more about the nature of Jesus, we must use present-day language.

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Questions for thought and discussion

1. How would you explain the meaning of the title 'Son of God' to a person of a different religion?
2. Why is it so important to believe in the Virgin Birth of Jesus?
3. What difference would it make to your faith if you were told that Jesus was not a real man, only a divine being who appeared on earth?
4. What does it mean to you to think of yourself as a child (son) of God?
5. Do you find it helpful to call Jesus your brother (as in Heb.2:11,17)?

Chapter 3 King, Messiah

The need for authority

Human leaders have a very difficult task. People like to feel they have a certain amount of freedom, but they soon complain if they feel their leaders are not taking sufficient action when problems arise. Because human nature is sinful, we need laws to control our social life, and the means to enforce these laws. In Rom.13:1-7, Paul clearly teaches that God's will is that we should have leaders to rule over us and that we should obey them. The worst thing that can happen to a country is when authority breaks down and armed groups take the law into their own hands, terrorising the population. Every country needs one person who is the final authority, who may be called by names such as chief, king, or president.

God as King of the Jews

The Jews only became a nation when they were delivered from slavery in Egypt. Moses was their human leader, and he acted under God's guidance. It was God who delivered them from Pharaoh, who gave them laws for daily living, then guided them across the wilderness to the land that he had promised them. It was God who was their King.

God made plans for the day when they would have a human king, for in Deut. 17:14-20 we read instructions for this king. He must not abuse his power as some of the rulers of other countries did. He could only act under God's authority, he was to be given a copy of God's law so that he could study it and follow its decrees. He was to avoid the personal temptations associated with that position.

When Moses was old, God appointed Joshua to succeed him. But after Joshua there was no strong leadership, it was a sad period in the history of the Jews when "Israel had no king, everyone did as he saw fit" (Jud. 21:25).

The appointment of a king

This dark period of Israel's history ended when Samuel became a spiritual leader as well as a civil judge. The country was effectively controlled by the Philistines, but he was able to travel around administering justice. Then when he grew old, the people asked him to appoint a king over them. God told Samuel that they were doing this for the wrong reason, "it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king" (1 Sam. 8:7). They wanted a military leader to give them freedom from the Philistines. But God then told Samuel to give them what they wanted and anoint Saul as king (1 Sam. 9:16). However, Samuel made it clear that Saul only ruled with God's authority, he wrote down the "regulations of the kingship" (1 Sam. 10:25), and still exerted spiritual leadership.

Saul proved to be an able military leader, but proved a failure spiritually. God then chose David to replace Saul (1 Sam. 16:1-13), and told him that the line of succession would remain in his family "for ever" (2 Sam. 7:8-17). From then on, the line of kings was known as the 'house of David', they sat on the 'throne of David'. But the king only ruled as God's representative as we saw in the previous chapter. Also, he still had only secular power; during the Old Testament period, the king was never allowed to take over the functions of a priest. This is in contrast to the kings of other nations who increased their authority by claiming that they were semi-divine, so they controlled both religious and political affairs.

The limitations of human kings

The Jews soon became aware of the disadvantages of a human king. Saul became unable to deal with the growth of Philistine power; the end of David's reign was plagued with a struggle as to who should succeed him, and Solomon became known as a ruthless employer of forced labour (1 Kgs. 12:4). This led to the nation dividing into two kingdoms,

King

David's successors only ruled over the tribe of Judah in the south, while the northern tribes were ruled over by a succession of dynasties. We read that social conditions in both kingdoms grew worse, so God sent prophets to both northern and southern kingdoms to speak against the injustice and oppression, warning that they would be sent into exile as judgement if they did not repent.

Conquest and Exile

The Jews did not only have problems from imperfect kings. Soon they were threatened by more powerful nations. First the Assyrians invaded the Northern Kingdom and took many of the people into exile and replaced them by other people groups that they had conquered. The writer of the book of Kings, in describing this said that it happened as a judgement on the people because of their sin (2 Kgs. 17:7-23). At that time, the Southern Kingdom had a miraculous deliverance from the Assyrians, God had mercy on them. But the general moral situation there grew worse. One hundred years later, Jeremiah preached against the continuing spiritual decline among the people as a whole. Eventually they too were taken into exile by the Babylonians as the prophets had predicted.

Did that mean that God was no longer keeping his promise that a descendant of David would always rule over the Jews? As well as predicting captivity and exile, some of the prophets promised that there would be a spiritual and national restoration when a king descended from David would come and "reign wisely", so that "Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety" (Jer. 23:5,6).

There were hopes that this promise would be fulfilled when the Persian emperor Cyrus took control over the Babylonian empire and allowed Jews to return to their land. But the Jews were still ruled by a foreign power, and economic conditions were so bad that the people became thoroughly depressed. The Old Testament ends with the fulfilment of the promise no nearer. The Greeks replaced the Persians as the ruling power. There was a brief period when the power of the Greek empire declined and they appointed their own rulers, but these were not accepted as fulfilling any of the Old Testament prophecies of a coming king as they were not descended from David.

The Ideal King

Many of the prophets and some of the psalms present us with a picture of an ideal king who would come and rule over them. In Isa. 9:7 we are told he will "reign on David's throne ... with justice and righteousness". This includes taking care of those in particular need, for Ps. 72:12 says

"he will deliver the needy who cry out,
the afflicted who have no-one to help."

But not only would the king rule justly, the people would also obey God, for he promised through Ezekiel, "They will follow my laws and be careful to keep my decrees" (Eze. 37:24). There would be political as well as spiritual restoration. Then as a result of just rule and people obeying God's laws,

In his days Judah will be saved
and Israel will live in safety" (Jer. 23:6).

Zechariah also promised peace in language relevant to their lifestyle, "In that day each of you will invite his neighbour to sit under his vine and fig tree" (Zech. 3:10), neighbours would be friends and not enemies.

There are also several passages which speak of the king ruling over a world-wide empire.

"He will rule from sea to sea
and from the River to the ends of the earth" (Ps. 72:8)
"All kings will bow down to him

King

and all nations will serve him" (v. 11)

This was not just to increase the personal power of the king, but to be a realisation of the fact that "God is the King of all the earth" (Ps. 47:7). The king would rule from Zion as that is God's "holy hill" (Ps. 2:6). The same psalm speaks of opposition which is put down firmly, "You will rule them with an iron sceptre" (v.9). This may sound harsh, but from our knowledge of human nature, peace and harmony can only be achieved in this present world order when those who rebel against authority are controlled.

In Zech. 6:12,13 we read of a man known as "the Branch" who would "build the temple of the LORD ... and rule on his throne", and "will be a priest on his throne". The title 'Branch' is also found in Jer. 23:5 where this person is also called "a King who will reign wisely". So 'the Branch' is another name for the coming king; David is like the root of a tree, and the coming king is a Branch from this root.

The passage in Zechariah also predicted that this person would be both a political and spiritual leader, a situation which had always been avoided in Old Testament times. There is a similar prediction in Ps. 110:4 where God addresses the king, "You are a priest for ever in the order of Melchizedek". All that we know about Melchizedek is that he was the Priest-King who blessed Abraham (Gen. 14:18-24), so the "order of Melchizedek" can be understood as meaning a person who combines the functions of priest and king.

The Messiah

The reigning king of the Jews was frequently called "the LORD's anointed", for kings were anointed with oil when they took office, a sign that God had appointed them. After the end of the Old Testament era, the Jews began to call this expected king 'Messiah', a Hebrew word meaning 'anointed'. There were other names that were accepted as referring to the same person, 'the Branch' has been mentioned as one. It is possible that some believed 'the Servant of the LORD' was the same person, and also 'the Son of Man', but, as has been mentioned in chapter 2, we cannot be certain of this. This is why most of these titles are considered in separate chapters.

Many Jews in New Testament times were expecting that the Messiah would fulfil all the Old Testament prophecies concerning a coming king who would bring freedom to the Jews, set up a world-wide kingdom centred on Jerusalem, and restore the authority of the Law as given through Moses.

If we look closely at some of these predictions and ask what sort of a person would this Messiah be, there are those passages which suggest that he would not be an ordinary human king. The Jews believed that Ps 110:1 was written by David who told of a coming Messiah and addressing him as "my Lord". But if he was a human son of David, he would not have been called "my Lord" for in those days, people accepted that an ancestor was always greater than his descendants. This is discussed further in chapter 5. Another verse suggesting that the coming king would be more than human is Isa. 9:6 where one of his names is said to be "Mighty God".

However, from Jewish writings between the two Testaments, it seems that most people were expecting merely a human Messiah. There is evidence that some believed that there would be two separate periods; the 'days of Messiah' under a human king, followed by an Ideal Age, the 'age to come', when God would rule directly. We also know that, in the time of Jesus, there was the Zealot party who were willing to use force to achieve independence from the Romans. But there must have been a group of faithful Jews such as Zechariah, Simeon and Anna who were looking forward to a spiritual "redemption of Jerusalem" (Luke 2:38), and who by faith saw in the infant Jesus the fulfilment of the Old Testament promises.

King

The Fulfilment in Jesus

It was Mary who was the first to receive a definite promise that the expected Messiah was about to come, for the angel Gabriel, speaking of her child said, "The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ... his kingdom will never end". (Luke 1:33). In other words, he was to be the king that had been promised, who would reign over an eternal kingdom. After Jesus was born, the shepherds were the first to be told, "a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord (Luke 2:11). No wonder they were eager to leave their sheep to look for this child! (The Greek word for "anointed" is "*Christ*", so that is the word usually used in the New Testament to mean the Messiah of Old Testament expectation.)

What Jesus claimed

Of course Jesus never made any public claim to be either a king or the expected Messiah. For if he had done so, the Romans would have seen him as a political threat, and would have lost no time in removing him. Jesus had to distance himself from the aspirations of Jewish nationalism. Instead, he waited patiently till the disciples came to realise for themselves who he was. So when Peter confessed that he was the Christ or Messiah, (Mt.16:16), he warned them to keep quiet about this lest it be misunderstood (v.20). He had not come to set up an earthly, political kingdom, he was not the Messiah of popular belief. He was to be condemned to death, then raised to life before any public proclamation that he was the Messiah could be made.

However, there were many things that he said which told those who had faith to perceive who he was. In the parable of the Sheep and the Goats, he talked about the Son of Man coming in glory and acting as judge, and he is also called "the King" (Mt. 25:31,34). Also when he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey on 'Palm Sunday', he fulfilled the promise in Zech. 9:9 "Your king comes to you, ... gentle and riding on a donkey". Many were wanting a Messiah who would act in power to bring them freedom, so that had a problem understanding a prophecy which described the coming King as "gentle".

At Jesus' trial, the High Priest asked Jesus if he claimed to be Messiah as well as Son of God (Mt. 26:63), and in Matthew's account, Jesus merely replied "Yes, it is as you say" (v.64), acknowledging that they were right, but he was not the kind of Messiah they were expecting. However, on the basis of Jesus' reply, they could tell Pilate that he was claiming to be a king (Lk. 23:2). And they expected that Pilate would have considered this to be more serious than a purely religious offence. But when Pilate questioned Jesus about this claim, he made it clear that his was not a political kingdom, "My kingdom is not of this world" (Jn. 18:36).

All four Gospels record that the charge placed above Jesus on the cross was that he was "King of the Jews". It is ironic that the first public pronouncement of Jesus as King came from a Gentile ruler. The inscription proclaimed that Jesus was the king they were rejecting (Jn. 19:22). Pilate must have taken great delight in the fact that he had wrung from the Jewish leaders the confession of allegiance "We have no king but Caesar" (Jn. 19:15), words which could be taken as betraying all Jewish aspirations to independence.

The beliefs of other people

Several times in the Gospels we read that people wondered if Jesus was the Messiah when they saw the miracles he performed. In Mt. 12:23, they ask "Could this be the Son of David?" another way of naming the Messiah. The three synoptic gospels all record the story of the blind man outside Jericho who wanted his sight restored, calling Jesus, "Son of David" (Mt. 20:31, Mk. 10:47, Lk. 18:38). John records that Andrew, after his first meeting with Jesus, tells Peter "we have found the Messiah" (Jn. 1:41). Then Mary of Bethany confesses to Jesus, after Lazarus' death, her faith that he was "the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world" (Jn. 11:27). No doubt these two incidents are recorded

King

because of John's stated purpose that his Gospel had been written to lead his readers to believe that Jesus was both the Messiah, and the Son of God (Jn. 20:31).

The Proclamation by the Early Church

After Jesus' resurrection and ascension, during the Jewish festival of Pentecost, Peter told the crowd of worshippers, "God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36). The people gathered because the disciples were speaking in the different languages of the pilgrims, and Peter said that this was because of the power of the Holy Spirit in them, and this in turn was vindication of Jesus' claim to be the promised Messiah. Paul also, immediately after his conversion, lost no time in seeking to prove to his fellow Jews that "Jesus is the Christ" (Acts 9:22). So for Jews, acknowledging that Jesus was the promised Messiah was the important step to putting their faith in him. However, Gentile Christians did not see any significance of a name meaning "the Anointed One" until they had understood first the Old Testament background. This is why, in the epistles, we find that 'Christ' becomes simply another name for Jesus.

The Kingdom of God

Though Jesus said little of himself as a king, he said a lot about the kingdom of God. The first words spoken by Jesus in public, recorded in Mark, are "The kingdom of God is near" (Mk. 1:15). This meant that he was wanting people to acknowledge God's rule over them, and this meant repenting from sin, "Repent and believe the good news". Jesus contradicting the Jewish tradition that they were automatically members of the kingdom simply because they were Jews, God's chosen people. He taught that they could only enjoy the benefits of the kingdom if they repented of sin and allowed the Holy Spirit to bring about a change in their lives which is like a new birth. For when the devout Pharisee Nicodemus came to Jesus, he told him "No-one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit" (Jn. 3:5).

Those who simply made a profession of allegiance could not enter this kingdom, they needed to obey him. Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Mt. 7:21).

Even after the resurrection, it seems that at least some of the disciples still thought that Jesus had come to set up a political kingdom on earth, for one day before his ascension they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). In reply, Jesus gave the commission to "be witnesses ... to the ends of the earth" (v.8). The kingdom would be spread worldwide, as people of all nations submitted to God's rule.

However, this task would not be easy. Jesus warned his disciples that they would be persecuted for their faith, and in the rest of the New Testament we read of opposition to God's kingdom which has continued ever since. In the book of Revelation, John sees in his vision that behind the events on earth, there is a struggle between Satan and God, but there is no doubt that God is in control. In ch. 19:11-21, he sees a rider on a white horse who will overcome those who oppose him. His name is given as "KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS" (v.16). Clearly this is Jesus in his role as King and Judge. Then John quotes Ps. 2:9, "He will rule them ('the nations') with an iron sceptre". In one sense Jesus is ruling now, but one day all opposition to his rule will be removed.

The Bible closes with a picture of a New Heaven and a New Earth. We are not given many details of God's future purposes, but we are told how this should affect our lives now. It should be a stimulus to "live holy and godly lives" (2 Pet.3:11), for this New Universe will be "the home of righteousness" (v.13). This means that we must not tolerate in our lives what will not be tolerated in this kingdom. Paul also warns us that those who live immoral lives "will not inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor.6:10). To submit to Christ's rule in our lives means obeying God's moral laws.

King

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We have seen that the Old Testament predictions of a coming King-Messiah to rule over God's kingdom are not just for the benefit of Jews, but for all. God's promise to Abraham that "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen. 12:3) will only be completely fulfilled when God's rule is established throughout the world. God first gave the Jews the moral laws by which we should live. Then after Pentecost, Jesus told the disciples to spread the Good News throughout the world; the kingdom is for those, both Jew and Gentile, who seek to obey God.

When Jesus came, he made it clear that God wants people to submit to him voluntarily, he does not force submission. However, one day he will come as Judge and remove all that opposes the kingdom. Then God will bring about a New Heaven and a New Earth.

Meanwhile, we suffer various trials of our faith, but the certainty that God will triumph over all opposition should sustain us, and encourage us to be faithful in serving Him.

Questions for thought and discussion

1. There are few kings or queens today with political power, so we may find it difficult to imagine what life would be like under the rule of such a king. In what ways would that be different from life lived under a democratic form of government?
2. There are several parables of Jesus which mention the Kingdom of God, or the Kingdom of heaven. What do these teach about:
 - (a) the way we should live now?
 - (b) future judgement?
3. Jesus told Pilate "My kingdom is not of this world" (Jn. 18:36); are there any New Testament passages which suggest that the rule of Christ, the kingdom of God, should have an effect on the society in which we live?

ch.4 The Shepherd-King

When we read about sheep and shepherds in the Bible, it may conjure up peaceful pastoral images of sheep peacefully grazing, while the shepherd stands and watches over them. But those who have motored in places where sheep have open access and have come face to face with a sheep in the middle of the road know that they are animals with a mind of their own. Also, from what David said in 1 Sam.17:34-37, the life of a shepherd in those days was anything but peaceful with the constant threat of attack from wild animals. There were few lush meadows, a knowledge of where to find fresh water and green grass was essential for a shepherd if his flock was to stay alive.

The King as Shepherd

We often read about sheep and shepherds in the Bible, as theirs was an agricultural way of life. Leaders are often referred to as shepherds, for they had the responsibility of providing for the needs of those under them, and these people could be far from co-operative. It is no coincidence that two of the greatest leaders in the Old Testament, Moses and David, had both been shepherds, for in that period of their lives they learnt important skills needed for leadership. Several of the prophets condemned the nation's leaders as being like bad shepherds. Also, the phrase "sheep without a shepherd" occurs several times; a nation is in a bad way when there is no clear leadership.

But over the human rulers, was God, he is addressed as the "Shepherd of Israel" (Ps.80:1), who led his people "like a flock" when they were in the wilderness (Ps.77:20). He was the one who guided and provided for them. Similarly, the promise of return from exile is given with the same pastoral picture,

"He (God) tends his flock like a shepherd" (Isa.40:11).
"He who scattered Israel will gather them
and will watch over his flock like a shepherd" (Jer.31:10).

Messiah as Shepherd

In Bible times it was common for kings to be spoken of as shepherds. It is therefore not surprising to find passages where the coming King-Messiah is referred to in this way. In Eze.34:23 God promises "I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd." This is in marked contrast to the rulers of Ezekiel's day who are condemned as being selfish and unfaithful shepherds. Mi.5:2,4 also predicts the coming of one who will be born in Bethlehem, he will be "ruler over Israel", and "will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD".

The Good Shepherd

For this reason, the claim by Jesus to be "the good shepherd" (Jn.10:11) can be regarded as another indirect claim to be Messiah. He draws a sharp contrast between himself and "all who ever came before me" who "were thieves and robbers" (v.8), and also "the hired hand" (v.12) who had no care for the sheep. What marked him out from these was that "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (v.11). This is one of the many occasions when he pointed out that it was necessary for him to die.

Jesus also spoke of his followers as sheep. His own disciples were a "little flock" (Lk.12:32). Other Jews were "the lost sheep of Israel" (Mt.10:6). Future Gentile converts would be "other sheep which are not of this sheep pen" (Jn.10:16). His sheep are marked out by the fact that they listen to his voice and follow him (Jn.10:27). When we read that Jesus saw the people "like sheep without a shepherd" (Mt.9:36), it was an indirect condemnation of the rulers of his day for not caring for people's spiritual needs.

The Shepherd-King

The Shepherd in Zechariah

The shepherd theme occurs in two passages in the book of Zechariah. These speak of the suffering and rejection of a person who is described as a shepherd. It is difficult to understand in detail what is meant, but the main message is clear. In ch.11:4-17, the speaker is obviously a shepherd appointed by God, but he is rejected by the people. "The flock detested me, and I grew weary of them and said 'I will not be your shepherd'" (v.8,9). As judgement on the people for this rejection, they are promised a shepherd who will not care for them (v.16,17).

This passage makes two predictions, first that the Jews would reject the leader God had given them. Then, as judgement on them, they find themselves ruled by an unjust leader. But this person will also be judged by God,

"Woe to the worthless shepherd
who deserts the flock" (v.17).

In the Old Testament, we find the Jews consistently rejecting those whom God sent them, as Stephen pointed out in his speech in Acts 7, "You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit!" (v.51). When the Jews rejected Jesus, it was the ultimate fulfilment of this passage in Zechariah.

We also read that the shepherd is paid "thirty pieces of silver" as his wages (11:13). We cannot be sure if this was something that actually happened in Zechariah's time, but Matthew sees this fulfilled in the thirty pieces of silver paid to Judas Iscariot for betraying Jesus, which he later gave back to the Jewish leaders (Mt.27:9).

The second 'Shepherd' passage in the book is 13:7-9. God commands a sword to,

"Strike the shepherd,
and the sheep will be scattered" (v.7).

Not only would God's appointed shepherd be rejected by the people, but now God is commanding that he be smitten. No doubt those to whom these words were originally spoken would find it hard to understand why God should do this. But Jesus quoted this passage at the Last Supper, warning the disciples that it was about to be fulfilled when he would be betrayed and they would desert him. He told them "you will all fall away" (Mt.26:31).

However, Zechariah tells us that one result of this event will be that those faithful to God will have their faith refined by this situation, they will still find that God answers their prayers.

"I will refine them like silver
and test them like gold.
They will call on my name
and I will answer them" (v.9).

A third passage in Zechariah which is quoted in the New Testament as being fulfilled in Christ is ch.12:10-14, where we read of great mourning for somebody who had died, "They will look on me, the one they have pierced" (v.10). Again, we do not know if this applied to any event in Zechariah's day, but John saw it as being fulfilled when the soldier pierced Jesus in the side with his sword after he had died (Jn.19:37).

It is also important to notice that this passage starts by saying that the mourning for this dead person will be because God pours out "a spirit of grace and supplication" (v.10),

The Shepherd-King

and is followed by a promise that "On that day a fountain will be opened to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity" (13:1). The death for which they will mourn is clearly connected with the promise of forgiveness.

Before Jesus' death, the disciples could not understand why Messiah had to be rejected and killed. But after his resurrection, they understood that these passages, like many others in the Old Testament, showed that what happened was planned beforehand by God, he had a reason for it.

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The title `Shepherd' is linked with that of `King' it was one commonly applied to any leader. It speaks of responsibility for caring for those under his authority. When Jesus called himself Shepherd, it meant that he was fulfilling the Old Testament promises mentioned, including the passages in Zechariah.

When we think of Jesus as our Shepherd, it means that we are his flock, he provides for our needs and cares for our problems. But we have a responsibility to listen to his voice, to follow where he leads, and to look to him for help.

Questions for thought and discussion

1. There are three passages in the epistles where Jesus is called Shepherd, Heb.13:20, 1 Pet.2:25; 5:4. Look them up, and see what we are to learn from them.
2. From your knowledge of sheep or other similar animals, in what way should we be like them, and in what way should we not be like them?

ch.5 Lord

In Britain today, the feudal system is a dim historical memory, so to most people, the title "lord of the manor" does not mean much. Certainly the members of the House of Lords are given little political prominence these days. But we still think of the title "lord" as signifying somebody with authority. In our devotional life, we may use the titles "Lord God" and "Lord Jesus" without thinking much of their significance. But it seems that the phrase "Jesus is Lord" found in 1 Cor.12:3 was what the early Christians would say to testify to their faith, so we need to consider exactly what those words would mean to them.

Two Hebrew Words

In the Old Testament, there are two very different Hebrew words both translated Lord in English. The first, *Adon*, is used for human lords as well as God, it means any person in authority, one who has the right to command. The phrase "my lord" was used often as a mark of respect, Aaron used it when addressing Moses (Ex.32:22) "Do not be angry, my lord". Also a common way to address a king was to say "my lord the king".

God is sometimes called *Adon*, for example when speaking of his rule over the natural world. In Josh.3:11, Joshua gives instructions about the ark when they were about to cross the Jordan. The ark belongs to God who is "the Lord of all the earth", and so he can stop the river Jordan from flowing so that they can cross. In Ps.97:5, the same phrase occurs; the "Lord of all the earth" appears in dark clouds, and before him the mountains "melt like wax".

However, the plural form of this word is more commonly used, for this indicates majesty, just as the Hebrew word for God, *Elohim*, is a plural word. Then the suffix meaning "my" is put on, and it is usually written as *Adonay*, meaning literally "My Lord". This is how it is sometimes translated in the K.J.V., but modern translations usually translate it as "Lord".

The LORD

The second Hebrew word is always translated as "the LORD", printed in capitals, to distinguish it from "the Lord" (*Adon* or *Adonay*). This Hebrew word consists of the four consonants *YHWH* (for ancient Hebrew, like modern Arabic, was only written as consonants). We cannot be absolutely sure how it was pronounced, because after the exile the Jews ceased to pronounce this word in public out of reverence lest they break the command in Lev.24:16 which says "anyone who blasphemes the name of the LORD must be put to death". The correct pronunciation was lost during the Middle Ages, but people now think it was pronounced Yahweh.

During the seventh century A.D., when Jewish scribes added vowels to the Hebrew text, the vowels of *Adonay* were put underneath the consonants *YHWH*, meaning that whenever they saw "*YHWH*" written, it was to be read as "*Adonay*". Later, Christians began to read it as "Jehovah", and though this could not have been the original pronunciation, it has become accepted as a name for God by constant use. In the K.J.V. *YHWH* is translated "Jehovah" 7 times.

We cannot be sure how the name *YHWH* originated, but it was the name by which God revealed himself to Moses in the Burning Bush (Ex.3:13-15). Up till then, he was known as the God who had revealed himself to Abraham, then Isaac, then Jacob. Moses asked God what he should answer if the Jews asked for a name for the God he had met. In reply, God did not just give his name, but its significance, "I AM WHO I AM" (v.14). This is a play on words, for the letters *YHWH* are similar to the verb "to be", which can either be taken as meaning "to exist", or "to bring into existence". So the phrase "I AM WHO I AM" can either mean that he is the only One who exists without being created by any other being; or that he

Lord

is the Creator who brings everything else into existence. From then on, *YHWH* became the personal name associated with the covenant that God made with the Jews, just as the Greek gods have personal names such as Mars and Jupiter. It stood for the God who had entered into a covenant relationship with them.

Sometimes the names *Adon* and *YHWH* occur together. This is very common in the book of Ezekiel where God is emphasizing his power and authority over human affairs. But this presents a problem to the translators, literally it means "the Lord the LORD". The K.J.V. translates this as "the Lord GOD", and the N.I.V. has "the Sovereign Lord". In the Psalms, often different names for God are put in parallel. No one name can sum up all that God is; in our prayers and in our worship we use many different names to express what God means to us.

`Lord' in the New Testament

The Greek word for "lord" is *kurios*, which means somebody having power, authority, or the owner of something. In Mk.12:9 it is used for the "owner" of a vineyard, and in Eph.6:5,9 of the owner of master of slaves. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, it is used to translate *Adon* and *Adonay*. Also, because *YHWH* was pronounced *Adonay*, that too was translated by *Kurios*, though in early Christian literature it is found in various forms such as *iaoue*. This has given us the clue as to how *YHWH* should be pronounced.

Sometimes the word `Lord' refers to God the Father; in Mt.11:25, we read that Jesus addressed God as "Father, Lord of heaven and earth". Paul told the philosophers of Athens "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth" (Acts 17:24). Here, `Lord' is used in the sense of `Ruler'. In the book of Revelation, God is often addressed as "the Lord God Almighty".

How Jesus was addressed

The early disciples of Jesus spoke Aramaic, a language similar to Hebrew. In Matthew and John, gospels written for Jewish readers, we read that the disciples addressed Jesus using the title Rabbi, the Aramaic word used to address the Jewish teachers (Mt.23:7), which means "my great one". A variation of this is "*Rabboni*", used by a blind beggar in the Greek version of Mk.10:51, and Mary Magdalene in Jn.20:16. At first, Jesus was looked on as a teacher. But even when they came to believe he was more, they still kept the same form of address, which is probably why in these gospels the Aramaic word is written without being translated. Another Aramaic title which has been preserved is "*Marana*" in 1 Cor.16:22 which means "our Lord".

In Jn.12:21 we read that some Greeks address Philip as *kurios*, evidently this was a polite way of addressing somebody. So when Jesus was called "Lord", it may have meant no more than a mark of respect, for example when the Greek woman from Syrian Phoenicia spoke to him (Mk.7:28). Jesus was also called "Teacher" and "Master". What we can learn from all this is that, at first, Jesus was treated with the same respect as other teachers of the law.

Jesus' use of `Lord'

Occasionally Jesus referred to himself as "Lord" meaning one who has authority. In a dispute over what could and could not be done on the Sabbath, he said "the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath" (Mk.2:28). This meant that he had authority to say what could and could not be done on the Sabbath. Then when speaking of his Second Coming, he told his disciples "you do not know on what day your Lord will come" (Mt.24:42), and he follows this by telling a parable where he is like the owner of a house. He also told the disciples that though he accepted the titles of `Teacher' and `Lord' from them, he was willing to wash their feet, so setting them the example that those with human responsibilities had a duty to serve others (Jn.13:13-15).

Lord

In chapter 3, we saw that Ps.110:1 is an important Old Testament passage which predicts that the promised Messiah will be more than human. It is an example of the two very different uses of 'Lord', for it reads "The LORD (*YHWH*, God the Father) said to my Lord (*Adon*, whom the Jews believed referred to the Messiah): 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.'" By quoting this passage, Jesus was trying to help the Jews to realise that the promised Messiah was to be Lord even over the great king David. In Jewish thought, a son could not be greater than his father, but Jesus is taking this passage to prove that Messiah, though descended from David in one sense, would be greater than him in authority. He would not be a mere human whom they could fit into their existing religious organisation, but a Lord to whom they must submit.

After the resurrection

On the Day of Pentecost, Peter stood up and announced to the crowd that the power of the Holy Spirit with which they were filled was proof that Jesus had been raised from the dead, and this in turn was proof that "God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36). As authority for saying this, he quotes from Ps.110:1 where God the Father invites "my Lord" to sit at his right hand, the place of honour. Peter is telling them that the Jesus that many of them had seen crucified is now in the position of authority, and must now be given the same homage and glory as God.

Later on, Peter introduced Jesus to Cornelius, the Roman Centurion, as "Lord of all" (Acts 10:36). No doubt Cornelius had heard of Jesus, but Peter is first introducing him as a person of great authority. Then after summarising Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, Peter announces "he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead" (v.42). There is a similar phrase in Rm.14:9 where Paul, writing to the Christians in Rome, tells them that Jesus is "Lord of both the dead and the living". As Lord, he is also Judge.

The confession of the early Christians

In Rm.10:9, Paul says that the two marks of a Christian are first the inner belief in the resurrection of Jesus, and then the public confession that "Jesus is Lord". Evidently to say this was the sign that a person had become a Christian. In Phil.2:11, we read that every tongue should "confess that Jesus Christ is Lord".

Also, in the previous verse Paul says "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow", and this is a quotation from Isa.45:23 where it is God who says "before me every knee will bow". The homage due to God is now to be given to Jesus. This means that Jesus has the same nature as God, he is divine. So to say 'Jesus is Lord' means acknowledging both that Jesus is divine, and that he has authority over us.

'Lord' in the rest of the New Testament

Many times in the epistles, Jesus is given the full title "The Lord Jesus Christ". However, he may be referred to as "the Lord" when his authority is being emphasised. So Paul refers to "the Lord's command" in 1 Cor.14:37, and "the Lord's Supper" in 1 Cor.11:20 when we remember "the Lord's death" (v.26). It is the Lord who "will come down from heaven" (1 Thess.4:16) after which Christians "will be with the Lord for ever" (v.17). Also, as an exhortation to moral purity, Paul informs the Thessalonians that "The Lord will punish men for all such sins" (1 Thess.4:6).

We can contrast this with the references to the fact that it is Christ who died for our sins, was buried, and raised on the third day (1 Cor.15:3,4). The name Christ is associated more with the life of Jesus on earth.

The title 'The Lord' also tells us of Christ's authority in the world, for in 1 Tim.6:15 he is proclaimed as "King of kings and Lord of lords". This may be linked with the various

Lord

references to the fact that Christ has power over the devil and demonic forces. Just before his death he said "now the prince of this world will be driven out" (Jn.12:31). In Col.2:15, Paul speaks of Christ "having disarmed the powers and authorities", and in 1 Cor.15:24, he says "Then the end will come, when he hands the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power" (these are understood to be names for various demonic powers). Jesus has authority over all spirit beings.

Often, "the Lord" can equally mean Jesus or God, as when Peter refers to "the Spirit of the Lord" (Acts 5:9), who is also called "the Spirit of Christ" (Rm.8:9). This is further proof that the writers of the New Testament put Christ in a place of equal honour with God. For us, the title `Lord' expresses our belief in his divine nature, in the same way that `Son of God' does.

* * * *

The title `Lord' as applied to Jesus speaks of ownership; to acknowledge him as Lord means that we are accepting his authority over our lives. It also speaks of his authority over the world in general; he is the Lord of Creation. Also, because it is the name given to the Father, it implies that we give him the same honour and glory, believing him to be divine.

Questions for thought and discussion.

1. Does it help you to understand the Old Testament better by reading "Yahweh" whenever you see "the LORD" written? But since pious Jews never pronounce the Divine Name Yahweh for fear of profaning it, is there a danger that we might become too familiar by using it?
2. What are some of the positive ways in which we can show reverence to God and Jesus?
3. Should the teaching on the future judgement of Christians be given more prominence?
4. If a person in New Testament times proclaimed that he was a Christian by saying "Jesus is Lord", what would be the equivalent phrase today?

ch.6 The Word

Different meanings of `word'

In the Old Testament, a `word' usually means a whole message that is being communicated, rather than just a single word. We have the same meaning when we say "I want a word in your ear". `Words' can also mean songs (Ps.137:3), poems (Dt.31:30), or letters (Esth.9:26 K.J.V.).

The `word' that God speaks

The Bible often speaks of `The word of God' or `the word of the LORD'. This is something active that goes out from God to accomplish his purposes, and these purposes will be achieved.

"...my word that goes out from my mouth:
It will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." (Isa. 55:11).

The `word' in Creation

The story of Creation is told in Gen.1 as a series of eight commands: "God said `Let there be light'" etc. This is why in Ps.33:6 we read "By the word of the LORD were the heavens made". The natural world obeys God's commands. In the Bible, all natural processes are spoken of as the direct actions of God. He works through his creation to provide for man's need (Ps.107:20), and the different kinds of weather obey his command (Ps.147:15-18).

The `word' of prophecy

One of the central beliefs of the Christian faith is that God wants to communicate with us, and has revealed himself to us in many different ways. One of these is through the created world, this obeys God's command, and so God can reveal himself through it.

We also read of God giving specific messages to certain people. One of the commonest expressions used in the Bible to describe God speaking is "the word of the LORD came to ... ". Usually we are not told how God spoke, though sometimes we are told that the person saw a vision or had a dream, what was important was the message God gave.

Sometimes when God spoke to people it had a dramatic effect on them. Once the prophet Jeremiah said of God's words "they were my joy and delight" (Jer.15:16), but on another occasion when people were rejecting his message, he said "the word of the LORD has brought me insult and reproach all day long" (20:8).

Sometimes the `word' was a prediction of future events. If it was a word from God, it was bound to be fulfilled, as in the case of Elijah being fed by a widow at Zarephath. "The jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the LORD spoken by Elijah" (1 Kgs.17:16).

It is important to note that I used the word `prophecy' above, in the general sense of God speaking, not necessarily predicting the future. It is unfortunate that in common English usage, `prophecy' is considered only as `prediction'. A prophet was one who passed on messages that God had given him.

The `word' of command

The books of Exodus to Deuteronomy record the various commands God gave to the Jews through Moses, which are summarised in the Ten Commandments, these are literally

The Word

'the Ten Words'. In Deut.8:3 we read of the importance we are to attach to the word of God. Moses told the Israelites that God had miraculously fed them with 'manna' in the wilderness to teach them that "man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD". Then he goes on to encourage them to obey God's commands, so the "word" here must refer to what God has commanded. To obey these commands is more important to our daily life than bread.

At the end of Deuteronomy, Moses makes another statement about God's word, he says it is not in an inaccessible place, but "it is in your mouth and in your heart so that you may obey it." (Deut.30:14). Here, he was also referring to God's commands, the people had been told what to do, so they had no excuse for not obeying. We can also note that in Rm.10:6-9 this passage is quoted applying "the word" to the Christian gospel which a person receives and believes, then he makes a public confession of this faith.

Psalms 119 shows that the word of God can have a wide range of meanings. It can refer to God's commands, usually called The Law, to instruction about God in general, or to the promises made to those who obey God's laws. The writer's life is in danger because of wicked men (v.109, 110), but because of God's promise (literally his "word") the writer knows God will deliver him from these enemies (v.154). In v.160, we read that God's words are true. Now truth in the Bible is not just an abstract idea, it means that God's word is a reliable guide to what God is like and what he requires of us. The important thing for the writer of this psalm is that they are God's commands, God's promises. The commands will keep him from going astray, and he can rely on God's promises to keep him safe when others are persecuting him. Also he is not content with just knowing what is written, he also wanted to understand it, for many times he prays "Give me understanding" (e.g.v.34).

'Word' in the New Testament

In the New Testament the 'Word of God' can be used with a similar meaning to that in the Old. In Luke 3:2 we read that "the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert", meaning that John was regarded as being like an Old Testament prophet. Jesus referred to the Old Testament Law as "the word of God" (Mk.7:13), in other words he assumed its divine origin. He also claimed absolute authority for his own words, for he said "my words will never pass away" (Mk.13:31).

'The word' is sometimes used for the whole of the Christian message. Jesus "preached the word" (Mk.2:2), and after Pentecost, the Christians "preached the word wherever they went" (Acts 8:4). The apostle John was imprisoned on the island of Patmos because of the "word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (Rev.1:9). In Col.3:16, Paul expresses his desire that the "word of Christ" dwell richly in his readers, meaning the message that Christ brought.

In Jas.1:18 we read that God "chose to give us birth through the word of truth". There are similar words in 1 Pet.1:23, 25 where we read that we are "born again ... through the living and enduring word of God ... this is the word that was preached to you." Here, we can understand this as referring to the message that had been preached which led to the conversion of the readers, the truth contained in this message, and also to the power of God which used this message to bring spiritual birth in the hearers. Peter then quotes from Isa.40:6-8, a passage which contrasts the permanence of God's word with grass which grows and decays so quickly; truth remains, in contrast with human ideas which come and go. But it is also "living", dynamic, not static. We believe that this word which was once spoken and then recorded can still speak to us and transform us.

Jesus as 'The Word'

At the beginning of his gospel, Luke refers to people who were "eyewitnesses and servants of the word" (1:2). This suggests that he means not a spoken or written word, but a

The Word

person. The God who had spoken in Old Testament times through the prophets has given his final revelation not in words, but in the person of his Son, Jesus (Heb.1:1,2).

The main passage where we read of "the Word" as a person is the beginning of John's Gospel. Here we have words which are simple, yet they convey a profound truth. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God". This Word is a divine Being, the N.E.B. translates the last part of verse 1 as "what God was, the Word was". He is a separate Person from God the Father, for he was "with God". So "the Word" must refer to Christ, and this passage is speaking of him before he came to earth. 'The Word' is the title which tells us that Christ is the fullest revelation of God to us.

In v.3, the Word is said to be the One through whom all things were made. This reminds us of Ps.33:6 which has been mentioned already, "by the word of the LORD were the heavens made"; the Word was God's agent in creation. Paul makes the same point in Col.1:16, "all things were created by him". Then in the next verse we read "in him all things hold together". The natural world is part of God's revelation, both in its origin and in its processes; for in the Bible, the writers regarded events in the natural world as God's actions. So to say that the Universe was created by Christ is the same as saying "He commanded and they were created" (Ps. 148:5). God works in the world through his Word.

Surely one of the most concise yet important statements in the Bible is "The Word became flesh" (Jn.1:14). God did not just speak through a succession of prophets, nor was his final word to man a sterile and unalterable dogma, it was a Person. The revelation was not only in what he said, but in who he was. Here, the truth about the Incarnation is stated very simply; the pre-existent Word, the Son of God, became united to a human body to become one Person. He had two natures, the human and the divine. But he was no schizophrenic with two competing natures, nor a divine Being pretending to be a man, nor yet a human being who became divine. Physically and mentally he was the same as us, but spiritually he was one with God the Father. "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." We may not be able to explain it, but by faith we can accept this simple truth.

Those with a knowledge of ancient Greek culture know that the Greek word for 'word' in Jn.1 is logos, which also means the principle of 'reason' in man and the idea of 'order' in Creation. This gives an added significance to the meaning of 'The Word' as a title of Christ. Paul brings out this thought in Col.2:3 when he says that in Christ "are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge", and in 1 Cor.1:24 he is called the "wisdom of God". Many cannot understand God's actions, they seem foolish. But for those who are willing to accept God's ways, there is a wisdom in what God has revealed. Jesus is the revelation of God's wisdom.

The 'Word of Life'

The first epistle of John begins with words which are similar to those at the beginning of his Gospel. We read of One who was from the beginning, whom they had heard, seen and touched. But then he says "we proclaim to you the eternal life" (1 Jn.1:2). This suggests that the phrase "the Word of life" in v.1 refers not to Jesus as a person, but to the message proclaiming the Christ who brings spiritual life. This theme of life also occurs in Jn.1:4, "in him (Jesus) was life, and that life was the light of men." Jesus had spiritual life, he also had the power to give this to others, and as they received this life, they also received spiritual illumination. At the end of his Gospel, John tells his readers that it was written with the specific purpose "that by believing you may have life in his name" (Jn.20:31). The living Word was no longer on earth, but the written word was being used by God to bring life.

The Word of Judgement

In chapter 3, reference was made to Rev. 19:11-21 where we read of a rider on a white horse who goes to rule the nations with an iron sceptre, whose name is given as "The

The Word

Word of God" (v.13). This cannot be the Word of revelation of Jn.1:1-14, but the Word of judgement. We can understand that this Rider represents Christ, but here his purpose is different from when he first came to earth. He now comes to bring God's judgement on men, "He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty". The vivid symbolism of a grape harvest reminds us of Old Testament passages such as Isa.63:6 and Joel 3:13. Though the doctrine of Judgement is not popular with some, it is a theme repeated many times in the New Testament; "he (God) has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed" (Acts 17:31).

The Bible as the Word of God

In the Old Testament, we find many references to writing, and these writings must have been preserved carefully. Eventually, out of many documents, what we call the books of the Old Testament, (called the holy Scriptures) were gathered together and accepted as "God-breathed" (2 Tim.3:16), a reliable account of how God revealed himself. Then the books of the New Testament were collected and accepted as an accurate account of what Jesus said and did, and also of the teaching of the apostles. So after much discussion, what we call the "Canon of the Bible" was agreed on by church leaders. We can accept that the Bible is the written word of God, the authority for our Christian faith. Today, the main way in which we can learn about Christ the Living Word is through the written word.

Today God can speak to us through the Bible, it is not just a collection of ancient writings. We believe that the words of Jesus which he said to his disciples apply to us as we read the Bible, "when he, the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth" (Jn.16:13). We need the Holy Spirit to bring God's message to us each time we read the Bible. And so we encounter Christ as a living person bringing God's salvation to us.

* * * *

Jesus as the Prophet

We can connect the title 'the Word' with that of 'the Prophet', for a prophet is one who brings God's word to others. This title is based on Dt.18:15-19 where Moses says "the LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers". This must first mean that God will send a succession of prophets, for we are then told how to test between a prophet who has a message from God and one who is a false prophet. However, we can also take it as promising one great Prophet, a second Moses, just as the ideal king was a second David.

We know that people in New Testament times were still expecting a prophet to come in fulfilment of Dt.18:15 for in Jn.6:14, people said of Jesus "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world".

Jesus saw his role as partly that of a prophet. When the people of Nazareth refused to believe that he was anybody special, he said "Only in his home town and in his own house is a prophet without honour" (Mt.13:57). Then when he heard that Herod wanted to kill him, he continued on his journey to Jerusalem saying "surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!" (Lk.13:33).

The apostles accepted that Jesus was the promised Prophet, for in Acts 3:22, Peter quotes this verse and adds "you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers" (v.25).

* * * *

In the Old Testament, the Word of God is something active, it is God speaking to people and also achieving his purposes in the world.

The Word

When we use 'The Word' to refer to Jesus, this means that he brought God's final revelation to us, he was the supreme Prophet. But he did not just tell us about God, he was God. Jesus told Philip "anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn.14:9). In his person as well as in his words he revealed God.

Now, we have the record of this revelation in the Bible, the written Word of God. As we read the Bible, may the Holy Spirit make Christ as a living reality to us and bring God's word to us each day.

Questions for thought and discussion

1. What are the different ways in which God has spoken to you in your experience?
2. Sometimes you can believe God is speaking to you, but it may be something from your own mind, or from somebody else and not from God. What tests can you apply to see if it is a genuine message from God?
3. Are there any parts of the Bible that you have difficulty in accepting as the Word of God? If so, discuss them with others to see if you can find the reason why those were accepted as part of the collection of writings which we call the Bible.
4. Read Jn.1:1-18 and think about the links between these words: Word, life, light, grace, truth.

ch.7 The Servant

The word `servant' in Bible Times

In Britain today, the word `servant' is not popular as a job description; instead people prefer to be called butlers, cooks, gardeners etc. However, those who work for famous people can be proud of that fact if some of the honour of their employer rubs off on them.

In Old Testament times, the word `servant' could be used for a variety of positions from a person in the service of a king to a slave who had been bought (Ex.21:2). The term could be used for a position of great responsibility; Abraham's servant was given the task of travelling about 500 miles to find a wife for Isaac (Gen.24), and Joseph was put in charge of all Potiphar's property, even though he had been sold as a slave (Gen.39).

In Ex.21:2-11 we find regulations which show that the Jews were to treat their servants fairly, a man who was bought as a servant must be given freedom to go after seven years, for God did not want the Jews to keep a fellow-countryman as a permanent slave; However he could remain voluntarily. God gave the reason in Lev.25:55, "the Israelites belong to me as servants. They are my servants whom I brought out of Egypt".

It is important to note that there is no separate word for "slave" in the Bible. The same word is translated as "servant" or "slave" in different versions of the Bible.

God's servant

As a mark of respect before somebody acknowledged to be greater, a person could describe himself as "your servant", as when Abraham greeted his three visitors in Gen.18:3. So it was a very great honour to be regarded as God's servant. God called Moses "My servant" in Josh.1:2; in the Psalms, David is called God's servant (e.g. Ps.78:70); and in Amos 3:7, prophets are called servants of the Sovereign LORD. This title is appropriate because they had the honour of being chosen for a particular task. The term "your servant(s)" is frequently used in the Psalms, indicating devotion to God, and as a basis for asking God to help them. The people who ministered in the temple are called "servants of the LORD" (Ps.134:1).

The servant of the LORD in Isaiah

In Isaiah chapters 40 to 55, God is speaking to the Jews who were in captivity in Babylon. Frequently he mentions "my servant"; sometimes adding the name Jacob or Israel. This obviously means the nation of Israel. We read,

"I said, `You are my servant';

I have chosen you and have not rejected you" (Isa.41:9).

God says this because they might have been tempted to think that God had rejected them by allowing them to be taken into captivity. Then God tells them, "'You are my witnesses,' declares the LORD, `that I am God'" (Isa.43:12). He is promising to deliver them, and this would tell other nations that God was the only God, pagan idols were nothing.

However, he had to reprove them,

"Who is blind but my servant,

and deaf like the messenger I send? ...

You have seen many things, but have paid no attention;
your ears are open, but you hear nothing." (Isa.42:19,20).

The reason why they had been taken captive was that they had been deaf to God speaking through the prophets. But now God is promising forgiveness,

"Remember these things, O Jacob,

for you are my servant, O Israel,...

I have swept away your offences like a cloud,

The Servant

your sins like the morning mist.
Return to me, for I have redeemed you." (Isa.44:21,22).

The Servant Songs

However there are four passages where the Lord's servant is clearly one person. God is commissioning him first to bring about the spiritual restoration of Israel, then to bring God's 'salvation' to other nations. However, he would be rejected and killed. But there was a purpose in this, his death was to be the means whereby the sin of the nation could be forgiven.

These four passages have been called the four Servant Songs. They are 42:1-9, 49:1-13, 50:4-9, and 52:13-53:12. There is a fifth passage where it refers to somebody anointed by God, which can be linked with these (61:1-3.)

The First Song (42:1-9)

In this, we read that God has chosen his servant, and will put his Spirit on him (v.1). He will be "a light for the Gentiles" to bring God's truth to them. He will be "a covenant for the people" (v.6), which means the mediator of a universal covenant. His task is to bring justice to the nations (v.1). These words are similar to those in Isa.11:2,3, where they are used of the coming King in the line of David who will rule with justice and righteousness. But the servant of the Lord is not presented as a powerful ruler, instead he will be quiet and gentle (41:2,3).

The Second Song (49:1-13)

Here the servant speaks, telling "distant nations" of his mission, repeating some of what is said in the First Song. But then he says,

"I have laboured to no purpose;

I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing" (v.4)

This must be because of the people's spiritual stubbornness which is described in more detail in ch.48. But he encourages himself,

"I am honoured in the eyes of the LORD
and my God has been my strength" (v.5)

The Third Song (50:4-9)

In this, the word "servant" is not mentioned, but it obviously refers to the same person as the other three. He speaks to himself. He has been obedient and not rebellious; God has given him suitable words to speak (v.4,5). But those to whom he has been sent have mocked him, spat on him and beaten him (v.6). However, he is confident,

"Because the Sovereign LORD helps me,
I will not be disgraced.

He who vindicates me is near.

Who then will bring charges against me?" (v.7,8).

The Fourth Song (52:13-53:12)

The Fourth servant Song has been described as the most discussed passage in the Old Testament. It speaks of the Lord's Servant suffering for the sins of others, being put to death, then being exalted. The footnotes show that there are many variations between the different manuscripts we have available; evidently those who copied the text found it hard to make sense of what they were writing.

The passage is symmetrical, in five parts: 52:13-15 and 53:10-12 tell of the Servant's exaltation, 53:1-3 and 7-9 speak of his rejection, and 53:4-6 describe his atoning sufferings.

The Servant

He was despised and rejected by those to whom he had been sent (v.3). He was tried and executed (v.8). He shared the sufferings of others, he carried them as a heavy load (v.3,4).

But more than that, it was the sin of all people that was laid on him (v.6), sin being defined as each of us going our own way. He was innocent (v.9), it was for the sins of others that he died. This was no misfortune, "it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer" (v.10), it was God who made his life a "guilt offering" (v.10). (The details of this ritual are given in Lev.5:14-6:7, where we are told that only when atonement has been made by sacrifice can sin be forgiven.)

But the end of the chapter speaks of him prolonging his days, and the will of the Lord prospering in his hand (v.10). He must have been raised from the dead. After this he will be exalted (v.12), kings and many nations will see and understanding these things. (52:13,15).

To understand the passage, we must first see it in its context. In ch.52, there is the promise that the Jews will return to their country and again prosper. In ch.54 is the promise that their numbers will again increase, and in ch.55 is the call that they must forsake their wicked ways and seek God. But it was important that the Jews understood that God was not just forgetting their sin. He could only offer forgiveness because a sacrifice was to be made to atone for their sin.

The Fifth Song (61:1-3)

This passage speaks of one who has been anointed by God to bring the good news of freedom to captives, and to comfort the mourners. God was showing his favour to them. The obvious literal meaning of these words is that the Jews will be freed from exile in Babylon, but later we will discuss how this passage is quoted in the New Testament.

Suffering in the Psalms

The Servant Songs can also be linked with those psalms which speak of the author going through great suffering, the most well known being 22 and 69. We know that David suffered a lot when he was fleeing from Saul, but sometimes the language of these psalms seems extreme, it is difficult to fit the language into what we read of his experiences in the books of Samuel. What we can say is that the writer may have spoken out of personal experience, but like Isaiah, he wrote words which were more completely fulfilled in the sufferings of Christ, for that is how the writers of the New Testament understood them.

Jesus as the Servant in the Gospels

The quotations from the Servant Songs in the New Testament show how it was believed that many details in them were fulfilled by Christ. When Simeon took the infant Jesus into his arms, having been led to the temple by the Holy Spirit, he showed that he believed Jesus was not only the promised Messiah for the Jews, but also that he would become a "light for revelation to the Gentiles" (Luke 2:32, quoting Isa.42:6, 49:6).

As a growing boy, Jesus would have read the Old Testament and would have seen that those who seek to serve God must be prepared for rejection and suffering. So it is possible that reading the Servant Songs could have been the means God used to help the human Jesus to become aware of his unique mission which was that he would have to die to make atonement for sin.

When Jesus withdrew from the crowds to avoid publicity, Matthew says that it fulfilled Isa.42:1-4, for he quotes it in full (Mt.12:15-21). He also sees Jesus' healing miracles as fulfilling Isa.53:4,

"He took up our infirmities
and carried our diseases" (Mt.8:16-17).

The Servant

Jesus claimed to be the person spoken of in Isa.61:1,2 when he read this passage in the synagogue at Nazareth, he told his hearers "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Lk.4:21). This was also the passage, together with Isa.35:5,6 of which he reminded John the Baptist when he sent a message to Jesus to ask if he was the "one who was to come" (Lk.7:20), meaning that he was fulfilling what was predicted in those two passages.

The three Synoptic Gospels record that on several occasions, Jesus told his disciples that he must suffer, die, and be raised again. In Mk.9:12 he says, "it is written that the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected". In other words, Jesus saw these events as having been predicted in the Old Testament. Just before his death, he quoted from Isa.53:12 that he was about to be "numbered with the transgressors" (Lk.22:37). In Luke 24:26,27, we read that Jesus explained to the two disciples walking home to Emmaus that the Christ had to suffer and enter his glory, and then we read that he explained "what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" beginning with "Moses and all the Prophets". There was not just one passage that predicted these things, it was a theme that ran through the whole of the Old Testament.

Jesus also taught the disciples that he had come to be their servant, in chapter 5 we saw that though he was Lord, he also set the example of serving others (Jn.13:13-15). In Mk.10:43-45, he had to point out that in dying for them, he was showing that "whoever wants to become great among you must first be your servant".

Jesus as Servant: the rest of the New Testament

In the first part of Acts, Peter calls Jesus God's "servant" twice (3:13,26, in the K.J.V. it is translated "son"). Then the apostles use it twice in their prayer in Acts 4:27,30 (in the K.J.V. it is translated "child"). But it is not used after that as an official title. (The Greek word used to translate `servant' in Isaiah is *pais* which can also mean `child'. This is the word used of Christ in these four places in Acts. But the words usually used for `servant' or `slave' are *doulos* and *diakonos*. However, as we are dealing with a general theme of service, I do not see that we should see much difference in the meanings of these three words).

Paul quotes from Isa.49:6 as the reason why he preached the Christian message to the Gentiles, Jesus was the "light for the Gentiles", but Paul believed God wanted him to be an agent for bringing this "salvation to the ends of the earth" (Acts 13:47).

In Acts 8, we read that the Spirit led Philip to meet an Ethiopian eunuch who was reading from Isaiah, (53:7,8 is the passage quoted), and he asked Philip to whom the words referred. Philip was in no doubt as to the answer, we read he "began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus" (Acts 8:35).

1 Pet.2:21-25 is a passage which has several similarities to Isa.53; we read that Jesus' suffering unjustly in silence is an example for us to do the same. Then Peter goes on to say "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree"; we can compare this with two statements in Isa.53, "he will bear their iniquities (v.11), and "he bore the sin of many" (v.12). Peter must have had this passage from Isaiah in mind as he wrote. He saw Jesus as not only sharing our sufferings, but also bearing our sin.

So we can definitely say that in New Testament times, people believed that Jesus fulfilled what Isaiah predicted of the Servant of the Lord, both in his life and death.

Some believe that Isaiah 53 refers to the Jews as a nation, for many other references to the Servant of the LORD in that part of Isaiah clearly apply to them. But the general theme in Isaiah is that the Jews were suffering for their own sins, their suffering could not

The Servant

benefit others. I see no reason why we cannot accept the traditional understanding that Isa.53 predicts the atoning death of Jesus, no other person has been able to bear the sin of others.

The example to us

The theme of service is common in the New Testament. Paul referred to himself as "a servant of Jesus Christ" (Rm.1:1). Writing to the Corinthians, he describes himself and Timothy as "your servants for Jesus' sake" (2 Cor.4:5), and to the Colossians he says that God has commissioned him to be a servant of Christ's body, the church (Col.1:24,25). So Paul, in his life, followed the example set by Jesus of serving others.

In Paul's great 'hymn' of Phil.2:6-11, he refers to Jesus "taking the very nature of a servant" and says that he was "obedient to death". Now, because God has "exalted him to the highest place", we should bow the knee to him. Paul puts before his readers the example of Jesus to teach us that, in our relationship with others, our attitude should be the same that he had. Unity in any Christian community only comes as we humble ourselves, and seek to obey God rather than pushing ourselves forward.

* * * *

We have seen that the description 'servant of God' was a common phrase in the Old Testament as meaning somebody who sought to serve God by obeying him. The nation of Israel was to be his servant, to serve him by being a world-wide witness to God. Christ came to serve God perfectly where they had been disobedient. He was the one who was completely obedient to the Father, willing to suffer and die for us so that we can receive forgiveness of sin.

This makes a fourfold challenge to us. We need to accept the forgiveness he offers. When we suffer, we can find comfort in the knowledge that he understands how we feel, and let him carry away our sorrows. We can follow his example of willing obedience to God, knowing that we will never be called to suffer as much as he suffered. Also, when we are given responsibility, we can look upon it as an opportunity to serve others.

Questions for thought and discussion:

1. In what ways can Jesus serve us now?
2. In what way is Isa.49:4 an encouragement to those who find frustration in their Christian service and feel tempted to give up?
3. If you set out to serve others, and you find they are taking advantage of you, what should you do?

ch.8 The Firstborn

The privileges of the firstborn

In British culture, most people think that parents should treat all their children equally. But in Bible times, the eldest son was given extra privileges. In Dt.21:15-17, it is commanded that the firstborn receive a "double share" of the father's property. So when Elisha asked Elijah for a "double portion of your spirit" (2 Kgs 2:9), he was asking to inherit Elijah's role.

The "birthright" was considered a sacred privilege. This is why Esau is said to have despised his birthright when he sold it to his younger brother Jacob in return for one meal (Gen.25:31-34). This explains why he is condemned so harshly in Heb.12:16,17 as an example of somebody who ignores spiritual values. Reuben also forfeited the right of the firstborn by his immoral behaviour (Gen.35:22), and so "the rights of the firstborn" went to Joseph (1 Chr.5:1), though the royal line went to Judah (v.2).

The firstborn could act with the authority of the father; thus it was Reuben who took responsibility for protecting Joseph when his other brothers wanted to kill him (Gen.37:21). On his death bed, Jacob said of Reuben "excelling in honour, excelling in power" (Gen.49:3).

The term firstborn is also used in a figurative sense to mean something or someone special. In Job 18:13 it speaks of "death's firstborn", probably referring to a particularly deadly illness. In Isa.14:30 the phrase "poorest of the poor" literally means "firstborn of the poor".

The importance of the firstborn son

There are two more Old Testament references which show how the firstborn son was regarded as being most precious. In Mi.6:7, the hypothetical question is asked, "Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression?" as this is the most precious thing a person could offer. Of course the answer is "No".

The other verse is Zech.12:10, which talks about grieving for a firstborn son. This grief would be more than for any other child. Also, the term "firstborn son" is put in parallel with "only child" (discussed in chapter 2), so they must both refer to extreme grief. The loss of the firstborn would be particularly distressing, as would be the loss of an only child.

Exceptions to the Firstborn Principle

However, there were some notable Old Testament examples when God passed over the firstborn and chose a younger son as the most favoured. This reminds us that God is sovereign, and that human customs may be superseded by other principles. At the birth of Jacob and Esau, God predicted that "the older will serve the younger" (Gen.25:23). Also, it was through Jacob's descendants and not Esau's that God's promises to Abraham were fulfilled.

Similarly, we can accept that it was divine guidance that led Jacob to predict the superiority of Joseph's son Ephraim over his older brother Manasseh (Gen.48:19,20), for in later years, the name Ephraim was used for the whole of the Northern Kingdom, or even for all Israel (Jer.31:9). Also God chose David in preference to all his older brothers on the basis that "The LORD looks at the heart" (1 Sam.16:7).

God's claim on the firstborn

God laid claim to the 'firstfruits' (a word related to 'firstborn') of crops (Ex.23:16); they were to be offered to God as a 'Harvest Thanksgiving'. He also commanded that the firstborn of all animals should be given to him, "Consecrate to me every firstborn male"

The Firstborn

(Ex.13:2). In Dt.15:19,20 they are told how to do this, "Set apart for the LORD your God every firstborn male of your herds and flocks. ... Each year you and your family are to eat them in the presence of the LORD your God at the place he will choose." If the firstborn was of an "unclean" animal, meaning one not acceptable as a sacrifice, it had to be redeemed (Num.18:15).

The custom of offering to God the firstborn seems to have existed from the time of Abel onwards as we read that he "brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock" (Gen.4:4). The principle here surely is that all we have is a gift from God, and out of gratitude we give back to him the best portion.

God called the nation of Israel His "firstborn son" (Ex.4:22), meaning that he looked on them as the most important of the nations at that time, since they had the privilege of a special relationship with God. It was because Pharaoh refused to release God's firstborn from slavery in Egypt that God slew Pharaoh's "firstborn", meaning all the firstborn sons in Egypt (Ex.4:23). But to prevent the firstborn of the Israelites being slain, a lamb was killed instead, and its blood sprinkled on the doorposts as a sign (Ex.12:7). That was the price of their deliverance from slavery.

When the Jews were at Mount Sinai, and Moses had gone up to receive God's commands for the people, the Jews made a Golden Calf, offered sacrifices to it, and indulged in "revelry" (Ex.32). Then when Moses returned and made the challenge "Whoever is for the LORD, come to me", only the Levites responded. They were commanded to execute those that were sinning, then Moses told them "You have been set apart to the LORD today, for you were against your own sons and brothers, and he has blessed you this day" (v.29). From then on, they were set apart as the tribe dedicated to God's service. Also in Num.3:41 we read that God had set the Levites apart in place of the firstborn. However, all firstborn sons still had to be redeemed by payment of 5 shekels when they were a month old (Num.18:16). Redemption means 'deliverance by payment of a price', here it means that the firstborn were 'delivered' to live an ordinary life, they were not 'set apart' in the sense that the Levites were.

David as the Firstborn

Another example of the figurative use of firstborn as a title is when God said he would appoint King David as his firstborn (Ps.89:27). He had set him as king over the Jews, but naming him as "firstborn" gives him added honour, which is expanded by saying that he is "the most exalted of the kings of the earth". Now David did rule over quite a large empire, but we can understand that this verse must have its ultimate fulfilment in Christ as King over the Kingdom of God. The two verses (26,27) are also discussed in chapters 2 and 3 as they contain the titles Son of God, King and Firstborn.

Jesus as the Firstborn

In giving the details of Jesus' birth, Luke specifically refers to him as Mary's firstborn child (2:7), for this was true in a physical sense. But Jesus is also called God's "firstborn" (Heb.1:6). This title has a different emphasis from that of 'Son'. Here it is used to describe his superiority over the angels. When Jesus was born, from the human point of view, Mary gave birth to her firstborn child; but from God's point of view, he was bringing his firstborn into this world.

We can compare this with the fact that the nation of Israel is called God's firstborn in Ex.4:22. The New Testament use of this term is an example of where a title originally used of Israel is later applied to Christ as fulfilling all that the nation should have been, in the same way that the title 'Servant' is applied both to Israel and to Christ (see chapter 7).

The Firstborn

In Col.1:15, Christ is described as "the firstborn over all Creation". This does not mean that Christ is part of Creation, for v.16 says that "all things were created by him". This refers to his authority over all Creation, just as the firstborn had authority over his brothers. This theme of authority is also brought out in Heb.2:5-8 which quotes Psalm 8, "You ... put everything under His feet." This in turn refers back to God's original command to Adam to "rule...over every living creature" (Gen.1:28). The author of Psalm 8 marvels at this responsibility given to mankind, and the quotation in Hebrews 2 states that this responsibility now belongs to Christ. We can link this with the theme of Christ as Representative Man as discussed in chapter 2.

Christ is also described in 1 Cor.15:20 as "the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep". We have already seen that the Hebrew word for firstfruits is related to that for firstborn. Jesus was the first to rise from the dead and not die again. The emphasis is not on being the first in time, rather on being the first in importance; that whole chapter was written to assure us that we shall be raised because Christ was raised.

Jesus is also called "the firstborn from among the dead" (Col.1:18, Rev.1:5). He has authority over death; it is the Last Enemy, but it will surely be destroyed (1 Cor.15:26).

In Rom.8:29 we are told of the close relationship between Christ and believers: he is "the firstborn among many brothers" because we are "predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son". In 1 Jn.3:2 we read that this process will be completed at Christ's Second Coming; "we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." As Firstborn he has authority over us because we have been adopted as God's sons. So we should aim to be like him in our lives.

Christians as the Firstborn

In Heb.12:23, all Christians are given the title of firstborn, for it says we belong to the "church of the firstborn". Through Christ we now share both the privileges and responsibilities of the firstborn: the authority we lost at the Fall can only be regained through Christ.

* * * *

The title 'Firstborn' in the Bible has been shown to mean not just being born first in time, but when applied to people, to mean someone important, someone who has authority. When the title is applied to Christ, it shows his authority over Creation, over Christians, and over death.

When Christians are called firstborn, it is an example of where we are now given a name that was originally given to Jesus; we now share the privileges and responsibilities of being called God's Firstborn.

Questions for thought and discussion

1. In the story of the first Passover in Ex.12, a lamb had to be killed to prevent the firstborn being murdered, is there any meaning in this for us today?
2. What does the phrase "church of the firstborn", found in Heb.12:23, mean to you?
3. Should parents today follow the Bible custom and treat their firstborn child differently from their other children?
4. How seriously should we take the offering of 'firstfruits' to God?

ch.9 Saviour

The ordinary meaning of the word `saviour' is somebody who rescues somebody from danger.

In the Bible, the word is often used in this ordinary sense. The judges who delivered the Israelites from the various tribes that attacked them soon after they settled in Canaan were called saviours by Nehemiah (Neh.9:27, K.J.V.). One of them was Shamgar, we read that he "saved Israel" (Jud.3:31). When an angel told Samson's parents that they were to have a child he announced that he was to be "set apart to God from birth, and he will begin the deliverance (literally, the "salvation") of Israel from the hands of the Philistines" (Jud.13:5).

God, the Saviour of Israel

In the Old Testament, the greatest danger both to individual people and to the nation of Israel was from enemies, personal and national. For this reason, modern translations sometimes translate the Hebrew word for "save" by "rescue" or "deliver". Often, when somebody gained a military victory, we are told that it was really God who saved them through this human leader. For example, in 2 Sam.3:18, we read that God had promised, "By my servant David I will rescue (literally "save") my people Israel from the hand of the Philistines and from the hand of all their enemies".

But there were occasions when God used other means to defeat the enemy. In 1 Sam.7:2-13, we read that when the Philistines gathered to attack the Israelites, God used a thunderstorm to put the enemy into a panic, and all the Israelites had to do was to chase them and kill them while they were fleeing. In the time of Hezekiah, when the Assyrians besieged Jerusalem, God gave Isaiah a message "I will defend this city and save it" (2 Kgs.19:34). "That night the angel of the LORD went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand men in the Assyrian camp" (v.35).

Because the Jews were God's chosen people, their enemies were God's enemies, their wars were holy wars, and God was on their side, fighting for them. If they won, it was not because of their military might, but because God had given the victory; if they were defeated, it was judgement on them for their sin.

Two great deliverances

The two most dramatic occasions when God's `salvation' was seen were when they were delivered from slavery in Egypt, and when they returned from exile in Babylon.

Immediately after the Jews had crossed the Red Sea, and the Egyptians who chased them were drowned, we read that Moses and the Israelites sang,

"The LORD is my strength and my song;
he has become my salvation" (Ex.15:2).

Throughout the rest of the Old Testament we find many references to the fact that God delivered them from Egypt as a demonstration of his power. This was to encourage the Jews to believe that God was able to bring about a similar deliverance at other times of need. But as a nation, they soon forgot the lesson they should have learnt, for in Ps.106:21 we read:

"they forgot the God who saved them (K.J.V. "God their saviour"),
who had done great things in Egypt"

The second part of the book of Isaiah, from chapter 40 onwards, is addressed to the Jews who had been deported to Babylon. Seven times in this part of the book God calls

Saviour

himself their Saviour, for he is promising to bring them back from exile. There is nobody else who can do this for them,

"I, even I, am the LORD,
and apart from me there is no saviour" (Isa.43:11).

He can do this because he has done it in the past,

"I am the LORD, your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour;
I gave Egypt for your ransom" (Isa.43:3).

Often the promises describe the return as if will be similar to crossing the wilderness from Egypt to Canaan,

"I am making a way in the desert
and streams in the wasteland" (Isa.43:19).

The purpose of this deliverance is so that all people will learn of God,

"Then all mankind will know
that I, the LORD, am your Saviour" (Isa.49:26).,

Salvation from sin

However, the writers of the Old Testament make it very clear that the Jews were exiled because of their sin, so they can only return when this sin has been forgiven. This is why the promises of return begin with the assurance that their sin had been forgiven, this is the basis on which they can return to their land.

"Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
... that her sin has been paid for" (Isa.40:2).

The prophet Ezekiel promises not only return from exile, but also a national spiritual renewal when God puts his Spirit in his people, "I will cleanse you from all your impurities I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you ... I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws ... I will save you from all your uncleanness" (Eze.36:25-29). Then, in the next chapter we read, "I will save them from all their sinful backsliding" (37:23). Here, God is going to save them from sin, not only forgiving the sin that is past, but also giving them a desire to obey God so that they will not want to sin in the future.

This salvation will affect their social life. In Eze.34, the prophet condemns their rulers for not caring for the needs of the ordinary people. Then he promises "I will save my flock, and they will no longer be plundered" (v.22). The person who will rule over them is named as "my servant David" who will be "prince" among them (v.24). It will be Messiah who will bring God's salvation, justice and prosperity for those who have been oppressed by power-hungry leaders.

World-Wide Salvation

The Jews are not the only nation which will benefit from God's salvation. In chapter 7 we saw that God wants to use his Servant to bring God's "salvation to the ends of the earth" (Isa.49:6). This will happen because "he will bring justice to the nations" (Isa.42:1). God calls to all,

"Turn to me and be saved,
all you ends of the earth;
for I am God, and there is no other" (Isa.45:22).

When this happens, people will bow the knee to God, and acknowledge that "in the LORD alone are righteousness and strength" (v.24). God's salvation is for Jew and Gentile, he wants the whole world to enjoy the benefits that come when they follow his laws.

Saviour

The same theme is found in Ps.67. The writer is praying for God's blessing in order that his salvation may be known "among all nations" (v.2). He also proclaims that God rules the nations justly (v.4), and calls on all to praise God (v.5). It is only as people follow God's ways and worship him that they find his salvation, experiencing the prosperity that is mentioned at the end of the psalm.

Personal Salvation

When God had answered Hannah's prayer for a son, and she had given birth to Samuel, we read that she sang "I rejoice in thy salvation" (1 Sam.2:1, K.J.V.). God had saved her from the reproach of not being able to bear children.

David's troubles were much more obvious; for several years his life was in danger because of Saul and other enemies. When he became king, we read that after the Lord had delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul, he sang of God, "He is my stronghold, my refuge and my saviour" (2 Sam.22:3). He was very much aware that God had taken a personal interest in him, and had preserved his life when so many had wanted to kill him.

This is also the theme of Ps.34. The writer was saved from all his fears (v.4), and learned that God delivers the righteous from all their troubles (v.17).

In Ps.118:14 we find Ex.15:2 quoted, the song that Moses and the Israelites sang when they had crossed the Red Sea, and here the writer applies it personally,

"The LORD is my strength and my song;
he has become my salvation."

God's salvation is as much for the individual as for the nation.

This is the general theme of the Old Testament, those who obey God can rely on his help. This is why the writer of Ps.119 can pray to God

"Save me, for I am yours;
I have sought out your precepts" (v.94).

His life is in real danger, he prays that he may be kept safe so that he can continue to serve God,

"I call out to you; save me
and I will keep your statutes" (v.146).

Personal Forgiveness

After David had achieved victory over his enemies, he found he had a problem which was more serious, that of personal temptation. In 2 Sam.11 we read the story of how he committed adultery with Bathsheba. Ps. 51 is introduced as his prayer of repentance after he had been convicted of his sin. In v.12, he prays "Restore to me the joy of your salvation", addressing God as "the God who saves me" (v.14). He acknowledges his sin, and wants not only forgiveness but a "pure heart" and a "steadfast spirit" to enable him to do right in the future. His prayer was answered, for in 2 Sam.12:13 we read that after he had repented, he was assured by the prophet Nathan, "The LORD has taken away your sin". He had experienced a spiritual salvation.

Salvation in the New Testament

The two "songs" which we find in the first chapter of Luke, the song of Mary and the song of Zechariah, provide a link between the two Testaments in that they are full of words which echo passages from the Old Testament.

The song Mary sang when she visited her cousin Elizabeth (known as the 'Magnificat') is very similar to the song of Hannah in 1 Sam.2:1-10). She called God her Saviour because he had promised that she was to give birth to the Messiah (Luke 1:47).

Saviour

In his song Zechariah says God promised Abraham that they would be saved from their enemies, and this is

"to enable us to serve him without fear

in holiness and righteousness before him all our days" (Lk.1:74-75)

We must note that this salvation from their enemies is for a spiritual purpose, so that they can serve God better. He also describes the coming Messiah as "a horn of salvation for us" (v.69), for he will

"give his people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins" (v.77).

Here, salvation clearly involves forgiveness.

Jesus the Saviour

When the angel told Joseph that the child to be born was to be called Jesus, this was because he would "save his people from their sins (Mt.1:21, the name Jesus comes from the Hebrew word *Yeshua* which is derived from the word "to save"). Then after he was born, it was shepherds who first heard the good news from the angels, "Today ... a Saviour has been born to you" (Lk.2:11).

When Simeon met Joseph and Mary as they brought the infant Jesus to the temple, he said

"my eyes have seen your salvation ...
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel" (Lk.2:30,32)

By faith he believed that the child he was holding in his arms was the promised Saviour, and that not only for Jews, but for all nations.

In describing Jesus' healing miracles, often the Gospel writers use the Greek word meaning 'save', but this is usually translated as "heal" (N.I.V.) or "make whole" (K.J.V.). A common phrase used by Jesus literally means "your faith has saved you". He said this to the woman with internal bleeding (Lk.8:48), to a blind beggar (Lk,18:42), to a leper he had healed (Lk.17:19), and also when he pronounced forgiveness to the woman "who had lived a sinful life" who anointed Jesus' feet with perfume (Lk.7:50). After Jesus had been to Zacchaeus' house, he announced "Today salvation has come to this house" (Lk.19:9). His salvation was from a life of greed to one of generosity. In all these examples, it was their faith that enabled them to receive salvation, whether from disease or from sin.

Sometimes we read that Jesus' healing miracles gave an opportunity to teach about salvation from sin. So when the paralysed man was let down through the roof by his four friends, before Jesus healed him, he said "Son, your sins are forgiven" (Mk.2:5). In this case, five people had faith, for we read that it was "when Jesus saw their faith" that he pronounced forgiveness.

In the Gospel of John, salvation is an important theme. Jesus told the people "I did not come to judge the world, but to save it" (Jn.12:47). He spoke of future judgement (Jn.5:22,27), but his mission at that time was to give people the opportunity of being saved from condemnation. Also, speaking in parable form, he said "I am the gate: whoever enters through me will be saved" (the footnote says "kept safe", Jn.10:9): in the next verse he speaks of having life "to the full", his salvation is that our lives should be all that God intended them to be. Then when he broke down the social barriers of the day by speaking to a Samaritan woman, she came to realise that "this man really is the Saviour of the world" (Jn.4:42): she discovered that his salvation was for all races.

Saviour

The nature of salvation

In Acts as in the Gospels, the publicity aroused by healing miracles was used as an opportunity for preaching that Jesus came to save from sin. When Peter and John were brought before the Jewish Sanhedrin and questioned about the authority for their preaching, Peter told them that it was by the name of Jesus that a lame man had been healed (Acts 4:10). Then he boldly announced that "salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (v.12).

Later the apostles were again arrested and questioned, they said of Jesus "God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel" (Acts 5:31). The healing miracle enabled them to proclaim Jesus as Saviour from sin. For the Jewish leaders could not deny that the power of God had been shown in the healing of this lame man. So they could not contradict Peter when he asserted that the Jesus they had crucified had been raised from the dead. Now his power was able both to heal and to forgive sin.

Salvation: past, present, future

It is important to realise that there is a past, a present, and a future aspect to salvation in the New Testament.

Paul says "it is by grace you have been saved" (Eph.2:8), this is the forgiveness of past sins which God offers to us by his grace.

The present aspect is brought out in 1 Pet.2:2 where the readers are exhorted to "crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation". Here, salvation is clearly something we aim for, a maturity of Christian character. It has already been noted that an alternative translation of the words "be saved" is "kept safe"; salvation includes being kept from sinning.

There are a very large number of passages which refer to the future aspect of salvation, being saved from future judgement. Jesus warned his disciples that they would be persecuted for their faith, but "he who stands firm to the end will be saved" (Mk.13:13). Those who do not renounce their faith in such trials show that it is genuine.

Peter also encourages his readers that we "through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Pet.1:5). This salvation is our final deliverance from sin at death or at Christ's Second Coming. "We eagerly await a Saviour from there (heaven), the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body." (Phil.3:20,21). Jesus will come to be our Saviour, to complete our salvation.

So when reading a passage which speaks of salvation, it is important to understand which aspect is being referred to, otherwise misunderstanding can arise.

God the Saviour

In the New Testament, any one of the three Persons of the Trinity may be mentioned as bringing about our salvation. Sometimes it is God who is called "Our Saviour"(1 Tim.1:1, 2:3, Tit.1:4).

But in Tit.1:4, Christ Jesus is also called "our Saviour". Evidently Paul sees no need to make sharp distinctions between what God the Father does and what Christ does. Then in Tit.2:13, Jesus is called "Our great God and Saviour". This passage also links the past, present and future aspects of salvation, Jesus "gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness (the past) and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to what

Saviour

is good" (the present, v.14). And the reason why we should want to live morally pure lives is because "we wait for the blessed hope - the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ." (future salvation, v.13).

Corporate Salvation

In our church life, we rightly emphasise that an individual needs to receive God's forgiveness and make his own personal commitment to serve God. But there is a corporate aspect, applying to a community of Christians, a local church. In Eph. 5:23, we read that "Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour." There is a corporate life of any local Christian church which needs saving or renewing, because it is made up of imperfect members. This corresponds to the Old Testament teaching that God could save his people the Jews as a nation, as well as individuals.

The Old Testament promises of spiritual renewal given to the nation of Israel can also be applied to a local fellowship. We must remember that many of the epistles in the New Testament were addressed to churches as a whole, so the teaching applies to the life of the church as well as to individual members. Any community of Christians has many things it needs saving from.

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We have seen that the Bible uses the word Saviour in a very general sense; in order to understand a particular passage in the Bible, we must find out what the salvation is from, whether danger, disease, or sin.

In the Old Testament, deliverance was closely linked to obedience. Only when they followed God's laws were the Jews saved from their enemies. Disobedience brought disaster, but out of this they learnt that forgiveness is promised for those who repent.

In the New Testament, Jesus is called Saviour because it was he who came to bring salvation, to die that we might be saved from sin. We can know the salvation which is the forgiveness of past sins. We can know present salvation which is victory over temptation. We also look forward to the return of Christ when we will be like him, the work of salvation will be complete.

Till then, we are not delivered from all sickness or all material danger. God sometimes allows us to suffer to test our faith. When he does deliver, it is a sign of his power, working for his glory. The deliverances recorded in the Old Testament and the healing miracles described in the New should lead us to look for that spiritual deliverance which is of eternal value.

Jesus is the Saviour of the whole world, the Good News he brought is not just for one nation or race. We have been commanded to bring this Gospel to "all nations" (Mt.28:19). May he help us to do this.

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Questions for thought and discussion

1. Could God forgive sin if Christ had not died?
2. What are the most important things that you personally need saving from?

Saviour

3. In the Bible, God's salvation is both material (salvation from an enemy, sickness etc.) and spiritual (forgiveness, victory over temptation etc.). As we seek to bring the Christian message to others, which needs should we seek to meet first, and why?
4. Jesus' salvation is personal, each of us has to accept for ourselves God's offer of forgiveness. So how important is it that we also emphasise the corporate aspect of salvation today? Think of it applying to your family, your church, and your local community.
5. Some say that we do not need to bring the Christian message to those who follow another religion, they are simply following another path to the same God. What is your answer to that?

Postscript

In this book we have studied some of the Old Testament predictions of a Coming One, and how these predictions were fulfilled in Jesus. God revealed his purposes, not in terms of a timetable, but in terms of a person.

Yet even if we know everything about Jesus, it is not the same as knowing him as a person. When Jesus prayed to God for his disciples he said "This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (Jn. 17:3). In the Bible, when it speaks of 'knowing' a person, it is not just knowledge about them, but entering into a relationship with them.

To truly know Jesus involves both these aspects, we cannot have one without the other. A student of theology may learn all the facts about Jesus in order to pass his exams, and yet not believe a word of what he writes. On the other hand, somebody else may have a deep mystical experience, but without comparing this with the revelation of Christ in the Bible, we cannot be certain about the origin of this experience. Knowing Christ involves our minds and our emotions.

In turn, this knowledge must affect the way we live, for Jesus' call to his disciples is "Follow me". Outward actions and inner belief cannot be separated. It is our inner belief which guides our actions, and these actions in turn show the reality of our faith. James puts it clearly, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead ... I will show you my faith by what I do" (Jas. 2:17,18)). My prayer is that this book has helped you understand more clearly what the Bible says about Jesus, and has strengthened your faith in him, so that you might become more like him in your life.