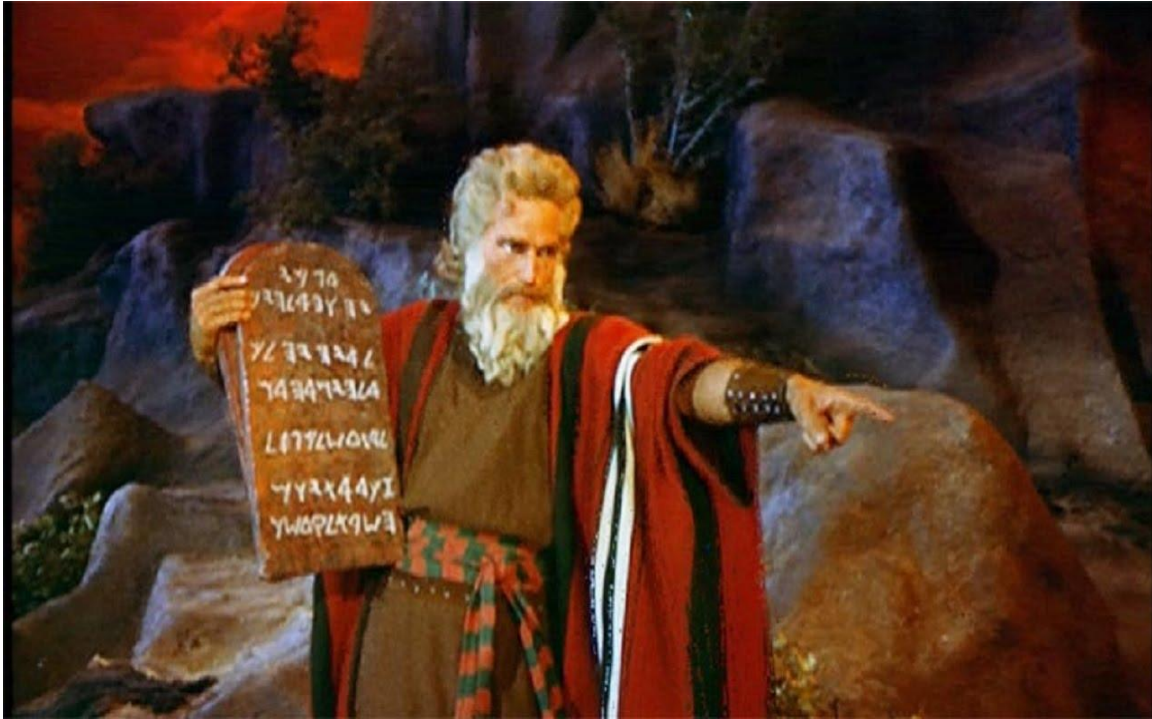


A BIBLE PRIMER



By
Fr. Lorenzo Carraro, MCCJ
2021

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FOREWORD

This book contains the study notes on the listed books of the Bible which I prepared for the pupils of my Bible Study Groups. There are many other books of the Bible that I studied with them but the notes were not completed, they remain in a sketchy form.

It was August 2007, when I was encouraged to start a Bible Study Group with the seniors of our Daniel Comboni Seminary Chapel. The initiative was appreciated and the Group continued its existence for more than twelve years. The last meeting was on March 11, 2020. Then Covid 19 marked the end of the Group. The situation has not yet improved enough that the Group can resume its existence.

On the occasion of the tenth anniversary of it, I started a second Bible Study Group, in September 2017, at St. Benedict Chapel-Paradise Village, belonging to Immaculate Conception Parish in Project 8, and it continued successfully until March 2020, when it had to stop because of the pandemic.

I was going to turn 70 years of age in August 2007, and the Bible Study Groups are the precious achievement of my old age. Not only they satisfied the desire of the members to become more acquainted with the Book of God, but the work was for me personally a discovery of the beauty and relevance of the Bible, which I had not understood in such an exciting and vital way during the previous periods of my life, including the time of my theological studies.

The best fruit I got is the importance that the literal sense has over and above the symbolic, moral and spiritual senses which build on the literal and come after the literal. To comprehend the literal sense, a proper study of the text of the Bible is necessary and vital. That is what I have understood and that is what I am after in the first place not only in explaining the Bible during the study periods, but also in my preaching.

This approach is most satisfying to me and I think most profitable to those who listen to me or study with me. Thank God for that.

Fr. Lorenzo Carraro, MCCJ

Quezon City, December 10, 2021.

PREFACE

This booklet intends to give the basic and elementary concepts which are needed in order to be able to approach the book of the Bible with profit.

The suggested method is to follow the initial explanation of the concepts by immediately reading the passages of the Bible which are the foundation of the same concepts.

For this reason more than 150 bible passages are given in the text of this booklet. There is no better method of approaching the Sacred Scriptures than to open the book and read. Every explanation comes later and in consequence.

The guided reflexion and assimilation of these basic concepts about the Book of God give us a certain serene assurance in approaching the Sacred Text and free us from many prejudices which are the result of ignorance.

With my best wishes of a joyful study of God's Word,

Yours in Christ,

P. Renzo Carraro, MCCJ

INITIATION TO THE BIBLE (1): The 3 Steps

BIBLE means “books”

The number of books in the Catholic Bible is 73: 46 for the Old Testament; 27 for the New Testament. This division in Old and New Testament is present since the beginning and typical of Christianity: it is there already in the text of the New Testament (the term “New Testament” is e. g. in *Luke 22:20* and *1 Corinthians 11:25*).

JESUS CHRIST is

- the HINGE that keeps together the two Testaments
- The HUB that keeps all the books of the Bible together and gives UNITY to the Bible.

“NOVUM TESTAMENTUM IN VETERE LATET, VETUS IN NOVO PATET”

(“The New Testament is hidden in the Old, the Old is revealed in the New”) this is a very famous sentence and principle stated by Saint Augustine.

The Church has inherited the Old Testament from the Jewish People. It was written before the birth of Jesus Christ.

The New Testament was written during the time of the 12 Apostles and by them. With the death of the last Apostle, John, the Bible ends, since with Jesus Christ everything has been said. He is the incarnate Word, the definitive Word. The Twelve are the direct witnesses of his life, death and resurrection.

The 3 stages in the formation of the New Testament

(The face of the Word of God is Jesus Christ)

The point of departure is the New Testament that was written by the Apostolic Church. It is in the Bible itself (New Testament) that we find the explanation of the existence of the New Testament and the stages of its formation.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT THE BIBLE?

1. It says that the first step in evangelization and the founding of the Church is the APOSTOLIC EXPERIENCE OF JESUS:

1 John 1:1-4 “*What we saw...*”

2 Peter 1:16-21 “*We were there...Scripture is a lamp...*”

The Apostolic Experience of Jesus done IN FAITH:

Luke 24: 36-43 “*Jesus said: Look, touch...*”

John 20:26-29 “*Do not be unbelieving any more , but believe...*”

INITIATION TO THE BIBLE (2) – THE REVELATION OF GOD

God is a great mystery: John 1:18/ 1 John 4:16

God speaks to humanity: Hebrews 1:1-4

This is what we call God's **REVELATION**.

God in his wisdom and goodness reveals himself. With deeds and words, he reveals himself and his plan of loving goodness which he decreed from all eternity in Christ. According to his plan, all people, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, are to share in the divine life as adopted sons and daughters in the only begotten Son Jesus Christ.

1 Timothy 2:1-8

Romans 8:28-39

God reveals his “**plan of salvation**”.

God's plan is our destiny and it was decided from all eternity, even before we were created, it is called “**PREDESTINATION**”. This is the content of the Gospel, the Good News: “God desires all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth”. Jesus Christ is the Truth. He must be preached to all and believed by all. This revelation is transmitted by the **APOSTOLIC TRADITION**.

The **transmission** of God's Revelation

The Apostolic **TRADITION** is the **Living and Believing Community** of the Church (the preaching, the witnessing, the leadership, the worship, the life) that started at the time of the Apostles and continued throughout the times up to now.

To this tradition the Bible belongs. It is this tradition that makes known to the Community of the Church the **Canon** (official list) of the Sacred **SCRIPTURES** (the Holy Bible) and teaches how to read and interpret them, making them effective for the life and holiness of the community.

A special place is that of the **MAGISTERIUM**, i.e. The Bishops with the Pope (Hierarchy or Sacred Leadership): they have the task of supervising and protecting the Christian Heritage (*Depositum Fidei*) that belongs to all the faithful. Tradition, Scriptures and Magisterium are all necessary and need each other. None of them can stand by itself.

They are aspects of the Living and Believing Community of the Church.

Traditional reading of the Scriptures or Bible is done in the light of faith and for prayer.

The first most important usage of the Scriptures or Bible in the community of the Church is the **Proclamation** of the word of God in the Liturgy. This is the “**Public Use**”. The “Liturgy of the Word” in the Mass is also called “the table of the Word”, before passing to the “table of the sacrament”.

The “**Private Use**” is the reading of the Scriptures by individuals and groups outside the liturgy. A traditional method of reading the Scriptures that we inherited from the monastic tradition is the **Lectio Divina** that is developed in 5 steps:

1. **Reading** (*Lectio*): slow, repeated reading of the passage in question;
2. **Meditation** (*Meditatio*): reflection on the reading of the passage with this main question : How does this word of God affect my life?
3. **Prayer** (*Oratio*): personal, spontaneous conversation with God about the result of the meditation
4. **Contemplation**: dwelling affectionately and at length in a detail of the Word of God.
5. **Sharing** (*Collatio*): if the exercise is done in a group we may be inclined to share some of our reflections with our companions.

The Senses in Scripture:

1. **Literal**: what the text says by itself. This is the first sense to be always understood and which to pay attention to, before considering the other senses.
2. **Allegoric or Symbolic**: the literal sense becomes the first step in order to point to a symbolic meaning which usually refers to Christ. Allegory: a symbol which is developed in all its details.
3. **Moral**: it directs our behavior according to God’s guidelines or commandments.
4. **Spiritual (and Eschatological)**: it points to the soul’s struggle for holiness in order to reach the final destination, Heaven.

There is also, very important, the FULL SENSE (“Sensus Plenum”): it is what we read in a given text from the perspective of the Risen Christ. It illustrates the principle that only with the knowledge of the Risen Christ we can understand fully the Scriptures.

10 GUIDELINES FOR A PROFITABLE READING OF THE BIBLE:

1. Don’t think that you are the first to read the Bible. Many people in all generations have read, meditated and put it into practice. The best interpreters of the Scriptures are the Saints.

INITIATION TO THE BIBLE (5) SIGNPOSTS OF TIMES AND PLACES

HISTORICAL SIGNPOSTS IN THE BIBLE

OLD TESTAMENT: Genesis 1-11 **Pre-History**

Genesis 12..... **History** begins with the story of Abraham

1850 before Christ (BC): Abraham

1250 **Exodus**

1000 King David- Solomon and the 1st temple

721 Fall of Samaria by the Assyrians (Kingdom of Israel)

587 Fall of Jerusalem by the Babylonians (Kingdom of Judah)

Exile

538 Return from exile (Cyrus, king of Persia) -2nd temple

323 Death of Alexander the Great

167-168 Persecution of king Antiochus Epiphanes and rebellion of the Maccabees

164 Purification of the temple.

63 The Romans conquer Palestine. King Herod, vassal of the Romans,
Reconstructs the temple -3rd temple

NEW TESTAMENT

Birth of Jesus (6 BC)

27 AD (Anno Domini) CE (Christian Era/Current Era) John the Baptist

30 Jesus' Death/The Risen Lord

48 Council of Jerusalem

50 1-2 Letters to the Thessalonians (First NT writings)

64/67 Martyrdom of Peter and Paul in Rome

70 Fall of Jerusalem/destruction of the city and the temple

95-100 Book of Revelation and death of John, the last of the Apostles. End of The Bible.
End of the Apostolic Era.

INITIATION TO THE BIBLE (6) OLD & NEW TESTAMENT: DIFFERENCES

1. **The concept of God**: The contribution of the O.T. to our concept of God is immense. In this sense we belong to the Jewish religious tradition. The first idea is that God is one: **monotheism**. The second is that God is good. We see this through the goodness of his Creatures. We see this through God's law: **morality**. Then the God of the Bible is a personal God who wants to communicate with his creatures, with humanity and cares for us. God's personality and concern for us is witnessed throughout the whole Bible. He is a God who wants to have a covenant with his chosen people, gives them his Law (the content of the covenant) and the heart of God's covenant is love.
 - Deuteronomy 6:4-9
 - Exodus 3:1-15
 - Genesis 12:1-5
 - Psalm 23
 - Psalm 103.

All the same, **God is a great mystery**: we cannot see God's face, only his back: Exodus 33:18-33

In the N.T., Jesus reveals the mystery of God: God is "a family of love", the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

- John 1:18
- 1 John 4:12

GOD "*ad intra*": 1 John 4:16-17

GOD "*ad extra*": John 3:16

Our Lord Jesus Christ is the revelation and the sacrament of God's love for us:

John 1:1-18

John 14:1-11

John 15:1-11

- The Trinitarian **commission**: Matthew 28:18-20
- The Trinitarian **prayer**: The sign of the cross
- The Trinitarian **greeting**: 2 Corinthians 13:13

Baptism attaches, links a person to Jesus, the Savior. All his work of salvation proceeds from the Father's love and reaches its completion in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

- Romans 6:3-11
- Romans 8:12-17

2. **The images of God**: In the O.T. images of God are forbidden for fear of idolatry: to worship the creatures instead of the Creator. In the prophets we find a strong polemic against idols. The prohibition of making images is strong even nowadays in Judaism and Islam. It is a safeguard for monotheism.
 - Deuteronomy 5:7-10 (Exodus 20:3-6)

INITIATION TO THE BIBLE (7) OLD & NEW TESTAMENT: DIFFERENCES

4. The law/The New Law

In the O. T., in a very special moment of Salvation History, when God had already proved his love for the chosen people and his faithfulness to the covenant by making his chosen people come out of the slavery of Egypt, he gives Moses the Ten Commandments, the Law.

- Exodus 20
- Deuteronomy 5
- Deuteronomy 4:1-9

The Law is the content of the covenant for the chosen people: if they want to be God's friends, they must keep God's commandments. There is an essential link between Monotheism and Morality. We cannot please God or worship him if we are bad/crooks. It goes against God's holiness/goodness.

The Prophets, fighting for God against the unfaithfulness of the people, already point out that the heart of the covenant is love, in this way anticipating and preparing the N. T. In this they continue the very important passage of Deuteronomy 6:4-9 ("*Shema, Israel*") that is like the Jewish confession of faith.

In the N.T., Jesus completes and perfects the Law, making it new and showing all the implications:

- Luke 10:25-37
- Matthew 5:17-19
- Matthew 5:20-48
- Matthew 25:31-46

The **novelty** introduced by Jesus is the joining of the two commandments ("Love your neighbor as you love yourself" is from Leviticus 19:18) and saying that the second is equal to the first, but especially when he puts himself as an example of brotherly love: "Love your neighbor as I have loved you" and, above all, as the object of our love for the brethren: "Whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers it is to me that you do it".

5. THE WORSHIP OF THE O.T./THE WORSHIP OF THE N.T.

The worship of the O.T. consisted in sacrifices of animals, performed in an official place, the temple of Jerusalem, by a specialized priestly group, the tribe of Levi. Examples of sacrifices of animals in very important moments of the history of the covenant:

- Genesis 15:1-21
- Exodus 24:1-8

6. LIFE AFTER DEATH

1. In the O. T., the idea of a life after death, where goodness is rewarded by God and wickedness is punished, appears only gradually together with the resurrection of the body. In the beginning, **the reward of faithfulness to God and his commandments is expected in this life**. When the experience of life shows that many times the opposite is happening, i. e. the wicked are successful and prosperous and the good are troubled by misfortune and sickness, the fact is perceived as a great problem and becomes the object of meditation and prayer... Often the solution is still placed in this lifetime and in this world, or the problem remains unanswered and becomes a drama. Then, little by little, the conscience of a life after death emerges as we can see from some relevant passages and it prepares the full blossoming of this doctrine and conviction in the N. T.

Examples of God's blessings for the good and punishment for the wicked:

Psalm 1

Psalm 128

Problem of the fate of just and wicked: Psalm 73

2. Problem of life after death : **SHEOL: a word of unknown origin, meaning the "underworld"** to which the dead "go down" to and where the virtuous and the wicked lead a colorless existence. God is not praised there but the dead are not outside God's power.

Canticle of Hezekiah: Isaiah 38:9-20

Psalm 6:4-5

Psalm 88, the whole text, especially vv. 10-12

Ezekiel 32:17-32

But let us keep in mind **Jesus' exegesis** as in Matthew 22:31-33: the faith in the ancestors was already faith on the life after death.

3. The doctrine of reward and punishment beyond the grave and of bodily resurrection is anticipated somehow by **some passages** of the psalms and other O. T. books, but doesn't make a definite appearance until the O.T. is drawing to a close.

Anticipations in the psalms and other O. T. books:

Psalm 16:8-11 *"I keep the Lord before me always, for with him at my right hand nothing can shake me. So my heart exults, my very soul rejoices, my body, too, will rest securely,*

for you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, nor allow the one you love to see the Pit; you will reveal the path of life to me, give me unbounded joy in your presence, and at your right hand everlasting pleasure”.

Psalm 49:15 *“But God will redeem my life from the grasp of Sheol, and will receive me”.*

Job 19:25-2 *“This I know: that my Avenger lives, and he, the Last, will take his stand on earth. After my awakening, he will set me close to him, and from my flesh I shall look on God”.*

Clear affirmations of the immortality of the soul and of the resurrection:

Daniel 12:2-3 *“Of those who lie sleeping in the dust of the earth many will awake, some to everlasting life, some to everlasting disgrace. The learned will shine as brightly as the vault of heaven, and those who have instructed many in virtue, will be as bright as stars for all eternity”.*

2 Maccabees 7:9 *“With his last breath he exclaimed, ‘Inhuman fiend, you may discharge us from this present life, but the King of the world will raise us up, since it is for his laws that we die, to live again forever”.*

2 Maccabees 12:38-45

Wisdom 3-5 *“But the souls of the virtuous are in the hands of God, no torment shall ever touch them. In the eyes of the unwise, they did appear to die, their going looked like a disaster, their leaving us, like annihilation; but they are in peace. As they experienced punishment as men see it, their hope was rich with immortality; slight was their affliction, great will their blessings be”(3:1-4).*

4. In the N. T., the fact of **the Incarnation brings a new perspective**: The Son of God comes into the world to share our life so that we may be able to enter God’s life, the Trinitarian family, life after death. The Resurrection of Jesus is the foundation of our faith in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. We have very many places in the N. T. where this truth is attested, but we quote only few essential ones:

John 14:1-3

Matthew 25:31-46

John 6:40,47-58/John 11:17-26

1 Corinthians 15:12-20

So strong is the faith in the life to come, that the first Christians felt that they did not belong to the world: Philippians 3:20-21 *“For us, **our homeland (citizenship) is in Heaven, and from heaven comes the savior we are waiting for, the Lord Jesus Christ,***

Evil in the Bible is represented by **violence and immorality**. Sometimes evil is simply described but not approved. No problem in that. Sometimes it is described and condemned. In the Bible even kings can be condemned by the prophets because of their evil deeds: famous episodes are Naboth's vineyard and king David's sins of adultery and murder:

1 Kings 21

2 Samuel 11,12

The problem arises when evil is ordered by God.

VIOLENCE

The ancient warfare was very cruel. This cruelty is represented especially by the BAN.

1. Ban (*herem*): a primitive Hebrew religious institution by which persons and objects were devoted to the deity for destruction. The ban is mentioned most frequently in the period of the conquest. It is a survival from more primitive and barbarous times. **These mass murders of hostile people cannot be justified morally** in any way by the fact that the Hebrews believed that the action was pleasing to God, even ordered by God.

Joshua 6:17-21

1 Samuel 15

The conception of Yahweh as a warrior was an imperfect apprehension of his reality and activity. There is however a development and a growth in the moral and religious mentality in the O.T.: this is shown by the fact that the practice of the ban doesn't appear any more after the war of Saul against the Amalechites.

2. The Bible itself presents elements which permit man to **emancipate from the idea of war** which is "primitive" in ancient as well as in modern times. Several passages of the prophets declare the **futility of the war** as a means of assuring peace and security: it is not the means of salvation for Israel: their survival is assured by faith. Especially **the messianic dream** of the prophets is **a world without war**, bound by universal peace and tolerance.

Isaiah 30:15-17

Isaiah 2:1-5

3. In the N.T., Jesus says that whoever lives by the sword will die by the sword (Matthew 26:52). **Jesus especially teaches not to resist evil and to love our enemies.** Jesus' total non violence is present in the Church in some categories of his followers like the religious and espoused by some (*pacifists*); but the catholic

tradition has always accepted **reasonable defense** against unjust aggressor and still more opposition to evil in the world:

Matthew 5:38-48

John 18:22-23

4. A compound problem is **the conquest of Canaan**. When Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were leaders of large families and nomadic clans they used to wander through the land of Canaan, looking for pasture and water for their flocks. The land did not belong to them but to several other peoples. Abraham only bought the property at Machpelah-Mambre (Hebron) to be his burial ground.

Genesis 23

But the Israelites multiplied and became a people during the slavery in Egypt, and when they emerged from the desert, they felt that they deserved their own land. So they attacked and conquered the inhabitants of Canaan. **The Bible presents the conquest of Canaan as the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham and a gift from God.**

Genesis 12:7 15:18-21

Deuteronomy 7,8

It is true that the Canaanite population were very corrupt, promoting sacred prostitution and human sacrifices, but the fact that **the Bible present the conquest as the fulfillment of God's promise can be understood as a provisional step in the history of salvation**. In the N.T., the new Israel of God is made up of all the peoples of the earth who believe in Jesus Christ. For the Christian people the "promised land" is Heaven ("*We do not have here on earth a permanent residence; our homeland is in Heaven*"). It cannot be said nowadays that the Bible states that Palestine must belongs to the Jews.

IMMORALITY

Here, the main problem is the polygamy of the patriarchs and kings. The purpose of marriage is mentioned in the two accounts of the origin of man with some differences. In Genesis 1:27ff, the differentiation of sexes has as its purpose that man should multiply. In Genesis 2:18-25, marriage is the union in which the wife is to be the helper of the man, for it not good for a man to be alone. It is implied that the union of man and woman is monogamous. Sex and marriage are divine institutions through which man finds fulfillment. In Tobit 8:5-7 the husband doesn't take the wife in lust, but in truth.

1. **Genesis describes polygamy as part of the degeneration of mankind**. With polygamy goes concubinage and divorce.

Genesis 4:23-24 Lamech's savage song

THE BOOK OF JOB

INTRODUCTION

1. The Book of Job is the literary masterpiece of the wisdom movement. It is perhaps the most profound and original book of the whole Old Testament. Within the Dialogue in it, there are many reminiscences of the hymns and lamentations of the Psalms. The author is a Jew, but we know nothing about him, not even the name.
2. The Prologue and the Epilogue are in prose and probably are older in time of the poetry of the Dialogues which constitutes the bulk of the book and its originality.
3. Job is not a Jew: the character is an upright person who comes from a tradition attached to the land of Edom, on the border with Arabia, a region re-known for its wise men. He is mentioned in Ezekiel 14:14,20 together with other two wise men: Noah and Danel.
4. **STRUCTURE**
 - Prologue** 1-2
 - Dialogue with the 3 friends** 3-31:
 - 3 Introductory speech by Job
 - 4-14 First Round
 - 15-21 Second Round
 - 22-27 Third Round
 - 28 Poem in praise of wisdom
 - 29-31 Job's Final Speech
 - 32-37 **Elihu's Four Speeches**
 - 38-39 **Yahweh's Two Speeches**, followed by Job's submission (40:1-5)
 - 40-41 Yahweh's Final Two Speeches and Job's final submission (42:1-6)
 - Epilogue:** 42
5. There is no reason to affirm or to deny the historical existence of Job. The allusion to his patience in James 5:11 implies his historicity no more than the parable of the Good Samaritan demands a historical background.
6. The book offers no concrete evidence of its date. It seems very probable that the discussion of the problem of the book did not occur in Israel until the time of the Exile or afterwards; on this basis most scholars believe it was composed around the 5th century.
7. As the wisdom of man is demonstrated in the management of his life, so the wisdom of God is manifested in the management of the universe. The world is full of the mystery of God's wisdom; in spite of its paradoxes, it doesn't fall apart, it does not return to chaos. Of the world man, and one man in particular, are but a

small part. Job must accept the world as it is and from this accept God as He is. This is not a speculative solution. The author does not offer Job's experience as a way to understand evil, but as a way to live with it. The experience of Job is that one can put up with evil only when one experiences a theophany: an insight into the reality of God. Without this insight, the conclusion can be that there is no difference between good and evil, but life is an absurd, a nonsense. In front of evil human wisdom and human reason are bankrupt. The Book of Job ends with the conviction that only faith makes evil tolerable, faith which brings insight through the experience of God which is within reach of one who desires it (John McKenzie, S.J.)

DETAILED STRUCTURE (by chapter)

1-2 PROLOGUE

The story of Job introduces the poem-dialogue and continues in the epilogue whereby the story ends.

1:20-22 "Then Job stood up, tore his robe and shaved his head. Then, falling to the ground, he prostrated himself and said: *Naked I came from my mother's womb, naked I shall return again. Yahweh gave, Yahweh has taken back. Blessed be the name of Yahweh!* In all his misfortune, Job committed no sin, and he did not reproach God."

DIALOGUE : first round

3 Job (1) curses the day of his birth and wishes to die

4 Eliphaz of Teman (1): God is good, He rewards the good and punishes the crook

5

6 Job (2) : feels abandoned by God and friends

7 "*Man's life on earth is toil...*"

8 Bildad of Shuah (1) : Experience teaches that God abandons only the crooked

9 Job (3): Man is small and weak and God does to him as He likes

10

11 Zophar of Naamash (1): indicts Job: you have spoken like a fool, correct yourself...

12 Job (4): proclaims his innocence and calls on God...

13

14 *“Man, born of a woman, short of days and full of trouble, is like a shadow...”*

Second round

15 Eliphaz (2): tries to convince Job of his guilt.

16 Job (5): asks God to recognize his innocence in front of everybody

17 *“God is the Avenger of blood for Job...”*

18 Bildad (2): Job is behaving like the evil people and will share their end.

19 Job (6) abandoned by all, he puts his trust in God: God will intervene...

19:25 *“I know that my Avenger lives...without my flesh, I shall see God..”*

20 Zophar (2): Job has offended everybody, he will not escape God’s punishment.

21 Job (7) Why are the evil men successful and lucky?

Third Round

22 Eliphaz (3) : Is Job insinuating that God has punished him because he is good?
Absurd!

23 Job (8) He asks to meet God because the human beings cannot understand him.

24

25 Bildad (3) : How does Job dare to challenge God’s greatness?

26-31 Job (9) Job makes fun of the help received by his friends and appeals to God’s justice.

27

28 The structure of the world shows God’s wisdom and is known fully only by God.

29 Conclusion of the dialogue by Job: memory of the happy past;

30 Comparison with the present which is tragic and threatens despair,

31 especially because it appears without a reason, a justification.

THE SPEECHES OF ELIHU

32 Introduction of Elihu and first speech: he reproaches the friends and exhorts Job to pay attention to God's speech.

33

34 Second speech: Job is wrong to accuse God to be insensitive to the vicissitudes of humans...

35 Third Speech: Man's actions don't touch God who at any rate does not remain indifferent.

36 Fourth Speech: God is just and almighty and man must acknowledge his greatness.

37

DIALOGUE BETWEEN God and Job

38 God challenges Job to explain the secrets of nature: mineral life, animal life....

39

40:3-5 Job answers: *"I will put my hand over my mouth. I will speak no more..."*

God continues to challenge Job: 2 examples of strength in the world created by God: the hippopotamus and the crocodile(Leviatan)...

41

42:1-6 Job says: *"I have spoken without discerning about things above my understanding... I change my mind and I express my sorry in dust and ashes"*

EPILOGUE

42:7-17 God reproaches Job's friends and rewards Job with health and prosperity. Job's three daughters are the most beautiful women with very fanciful names and he gives them inheritance like to the boys. "Then, old and full of days, Job dies".

CONTENT AND EVALUATION

The writer puts the case of the good person who suffers. This is a paradox for the conservative view then prevalent that actions are rewarded or punished here on earth. This iron rule is plainly enunciated, so far as a nation as a whole is concerned, by the classic texts of Deuteronomy 28 and Leviticus 26; its working out in history is demonstrated by the books of Judges and Kings and the same idea underlines the teachings of the Prophets.

With Ezekiel (chapter 18) the conception of individual responsibility finds clear expression, though it was already latent and occasionally expressed Deuteronomy 24:16,

2 Kings 4:6, Jeremiah 31:29-30. But even Ezekiel has only earthly retribution in mind and is therefore brought sharply up against harsh reality. When a community is concerned, it may well be that the faults of a society as society prevail, and that the good are therefore punished with the wicked.

But if it is the rule that the individuals are to be recompensed for their own actions, how is it that the good suffers? Yet this is the fact, and Job is an example. The reader is indeed informed in the Prologue that Job's distress is not God's doing but Satan's and that it is a test of his fidelity.

But Job doesn't know this nor do his friends. These offer the old solutions: the happiness of the wicked is short-lived: see Psalms 37 and 73; the suffering of the good tests their fortitude: see Genesis 22:12 or possibly punish faults committed unwittingly or out of weakness: see Psalms 19:12 and 25:7.

The three friends propose these explanations while they think Job more or less innocent. But the cries that pain wrings from him and his impatience with God persuade them that his guilt goes deep: only great sins can explain distress like this.

The speeches of Elihu take up and develops these solutions: the suffering of those who are commonly judged upright is an expiation of sins of omission or thoughtlessness, or possibly (the most original contribution of this section) a safeguard against still more serious faults and a cure for pride. But like the three friends, though not as harshly, Elihu holds that sin and suffering are connected, one with the other.

Job protests about this rigorous theory of cause and effect with the vigor of conscious innocence. He doesn't deny the principle of earthly recompense, indeed he lives in the hope of it, and God gives it in the end (see the Epilogue).

But the recompense is here and now withheld: this is Job's problem and he seeks in vain for the meaning of it all. In his anguish he reaches out for God; God eludes him but Job still trusts in his goodness. When God does appear it is to tell how inscrutable are his person and his designs, and Job falls to silence.

This is the book's lesson: faith must remain even when understanding fails. At this stage of divine revelation the author could go no further. More light cannot be thrown on the mystery of the suffering innocence until God opens up the prospect of a future life in which recompense is made (see the parable of "The Rich Man and Lazarus") and reveals the worth of suffering when it is united with the sufferings of Christ.

Two texts of Paul give Job his answer: "All that we suffer in this life is nothing in comparison with the glory which is destined to be disclosed for us" (Romans 8:18) and "It makes me happy to be suffering for you now, and in my own body to do what I can to make up all that is still to be undergone by Christ for the sake of his body, the Church (Colossians 1:24).

(New Jerusalem Bible)

NOTES

Chapter 1, verse 6

“Sons of God”: They are the angels, among them Satan: “the Accuser, the Adversary”, he is different from the others, jealous... The figure of Satan will develop and become the Devil, the adversary of God, the being envious of the humans, the one who introduces death into the world because of his disobedience, rebellion, the Serpent:

Genesis 3: the Fall

Wisdom 2:24 “Death came into the world only through the Devil’s envy, as those who belong to him find at their cost”.

Revelation 12: “The great Dragon, the primeval Serpent, known as the Devil or Satan, who has led the world astray...” (The same expressions are in *Revelation 20:2*).

Luke 10:17-18 “The seventy two came back rejoicing: ‘Lord, they said, even the devil submits to us when we use your name’. He said to them: “I watched Satan fall like lightning from heaven”.

In any case, Satan is a creature, not a principle of evil powerful as God, but a fallen angel. God is one, and he is good, this is the message of the Jewish and Christian bible.

Verse 8

The Leviathan, the primeval serpent, can swallow the sun (eclipse)...

Chapter 19:25-26

“I know that I have a living Defender and that he will rise up last, on the dust of the earth. After my awakening, he will set me close to him, and from my flesh, I shall look on God”.

The word “*Go’el*”, approximately translated “Defender” is a term of Jewish law (Cf. *Number 35:19* “The Avenger of blood will put the murderer to death”. The avenger of blood was the victim’s closest relative; he was also the legal protector of his relations. He was especially bound to prevent the alienation of their landed property.

By extension, God is called the *Go’el* of Israel: *Psalms 19*: “May the words of my mouth always find favor, and the whispering of my heart, in your presence, Yahweh, my rock, my redeemer (*Go’el*)”.

God as Avenger, Savior and Rescuer from death of his people and his servant: *Isaiah 41:14* “Don’t be afraid, Jacob, my worm! You little handful of Israel, I shall help you, declares Yahweh; your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel”. The term *Go’el* is often used of God, the Savior of his people and the Avenger of the oppressed. Sometimes it applies to the Messiah: Defender/Avenger/Redeemer.

Job, slandered by his friends, awaits a Defender who this time is God himself: Cf. *16:18-21* “Cover not my blood, o earth, and let my cry mount without cease! Henceforth I have

a witness in Heaven, my Defender is there on high”. But Job still believes his happiness to be lost forever and his death to be at hand. When God undertakes to avenge his cause, it will be after his death.

Nonetheless, Job hopes to witness this and see his vindication. Cf. 14:10-14 “...will no one hide me in Sheol and shelter me there till your anger is past, fixing a certain day for calling me to mind? Can the dead come back to life? Day after day of my service, I shall be waiting for my relief to come”.

Job envisages a temporary shelter in Sheol and here it would seem that he is counting on a brief return to earthly life to see his vindication accomplished and that is what eventually happens: he is restored to health and prosperity. The power of Yahweh to bring back people from Sheol is present in the written tradition of the Scripture: *1 Samuel* 2:6, in the canticle of Hannah it is said: “Yahweh gives death and life, brings down to Sheol and draws up...”.

This faith of Job momentarily defies horizons of mortality in his desperate need for justice: it prepares us for the explicit revelation of bodily resurrection like in *2 Maccabees* 7:9 “... the King of the world will raise us up, since we die for his laws to live again forever”.

Chapter 42:8 “...while Job my servant offers prayers for you, I shall show him favor”.

Job acts as intercessor like Abraham (*Genesis* 18:22-32 for Sodom and Gomorrah), Moses (*Exodus* 32:11-14 after the episode of the Golden Calf: Moses stood in the breach, Cf. *Psalms* 106:23 “He thought of putting an end to them, had not Moses, his chosen one, taken a stand in the breach and confronted him, to turn his anger away from destroying them”);

Samuel (*1 Samuel* 7:5 “I shall plead with Yahweh for you”; *1 Samuel* 7: the whole chapter: Samuel, Judge and Liberator, interceding to God against the Philistines; *1 Samuel* 12:19 “They all said to Samuel: Pray for your servants to Yahweh, your God, to save us from death: for to all our sins we have added this wrong of asking for a king”.);

the High Priest Onias (*2 Maccabees* 15:14-16 Onias, the High Priest, prays for the community and Jeremiah appears to intercede for the Holy City: “This is a man who loves his brothers and prays much for the people and the Holy City-Jeremiah, the prophet of God. Then Jeremiah stretched out his right hand and presented Judas (Maccabeus) with a golden sword as a gift from God: with it you will shatter the enemy”);

Jeremiah 11:14 “Yahweh said to me: you, on your part, must not intercede for this people, nor raise either plea or prayer on their behalf, for I will not listen when their distress forces them to call to me for help”);

Ezekiel 14:14.20 Noah with Danel (unknown) and Job are shown as intercessors even if unsuccessful.

Job's painful ordeal has apparently given power to his prayers. In the background, we descry (we see a long way away) the Servant of Yahweh (Isaiah 53:12) whose suffering is unequivocally an expiation for the sins of others.

ANTHOLOGY

(The following are the passages chosen in the Liturgy of the Hours, 8th & 9th week of the Ordinary Time of the Year) Here, we will write down the passages, encode some of the text and add some considerations.

1. Job 1:1-22 Job is deprived of his possessions.

Verses:

20-21: "Then Job stood up, tore his robe and shaved his head. Then, falling to the ground, he prostrated himself and said: Naked I came from my mother's womb, naked I shall return again. Yahweh gave, Yahweh has taken back. Blessed be the name of Yahweh. In all his misfortune, Job committed no sin and he did not reproach God".

Commentary:

The expression represents a graphic, powerful and stirring description of our human condition and at the same time a very profound witness of natural and biblical religiosity: the faith that our life is in God's hands and therefore, even in the realization of our mortality, a gift from God, the Creator who deserves our worship, since we are conscious of our situation and we are capable of gratitude and adoration. Like the expression that follows in chapter 2.

The sentence of Job is a summary of deep religiosity. He will come back to this attitude at the end of his diatribe with God, hopefully with a deeper awareness. The poem is a development of the feelings of an innocent who is convinced that he is unjustly treated since he suffers and he knows that he is innocent. The end of the poem is an act of surrender to God even in front of the fact that no answer was given to the inquiry but only a description of God's omnipotence and an invitation to rely on his goodness. So the statement of the beginning befits the conclusion with the difference that God appreciates Job who complained because of his innocence more than those who bowed down in front of God unquestioningly but may be did not show such a trust in God as Job. Because of this, the three friends are asking Job to pray for them, as God has instructed them. His intercession is more powerful.

2. Job 2:1-13 Job is afflicted with an ulcer and is visited by his friends.

Vv 7-10: "Satan struck Job down with malignant ulcers from the soul of his feet to the tip of his head. Job took a piece of pot to scrape himself and went and sat among the ashes. Then his wife said to him: Why persist in this integrity of yours. Curse God and die. That

is how a fool or a woman talks, Job replied. If we take happiness from God's hands, must we not take sorrow too?. And in all this misfortune, Job uttered no sinful word".

Commentary:

"If we take happiness from God's hands, must we not take sorrow too?" This sentence implies a deep religiosity. There is the concept that God is good, therefore implicitly even if he gives us sorrow, this must be for our good, even if we do not understand. The whole moral of the book is already here, in the beginning. To the same attitude of resignation in God's hands Job will eventually return, after his tale of complaining and his remonstrations of innocence. Moreover, the distinction is clear between evil physical and moral. "And in all this misfortune, Job uttered no sinful word".

3. Job 3:1-26 Job's Dirge

Dirge: Usually a song sung at a burial or for a dead person. Here: a mournful song.

"In the end it was Job who broke the silence and cursed the day of his birth. This is what he said: Perish the day in which I was born, and the night that told of a boy conceived. May that day be darkness, may God on high have no thought of it, may no light shine on it...Why was not I still-born, and why did I not perish as I left the womb? Why were there knees to receive me, breasts for me to suck? Now, I should lie in peace, wrapped in a restful slumber...or put away like an aborted child, like little ones that never see the light. Down there the wicket bustle no more, there the weary rest; prisoners, all left in peace, hear no more the shouts of the oppressors. High and low are there together, and the slave is free of his master...For me, there is no calm, no peace; my torment banish rest".

Commentary

This cry of wounded humanity is found also in Jeremiah 20:14-18 and in Psalm 88. Such despair is rarely expressed in the Bible, because the overall message is that life is good as a creation of God who is essentially good. So, this cry of wounded humanity is like a blasphemy which is allowed only to express the depth of anguish and confusion. It is not a definitive statement about life but the expression of a momentary, unspeakable pain and sorrow. Jeremiah 20:14-18: "A curse on the day I was born... Why ever did I come out of the womb to see the toil and sorrow and end my days in shame?". Jeremiah, however, remains convinced that Yahweh is the God of grace, and, even in the depth of his anguish, utters a cry of hope (20:11-13)".

Psalm 88 is utterly dark: "For I am filled with misery, my life is on the brink of Sheol; already numbered among those who sink into oblivion, I am as one bereft of strength, left alone among the dead like the slaughtered lying in the grave, whom you remember no more, cut off as they are of your protection...All that I know is darkness".

4. Job 7:1-21 Job calls to God out of his weariness of life.

“Is not human life on earth just conscript service? Do we not live a hireling’s life? Like a slave, sighing for the shade or a hireling with no thought but for his wages, I have months of futility assigned to me, nights of suffering to be my lot. Lying in bed I wonder: When will it be day ? No sooner up than: When will evening come?...What are human beings that you should take them so seriously, subjecting them to your scrutiny, that morning after morning you should examine them? Will you never take your eyes off me, long enough for me to swallow my spittle?...For soon I shall be lying in the dust, you will look for me and I shall be no more”.

Commentary

Here the futility of human life contrasts with judgmental attitude of God. God is experienced as a demanding judge, not allowing humans out of his control, a sensation of suffocating, as he breaths down your neck, not allowing a moment of respite (even to swallow my spittle!) and yet human life is so transient as to appear irrelevant...Yet, God’s demands of holiness, in their strictness, gives value to us human beings...The solution will be the revelation that human life is destined to outlast death, to extend beyond time into eternity.

5. Job 11:1-20 Zophar outlines an answer to the riddle.

“These were your words: My conduct is pure, in your eyes I am free of blame. Will no one let God speak, open his lips and give you answer, show you the secret of wisdom which put all darkness to shame? Then you will realize that God is calling you to account for your sins. Can you claim to fathom the depths of God, can you reach the limit of Shaddai? It is higher than the Heavens: what can you do? It is deeper than Sheol: what can you know?”.

Commentary

The traditional doctrine that if you suffer it is because of your sins is contradicted by Job who proclaims/revenges his innocence. The problem is not God’s omniscience, but the acute consciousness of the innocent who remonstrates with God, and this stands against God’s infinite wisdom: the solution is in God, but without denying the innocence of the sufferer. The infinity of God’s goodness embraces also the mystery of the innocent suffering as it will make sense in Christ’ Passion and salvific suffering. A prophecy of this are the Songs of the Servant of Yahweh in Deutero-Isaiah.

6. Job 12:1-25 God’s dominion over all human wisdom.

Job wants to ask God the reason of his sufferings because he is innocent and sees the guilty unpunished. He is not questioning God’s overwhelming wisdom.

“In his hand is the soul of every living thing and the breath of every human being. Can the ear not distinguish the value of what is said just as the palate can tell one food from another? Wisdom is found in the old and discretion comes with great age. But in him there is wisdom and power too, and good counsel as well as discretion. What he destroys no one can rebuild; whom he imprisons no one can release”.

Commentary

Job does not deny the omnipotence and omniscience of God which is plain to him from the order of creation. So, because of this and notwithstanding this, he wants to question God about the problem which is vital to him. His accusers do not listen seriously and honestly to Job, they assume that he is guilty. They do not think that he has the right to question God.

7. Job 13:12-14:6 Job makes his appeal to the judgment of God.

“Your received ideas are maxims of ash, your retorts, retorts of clay. Be quiet! Let me do the talking, happen to me what may. I am putting my flesh between my teeth, I am taking my life in my hands: let him kill me if he will: I have no other hope than to justify my conduct in his eyes. And this is what will save me, for the wicked would not dare to appear before him”...

“For his part, he crumbles away like rotten wood, or like a moth-eaten garment, a human being, born of woman, whose life is short but full of trouble. Like a flower, such a one blossoms and withers, fleeting as a shadow, transient. And this is the creature on whom you fix your gaze, and bring to judgment before you. But will anyone produce the pure from what is impure? No one can! Since his days are measured out, since his tale of months depends on you, since you assign him bounds he cannot pass, turn your eyes from him, leave him alone, like a hired laborer, to finish his days in peace”.

Commentary

The beginning of Chapter 14 is an elegy of human misery and fragility (See the comparison with a tree: vv. 7-12 “The is always hope for a tree”). This is an experience of humility and an invitation to self-acceptance, without being a reason for irresponsibility. The consciousness of our mortality and irrelevance, on the other hand, shows the tender care of God for the most precious of his creature, the only one that can answer God in love.

8. Job 28:1-28 Wisdom rests with God alone.

“Silver has its mines, and gold a place for refining. Iron is extracted from the earth and smelted rocks yield copper....Man attacks the flint, upturning mountains by their roots. He cuts canals through the rock, on the watch for anything precious. He explores the sources of rivers, bringing hidden things to light. But where does wisdom come from? Where is intelligence to be found? No human being know the way to her, she is not to be found on earth where they live....God alone understands her path and knows where she is

to be found...Then he said to human beings, “Wisdom”? – that is fear of the Lord; “Intelligence”? – Avoidance of evil”.

Commentary

This passage is mysterious and its position in the book is questionable. There is a similarity with *Proverbs* 8:22-36 and *Baruch* 3:9-38; 4:1-4: here God’s wisdom is given to Israel and it is the Law of Yahweh that stands for ever: the Ten Commandments. Here, however, the writer is speaking of a wisdom inaccessible to human beings. The idea may be stated thus: Wisdom, having inspired God’s plan, having the key of all his works and incarnating his Providence, is beyond the intellectual reach of the human mind; despite all efforts and discoveries, human beings can never penetrate the final mystery of a Wisdom far surpassing their scope.

The difference between the various passages is not so relevant, if we take into account that in any case, even when wisdom makes herself available to humans, his true nature is divine, so infinitely out of reach of the human mind.

9. Job 29:1-10; 30:19-23 Job’s lament in his affliction.

“Will no one bring back to me the months that have gone, and the days when God was my guardian, when his lamp shone over my head, and his light was my guide in the darkness? Shall I ever see my days of harvest again when God protected my tent; when Shaddai still dwelt with me, and my children were around me; when my feet were bathed in milk, and streams of oil poured from the rocks? ...On hearing me, people congratulated me; on seeing me, people deferred to me, because I freed the poor in distress and the orphan who had no helper... And I used to say: I shall die in honor, after days as numerous as sand...My glory will be forever new, and the bow in my hand forever strong”. “And now, I am a laughing stock of people that are younger than I am and whose parents I would have disdained to put with the dogs guarding my flock... I cry to you and you give me no answer; I stand before you, but you take no notice...”.

Commentary

The description of the previous good fortune is expressed by the respect and veneration of the people of the community...The appearance in public is a sign of common esteem and it goes together also in the just man of the Old Testament with the concern for the poor, the orphan and the widow. The sudden overturn of fortune, unexplained and shocking in its diminishing details, becomes an argument against God’s justice, an urgent questioning which doesn’t seem to elicit an answer from God.

10. Job 31:1-8; 13-23; 35-37 Job’s Apologia.

“I had my last word, now let Shaddai reply! When my adversary has drafted his writ against me, I shall wear it on my shoulder and bind it around my head like a royal turban. I shall give him an account of every step and go as boldly as a prince to meet him”. Ends of the words of Job.

Commentary

In this passionate protestation of innocence, Old Testament morality reaches its highest stage of development, directly prefiguring the morality taught in the Gospel. The form of this protestation of innocence is that of a conditional imprecation against oneself, required of the accused by law, Cf. *Exodus* 22:9-10; *Numbers* 5:20-22. This attitude so insistently assumed by Job is his originality and it is appreciated by God more than a formal acceptance of guilt for something that the person is not aware to have done. This sincerity is a more genuine attitude and therefore approved by God even if its request receives no direct answer.

11. Job 32:1-6; 33:1-22 Elihu speaks of the mystery of God.

Note: There is nothing leading up to Elihu's intervention in the Dialogue and no reference to him in the Epilogue. It look like an addition or interpolation.

"How could you say in my hearing – for the sound of your words did not escape me – 'I am clean, I am sinless, I am pure without fault. But he keeps inventing excuses against me and regards me as his enemy. He puts me in the stocks, he watches my every path?', in saying so, I tell you, you are wrong: for God is greater than any human being. Why then quarrel with him for not replying to you word by word?"

Commentary

God speaks to men in dreams and admonishes by means of sickness. Sometimes, there is a "Mediator" near God to suggest that he spares the person, has pity and rescues the sick from death and corruption: this "Mediator" can be an angel of God or a good person who intercedes or even expiates for the other (Cf. *Isaiah* 53, the Servant of Yahweh). So, the conclusion is for Job to keep quiet: "Pay attention, Job; listen to me: keep quiet, I have more to say. If you have anything to say, refute me, speak out, for I would gladly accept that you are upright. If not, then listen to me: keep quiet and I will teach you wisdom" (33:31-33).

12. Job 38:1-20 God confounds Job.

"Then, from the heart of the tempest, Yahweh gave Job his answer. He said: Who is this obscuring my intentions with his ignorant words? Brace yourself like a fighter; I am going to ask the questions, and you are to inform me...Have you visited the place where the snow is stored? Have you seen the stores of hail, which is kept for times of distress, for days of battle and war? Who bores a channel for the downpour or clears the way for the rolling thunder so that rain may fall on lands where no one lives, and the desert void of human dwelling, to meet the need of the lonely wastes and make grass sprout on the thirsty ground? Has the rain a father? What womb brings forth the ice, who give birth to the frost of heaven when the waters grow hard as a stone and the surface of the deep congeals?"

The Psalms are a wisdom book in a special way because they require a way of listening to them (once one has studied them) that gives way to that SILENCE in which God speaks.

The Psalms are poetry and prayer. They have as central theme the DRAMA of our Human Existence as it calls for God. They express a variety of feelings that give resonance to the Human Drama that marks the field of our prayer: to make room for the Spirit of God to intercede for us, within us (Cf. *Romans* 8:26-27).

The Psalms are part of the heritage or patrimony of Humanity. They are “the Prayer” *par excellence*. They are, as it were, within the “genetic code” of humanity. The “child”, which is in every human being, crying for God (*Ps.* 8:2-3). The moment of spontaneity and authenticity, the intensity of the experience become words that resonate in the depths of our interiority and become prayer.

“Nobody has ever seen God” (*John* 1:18). Our time is a time of noise, and absence of God (secularization/materialism): our search for God must therefore be done in Silence/ in the bosom of Silence/ and as the fruit of a loving and persevering frequentation (Cf. *Psalms* 22:3).

In prayer, we run the risk of subjectivism, or psychologism: to make of our prayer a monologue with ourselves, a mere psychological analysis. But the word of God comes to our rescue. The Psalms are the words of prayer that God himself puts in our mouth. It is the Holy Spirit the true Pray-er (2 *Timothy* 3:16). Cf. The note of Joseph Ratzinger (Congregation for the Defense of faith) on *the True Prayer of the Christian*:

1. Christian Prayer is essentially the answer to a questioning which comes directly from the word of God. A personal encounter with a personal God.
2. The fruit of authentic Christian Prayer is the Obedience of Faith.
3. Christian Prayer is not only/mainly the profound expression of the depths of our being but especially the fruit of the Holy Spirit who prays in us.
4. In the Psalms: Jesus is hidden; The Holy Spirit rests.

The Classification of the Psalms

(General suggestions)

1. Traditionally, the PSALTER is divided into 5 books and each book ends with a Doxology.

Book I : 1 – 41 (41:13 Doxology)

Book II : 42 – 72 (72:18-20 Doxology)

Book III : 73 – 89 (89:52 Doxology)

Book IV : 90 – 106 (106:48 Doxology)

Book V : 107 – 150 (From 147 to 150 all Doxology)

This division has **no relevance** because there is no order in the grouping of the Psalms.

2. There are different ways of classifying the Psalms and there are different opinions as to how to classify an individual Psalm (or to which category to attribute it). What follows are different ways of understanding a classification of the Psalms that shows us their richness.

3. The Psalms reflect the three basic moods of the human heart: The pinch of need: Petition, Entreaty; The joy of receiving: Thanksgiving; The movement of forgetting self, absorbed as we are in the beauty of God and his creatures: Praise.

4. The following is a simple way of classifying the Psalms in reference to our life experience: PSALMS of ORIENTATION: when everything goes well: Hymns of Praise, Wisdom Psalms; PSALMS OF DISORIENTATION: when there is a problem, suffering, crisis: Petition, Lamentation, Entreaty; PSALMS OF RE-ORIENTATION: God sends His help/the situation changes for the better, life starts again: Thanksgiving.

Petition, thanksgiving and praise: 3 forms or kinds of prayer: they correspond to the movements of the heart (the 3 moods of the Heart). It is a story of ORIENTATION: God is the law of my life; it is a story of DISORIENTATION: God is with me in the midst of my crisis. The Psalmist still cries to God in darkness, pain and confusion; it is a story of RE-ORIENTATION - God comes to the rescue. After death comes Resurrection.

5. The PSALMS are a memory and a celebration of what God has done for His people, Israel. In *Deuteronomy* 6:4 (SHEMA, ISRAEL) God (Moses) exhorts the people to Hear and to Remember.

Hearing means:

Listening and Understanding.

- **Remember**- to keep in the mind and heart: memory, memorial;
- **Celebrate** – the memory has to be celebrated (obedience to the word);
- **Act** – celebration leads to action which has to transform or change the situation.

Learn from the Psalms: Listen to heartbeat of Yahweh (the Psalms are the heartbeat of Yahweh). Listen to Yahweh's story in the Psalms. How he wants to intermingle with the story of Israel/with my story – God and Me.

6. The dynamics of the PSALMS are **from PLEA to PRAISE**. Praise is the point of arrival. In Hebrew, the Book of Psalms is called: "Book of Praises". Praise and Thanksgiving mark a movement of reaching out/having come out of our problems. It is an Exodus and Exodus is the principal reason for Praise: Freedom. Praise is an expression of the memory of the powerful deeds of God.

7. Contrast between Saul and David (*1 Samuel* 16:23). David's attitude is to go out of himself by means of singing. This is the therapeutic power of the psalms. David is a free spirit, loving, singing, praising, happily losing control in dancing... In opposition to Saul: gloomy, jealous, depressed ... The same his daughter Michal: David's dance is an act of exuberance, of religious vitality. Michal's refusal to praise and to dance is expression of death/sterility (*2 Samuel* 6:14; 20-23). We however cannot come too quickly to PRAISE, otherwise it is a cheap praise, superficial. It will short-change our prayer. We must not be afraid of looking in the face of our sins, imperfections, problems and bring them to the Lord with the prayer of the Psalms.

8. In order to understand the Psalms as Prayer, we need to enter in consonance/ syntony with them. It is difficult to understand religious texts if one is not a believer. It is even more difficult (extremely difficult) to understand the Psalms as prayer if one is incapable of praying. So, we have to study and approach the Psalm in a prayerful atmosphere as T.S. Eliot writes: "The PSALMS: A privileged gateway to Prayer. Doors of Perception."

CLASSIFICATION SPECIFICS

Literally genre: it is a "literary unit : i.e. a form of expression with words (written words) that has a certain unity. What is used are: *words*, *formulae* (or forms: combination of words to create a sentence), and *images*. These forms of expression are similar between themselves in as much as they express a similar situation or sentiment (feeling). So a "literary genre" is the use/usage of similar forms in order to fit similar contents. To classify or describe a "literary genre" one has to consider 3 elements: the content, the existential situation, the form/style.

Although The PSALMS are poetry and prayer and therefore have an infinite variety and vitality of forms which defy classification, yet **classification is useful in order to reach a certain comprehension of the Psalms. It is a way of putting order and "comprehend" i.e. embrace the richness of the Psalter.**

1. WP
2. RP
3. IT
4. IT
5. IE
6. IE
7. IE
8. HP
9. ITH
10. ITH
11. IT
12. CE
13. IE
14. PE
15. L
16. IT
17. IE
18. RP
19. HP
20. RP
21. RP
22. IE
23. IT
24. L
25. IE
26. IE
27. IT
28. IE
29. HP
30. ITH
31. IE
32. ITH
33. HP
34. ITH
35. IE
36. IE
37. WP
38. IE

39. IE
40. ITH
41. IE
42. IE
43. IE
44. CE
45. RP
46. CZ
47. KY
48. CZ
49. WP
50. PE
51. IE
52. PE
53. PE
54. IE
55. IE
56. IE
57. IE
58. CE
59. IE
60. CE
61. IE
62. IT
63. IE
64. IE
65. CTH
66. CTH
67. CTH
68. CTH
69. IE
70. IE
71. IE
72. RP
73. WP
74. CE
75. PE
76. CZ
77. CE
78. HPS

79. CE
80. CE
81. L
82. CE
83. CE
84. CZ
85. CTH
86. IE
87. CZ
88. IE
89. RP
90. CE
91. WP
92. ITH
93. KY
94. CE
95. PE
96. KY
97. PE
98. KY
99. KY
100. HP
101. RP
102. IE
103. HP
104. HP
105. HPS
106. CE
107. ITH
108. CE
109. IE
110. RP
111. HP
112. WP
113. HP
114. HP
115. CT
116. ITH
117. HP
118. CTH

119. WP
120. IE
121. IT
122. CZ
123. CE
124. CTH
125. CT
126. CE
127. WP
128. WP
129. CT
130. IE
131. IT
132. RP
133. WP
134. L
135. HP
136. HP
137. CE
138. ITH
139. WP
140. IE
141. IE
142. IE
143. IE
144. RP
145. HP
146. HP
147. HP
148. HP
149. HP
150. HP

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE GENRES

HYMNS

The hymn is a song/ joyous song of PRAISE for the marvels done by God. Two are the fields where we contemplate God's marvelous works:

1. Creation
2. Salvation History

FORMS:

1. INTRODUCTION: an invitation to praise directed to the assembly or to the author himself;
2. BODY : The reasons for the praise of God are numbered and explained, but with much freedom;
3. CONCLUSION can be a renewed invitation to praise as a summary of the reasons.

To the Hymns we add:

The Psalms of the Kingship of Yahweh:

They describe the enthronement of Yahweh and they have a liturgical framework. Probably they were composed for the occasion of the moving of the Ark from one place to another. When the ark was arriving in the new place and placed or put in place, then Yahweh was enthroned among/or in the midst of the Cherubim, (Cf. Timothy Radcliff: "*The throne of God*": The throne of God is empty: God is expressed as the GREAT ABSENCE in the sense that He is TRANSCENDENT/completely different (not contained in human words and images).

They are a celebration of the Divine Kingship; they respond to the exclamation that we find in *Isaiah* (24:23; 52:7): **Yahweh Malak**: Yahweh has become king. Our God reigns! The Kingship of God is celebrated in time, and in opposition to the enemies, but it is meant for ever/everywhere: eschatological dimension: in the end/or the end of time, the Kingship of God will be recognized by everybody...

The Songs of Zion. These hymns are directed to the Holy City of Jerusalem. They probably originated on the occasion of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem or a feast. Jerusalem is sacred because of the presence of God and is the place of longing and praise because in it we meet God.

PSALMS OF THANKSGIVING

They can be communitarian or individual.

They are marked by joy: no one can be thankful and unhappy.

They are more focused on the Salvation History: what God has done for us. They are the expression of an unshakable TRUST, that God will be faithful to His promises.

They usually refer in thanksgiving to what God has done in the past, in order to ask help for the present. For an example of this type of DOXOLOGY (Praise) we have in *Rev 4:8*: “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God, the Almighty; He was, He is and He is to come”. This verse reminds us of *Isaiah 6:3* and *Exodus 3:14*.

PSALMS OF ENTREATY

They are the most numerous, they occupy more than one third of the Psalter. The entreaty is usually done in the context of trouble, suffering, problems; the tone therefore is one of pain, sorrow and complaint or lament.

Form/Pattern:

1. INTRODUCTION: Invocation to God, calling on God; eagerly addressing God to come to the rescue;

2. BODY: articulated often around the following two attitudes;

A. Lament or complaint

- *Individual entreaty*: danger, sickness, injustice
- *Collective*: natural calamity, epidemics, draught or national catastrophe like defeat in war, invasion, etc.

B. Entreaty: cry to God, appeal for help: a real *epiclesis*: it shows the closeness of Yahweh to His people. The past is a reason to rely on God. The entreaty tends always to make the Lord come down to the present situation of need:

Epiclesis: “Calling on God” is common and typical in Christian Prayer: “O God, come to my assistance” (The Father); “Come, Lord Jesus” (The Son); “Send your Spirit on these offerings”; “Come, Holy Spirit” (The Holy Spirit).

CONCLUSION: Can be a blessing or renewed expression of trust or a thanksgiving.

PSALMS OF TRUST

The prayer is addressed to God to express total and unconditional trust in God, only source of peace and joy. It is usually provoked by an existential situation. Ex. “Only in God is my soul at rest, only in God I trust for in you I hope, my God”. The three dimensions of time: past, present and future are summed up in “the present of God’s eternity”. These Psalms are a therapy against self-centeredness and individualism. They express a peaceful surrender and abandonment in God. There is no pattern, they are left to the inspiration of the moment. Ex. *Ps* 4:8: “I will lie down in peace and sleep comes at once for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safely”.

ROYAL PSALMS

They have a special place because of the function of the monarchy in the OT and plan of salvation (Cf. the prophecy of Nathan (2 *Sam* 7). The succession of King David is very important. It is considered sign of the presence of God and place of his promises since the Messiah is expected to come from the stock of Jesse and the family of David. A special section of the Royal Psalms are the Messianic Psalms.

WISDOM (or DIDACTIC) PSALMS

This group contains a variety of compositions. They are very different from each other and the main difference is that the focus is not usually God but MAN. They are :

- a meditation on the Law
- a description/meditation on the different destiny of the just man and the evil one.
- The problem of the just suffering
- The problem of the retribution of the evil person (Cr. *Ps* 73:2-3)

The same approach (Didactic) is about a category of PSALMS called **Historical**: a meditation and a celebration of God’s presence in the happening of the past, especially Exodus. The Psalms want to underline the situation of the present, so the past events become, as it were, contemporary because of the bearing the past events have in the present situation. It is a wisdom approach to time as the *milieu* of God’s plan of salvation, where his power is displayed.

THE MESSIANIC PSALMS

We have already drawn attention to the prophetic element in the Psalter by mentioning the eschatological character of

1. *The songs of Zion and of the Psalms of the Kingship of God.*

The universal renewal foretold by these poems is the messianic era (age); other psalms, more specifically, speaks of the Messiah in person. Scattered through the Psalter, and of varying literary form, is a group of

2. *Royal Psalms:*

These are: - divine oracles addressed to the King: 2, 110

- prayers for the King: 20, 61, 72, 89
- thanksgiving for the King: 21
- praying of the King himself: 18, 101
- or royal procession song: 132
- a hymn of the King: 144
- even a bridal ode for a royal marriage: 45

They are ancient poems, dating from the time of Monarchy and reflecting the custom and ceremonial of the court. As originally composed, they referred to the King as a contemporary, and had a royal successor of David in mind.

BUT the King of the Chosen People is divinely anointed (in Hebrew “Messiah, the anointed one”) and he is the recipient of God’s blessing, and this blessing ensures the prosperity of his people. But this is not all. The divine promises to the dynasty of David made it possible to glimpse beyond this King to another and privileged descendant of David in whom God would have particular delight and whom he would designate to his saving work.

This King is the anointed without equal, the Messiah. The prophecy of Nathan (2 *Samuel*, 7) is the first in this series of prophecies related to the Messiah, son of David. This promise was essentially one of stability for the House of David, and this is the sense in which *Ps* 89:29 -38 and 132:11 – 12 quote it, but it was not long before it was interpreted as referring to an INDIVIDUAL, and this in *Acts* 2: 30 comes to be applied to CRIST.

It was natural, therefore, for some of these ancient royal songs, remaining in use after the fall of the monarchy, to become MESSIANIC SONGS in the strictest sense of the word. The messianic sense of *Ps* 2, 72, 110 is plain. (110 is the more frequently quoted in the N.T. than any other psalm). Even the wedding song of *Ps* 45, interpreted in the marriage allegory, beloved of the Prophets, came to express the union of the Messiah with his new Israel, and *Hebrews* 1:8 applies it to Christ.

Following the same trend, **the N.T. and early the Christian tradition applies other Psalms to Christ** which, although not royal Psalms, anticipated the situation and mind of the Messiah, the suffering of the essentially Good Man, thus 16 and 22 and selected passages from many psalms, particularly : 8, 35, 40, 41, 69, 97, 102, 118.

Similarly, the Kingship Psalms have been applied to the Kingship of Christ. Even if these applications go beyond the immediate literal sense of the text applied, they are legitimate in that the hopes inspiring the psalms could not be fully realized until the coming of the Son of God to the earth.

Analysis of SOME

Psalm 2: The messianic DRAMA.

Jewish and Christian traditions regard this Psalm as messianic in the same way as 110 on which it possible depends. His horizon is the future messianic era or age.

1. The rebels speak : 1 – 3
2. Yahweh speaks : 4 – 6
3. the Messiah speaks : 7 – 12
with a short conclusion

“*You are my son*” - By consecrating Him King of Israel, God pronounces him “his son”. This title is present in the ancient books; but here it is more relevant in connection with Nathan’s prophecy regarding David’s descent. In the new Testament, it is interpreted as “the eternal generation of the Word”; in the same way it is used in the liturgy.

Acts 4:25 ff: Prayer of the apostles

13:33: Part of Peter’s speech

Hebrews 1:5: Christ superior to the Angels

5:5: Jesus chosen as high Priest

Ps 110: The Messiah: King and Priest and Judge

The prerogatives of the Messiah, worldwide sovereignty and perpetual priesthood, are no more confirmed by earthly investiture than were those of the mysterious Melchizedek (*Genesis* 14, 18f)

1 - 2 : King - Enthronement

3: Divine adoption

4: Priest according to Melchizedek (both are kings and priests; both offer bread and wine; both receive their priesthood from God).

5 – 7: Judge

The most quoted Psalm in the New Testament:

- *Matthew* 22, 44

- *Acts* 2:34 –35

- *Hebrews* 1:13 5:6; 8:1; 10:12-13

- *1 Peter* 3,22

- *Philippians* 2:6-11

Psalm 45: Royal Wedding Song

According to some scholars, this psalm may be a secular song to celebrate the marriage of an Israelite King; but Jewish and Christian tradition understand it as celebrating the marriage of the messianic King with Israel (prefiguring the Church)

cf. *Ezekiel* 16:8-13; *Isaiah* 62: 5; *Song of Songs*, 3:6-10 etc = a prophetic theme).

1) vv. 2 – 9 : The poet first addresses the messianic King: crediting him with attributes of Yahweh (*Ps* 145, 4 -7; 12-13 etc) and Emmanuel (*Isaiah* 9:5-6).

2) v. 10 – 16: then addresses the queen. Some passages draw their messianic meaning from allegorical interpretation: v. 8: *daughters of Kings*: the pagan nations converted to the true God; v. 10: *forget your nation*: Israel, like the ancestral figure of Abraham, must cut all links with the surrounding pagan world; v. 12-13: the homage of the pagans peoples is prophesied for the messianic age.

READING THE PSALMS

I. The classification should not be rigid; it has a functional importance. It is a point of departure:

- it is useful to put the reader and the pray-er in the right atmosphere of prayer, to assume the right attitude;

- It is the door/it gives the key for the right interpretation

- It is a springboard to the more intimate and profound fruition of the prayerful and poetic aspects of the Psalms.

II. The second step is to un-tap all the philosophical and theological richness of the Psalms, but especially the symbolic and spiritual dimensions of the Psalms.

III: The point of arrival is PRAYER: to make present and personal the prayerful value of each Psalm. Underlying the whole book of the Psalms is the conviction that: “to pray to

God has sense and value. The mere fact of praying is seen as something extremely valuable. The Human Person (MAN) in prayer/ while praying, places himself in his place as a creature, both humble but very noble. Humble, because He becomes aware of being a creature in front of the Creator; very noble because He knows that he can speak with God, He is an interlocutor with God.

THE SYMBOLIC VALUE OF THE PSALTER

The prayer/poetry value of the Psalms goes beyond or transcends the concrete circumstances in which they were composed: they become symbols of the human condition and the human destiny and its relationship with God. They have a universal value.

The three most elementary dimensions of the symbolic universe of the Psalms are:

1. VERTICAL: The standing person
2. HORIZONTAL: The sitting down person
3. DYNAMIC: the person in motion

The VERTICAL DIMENSION: The standing person: the Human Person is a standing animal:

- A. His head is symbol of his dignity (*Ps.21,3 ; 110,7*);
- B. The standing person naturally looks at the heavens, the sky, God's habitation; lifting of the mind to God;
- C. The greatest image of verticality: is the Holy Mountain, Mount Sinai, the house of God, who comes down to meet the people. Man goes up to meet God: *Ps.43,3-4*, guided by God's light. The source of light is God's face. "Let the light of your face shine on us and we shall be saved" (*Ps. 80* refrain).
- D. God looks down on us, and we look up to God: *Ps. 123:1-2*: To you I lift up my eyes, you who dwell in the Heavens, like the eyes of slaves on the hand of their Lord.

From this vertical symbolism we understand the importance of prayer, that is essentially an act of trust in the Paternity/Maternity of God. A God who cares, who comes down to meet his creature, who has pity. *Ps. 103:13-14*: "As a Father has compassion on His sons, the Lord has pity on those who fear Him for He knows of what we are made of, He remembers that we are dust".

II. The HORIZONTAL DIMENSION: the sitting person

- A. *A person sits in his house*: symbol of stability:
 - to sit
 - to lie down

- to abide (inhabit)

Cf. *Ps.* 16:9: “And so my heart rejoices, my soul is glad, even my body shall rest in safety ...”.

- C. *God’s presence gives this stability, serenity.* Habitation/house and stability” “The upright shall live in your presence (*Ps* 140:114) ... to sit, to lie or to live in the House of God is to be in His presence: Intimacy of friendship and dialogue.
- D. *The House:* is the symbol of intimacy and stability: *Ps* 23:5-6 “He has prepared a banquet for me... in the Lord’s own house shall I dwell forever and ever”.
- E. *The House of God is Jerusalem or the Temple:* *Ps.* 24:3 “Who shall climb the mountain of the Lord; ? who shall stand in His Holy place?” Innumerable are the references to the beauty and strength of the city of God and of its temple. In it the faithful finds protection: *Ps* 91:4 “He will conceal you with His pinions, and under His wings you will find refuge” (this is a reference to the cherubs on the Ark of the Covenant). God’s city is a citadel, a rock, a shield. In it man finds peace or tranquility, intimacy: like the swallow or the sparrow: Cf. the whole of *Ps.* 84 “How lovely is your dwelling place, Lord God of Hosts”.

III. The dynamic DIMENSION: The person on the move

- A. *The idea of the journey* is very important in the Bible, with its symbolic implications. The History of Salvation implies a Humanity that moves towards God gradually/step by step/in the dynamism of revelation/reception. The stages of Salvation History express the direction of this journey. It’s a movement in time.
- B. *The movement towards the meeting/encounter with God,* the House of God, peace, stability, the temple of God, the City of God....
 - “to go, to move”
 - “the way”
 - “towards” (direction)
- C. *A special place is reserved for the movement/journey towards the Temple:* to “climb” the Holy Mountain, Zion, ... The “Gradual Psalms/Psalms of Ascensions”: 120-134 are the songs of the Pilgrims to the Temple of Jerusalem. The spirituality of the Pilgrim: a passage from the everyday life (profane) to the temple (the sacred realm). Climbing to the hill of Zion and the temple marks also the climbing of the incense from the altar to the sky: symbol of people’s prayers. The movement upwards brings us, through prayer, to God’s level where the mystery of man is better understood and especially we experience communion with God.

JESUS AND THE PSALMS

As a pious Israelite, Jesus prayed the Psalms in the synagogue. The Psalms were His Prayer Book. Through many quotations, the Gospels show us that Jesus mirrors Himself and the circumstances of His life in the Psalms (Cf. *Luke* 24:44). For example:

Ps 110: Jesus uses it to claim His Divine Lordship

(*Matthew 22-44-45*);

Ps 118:22: Jesus mentions when he says that “the stone rejected by the builders...” (*Matthew 21:42; 1 Peter 2:7-8*);

Ps 8:3: Jesus quotes this psalm to justify His solemn entrance into the Temple (*Matthew 21:16* “from the mouth of children, babes at the breast...”).

Before going down to the Kedron Valley, after the last supper, he recites the “Great Hallel” *Ps 136* (*Matthew 26:30*);

Psalm 22:15-16 (*John 19:28* “I thirst!”);

- also *22:1* “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” (*Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34*);

Ps 31,6 “Into your hands I commend my spirit” (*Luke 23:46*);

The Psalms have penetrated the fabric of the Gospels and through Jesus they acquire all their splendor. Jesus embodies them and fulfills them: “All the aspirations, sorrows and hopes of the human beings throughout the centuries have gathered in the heart of Jesus and through Him they have found an offering to God, appealing in a powerful and irresistible way through Jesus, for love and redemption”.

The Prayer of Israel becomes the prayer of Jesus:

1. In praying the Psalms, Jesus prayed to God as ABBA. We therefore can now pray to God in the Psalms as FATHER.
2. Jesus is spoken of in the NT as Lord (*Adonay*: The Lord in the place of the unpronounceable *Yahweh*. In Greek is *Kurios*. Some Psalms are attributed to Jesus by the Christians.
3. Jesus is “spoken of” in the Psalms (they speak of Jesus) like the Messianic Psalms: 16, 110, 8, etc. There’s a whole Christology in the Psalms.
4. Jesus recites the Psalms (as we saw before Cf. 22). We can see that Jesus uses the Psalms to make sense of His life according to the prophecies of the OT, and to help us to make sense of our life too. This is particularly true of the last days of His life (in the Agony in the Garden of Olives *Ps 41-42*; on the Cross: *Ps 22, 31*...).
5. Jesus’ story and destiny are embodied in the situation of the just man unjustly persecuted: who does not show mere resignation/passivity but cries to God in pain/anger/complaint but also expecting liberation from God.

Spiritual value of the Psalms

(From the Jerusalem Bible)

The spiritual riches of the Psalter need no commendation. The psalms were the prayers of the Old Testament in which God inspired the feelings that his children ought to have towards him and the words they ought to use when speaking to him. They were recited by Jesus himself, by the Virgin Mary, the apostles and the early martyrs.

The Christian Church has adopted them unchanged for her official prayer. Unchanged: the cries of praise, entreaty and thanksgiving, wrung from the psalmist by event of their own times and by their personal experiences, have a universal note, expressing as they do the attitude that every man should have towards God.

Unchanged as regards the words but with a great enrichment of the sense: in the New Covenant, faithful man praises and thanks God for unveiling the secret of His inmost nature, for redeeming him by the blood of his Son, for filling him with his spirit, hence each psalm ends with the Trinitarian Doxology: Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.

The ancient entreaties have become more ardent since the last supper, the cross and the resurrection have taught mankind the infinite quality of the love of God, the universality and gravity of sin, the glory promised to the faithful. The hopes sung by the psalmists have been fulfilled, the Messiah has come, he reigns and all nations are summoned to praise him.

THE BREVIARY ABOUT THE PSALMS

A reading from the discourses of St. Ambrose on the Psalms (1)

The delightful book of the psalms

Although the whole of sacred scripture breathes the spirit of God's grace, this is especially true of that delightful book, the book of the psalms. When Moses related the deeds of the fathers he did so in a plain straightforward narrative. But when he led the people through the Red Sea and saw King Pharaoh drowned with his army, he lifted his mind to more exalted things (since he had just accomplished a feat beyond his own powers) and he sang a triumphal song to God. And Mary too took her timber and urged on the other women, saying: 'Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.'

History instructs, the law disciplines, prophecy foretells, correction shows us our faults and morality suggests what should be done: but in the book of the psalms there is something more than all this and at the same time a sort of medicine for man's spiritual health. Whoever reads the psalms finds a special remedy to cure the wounds caused by his own passions. Whoever is at pains to read the psalms will find in them a sort of

gymnasium for the use of all souls, a sort of stadium of virtue, where different sorts of exercises are set out before him, from which he can choose the best suited to train him to win his crown.

If anyone will study the deeds of those who have gone before him in order to find something worthy of imitation, he will discover that just one psalm contains the whole of their history; and in one short reading he will discover a complete treasury of past memories. If a man is trying to discover what gives law its force (it is the bond of love: 'he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law'), let him read in the psalms about the great love shown by one man in submitting to great dangers in order to wipe out the shame of a whole people. In this triumph of virtue he will recognize the great things of which love is capable.

What can I say about the power of prophecy? What others announced in enigmas seems to have been promised quite openly to the psalmist alone, namely that the Lord Jesus would be born of his seed, as the Lord told him: 'One of the sons of your body I will set on your throne.' Thus, in the book of psalms not only is Jesus born for us: he accepts too his saving passion, he dies, he rises from the dead and ascends into heaven and sits at the Father's right hand. This prophet alone announced what no other had dared to say, and what was later preached in the gospel by the Lord himself.

A reading from the discourses of St. Ambrose on the Psalms (2)

I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also

What is more pleasing than the psalm? David himself expressed it so beautifully, when he said: 'Praise the Lord! How good it is to sing psalms to our God! How pleasant to praise him!' And this is indeed true: for in the psalms there is an opportunity for the people to bless and praise God; the psalms express the admiration that people feel and what the people want to say; in them the Church speaks, the faith is professed in a melodious way and authority finds a ready acceptance; there too is heard the joyful call of freedom, the cry of pleasure and the sound of happiness.

The psalm soothes anger, frees from care and drives away sadness. It is a weapon by night and a teacher by day: it is a shield in times of fear, an occasion of rejoicing for the holy, a mirror of tranquility: it is a pledge of peace and harmony, for with the aid of the harp the psalm makes one melody from a number of different notes. The beginning of the day hears the sound of the psalm and the end of the day hears its echoes.

In the psalm teaching is combined with charm; for it is sung for pleasure but learnt for instruction. Is there anything that does not come to mind as you read the psalms? It is there that I read: 'A Song for the Beloved', and at once I am on fire with a desire for divine love. There too I see the secret of revelations, the evidence of the resurrection, the gifts that have been promised. In the psalms I learn to avoid sin and I forget the shame of sins now repented.

What, then, is the psalm if it is not the musical instrument of virtues, which the holy prophet played with the help of the Holy Spirit, making the earth resound with the delightful melody of heavenly music? Just as this harmonious music is played on the

strings and chords of the harp, which are fashioned from the remains of dead animals, and is made into a song of the heavenly tune of divine praise, so the psalmist has taught that we should first die to sin and then that the various works of virtue should appear in this body. In this way our devotion should be sure to find favor with the Lord.

For this reason David taught that we should sing and praise the Lord in our hearts, just as Paul also sang: ‘I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also; I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also.’ The psalms teach us to shape our lives and our actions by the study of higher things, so that material pleasures may not arouse our bodily passions, by which the soul is weighed down instead of being redeemed. And the holy prophet said that he sang psalms for the redemption of his soul: ‘I will sing praises to you with the lyre, O Holy One of Israel. My lips will shout for joy, when I sing praises to you; my soul also which you have rescued.’

A reading from the Apostolic Constitution of Pope Pius X

on the Psalter in the Divine Office

The sweet sound of the Church’s singing

From the beginning of the Church, the divinely inspired psalms in the Bible have had a remarkable influence in deepening the devotion of the faithful as they offered to God a continual sacrifice of praise, that is the tribute of lips that acknowledge his name. Moreover, following the custom of the old law, they have played a major part in the sacred liturgy itself and in the divine office.

From this there derived what Saint Basil calls ‘the voice of the Church’, and the psalmody, which our predecessor Urban VIII describes as ‘the daughter of the sacred chant which is sung without ceasing before the throne of God and the Lamb’, the sacred chant which, as Saint Athanasius says, teaches those whose primary concern is the worship of God how they should praise him, and in what words they can glorify him worthily. Saint Augustine puts it beautifully: ‘To show men how to praise him worthily, God first praised himself; and since he has deigned to praise himself, man has discovered how to praise him.’

Moreover, the psalms have the power to fire our souls with zeal for all the virtues. ‘All our scripture, both Old and New Testaments, is divinely inspired and is useful for teaching, as the apostle says. But the book of psalms is like a garden which contains the fruits of all the other books, grows a crop of song and so adds its own special fruit to the rest’: these are the words of Saint Athanasius, and he goes on: ‘It seems to me that for him who recites them, the psalms are like a mirror in which a man may see himself and the movements of his heart and mind and then give voice to them.’

Thus in his Confessions Saint Augustine says: ‘I wept at the beauty of your hymns and canticles, and was powerfully moved at the sweet sound of your Church’s singing. These sounds flowed into my ears, and the truth streamed into my heart: so that my feeling of devotion overflowed, and the tears ran from my eyes, and I was happy in them.’

Who can remain unmoved by the many places in the psalms where the immense majesty of God, his omnipotence, his inexpressible holiness, his goodness, his mercy, his other infinite perfections are so sublimely proclaimed? Who is not similarly stirred by the acts of thanksgiving for God's blessings, by the humble, trusting prayers for favors desired, by the cries of repentance of the sinful soul? Who is not fired with love by the faithful portrait of Christ the Redeemer whose voice Saint Augustine heard in all the psalms, singing, sorrowing, rejoicing in hope, sighing in distress?

From: PAUL JOHNSON, *The Quest For God, a personal pilgrimage*, N.Y., 1997:

The world of antiquity understood the value of repetition and persistence in prayer. Every request is a form of prayer, if it be made decently and honorably, and the first prayer recorded in the Old Testament is the prayer of Abraham to God to spare Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham asks God to spare the Cities of the Plain if enough righteous men are found there, and the prayer is notable for its persistence and repetition—Abraham first sets the viable figure at fifty, then forty-five, then forty, then twenty, and finally ten. This first prayer was not a formal prayer, but was made on the spur of the moment in response to God's angry intimation that he had punitive plans for the cities. But it had many of the characteristics of a set prayer and that is why the authors of Genesis put it down as they did.

However, among the Ancient Hebrews prayers soon attained permanent form and became, as it were, universal prayers as opposed to particular ones, though they continued to have nuggets of particular history buried in them. The best of them were the form of musical poetry known as psalmody, the psalms employing the Ancient Hebrew poetic device known as parallelism, though they are not strictly speaking in meter, or if they are, we have to yet identified it.

Parallelism is well suited to prayer because it involves an element of repetition. It is of the kind of speech-protocol suitable when addressing a great personage. Thus, **synonymous** parallelism simply repeats the same thought in slightly different words – 'Hear my crying O God: Give ear unto my prayer.' In **antithetical** parallelism, the first 'member' is contrasted with the second: 'A merry heart doth good like a medicine: But a broken spirit dries the bones.' Then there is **synthetic** parallelism, in which the first member is developed by a second, similar thought, or a third. Thus: 'The kings of the earth stand up: And the rulers take counsel together: Against the Lord and against his Anointed.' There are further variations of this device, identified by scholars as climactic, introverted, stair-like and emblematic parallelisms, but all of them have the prayer-like characteristics of repetition.

I am going into this detail because that psalms are so important – and beautiful. They are perfect prayers. Considering the oldest of them were probably written well over 3,000 years ago, it is remarkable how many still resonate so powerfully, how many echoes they still find in our hearts, so that we can say or sing them to God in all sincerity, although the circumstances which originally drew them from anguished Hebrew breasts have long since passed away. There are human permanences of hope and despair, sorrow and anger, love, laughter and tears in these ancient prayers which will endure as long as our race.

There are 150 psalms, divided into five groups. Internal evidence of different groupings indicates that these 150 were selected from a larger, probably much larger, number. They are the best, or were thought to be the best. Those who compiled the Hebrew Masoretic Text of the Old Testament evidently believed that they were all composed by King David. So did St. Ambrose and St. Augustine, great theologians and scholars and judicious men not easily taken in by pious nonsense. On the other hand, St. Jerome, a closer student of the Bible than either, refused to believe it and so, many centuries later, did Jean Calvin, who was a keen man for the psalms and made them the centerpiece, almost, of his approved liturgy.

It seems evident now that they were composed by a number of authors at different dates. But some are clearly very ancient and could have been written under the first monarchs of Israel and even by David himself. He was a most remarkable man by any standards, not only a great leader and warrior, but an introspective, imaginative and thoughtful individual who lived on his nerves as well as by his wits and courage: quite likely a poet, in fact, and certainly a musician, as we are told explicitly by that part of the Old Testament which is most reliable for factual accuracy and detail. David believed in public performance and participated in it, and religious poetry set to music was exactly what he liked.

There is, too, an element of state policy in some of the psalms which suggest to me a kingly hand. And the psalmist's zeal for the right often found expression in a passionate desire to see God's vengeance inflicted on the wicked, who are as like as not enemies of state. These Imprecatory Psalms, as they are termed (58, 68, 69, 109, 137, etc.) are distantly reminiscent of the Ancient Egyptian Execration Texts, repetitive and rhythmic cursing-prayers for invoking the wrath of various gods on Pharaoh's enemies (and later, in vulgar use, by individuals against personal enemies) and which reek of paganism at its most distasteful.

The Imprecatory Psalms are potent and gamey stuff too, and when the somewhat mealy-mouthed Anglican bishops prepared the revised Book of Common Prayer in the 1920s, they omitted from public recitation these and similar psalms whose tone of hatred and revenge they considered inconsistent with the spirit of Christianity. This may have been one reason why members of the House of Commons, who took a more robust view of things, rejected the measure in 1928.

The book of Psalms as it has come down to us is a liturgical work for regular, public performance. These prayers are meant to be chanted or sung by an entire congregation, with or without music, and there is little doubt that collectively they formed the official hymn book of the Second Temple, erected after the return of the Jews from Babylonian exile. They were rather like the *Book of Common Prayer or the Stonyhurt Canzonale* which I used at school. When, at the Reformation, the psalms were translated into English and put to music, and roared out by congregations of many thousands at St. Paul's Cross, immediately outside St. Paul's Cathedral in London, the effect may not have been very different from what took place at the Temple in Jerusalem in the second half of the first millennium BC.

But the transcendent merit of the psalms is that they lend themselves to private, solitary prayer as well as to public performance. Jesus Christ seems to have recited the psalms to himself and he certainly employed ideas from them in his discourses (e.g. the metaphor from Psalm 118 of ‘the stone which the builders rejected’). He quoted the psalms (22 and 31) even on the Cross. And it is hard to think of any great man of the early Christian Church, from St. Paul on – or, for the matter, any great rabbi – who did not make continual and extensive use of the psalms. St. Augustine worked out in his lengthy commentary on the psalms that the Christian message is prefigured in almost every one. St. Jerome and St. Ambrose, and many other doctors and teachers, recommended Christians to use the psalms constantly. And they did.

When I was a boy, every priest of the Roman Catholic Church who said the Divine Office from his breviary dutifully got through all the psalms once a week. (This has now been changed: I do not know why – perhaps because priests are thought to be too busy doing others things, like preaching the ‘social gospel’, etc.) The Anglican liturgy goes through the cycle once a month. Devotion to the psalms cuts across every barrier of religious temperament and affiliation. It was one thing people as diverse as monkish Benedictines and fastidious Puritans, Luther and Francis Xavier, Wesley and Newman, had in common – they loved and continually recited the psalms.

Even more striking was the fact that, over the centuries, the psalms were the daily prayer-fodder of secular men and women as well as ecclesiastics. Warlike knights usually had a little Psalter tucked away among their gear. It slowly became dog-eared as they used it on campaign. Kings and queens had their personal Psalters, very elaborate ones by the leading miniaturists for public display, and much smaller ones, still richly decorated though, for their personal use. These books too, where they survive, often show the marks of continual use.

It seems to me a pity that this habit of reciting the psalms to oneself has lapsed among most people. They still have a huge amount to offer us all, and I am sure that many today, of all ages, both sexes, all kinds of temperament, including those who find regular religious worship distasteful and personal prayer difficult, would be astonished, if they looked into the psalms, by their relevance and riches. They are, as one poet put it, ‘The pastoral heart of England’ – and of other lands too.

The psalms, being both public and private, transcend the fundamental division of prayer. In the ancient world, I imagine virtually all prayer was public. The ancients did not like or understand the need for privacy. There was something subversive about the private acts. Even in private, men prayed aloud. They read aloud, always. Silent reading seems to have been unknown in the classical world and came into use only in the second half of the fourth century AD. When St. Augustine first met St. Ambrose, he was struck by the fact that the great Bishop of Milan read to himself: ‘His eyes scanned the page, and his mind penetrated its meaning, but his voice and tongue were silent.’

Ambrose certainly prayed silently too. But he saw the point of public prayer better than anyone else in those times. It was St. Ambrose, in the splendid new basilica he completed in Milan in 386, who created the prototype medieval cathedral worship, with daily Mass, regular prayers at morning and evening and sometimes at other periods of the day, and

special ceremonies to commemorate the saints according to a strict calendar. To combat Arians and other heretics, and the lingering paganism of the dying classical world, he deliberately dramatized the cathedral services, clothing the priests in splendid vestments, introducing the antiphonal singing of the psalms and new-fangled metrical hymns.

For this singing he employed professional choristers, but he also trained the congregation. He was fighting the Arians with their own weapons, for Arius had been a great writer of propaganda hymns – popular monotheist ditties for guilds of tradesmen, holy marching songs for soldiers, vast numbers of whom had become Arians, and sacred sea-shanties for sailors. So Ambrose wrote his own hymns for Trinitarian Christianity and he had a knack for it. He was the first to put Christian prayers into hymn form, turning them into memorable iambic diameters in four-line stanzas of eight syllables to the line, which could easily be set to music and taught to the congregation. For are still in use.

Thus St. Ambrose began the long and fruitful tradition of Christian liturgical music, with not only the psalms and hymns but even more important, the principal prayers of the Mass – Kyrie, Confiteor, Gloria, Sequence, Credo, Sanctus, Benedictus and Agnus Dei – set to music and sung by choir or congregation or both. It is impossible to think of Western music without it. First through plain-chant, then through polyphony, finally through orchestrated settings of the Mass for full choir, these prayers became the texts used by most of the greatest composers, from Byrd and Palestrina and Purcell, through Bach and Mozart and Beethoven, then on to Verdi and finally, in our own day, to Britten, to develop musical forms.

It is broadly true to say, from King David's day to this, that prayer created music and music was, until the rise of secular opera, a form of prayer, or its handmaiden. Some held and hold, or course, that prayer and music can be at variance. The Puritans of the sixteenth century argued that elaborate music was a form of vanity which destroyed prayer, that polyphony in particular was an obstacle to sincere prayer. They insisted there could not be more than one note on each syllable of a musical setting of a prayer.

This was not what St. Ambrose had believed. He argued that the length and complexity of a musical setting, and not least its volume, were important elements in public prayer. He specifically approved of harmonics and wrote: 'From the singing of men, women, virgins and children, there is a harmonious volume of sound, like the waves of the ocean.' He thought the volume frightened the devil, while the harmonics and the beauty of the melodic line were pleasing to God. Over the centuries most people have tended to agree with St. Ambrose rather than the Puritans.

The grand musical settings can indeed help us to pray and give us spiritual insights that we might not be able to obtain in any other way. Who has not been uplifted by Bach's B-minor Mass or his settings for the Passion? Who does not feel that the requiem masses composed by Mozart and Verdi enable us to think of the dead, and their relationship with God, more profoundly but also more positively than before we heard the memorial prayers in these sublime settings?

The word ‘uplift’ is a key one in prayer. The great eight-century Greek-speaking theologian, St. John of Damascus, distinguishes between public and vocal prayer, what he calls ‘the decent beseeching of Him’, and private silent prayer, which he calls ‘the ascent of the mind to God’ (*ascensus intellectus in Deum*). By mind, incidentally, St. John did not mean the reason (*ratio*), but the faculty of spiritual vision. An alternative way of putting it is expressed in the phrase *sursum corda*, ‘let us lift up the heart’. It is as though the person praying, silently and internally, not opening his or her mouth, nevertheless almost physically, as it were, sends up unspoken words to God.

And the words must be tied to their thoughts – a point made, in his wicked despair, by Claudius, the bad king in *Hamlet*, who is observed praying in his chapel by the would-be-vengeful Prince:

My words fly up, my thoughts remain below

Words without thoughts never to Heaven go.

This practice of private prayer, or uplifting thoughts to Heaven, is not as old as public communion with God, but it is ancient nonetheless. It was already practiced in Jesus Christ’s day, and perhaps he learned it from his holy mother, Mary, who as a young virgin utters a prayer of acceptance the moment she is told by the Angel Gabriel that she is to bear the Son of God: ‘Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.’ Later, when she visits her cousin Elizabeth, Mary breaks into that exultant prayer we now know as the *Magnificat*, beginning ‘My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my savior.’

This spontaneous expression of Mary’s joy in her state, with its radical notions of exalting the humble and over-throwing the mighty – so prophetic of the coming message of Christianity – may seem strange coming from the lips of a young virgin. But it has echoes of the psalms too, and we must assume that Mary was brought up in a household where the psalms were frequently, perhaps daily, recited, and had entered its common, everyday language. At all events, these private prayers of Mary, addressed to herself or to a single member of her family, were the precursors of the private prayers which Jesus addressed to God on a number of occasions, notably when he went into the desert to pray for his mission and again, at the end of it, when he prayed alone in the Garden of Gethsemane for strength to endure his coming Passion”.

THE GOSPELS

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

(Study Notes)

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INTRODUCTION TO THE FOUR GOSPELS

1. The term "Gospel" in English means literally: Good News (Good Spell), corresponding to the NT word "**Euangellion**" which means "Good News" and has remained in the neo-latin languages as such: Italian "Vangelo"; Spanish "Evangelio"; French "Evangile", Tagalog "Magandang Balita"...
2. **The name "Gospel" is more ancient than the books of the Gospels.** In the NT we find it in the following quotations: 1 Corinthians 15:1-4 "Now I would remind you, brethren, in what terms I preached to you the Gospel, which you received, in which you stand, by which you are saved, if you hold it fast- unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures...";

1 Corinthians 9:16 "For if I preach the Gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!".

Romans 1:16-17 “For I am not ashamed of the Gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first but also to the Greek...”

All these passages belong to NT documents that are chronologically older than the books of the gospels. Remarkable the use of the word within the text of the gospel in Mark; 1:1 “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”; and 1:14 “Now, after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God and saying: ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel’.

3. **The term comes from the OT.** Cf. Isaiah 40:9-11 “Get you up to a high mountain, o Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, o Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, “Behold your God!” Behold the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rule for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather his lambs in his arms, he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those who are with young”.

Isaiah 52:7 “How beautiful upon the mountain are the feet of him who bring good tidings, who publishes peace and bring good tidings of good, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion: “Our God reigns.”

Isaiah 61:1 “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison for those who are bound...”.

These passages refer to **the liberation and the return of the exiles**, their extraordinary charge of elation foreshadows **the messianic era**, when God’s dream will become a reality: see God’s dream in Isaiah 2:1-5 which corresponds almost with the same words in Micah 4:1-4. To take into account that this “second” Isaiah contains also the four songs of the Servant of Yahweh which are fulfilled in Jesus and in his Paschal Mystery.

4. The 4 gospels are not called “Life of Jesus” (biography), but “gospel according...” i.e. **the joyful announcement of salvation that God has fulfilled through Jesus crucified and risen**: the resurrection is the point of view to understand Jesus’ life, death and mission. The content of the gospel is the Christian Mystery as it is spelled clearly in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4.

And the **concept of Gospel** is explained very precisely by John in the first conclusion of his gospel, 20:30-31 “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name”. Yet the term “Gospel” doesn’t appear in John.

5. So, we have four accounts of the Christian Mystery, the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, reflecting the different vicissitudes of the

proclamation and catechesis as it evolved in the different communities and as filtered through the different personality of the authors, yet the announcement of the life, death and resurrection of Christ is the same, there is **an amazing unanimity** in these so different documents, originated in different distant places, times and approaches.

6. Because the 4 gospels are different from each other. The first three, Matthew, Mark and Luke are traditionally called “**Synoptic**” from the Greek word “**Synopsis**” i.e. **seen together/ensemble view**, because if placed in three parallel columns, they reveal the several parts that are similar. It appears that Luke and Matthew have made use of much of the material present in Mark, together with other material from a hypothetical source which is called Q (from the German word *Quelle* which means source).
7. All the same **each synoptic gospel is very different** from the other two, with a distinct structure, purpose and individuality: Mark is the shortest, very vivacious in the account of the miracles of Jesus, centered on the identification of Jesus which is its aim since the beginning, but covered by the “messianic secret”, then in the open with the confession of Peter and in the end with the acknowledgement of the centurion who represent the pagans.

Matthew is the longest, more systematic and didactic, with the infancy narrative, the five books, marked each by a discourse or sermon and concluded by the account of the passion, death and resurrection. He gives us the Beatitudes and the longer form of the Our Father, Jesus-Messiah, the fulfillment of the OT prophecies, and concludes by the Trinitarian commission to the apostles, directed to the whole of humanity.

Luke is so unique in his gospel, with the infancy narrative containing the Annunciation and the *Magnificat*, the account of the nativity, the gospel of mercy, with the mercy parables especially that of the Prodigal Son; the emphasis on Jesus going to Jerusalem with determination, the last supper and the Eucharist and the unique resurrection stories, the disciples of Emmaus and the scene of the Ascension with Jesus going up to heaven while blessing us.

The awareness that the three synoptic gospels are so different from each other, makes the difference of the forth gospel, the gospel of John, not so extraordinary: yes, it is so different, it reflects a much deeper level of theological reflection on the data of the Christian Mystery, it is called **the spiritual gospel** and yet the essential “traditional” elements of the faith in Jesus Christ are not only present but the gospel of John is the witness of some factual details which are not present or clear in the Synoptics themselves.

We can say that the four gospels are such an extraordinary document of the faith in Jesus, of his life and teaching that we can only conclude with the words of

Luke's prologue: "so that you, most excellent Theophilus, may **know the truth** concerning the things of which you have been informed".

8. The gospels are the fruits of a long process which includes first of all **the experience of Jesus by the Apostles**. This is the greatest apostolic charism of which they show to have been aware: the extraordinary fortune of having lived with, seen, heard, touched Jesus and especially the "extraordinary" experience of the resurrection, of the risen Jesus. They are witnesses, official witnesses as we find e.g. in 1 John 1:1-4, 2 Peter 1,16... **Their witness about Jesus happens in the context of the proclamation , this is the Oral Tradition.**

Eventually comes the writing, as it is witnessed by Luke's prologue: "Many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word" (Luke 1:1-2). Those who wrote the 27 books of the NT are the Apostles: Matthew, John, Paul, Peter, James, Jude and the 2 disciples: Mark who writes in the name of Peter and Luke who writes in the name of Paul.

9. The characteristic of the Gospels: they are a witness of faith but about a person: Jesus and facts of his life that really happened. **There are no reasons to doubt the sincerity of the eyewitnesses and the truth of the facts.** But it is not history as we would make it today. The interpretation, dependence on the preaching, the influence of the community of believers who wrote them and for whom they were written explain the differences.
10. It is written in the **DEI VERBUM, n.19**: "Holy Mother Church has firmly and with absolute constancy held and continues to hold that the four Gospels, whose historical character the Church inhesitatingly asserts,, faithfully hand on what Jesus Christ, while living among man, really did and taught for their eternal salvation until the day He was taken up into heaven (cf. Acts 1:1). Indeed, after the Ascension of the Lord, the Apostles handed on to their hearers what he had said and done. This they did with that clearer understanding which they enjoyed after they had been instructed by the glorious event of Christ's life and taught by the light of the Spirit of truth. The sacred authors wrote the four Gospels, selecting some things from the many which had been handed on by word of mouth or in writing, reducing some them to a synthesis, explaining some things in view of the situation of their churches and preserving the form of proclamation but always in such fashion that they told us the honest truth about Jesus. For their intention in writing was that either from their own memory and recollection, or from the witness of those who "themselves from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word" we might know "the truth" concerning those matters about which we have been instructed (cf. Luke 1:2-4)".
11. From the second century onward, the practice arose of designating each of these four books as a "gospel", understood as a title, and of adding a phrase with a

name that identified the traditional author, e.g., “The Gospel according to Matthew.” **The arrangement of the canon** that was adopted, with the four gospels grouped together at the beginning followed by Acts, provides a massive focus upon Jesus and allows Acts to serve as a framework for the letters of the New Testament. This order, however, conceals the fact that Luke’s two volumes, a gospel and Acts, were intended by their author to go together. It further obscures the point that Paul’s letters were written before any of our gospels, though the sayings and deeds of Jesus stand behind all the New Testament writings.

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MATTHEW

The position of the Gospel according to **Matthew as the first of the four** gospels in the New Testament reflects both the view that it was the first written, a view that goes back to the late second century A.D., and the esteem in which it was held by the church; no other was so frequently quoted in the non-canonical literature of earliest Christianity. The reasons for that becomes clear upon study of the way in which Matthew presents his story of Jesus, the demands of Christian discipleship, and the breaking-in of the new and final age through the ministry but particularly through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The Infancy Narrative

The gospel begins with a narrative prologue (1:1-2:23), the first part of which is **genealogy of Jesus** starting with Abraham, the father of Israel (1:1-17), Yet at the beginning of that genealogy Jesus is designated as “the son of David, the son of Abraham” (1:1). The kingly ancestor who lived about a thousand years after Abraham is named first, for this is the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the royal anointed one (1:16).

In the first of the episodes of the infancy narrative that follow the genealogy, **the mystery of Jesus’ person is declared**. He is conceived of a virgin by the power of the Spirit of God (1:18-25). The first of the gospel’s fulfilment citations, whose purpose it is to show that he was the one to whom the prophecies of Israel were pointing, occurs here (1:23); he shall be named **Emmanuel, for in him God is with us**.

The announcement of the birth of this newborn king of the Jews greatly troubles not only King Herod but all Jerusalem (2:1-3), yet the Gentile magi are overjoyed to find him and offer him their homage and their gifts (2:10-11). Thus his ultimate rejection by the mass of his own people and his **acceptance by the Gentile nations is foreshadowed**.

He must be taken to Egypt to escape the murderous plan of Herod. By his sojourn there and his subsequent return after the king’s death he re-lives the **Exodus experience** of Israel. The words of the Lord spoken through the prophet Hosea, “Out of Egypt I called my son,” are fulfilled in him (2:15); if Israel was God’s son, Jesus is so in a way for surpassing the dignity of that nation, as his marvellous birth and the unfolding his story show (see 3:17; 4:1-11; 14:33; 16:16; 27:54).

Back in the land of Israel, he must be taken to Nazareth in Galilee because of the danger to his life in Judea, where Herod's son Archelaus is now ruling (2:22-23). **The sufferings of Jesus in the infancy narrative anticipate those of his passion**, and if his life is spared in spite of the dangers, it is because his destiny is finally to give it on the cross as a "ransom for many" (20:28). Thus the word of the angel will be fulfilled, "... he will save his people from their sins" (1:21; cf. 26:28).

First Book

In 4:12 Matthew begins his account of the ministry of Jesus, introducing it by the preparatory preaching of John the Baptist (3:1-12), the baptism of Jesus that culminates in God's proclaiming him his "beloved son" (3:13-17), and the temptation in which he proves **his true sonship** by his victory over the devil's attempt to deflect him from the way of obedience to the Father (4:1-11).

The central message of Jesus' preaching is **the coming of the kingdom** of heaven and the need for repentance, a complete change of heart and conduct, on the part of those who are to receive this great gift of God (4:17). **Galilee** is the setting for most of his ministry; he leaves there for Judea only in 19:1, and his ministry in Jerusalem, the goal of his journey, is limited to a few days (21:1-25:46).

In this extensive material there are **five great discourses of Jesus**, each concluding with the formula "When Jesus finished these words" or one closely similar (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). These are an important structure of the gospel. In every case the discourse is preceded by a narrative section, each narrative and discourse together constituting a "book" of the gospel. The discourses are, respectively, the "Sermon on the Mount" (5:3-7:27), the missionary discourse (10:5-42), the parable discourse (13:3-52), the "church order" discourse (18:3-35), and the eschatological discourse (24:4-25:46). In large measure the material of these discourses came to Matthew from his tradition, but his work in modifying and adding to what he had received is abundantly evident. **No other evangelist gives the teaching of Jesus with such elegance and order as he.**

In the "**Sermon on the Mount**" the theme of **righteousness** is prominent, and even at this early stage of the ministry the note of opposition is struck between Jesus and the Pharisees, who are designated as "the hypocrites" (6:2, 5, 16). The righteousness of his disciples must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees; otherwise, in spite of their alleged following of Jesus, they will not enter into the kingdom of heaven (5:20). Righteousness means doing the will of the heavenly Father (7:21), and his will is proclaimed in a manner that is startling to all who have identified it with the law of Moses.

The antitheses of the Sermon (5:21-48) both accept (5:21-30, 43-48) and reject (5:31-42) elements of that law, and in the former case the understanding of the law's demands is deepened and extended. The antitheses are the best commentary on the meaning of Jesus' claim that he has come not to abolish but to fulfil the law (5:17). What is meant by fulfilment of the law is not the demand to keep it exactly as it stood before the coming of Jesus, but rather his bringing the law to be a lasting expression of the will of God, and in that fulfilment there is much that will pass away. Should this appear contradictory to his

saying that “until heaven and earth pass away” not even the smallest part of the law will pass (5:18), that time of fulfilment is not the dissolution of the universe but **the coming of the new age, which will occur with Jesus’ death and resurrection.**

While righteousness in the new age will continue to mean conduct that is in accordance with the law, it will be conduct in accordance with the law as expounded and interpreted by Jesus (cf. 28:20, “... all that I have commanded you”).

Though Jesus speaks harshly about the Pharisees in the Sermon, his judgment is not solely a condemnation of them. The Pharisees are portrayed as **a negative example for his disciples**, and his condemnation of those who claim belong to him while disobeying his word is no less severe (7:21-23, 26-27).

In 4:23 a summary statement of Jesus’ activity speaks not only of his teaching and proclaiming the gospel but of his “curing every disease and illness among the people” “this is repeated almost verbatim in 19:35.

Second Book

The narrative section that follows the Sermon on the Mount (8:1-9:38) is composed principally of accounts of those **merciful deeds of Jesus**, but it is far from being simply a collection of stories about miraculous cures. The nature of the community that Jesus will establish is shown; it will always be under the protection of him whose power can deal with all dangers (8:23-27), but it is only for those who are prepared to follow him at whatever cost (8:16-22), not only believing Israelites but Gentiles who have come to faith in him (8:10-12).

The disciples begin to have some insight, however imperfect, into the **mystery of Jesus’ person**. They wonder about him whom “the winds and the sea obey” (8:27), and they witness his bold declaration of the forgiveness of the paralytic’s sins (9:2). The episode of the narrative moves on two levels. When the crowd sees the cure that testifies to the authority of Jesus, the Son of Man, to forgive sins (9:6), they glorify God “who had given such authority to human beings” (9:8).

The forgiveness of sins is now not the prerogative of Jesus alone but “human beings,” that is, of the disciples who constitute the community of Jesus, the church. The **ecclesial character** of this narrative section could hardly be more plainly indicated.

The end of the section prepares for the **discourse on the church’s mission** (10:5-42). Jesus is moved to pity at the sight of the crowds who are like sheep without a shepherd (9:36), and he sends out the twelve disciples to make the proclamation with which his own ministry began, “The kingdom of heaven is at hand” (10:7; cf. 4:17), and to drive out demons and cure the sick as he has done (10:1). Their mission is limited to Israel (10:5-6) as Jesus’ own was (15:24), yet in 15:16 that perspective broadens and the discourse begins to speak of the mission that the disciples will have after the resurrection and of the severe persecution that will attend it (10:18). Again, the discourse moves on two levels; that of the time of Jesus and that of the time of the church.

Third Book

The narrative section of the third book (11:2-12:50) deals with the growing **opposition to Jesus**. Hostility toward him has already been manifested (8:10; 9:3, 10-13, 34), but here it becomes more intense. The rejection of Jesus comes, as before, from Pharisees, who take “counsel against him to put him to death” (12:14) and repeat their earlier accusation that he drives out demons because he is in league with demonic power (12:22-24).

But they are not alone in their rejection. Jesus complains of the lack of faith of “this generation” of Israelites (11:16-19) and reproaches the towns “where most of his mighty deeds had been done” for not heeding his call to repentance (11:20-24). This dark picture is relieved by Jesus’ praise of the Father who has enabled “the childlike” to accept him (11:25-27), but on the whole the story is one opposition to his word and blindness to the meaning of his deeds. The whole section ends with his declaring that not even the most intimate blood relationship with him counts for anything; **his only true relatives are those who do the will of his heavenly Father (12:48-50)**.

The narrative of rejection leads up to **the parable discourse** (13:3-52). The reason given for Jesus’ speaking to the crowds in parables is that they have hardened themselves against his clear teaching, unlike the disciples to whom knowledge of “the mysteries of the kingdom has been granted” (13:10-16). In 13:36 he dismisses the crowds and continues the discourse to his disciples alone, who claim, at the end, to have understood all that he has said (13:51). But, lest the impression be given that the church of Jesus is made up only of true disciples, the explanation of the parable of the weeds among the wheat (13:37-43), as well as the parable of the net thrown into the sea “which collects fish of every kind” (13:47-49), shows that it is composed of both the righteous and the wicked, and that separation between the two will be made only at the time of the final judgment.

Fourth Book

In the narrative that constitutes the first part of the fourth book of the gospel (13:54-17:27), Jesus is shown preparing for the establishment of his church with its teaching authority that will supplant the blind guidance of the Pharisees (15:13-14), whose teaching, curiously said to be that of the Sadducees also, is repudiated by Jesus as the norm for his disciples (16:6, 11-12). **The church of Jesus will be built on Peter** (16:18), who will be given authority to bind and loose on earth, an authority whose exercise will be confirmed in heaven (16:19). The metaphor of binding and loosing has a variety of meanings, among them that of giving authoritative teaching. This promise is made to Peter directly after he has confessed Jesus to be the Messiah, the son of the living God (16:16), a confession that he has made as the result of revelation given to him by the heavenly Father (16:17); **Matthew’s ecclesiology is based on his high Christology**.

Directly after that confession Jesus begins to instruct his disciples about how he must go the way of suffering and death (16:21). Peter, who has been praised for his confession, protests against this and receives from Jesus the sharpest of rebukes for attempting to deflect Jesus from his God-appointed destiny. The future rock upon whom the church will be built is still a man of “little faith” (see 14:31). Both he and the other disciples

must know not only that Jesus will have to suffer and die but that they too will have to follow him on the way of the cross if they are truly to be his disciples (16:24-25).

The discourse following this narrative (18:1-35) is often called **the “church order” discourse**, although that title is perhaps misleading since the emphasis is not on the structure of the church but on the care that the disciples must have for one another in respect to guarding each other’s faith in Jesus (18:6-7), to seeking out those who have wandered from the fold (18:10-14), and to repeated forgiving of their fellow disciples who have offended them (18:21-35). But there is also the obligation to correct the sinful fellow Christian and, should one refuse to be corrected, separation from the community is demanded (18:15-18).

Fifth Book

The narrative of the fifth book (19:1-23:39) begins with the departure of Jesus and his disciples **from Galilee for Jerusalem**. In the course of their journey Jesus for the third time predicts the passion that awaits him at Jerusalem and also his resurrection (20:17-19). At his entrance into the city he is hailed as the Son of David by the crowds accompanying him (21:9).

He cleanses the temple (21:12-17), and in the few days of his Jerusalem ministry he engages in a series of controversies with the Jewish religious leaders (21:23-27; 22:15-22, 23-33, 34-40, 41-46), meanwhile speaking parables against them (21:28-32, 33-46), against all those Israelites who have rejected God’s invitation to the messianic banquet (22:1-10), and against all, Jew and Gentile, who have accepted but have shown themselves unworthy of it (22:11-14).

Once again, the perspective of the evangelist includes not only the time of Jesus’ ministry but that of the preaching of the gospel after his resurrection. The narrative culminates in **Jesus’ denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees**, reflecting not only his own opposition to them but that of Matthew’s church (23:1-36), and in Jesus’ lament over Jerusalem (23:37-39).

In the discourse of the fifth book (24:1-25:46), the last of the great structural discourse of the gospel, **Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple and his own final coming**. The time of the latter is unknown (24:36, 44), and the disciples are exhorted in various parables to live in readiness for it, a readiness that entails faithful attention to the duties of the interim period (24:45-25:30). The coming of Jesus will bring with it **the great judgment** by which the everlasting destiny of all will be determined (25:31-46).

Conclusion

The story of Jesus’ passion and resurrection (26:1-28:20), the climax of the gospel, throws light on all that has preceded. **In Matthew “righteousness” means both the faithful response to the will of God demanded of all to whom that will is announced and also the saving activity of God for his people** (see 3:15; 5:6; 6:33). **The passion supremely exemplifies both meanings of that central word that we find in Matthew. In Jesus’ absolute faithfulness to the Father’s will that he drink the cup of suffering** (26:39), **the incomparable model for Christian obedience is given; in his death “for**

the forgiveness of sins” (26:28) the saving power of God is manifested as never before.

Matthew’s portrayal of Jesus in his passion combines both the majestic serenity of the obedient Son who goes his destined way in fulfillment of the scriptures (26:52-54) confident of his ultimate vindication by God, and the depths of fear and abandonment that he feels in face of death (26:38-39; 27:46). These two aspects are expressed by an Old Testament theme that occurs often in the narrative, i.e., **the portrait of the suffering Righteous One** who complains to God in his misery, but is certain of eventual deliverance from his terrible ordeal.

The passion-resurrection of God’s Son means nothing less than **the turn of the ages, a new stage of history, the coming of the Son of Man in his kingdom (28:18; cf. 16:28)**. That is the sense of the apocalyptic signs that accompany Jesus’ death (27:51-53) and resurrection (28:2). Although the old age continues, as it will until the manifestation of Jesus’ triumph at his *parousia*, the final age has now begun. This is known only to those who have seen the Risen One and to those, both Jews and Gentiles, who have believed in their announcement of Jesus’ triumph and have themselves become his disciples (cf. 28:19). To them he is constantly, though invisibly, present (28:20), verifying the name Emmanuel, “God is with us” (cf. 1:23).

The principal divisions of the Gospel according to Matthew are the following:

Prologue: The Infancy Narrative (1:1-2:23)

Book 1: The Proclamation of the Kingdom (3:1-7:29)

Book 2: Ministry and Mission in Galilee (8:1-11:1)

Book 3: Opposition from Israel (11:2-13:53)

Book 4: Jesus, the Kingdom and the Church (13:54-18:35)

Book 5: Ministry in Judea and Jerusalem (19:1-25:46)

Epilogue: The Passion and Resurrection (26:1-28:20)

THE MESSAGE OF SAINT MATTHEW’S GOSPEL

We can gather St. Matthew’s theology around two great nuclei: the comprehension of Christ and the articulation of the Church.

a. The figure of Jesus according to Matthew

With Jesus, God in a definitive way intervenes in history, show his face as Father and the intention of saving all humanity. We human beings, in order to own salvation, are called to a radical change of life, to live as children of the kingdom. This is why the announcement of the kingdom is linked to the call to conversion *to change life* (4:17).

Salvation is God's gift but at the same time is also *vocation*. To God's *gift* (grace) must correspond man's *commitment*; **to God's initiative the human response must follow.**

The first 2 chapters of the Gospel, attribute to Jesus a divine, supernatural origin, then **the sermon of the mountain shows him as *master of justice***; the bunch of 10 miracles (cc. 8-9) as a powerful and extraordinary *thaumaturge*. Jesus is at the origin of the mission of the Twelve (c. 10), he is the *revealer* of the mysteries of the kingdom (c. 13), the *organizer* of community life (c. 18), the *winner* against Scribes and Pharisees (c. 23), the *revealer* of the last events (cc. 24-25). The resurrection, at the end of the Gospel, lifts him up to the divine life (c.28). This is picture of Jesus that Matthew paints in his Gospel. By his actions and his word Jesus shows that he fulfills the announcement in the beginning of the Gospel: **He is *God-with-us*, the presence of God in the midst of his people** (1:23).

- **Master, Teacher**

Since the beginning of the Gospel, Jesus assumes a particular aspect: he is the *teacher/master* (5:1), it is demonstrated by the 5 sermons which emphasize the account of Matthew. Jesus is the *teacher/master* not so much because he uses explicitly that title but rather because of the overall image that emerges. His adversaries approach him in order to put him on to difficulties, but Jesus with his answers takes the weapons from their hand **showing in such a way an extraordinary wisdom.**

Jesus is the carrier of God's definitive and ultimate word, he is the new Moses, superior to the old one, he is the supreme teacher of life for men: **"*Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them*"** (5:17). Jesus has completed the law in the sense that he has interiorized it: they are not the acts of worship that count, but *the intention* which animates them. **And the intention has a name: love.** God asks to those who want to belong to his kingdom a concrete orientation towards love. Twice Matthew repeats in his Gospel a meaningful passage of prophet Hosea: **"*It is mercy I want, not sacrifice*"** (9:13; 12:7; cf. Hosea 6:6). Therefore, love which shows itself with gestures of mercy, of effective and cordial opening to the others.

About the observance of the minute and numerous prescriptions of the law: the Father demands from those called to his kingdom something more, He asks that they imitate his indiscriminate love for humankind: **"*So that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust*"**(5:45). **The comparison is with the divine perfection: "*You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect*"** (5:48).

More important even than the content **is the authority of Jesus' teaching.** Jesus doesn't refer to a tradition, doesn't invoke exterior supports to his word. **First of all there is his person: *I tell you*,** this formula occurs six times in the antitheses (5:21-48). The same is the meaning of the expression: **"*In truth I tell you*"** (5:18; 6:2).

- **Messiah, son of David**

Matthew is particularly interested in the title Messiah (Christ), familiar to his community composed of Jewish-Christians. According to the author of the first Gospel, the Jewish Messianic expectations find their fulfillment in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The title Messiah recurs 17 times in the Gospel, sometime it appears coupled with the title son of David and king of Israel.

Jesus is the Messiah preannounced by the prophets. He is a descendant of David (1:1-17). Bethlehem is the place of his origin (2:4-6). But contrary to the Jewish expectations, his is not a Messianism of power and glory. His Messianic power has nothing of politics or military quality. Jesus is a Messiah who loves, frees and saves. He wants God's mercy in preference to sacrifices (cf. 9:13; 12:7). This makes him heal the sick, forgive sinners (8:13). Matthew is the only one among the evangelists to point out the meaning of the name of Jesus: "*You will call him Jesus because he will save his people from their sins*" (1:21).

He has pity of the crowd that follow him and provides to feed them in the desert (14:14; 15:32). The leper (8:2), the centurion (8:6), the head of the synagogue of Capernaum (9:18), two blind people (9:27), the Canaanite woman (15:22), and the father of the epileptic (17:15-16) they plead with him and not for nothing to be helped. The forces of evil which enchain human beings see him enter the field as a powerful and effective fighter. The force of God's Spirit operates in him and because of him the *kingdom* becomes happening in history.

Jesus is Messiah of death and resurrection. Matthew multiplies in the passion account the references to the Old Testament, and underlines that the crucified Jesus fulfills fully the figure of the Suffering Servant of Yahweh sung by Isaiah (26:67). Even the most burning humiliation is part of the divine plan preannounced by the prophets and Jesus shows that he is aware of it (26:11-13.50.56).

Also the title *son of David* is strictly link to the Messianism. Matthew when applying this title to Jesus means to affirm that in him the hopes, the expectations and the prophecies about the Messiah are fulfilled. The title *son of David* underlines Jesus' role as David's Messiah and at the same time it puts in relief Israel's fault because it has not recognized him. Matthew points out this introducing persons who appear no so important (blind, lame, foreigners) who proclaim Jesus as son of David (9:2; 15:22) **whereas the guides of Israel reject him.**

To Jesus being the Messiah we must link the particular presentation of the miracles. The blind persons and the Canaanite woman cry insistently: *son of David, have mercy on us!* (9:27; 15:22; 20:30-31). After the healing of a man possessed by the devil, people, out of themselves by surprise, ask themselves: *Isn't this the son of David?* (12:23). These expressions put into people's mouth who invoke Jesus' help remind us of 11:2-6, where John the Baptist, through his messenger had asked Jesus whether He was the expected Messiah. Jesus' concrete answer are the miracles in as much as they are signs which qualify and show that he is the Messiah as well as manifesting his quality and nature as such. That **in Jesus, son of David, the promises and expectations of the people of Israel are fulfilled** is confirmed by the numerous "accomplishment quotations", by which the evangelist stresses the most important stages of Jesus' life.

- **Lord**

The Easter experience marks an important turning point as far as Christology is concern. This experience is expressed by the two titles: **Lord and Son of God**.

In Matthew the term *Lord (Kyrios)* recurs 44 times (only 6 times in Mark and 23 times in Luke). *Lord* is used only on the lips of those who accept Jesus, believe in him and recognize his close relationship with God; it never used instead by the adversaries.

The title Lord is not a simple expression of courtesy, it instead lets us see the transparency of the Risen Christ. By means of this title, the glory which is hidden in the earthly Jesus is intended to shine through. **Matthew makes a superimposition between the glorious Lord and Jesus of Nazareth.** In front of Jesus bend in adoration the leper, the Canaanite woman, the mother of James and John, etc; with the title Lord plead to him the centurion, the disciples, the father of the epileptic, etc.; They approach him with respect; the disciples, and Peter in particular, don't know other titles to address Jesus but the one of Lord.

During the Passion, although humiliated, Jesus moves about with great self-possession so as to **dominate what is happening and allow his divine majesty to shine through.** The Father with the resurrection gives him the universal fullness of his power (28:18). The Church sent by him in mission will experience his lively and effective presence as the Risen One (28:19-20). Although tossed like a boat in the middle of the stormy sea, she should not fear because the Risen Jesus will be with her to save her (8:23-27).

- **Son of God**

The title *Son of God* shine through already in the account of Jesus' birth and it is the one which **more than any other defines the mystery of Jesus' person.** Mary's virginal conception witness Jesus' divine origin (1:18-20); he is the *Emmanuel, the God-with-us* (1:23), *the savior* (1:21), all indications of his status as Son of God. The expressions *the son and the son and his mother* (2:11.13-14.20-21) hint at Jesus' divine son-ship. The title doesn't apply to Jesus until 3:17, because the identity of Jesus as *Son of God* will be *a revelation by the Father.*

Jesus' divine son-ship appears in the first and second temptation (4:3-7), and it is mentioned as a provocation by the devil ("*If you are the son of God*"). The text doesn't speak of Jesus' divine son-ship only but also of the way to live it out: Jesus entrusts himself totally to the Father and chooses to be instrument in order to reveal God's paternity to people, without imposing himself by extraordinary features, but taking us to a free and conscientious choice for God. **The theme of Jesus' divine son-ship is developed throughout the whole Gospel.** In 22:41.46 the title *Messiah* and *son of David* are said to be insufficient in order to define Jesus' being. It is the title **Son of God** the one which more than any other can define who Jesus really is.

- **Son of Man**

Jesus fills of himself even the future, in fact he will be the *universal judge*. His second coming will mark the time of the last judgment (24:30-31). Then the good wheat will be

separated from the weeds (13:40-43). Like the fisherman, once pulled the net to the shore, makes the choice of the fish, such will be the last judgment (13:47-49). With a sovereign act he will separate the peoples gathered in front of his throne (25:31). **He will be the Son of Man of whom prophet Daniel spoke** (16:27). To his judgment also the believers will appear and they will not be able to rely on their belonging or charismatic gifts since he will give his sentence only on the basis of their faithfulness to his law: the law of love.

b. The Church according to Matthew

The Gospel of Matthew is also the Gospel of the Church. The theme of ecclesiology is perhaps the most important of the first Gospel, the only one that mentions the term *ekklesia* (16:17; 18:17).

The ecclesiology is seen in the light of God's judgment impending first of all on the church that has replaced Israel so that she may give those fruits that the master expects from his vineyard (21:43). From the church a justice even more radical than the one of the Pharisees is requested (5:20), a perfection which reflect the very perfection of the Father (5:48). Belonging to the church doesn't guarantee salvation (22:1-14). Christians should feel of themselves as *called* nor *chosen* (20:16; 22:14), and **belonging to the church appears more as responsibility that warranty of salvation.**

o Founded by Christ

The Gospel of Matthew shows the church as a reality wanted by Christ and founded by him: "You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church (16:17-19). Jesus is the true building constructor of this new building. The verb is in the future "I will build" (16:18) and announces the future action of Jesus who will act on the foundation of Peter's ministry. The Resurrection and the Acts of the Apostles will show truly that the church is first of all fruit of the divine will and action and then of the apostolic ministry. Even if the church has a modest beginning (13:31-32), an extraordinary development is in wait for her. It is destined to grow and spread out thanks to God's hidden interior action (13:33).

o People of God

According to Matthew, the community of the disciples of Jesus is the true people of God, the messianic community of the last times, visible sign of salvation for all people. The historical Israel has refused to enter and belong to his community, has closed itself in incredulity in the face of his message and of his person, therefore **it is replaced by the true Israel, the Christian community.**

In the church, good and bad, goodness and evil live together. The parable of the wedding feast is meaningful in this regard (22:1-10). Matthew, if compared with Luke, says that. "*And those servants went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found; so the wedding hall was filled with guests*" (10). To the first evangelist we owe also the addition of the table-companion without the *wedding dress* who is thrown out by order of the king (11-14). **The wedding hall represents the church** that doesn't differentiate itself from

the world, a field where wheat and weeds grow together (13:24-30.36-43), net which gathers a bit of everything (13:47-50). Only in the end, in the judgment, there will be the separation.

The church doesn't identify with the kingdom, it goes towards it and partially anticipated the salvific reality. It is not a community of people who have already arrived, but of people who are walking towards a definite future which is hoped for and waited for.

- **Inner Life**

Matthew is not very much interested of the structural aspect of the church. What matters to him is the genuine character and the correct display of the ministries present in the church. For all the criterion used to verify the goodness of their charism is acting: *“Not those who say Lord, Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the heavenly Father's will”* (7:21).

Matthew recalls those who have guiding functions in the church so that they may avoid the proud ostentation of honor titles: *“But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have on teacher, and you are all brethren...Neither be called masters, for you have one master, the Christ”* (23:8-10). The task of all in leadership position is that of being the servants of the brothers (23:11) and the model to draw inspiration from is Jesus himself: *“Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave”* (20:25-28).

The Church is seen by Matthew as community of brothers. In front of the brother who misbehaves, each single believer must take friendly steps, brotherly concern capable of creating around the culprit a favorable climate inductive to his conversion (18:15-17). Prayer should not be neglected about the brother who sins (18:19-20).

Even more insistent is the Matthew's invitation to the forgiveness of offences. He recognizes that there is a very strict relationship between the forgiveness given to a brother and the forgiveness God will grant us in the last day: *“For if you forgive men their trespasses, your Heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses”* (6:14-15).

- **Community of the Disciples of Christ**

The Christian community is marked by a strict union with Christ. The church is born and lives by the union with Jesus' person. In the Gospel of Matthew everything which is stated of the historical disciples of Jesus of Nazareth is valid for the whole church, for all the Jesus' disciples.

The account of the call of the two couples of brothers, Simon and Andrew, James and John, (4:18-22) is an example of the *radical demand* which imposes itself to whoever wants to become Jesus' disciple. Not even filial piety can be a valid reason of putting off the commitment of the disciple (8:21-22). Even the dearest peoples cannot count more than Jesus in the heart of the one who wants to follow Jesus: *“Whoever loves father and*

mother more than me is not worthy of me” (10:37). The **route of the master takes to the cross** (16:21) and no renunciation accepted on his behalf will be excessive.

The community of the Christians must not constitute a self-centered group, close within itself and isolated from the other people. The church has a precise mission to accomplish in the world. It is a community sent by its Lord along the path-ways of the world. Its mission is to make disciples of all peoples because salvation passes through our adhesion to the person of Christ and our obedience to his teaching (28:19-20).

- **Waiting for the Last Judgment**

Matthew underlines with great insistence the theme of the last judgment. It will be the day of the definitive separation of the good from the evil, as it is explained in the parables of the wheat and weeds (13:39-40) and of the net thrown into the sea (13:49). Like the shepherd in the evening separates the sheep from the goats, in the same way Christ will separate people, putting the first on the right and the others on the left (25:31ff).

Important for Matthew the criterion of the last judgment. The discriminating factor will be the love towards the brethren (16:27; 25:31ff). The Christian community therefore is always under the threatening sign of verification which will be decided **on the basis of a praxis of love**. Consequently, at present what is commanded is the need of a careful preparation for the meeting with the Son of Man. His delay (25:5.19) cannot justify carelessness or negligence.

CONCLUSION: **Matthew the theologian**

Writing his Gospel, Matthew has done the work of a theologian. The concept of Christian faith upheld by his narrative is original and is based on the **three choices** that give the first Gospel its characteristic and unique profile:

1. The first choice is Matthew’s **passionate attachment to the earthly Jesus**. For the evangelist, the story of God with humanity is concentrated and accomplished in the story and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. In order to know God and his salvation plan the only possible way is to listen to and follow the historical Jesus.
2. **The second choice consists in the ethical accent** which is found in his account. Jesus presents himself as the authentic interpreter of the Law of God, the one who frees the Law of the bushy traditions which choke it. Jesus proposes a new relationship with God whom he reveals as Father, and the way to accomplish his will. He frames the whole ancient law in terms of love, declaring that in that being sons of God consists. His whole insistence is about doing, accomplishing God’s will. This necessary ethical dimension contains a warning for the church of all times. She herself is on a journey towards the last judgment and the only dignity she may boast about in the moment of the final judgment is the concrete, day-to-day faithfulness to the message of her Lord.
3. The third choice of Matthew is **his constant reference to the Old Testament**. Israel’s lack of faith and its punishment don’t erase the story of God with his people and the book which witnesses it. On the contrary. The earthly vicissitude and the teaching of Jesus cannot be understood but on the background of the O.T.

THE GOSPEL OF MARK

(Study Notes)

Introduction

DIVISION

1. Preparation for the Public Ministry of Jesus (1:1-13)
2. The mystery of Jesus (1:14-8:26)
3. The mystery begins to be revealed (8:27-9:32)
4. The Full Revelation of the mystery (9:33-16:8)
The Long Ending (16:9-20)

INTRODUCTION

1.

Probably Mark was the first to gather in a “Gospel” the main happenings of Jesus’ life and some of his teachings. Before Mark everything was handed on orally in the preaching of the Apostles and that of their first collaborators. Later there was the need to put them in writing, to offer the community a continuous narration which might be useful for its faith and Christian life.

Mark is considered the inventor of the “Literary Gospel”, as we can see from the beginning, the first verse of his Gospel. It is conceived as a “narration of the Passion of Jesus with a long introduction”. It is Calvary which reveals Jesus’ identity.

The one who has proclaimed the Good News, through his death and resurrection, becomes himself Gospel, good news to be proclaimed and about whom people have to take a decision. We have to pass from the faith in the miracle Worker to the faith in the Crucified One. **This is why this Gospel is called “The kerygmatic catechesis of Mark”.**

Author: This Gospel was traditionally assigned to John/Mark in whose mother’s house in Jerusalem Christians used to gather or assemble. Mark was a cousin of Barnabas (*Colossians* 4:10) and accompanied Barnabas and John in a missionary journey, causing a disagreement between them because he soon withdrew and went back. He appears in Pauline letters (*2 Timothy* 4:11 and *Philemon* 24) and with Peter (*1 Peter* 5:13). Patristic tradition makes him Peter’s interpreter.

Time: it is thought that the Gospel of Mark was written before the year 70 AD in Rome, at the time of impending persecution and when destruction loomed over Jerusalem. It was meant for non- Jewish Christians, unfamiliar with Jewish customs. The book aimed at equipping such readers to stand faithful in the face of persecution (13:9-13) while going on with the proclamation of the gospel.

2.

“The plan Mark follows is the least complex of the Synoptics.

The preaching of John the Baptist plus the baptism and the temptations of Jesus make up its prelude (1:1-13); next comes a period of ministry which, according to the occasional hints, took place in Galilee (1:14-7:23), then a journey by Jesus and his apostles to the district of Tyre and Sidon, the Decapolis, the neighborhood of Caesarea Philippi and back to Galilee (7:24-9:50); then the Transfiguration and the final journey through Peraea and Jerico to Jerusalem where the Passion and the Resurrection take place (10:1-16:8).

A part from individual sequences of fact, this broad outline itself is possibly artificial since it is likely, and to judge by the fourth Gospel fairly certain, that Jesus visited Jerusalem several times before the last Passover of his life. All the same, **this outline, broad as it is, does trace for us an important development which is both factually and theologically significant.**

The general public received Jesus warmly at first but their enthusiasm waned as they found that this gentle and other-worldly conception of the Messiah did not fulfill their hopes.

As a result, **Jesus left Galilee to devote himself to the instruction of a small group of faithful followers**, and the profession of faith at Caesarea Philippi showed that he had secured their faith. This was a decisive turning-point: after it Jerusalem became the focus of attention, and it was there that further opposition continued mounting, only to end in the drama of the Passion and in the final triumph of the Resurrection.

This paradox provides the central interest of this Gospel, i.e. how Jesus, while remaining misunderstood and rejected was at the same time God’s triumphant envoy. The Gospel is not particularly concerned with elaborating the Master’s teaching, and it records few of his sayings: the real point of its message is ***the manifestation of the crucified Messiah.***

On the one hand Jesus is the Son of God, acknowledged as such by the Father (1:11; 9:7); by evil spirits, and even by man (15:39); he is the Messiah claiming divine rank, higher than the angels, taking of himself the forgiveness of sin, vindicating his power and his mission by miracle and by exorcism.

On the other hand, the Gospel puts great emphasis on his apparent frustration at the hands of many: the mockery or refusal of the public, the antagonism of the religious Leaders, the lack of understanding even on his disciples’ part – all the hostile activities that were to lead to the shame of the cross. **It is this “scandal”, this refusal that the Gospel is intent on explaining.**

It does this not merely by contrasting the cross with the crowning victory of the resurrection but also by showing that the hostility was itself an integral part of God’s mysterious plan. It was necessary that Christ should suffer and so redeem the human race (10:45; 14:24), since this had been foretold by the Scriptures. Both for himself and for his

own followers, **Jesus laid down a way of humility and submission**; but the Jews, expecting a victorious warrior-Messiah, were ill-prepared for this answer to their hope.

The reason why Jesus wanted silence about his miracles and his identity was to avoid an enthusiasm which would have been as ill-advised as it would have been mistaken. Rather than call him Messiah, he used the modest and mysterious expression “Son of Man” (2:10 compare Matthew 8:20).

This cautionary measure is what is called “**messianic secret**” (1:34m) and **is the basic idea of Mark’s Gospel**. It was not something Mark invented: it corresponded to that underlying reality in Christ’s life of suffering which, in the light a faith finally and fully established by the Easter event, the evangelist was able to perceive and to place before us for our understanding.

(This plan is taken from the New Jerusalem Bible)

3.

The Gospel of Mark can be seen as **the narration of the identification of Jesus** as the Christ and the Son of God. This understanding makes more meaningful the narrative centered on the geography: from Galilee and some forays in pagan territory to Jerusalem where the story of Jesus finds its climax and conclusion.

The Gospel starts with the confession of faith of the evangelist (1:1) which contains the titles “Christ” and “Son of God”. Then the title “Christ-Messiah” will be the confession of Peter (8:29). Eventually the title “Son of God” will be at the end of the narration, on the lips of the Roman centurion (15:39).

The taking up of these two titles gives a good division of the narration which is concerned **with the “mystery” of Jesus**. The first step, Peter’s, answers the question: Who is Jesus? The second refers to what type of Messiah he will be. The “mystery” of Jesus explains the insistence in the Gospel of Mark on the “Messianic Secret”.

Moreover, in Mark, the person of Jesus is depicted with an unaffected naturalness: **he reacts to events with authentic human emotion**: Pity (1:44), Anger (3:5), Triumph (4:40), Sympathy (5:36; 6:34), Surprise (6:9), Admiration (7:29; 10:21), Sadness (14:33-34), and Indignation (14:48-49).

4.

DIVISION

1. Preparation for the Public Ministry of Jesus (1:1-13)
2. The mystery of Jesus (1:14-8:26)
3. The mystery begins to be revealed (8:27-9:32)
4. The Full Revelation of the mystery (9:33-16:8)
The Long Ending (16:9-20)

1.

PREPARATION FOR THE PUBLIC MINISTRY OF JESUS (1:1-13)

The first verse contains the whole Gospel. This is original of Mark.

The prophecy attributed to Isaiah is a combination: *Malachi* 3:1; *Isaiah* 40:3; *Exodus* 23:20.

The same Spirit received in Baptism drives Jesus into the desert for radical confrontation with Satan. Jesus prevails: he is surrounded by wild beasts that are tame (*Isaiah* 11:4-9). The angels come to minister to him like to Elijah (*1 Kings* 19:5-7). Jesus comes out from the desert all the more determined to be faithful to God's work and starts the Galilean ministry.

2.

THE MYSTERY OF JESUS (1:14-8:26)

Jesus starts to proclaim the "Gospel of God": this is the time of fulfillment: God's plan for humanity revealed in the Old Testament Salvation History is being fulfilled/accomplished by Jesus' mission.

The beginning of Jesus' ministry brings immediately the call of the Twelve as in Matthew, Luke and John, with different stories but the fact is that Jesus, since the beginning, doesn't want to be alone. In his mission, he is to be helped by others who eventually will continue it.

1:21-45 The account of a single day of ministry of Jesus, on a Sabbath, in and outside the synagogue of Capernaum, combines teaching, healing and exorcizing.

Towards the end we have the "Messianic Secret": Jesus forbids people to publicize his miracles. They disobey and he hides.

Chapter 2-3:6 Series of conflicts: since the beginning, Jesus finds opposition.

2:18-22 Jesus is the bridegroom: the metaphor of marriage concerns God (Yahweh) and the people. Jesus, saying he is the bridegroom, takes the place of God. The same happens about the Sabbath (2:28) and about the Son of Man who can forgive sins: Jesus takes the place of God because he is God. He does this for the Sabbath but not arbitrarily but in order to do good! Again, Jesus presents himself like God who doesn't rest on a Sabbath (Cf. *John* 5:17). Consequently, we ourselves are not bound by the Sabbath rest if we need to do good which we cannot avoid or delay.

3:13-19 The choice of the Twelve. Simon is called Peter by Jesus and he always appears first in the list of the Twelve (*Matthew* 10:2; *Luke* 6:14; *Acts* 1:13; *1 Corinthians* 15:5-6). Even in John, where the list is missing, but the Twelve are present and Peter has the first place (*John* 6:67-71).

3:39 The sin against the Holy Spirit is called an everlasting sin which cannot be forgiven because it is a direct assault against the truth: it attributes to Satan who is the power of evil what is the work of the Holy Spirit, namely victory over the demons. Similarly, every

other direct attack against the truth of God, as long as it lasts, is unforgivable, it goes directly against the Holy Spirit.

3:31-35 (and 6:3) The brothers and sisters of Jesus: it stays for “relatives”, see paper I have written a propos.

4:11-12 The purpose of the parables: they can be understood only by those who are prepared to explore their meaning. So, they enlighten and hide at the same time. The quotation is from Isaiah (see *Matthew* 13:10-15). To understand them is a gift from God not only the result of our commitment. In Semitic fashion, both the disciples’ understanding and the crowd’s obtuseness are attributed to God. Both the present and the future action of God, from the initiation to the fulfillment of the kingdom, is presented through the parables.

4:38 Jesus is asleep on a cushion: a detail typical of Mark’s way of narration.

5:11 The tending of pigs, animals considered unclean by Mosaic law (Leviticus 11:6-7) indicates that the people were Gentiles.

5:21-43 Jairus’ daughter and the woman with hemorrhage: one story within another: it occurs several other times in Mark’s Gospel (3:20-30; 3:31-35; 6:14-29, 11:12-25; 14:53-73).

6:7-13 The mission of the Twelve: it has slightly different details in the other Synoptic Gospels. It is a trial-mission, so, the guidelines do not have an absolute binding force: they aim to show the spirit which should inspire the Apostles, like simplicity, poverty, etc...

6:11 “Shaking the dust”: the summoning of people is not optional, but engages the responsibility of the listeners.

6:14-16 The various opinions about Jesus anticipate the theme of his identity which is still a mystery and the climax of its revelation will be in 8:27-30.

6:34-52 The two great miracles of the loaves and the lake are together in Mark, Matthew and even John.

7:1-23 Controversy about the traditions of the Elders: the Pharisees mind about external purity, external worship and keeping the letter of the law; Jesus minds about the true moral intent of the divine law. It is a new concept of cleanliness.

7:11 “Qorban”: a formula for a gift to God, dedicating the offering to the temple, so that the giver may continue to use it for himself and not give it to others, even needy parents.

7:19 “In this way, Jesus declared all foods clean”. This absolute assertion is found in Mark alone. Jesus’ position was not immediately followed by his disciples: Cf. *Acts* 10, Peter’s reluctance to kill and eat...

7:27-28 “Children fed at table”: Israel has the priority, but not exclusivity. The priority will be respected also by the Apostles in their preaching (see *Acts*).

8:1-9 Second miracle of the loaves: this happens in pagan territory and again has some Eucharistic traits...Jesus is for all, the Eucharist is for all.

8:11-13 The demand for a sign is an excuse which hides the lack of faith. We have the precedent in the Old Testament, *Numbers* 14:11. Jesus' depth of disappointment reveals his true humanity. The disappointment of Jesus extends to the disciples as we see in the following passage about the leaven of the Pharisees (14-21).

8:22-26 The blind man of Bethsaida: the cure is gradual and entails some gestures like putting saliva in the man's eyes: it may mean the gradualness of the recognition of the Christ by the disciples and a symbol of the sacraments.

3.

THE MYSTERY BEGINS TO BE REVEALED (8:27-9:32)

8:27-30 A turning point: Jesus' identity is partially recognized as the Messiah in Peter's confession, but still under "messianic secret".

8:31 The "Son of Man" is a title rather mysterious from *Daniel* 7:13-14. There it means the "Saints of the Most High", the faithful Israelites who receive the kingdom from God, The "Ancient of Days". Here it means simply "a human being". This is how it is understood in the New Testament: Jesus' humanity is the condition of his capability to undergo Passion and Death.

8:34-38 The conditions for discipleship: taking up one's cross. This is more understandable by the disciples after Jesus gave the example dying on the cross. The axiom about losing one's life is also in John (12:25) as well as in Matthew and Luke. Which proves that it is among the "ipsissima verba Jesu".

9:1 Mysterious but probably referring to Jesus' Paschal Mystery and the coming of the Holy Spirit and the constitution of the Church.

9:2-8 The Transfiguration happens few days after the first announcement of the Passion: it counterbalances the harshness of the coming Passion with a glimpse of the Resurrection.

9:5 Moses and Elijah represent the Old Testament or better the Jewish Scriptures. Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law and Prophets, of the Scriptures.

9:21-24 In other contexts, Jesus praises the faith, here he challenges people to believe. Beautiful prayer of the father of the epileptic boy: "I do believe but help my unbelief (or my little faith)".

4.

THE FULL REVELATION OF THE MYSTERY (9:33-16:8)

9:42-48 No sacrifice is too great to avoid the total destruction of Gehenna. These words of Jesus must not be taken literally: they are a paradox meaning to show the need of being determined in our faithfulness in God's law.

9:49 Salt is symbol of wisdom which purifies like fire i.e. the journey of purification of Jesus' disciples.

10:1-12 In Mark the law of the indissolubility of marriage is without exceptions.

10:23-27 In the Old Testament, wealth and material goods are considered a sign of God's favor. The words of Jesus (23-25) provoke astonishment because they go against the accepted conviction. Money, wealth, power give a false security. The true security is only God's goodness. Salvation is a free gift. Wealth can become an obstacle on the way.

10:38 "To drink the cup" is to accept the destiny assigned by God (*Psalm* 11:6; 16:5). Jesus' baptism is to be his crucifixion and death for our salvation. This is the "service" of Jesus.

10:45 "Ransom": liberation by paying some price. Here Jesus pays with his life offered for all. "Many": doesn't mean that some are excluded, but it designates the collectivity (the many) who benefit for the service/sacrifice of the one (see implied the reference to the "Servant of Yahweh" of Isaiah).

11:1-11 The disciples prepare Jesus' solemn entrance, according to Jesus' instructions as they will prepare for the Passover meal. In John, it is the people themselves who prepare Jesus' solemn entrance, while the disciples do not understand.

"Hosanna": literally and originally means: "O God, grant salvation... then it became an acclamation of welcome.

11:12-14 Jesus looking for fruits in the barren tree reminds us of the same circumstance in the prophets: *Jeremiah* 8:13; *Hosea* 9:13, both positive and negative. Now, the fig tree is the symbol of Israel who refuses to believe. Jesus curses the fig tree: this is a "parable in action", representing Jesus' judgment, see also the following parable of the Tenants of the Vineyard (12:1-13).

12:1-12 An allegory where every details has a symbolic meaning. The tenants/farmers are the leaders of Israel; the owner of the vineyard is God; the messengers are the prophets/John Baptist; the son of the owner is Jesus; The punishment and the transfer to the new Israel: the Church of the Gentiles.

12:35-37 Jesus doesn't deny the Messiah's descent from David, but implies that he is something more, of divine origin, since David calls him "Lord".

12:41-44 The Poor Widow's Contribution. She is the symbol of the *Anawin*, the poor of Yahweh or the childlike, the ones who inherit the kingdom: God is their only treasure.

13:3-37 The Eschatological Discourse joins the fall of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD 70, with the end of the world and the Last Judgment. To be noted:

- There is announcement of persecutions and the way believer should face them;
- There are exhortations about watchfulness and being ready;
- There are indications: v.10 “The Gospel must be preached...”: the period of the Christian Mission; v. 14 “The desolating Abomination” refers to the destruction of the temple by the Romans (as Antiochus Epiphanes had done: *Daniel* 9:27).
- “Those of Judea must flee to the mountains”: this is what actually happened during the siege of Jerusalem by the Romans: the Christians left the city and fled.

28-31 This will happen before the disappearance of the first generation of Christians.

24-27 The end of Jerusalem foreshadows the end of the world and the Last Judgment. The apocalyptic signs in the sky and the coming of the Judge, the Son of Man (*Daniel* 7:13-14). This was also what Jesus told the High Priest during his Passion, identifying himself with the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One (14:61-62).

Chapter 14: 1-2 The Feast of the Unleavened Bread was the celebration of the Passover: the liberation from the slavery in Egypt.

14:3-9 The Anointing of Bethany: see the difference with John 12:1-6, where the woman is Mary, sister of Martha, and the place is their house. May be they are two different episodes.

14:18 Judas: Jesus contrasts the intimacy of table fellowship at the Passover Meal with the treachery of the traitor (*Psalms* 41:10).

14:12 Difference with John 19:14. John is correct: he sees the Passover of Jesus in the condemnation, at noon on Friday, hour in which the Passover lambs are slaughtered. The Passover Meal was in the evening (already Sabbath): this is why the bodies of the crucified were taken down from the cross. For the Synoptic, the account of the Last Supper and the Institution of the Eucharist happened during the Passover Meal: we may think that Jesus anticipated the Passover Meal on Thursday night. It was his Passover Meal.

14:22-24 The actions and the words expressed within the framework of the Passover Meal and the transition to the New Covenant, the sacrifice of himself through the offering of his body and blood in anticipation of his passion and death.

14:27 The quotation is from *Zechariah* 13:17. Even in John, Jesus announces that they will be scattered and will leave him alone but then, after his resurrection, he will gather them in Galilee (John 21).

14:36 “Abba”, Aramaic for “Father” (Dad, Daddy): Jesus’ personal way of addressing God with filial intimacy. This will be also the way of the brothers of Jesus as in *Romans* 8:15 & *Galatians* 4:6.

14:51-52 The young man who runs away naked is thought to be Mark.

14:53-65 Mark brings Jesus in front of the Sanhedrin immediately after the capture during the night. Luke puts it in the following morning. The affirmation of Jesus, answering the question of the High Priest, is the reason of his condemnation. In John,

INTRODUCTION

This booklet is a subsidy for any person who would like to be introduced to the narrative "opus" of Luke the evangelist: the Gospel and The Acts of the Apostles which are considered by the biblical scholars as a united work. Here one will find the essential background, general meaning and basic commentary to the text. It is advisable to study the text of the Bible before any other step like meditation, "Lectio Divina", sharing in group or preaching.

The general presentations of the Gospel and the Acts (Number 2 and 4 of the table of contents) are taken from the *New American Bible*. The division and notes to the text (Number 3 and 5) are compiled by Fr. Lorenzo. Number 6, 7 and 8 are a presentation of the unitarian view of the Narrative Work of Luke by Prof. Giovanni Leonardi, a biblical scholar.

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LUKE

The Gospel according to Luke is the first **part of a two-volume work** that continues the biblical history of God's dealing with humanity found in the Old Testament, showing how God's promises to Israel have been fulfilled in Jesus and how the salvation promised to Israel and accomplished by Jesus have been extended to the Gentiles.

The stated purpose of the two volume is to provide Theophilus and others like him with certainty – assurance - about earlier instructions they had received. To accomplish this purpose, Luke shows that the preaching and teaching of the representatives of the early church are grounded in the preaching and teaching of Jesus who during his historical ministry, prepared his specially chosen followers and commissioned them to be witnesses of his resurrection and to all else that he did.

This continuity between the historical ministry of Jesus and the ministry of the apostles is Luke's way of guaranteeing the fidelity of the Church's teaching to the teaching of Jesus.

Luke' story of Jesus and of the Church is dominated by a historical perspective. This history is first of all salvation history. God's divine plan for human salvation was accomplished during the period of Jesus, who through the events of his life fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies, and this salvation is now extended to all humanity in the period of the Church.

This salvation history moreover, is a part of human history. Luke relates the story of Jesus and the Church to events in contemporary Palestinian and Roman history for, as Paul says in Acts 26:26, “this was not done in a corner”.

Finally, Luke relates the story of Jesus and the Church to the life of the church of his time. Luke is concerned with **presenting Christianity as a legitimate form of worship** in the Roman world, a religion that is capable of meeting the needs of a world empire like that of Rome. To this end, Luke depicts the Roman governor Pilate declaring Jesus innocent of any wrong-doing three times.

At the same time, Luke argues in Acts, Christianity is the logical development and proper fulfillment of Judaism and is therefore deserving the same toleration and freedom traditionally accorded to Judaism by Rome.

The prominence given to the period of the church in the story has important consequences for Luke’s interpretation of the teaching of Jesus. By presenting the time of the church as a distinct phase of salvation history, Luke accordingly shifts the early Christian emphasis away from the expectation of imminent Second Coming of the Lord to **the day-to-day concerns of the Christian community in the world**. He does this in the gospel by regularly emphasizing the words “**each day**” in the sayings of Jesus.

Although Luke still believes the *parousia* to be a reality that will come unexpectedly, he is more concerned in presenting the words and deeds of Jesus as guides for the conduct of Christian disciples in the interim period between the Ascension and the Second Coming and with **presenting Jesus himself as the model of Christian life and piety**.

Throughout the gospel, Luke calls upon the Christian disciple to identify with the master Jesus, who is caring and tender toward the poor and lowly, the outcast, the sinner and the afflicted, toward all those who recognize their dependence on God.

But who is severe toward the proud and self-righteous, and particularly toward those who place their material wealth before the service of God and his people. **No gospel writer is more concerned than Luke with the mercy and compassion of Jesus. No gospel writer is more concerned with the role of the Spirit in the life of Jesus and of the Christian disciple, with the importance of prayer, or with Jesus’ concern for women.**

While Jesus calls all humanity to repent, he is particularly demanding of those who would be his disciples. Of them he demands total and absolute detachment from family and material possessions. To all who respond in faith and repentance to the words Jesus preaches, he brings salvation and peace, and life.

Early Christian tradition, from the late second century on, identifies the author of this gospel and The Acts of the Apostles as **Luke, a Syrian from Antioch**, who is mentioned in the New Testament in Colossians 4:14, Philemon 24 and 2 Timothy 4:11.

The prologue of the gospel makes it clear that **Luke is not part of the first generation** of Christian disciples but is himself dependent on the traditions he received from those who were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word. His two-volume work marks him as someone who was highly literate both in the Old testament traditions according to the Greek versions and in Hellenistic Greek writings.

Because of his dependence on the gospel of Mark and because details in Luke's gospel imply that the author was acquainted with the destruction of the city of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD 70, **the gospel of Luke is dated by most scholars after that date: many propose AD 80-90 as the time of composition.** The characteristics of this gospel suggest that Luke was a non-Palestinian writing to a non-Palestinian audience that was largely made up of Gentile Christians. He is traditionally thought to have written his work under the influence of Paul, like Mark or Peter.

DIVISIONS of the Gospel of Luke

1. The Prologue (1:1-4)
2. The Infancy Narrative (1:5-2:52)
3. The Preparation for the Public Ministry (3:1-4:13)
4. The Ministry in Galilee (4:14-9:50)
5. The Journey to Jerusalem: Luke's Travel Narrative (9:51-19:27)
6. The Teaching Ministry in Jerusalem (19:28-21:38)
7. The Passion Narrative (22:1-23:56)
8. The Resurrection Narrative (24:1-53)

THE INFANCY NARRATIVE (1:5-2:52)

The first two chapters of the gospel of Luke cover the birth of Jesus at Bethlehem and his growing up at Nazareth. But it brings some interesting stories which differ from the Infancy Narrative in the gospel of Matthew. First of all, Luke brings the birth of John the Baptist as the cousin of Jesus and a hint at his growing up to be the stern prophet who prepares the coming of the Messiah.

The annunciation to Zechariah which precedes John's birth is followed by the annunciation to Mary which precedes the account of Jesus' birth: the two stories develop

in parallel and are connected by the episode of the visitation of Mary to Elisabeth when the two heroes meet while in the womb of their respective mothers.

The Infancy Narratives in Luke seem to have originated from the testimony of the Blessed Virgin Mary as it appears in the beauty of the detailed narrative of the two stories: the Annunciation and the Nativity. This is hinted by the writer himself when he writes that Mary was keeping all that was happening in her heart and mind.

The details in the story of the birth of John are according to the prophetic fashion and are meant to show that John is a link with the Old Testament. Whereas, the miraculous conception of Jesus in the womb of Mary is unique and corresponds to the Annunciation to Joseph in Matthew's gospel. This proves that Jesus is God with us, the Son of God the Father that God gives to Humanity out of love (CF. John 3:16).

In the presentation of Jesus in the temple and in the episode of Jesus who remained behind in the temple the future mission of Jesus is clearly foretold. In the whole infancy narrative, the protagonists and their stories are presented as the beginning of the fulfillment of God's plan of salvation announced in the promises, prophecies and expectations of the Old Testament. The blessings of Abraham are now starting to be fulfilled and to be extended to all the peoples of the world.

The narrative theology of Luke becomes evident in the three gospel canticles which embellish the infancy narratives: the "*Benedictus*" of Zechariah, the "*Magnificat*" of Mama Mary and the "*Nunc Dimittis*" of the old man Simeon. They all have a part which is biographical and fits the moment in which they are composed. They follow the tradition of the O. T. book of Psalms and they spell out in the form of prayer or hymn the fulfillment of the O. T. promises.

They state the purpose and meaning of the infancy happenings in the context of the understanding of the datum of faith. The canticles are a composition of the evangelist who interprets the true sentiments of the main characters and expresses them in the fashion of the psalms in the Scriptures.

THE PREPARATION FOR THE PUBLIC MINISTRY (3:1-4:13)

The section starts with a detailed connection with the history of the world and of Palestine (which we can call "civil history"). As in the beginning of ch.2 which deals with Jesus' birth we have the historical connection with Caesar Augustus and the census, here it is Tiberius emperor in Rome... It was then that "the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah in the desert".

John the Baptist speaks and acts as a prophet. Jesus comes to be baptized and the identity and mission of Jesus is foretold by the theophany. Here Saint Luke tells us that Jesus was

30 years old when he began his public life and puts Jesus' genealogy which is different from the one of Matthew: it starts from Joseph ("who was thought to be the father of Jesus") and goes back not only to Abraham but to Adam and to God. So here Jesus is already called "the son of God" as in the beginning of the gospel of Mark.

THE MINISTRY IN GALILEE (4:14-9:50)

Acceptance and rejection in Nazareth: it is interesting to notice the accuracy which Luke shows in describing the scene in the synagogue in order to emphasize the words of Jesus which are like a program of all his mission and ministry: 4:21: "Today, this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing". This sermon or statement inaugurates the time of fulfillment of the O.T. prophecies. Luke presents the ministry of Jesus as fulfilling O. T. hopes and expectations (7:22). For Luke, even Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection are done in fulfillment of the Scripture (24:25-27; 44-46; Acts 3:18).

The initial acceptance and admiration become soon rejection. Luke joins in this conclusions details that in Mark come later: this is the narrative characteristic of Luke: he likes to conclude the stories, anticipating what in reality happens much later.

Here the rejection of Jesus is a foreshadowing of the whole future ministry of Jesus. Moreover, the rejection of Jesus in his hometown hints at the greater rejection of him by Israel (Acts 13:46).

The vocation of Simon Peter at the beginning of ch. 5 is also a detailed piece of narrative according to the pattern of the vocation stories in the O.T. The Sermon of the Plain (6:20-49) corresponds to Matthew's Sermon of the Mountain. It also starts with the Beatitudes and ends with the parable of the two houses. The beatitudes are only four and are followed by the curses. They represent the original, simpler form of the beatitude which represents a paradox. "The paradox consists in this that the beatitude is declared not because of some good fortune but because of ill fortune: poverty, hunger, sorrow and persecution. Jesus states that in these things men may be happy if they accept them as coming from their Heavenly Father and in the spirit in which Jesus teaches them".

The love for enemy and compassion are stressed in the Sermon of the Plain. The sentence of Jesus in Matthew: "Be perfect as your Father in Heaven is perfect" becomes: "Be merciful...".

The mission of Jesus continues by the Twelve Apostles. Peter confesses Jesus to be the Messiah and Jesus gives the prediction of his Passion and the conditions of discipleship. This section ends with the Theophany of the Transfiguration. In Luke's account, Moses

and Elijah are discussing with Jesus about “his exodus which he was going to accomplish in Jerusalem”.

THE JOURNEY TO JERUSALEM: LUKE’S TRAVEL NARRATIVE(9:51-19:27)

This section is organized as a trip to Jerusalem, the city of destiny, where Jesus’ exodus (suffering, death, resurrection and ascension) is to take place, where salvation is accomplished and from where the proclamation of God’s saving word is to go forth (24:47; Acts 1:8). Much of the material in Luke’s “travel narrative” is teaching for the disciples. During the course of this journey, Jesus is preparing his chosen Galilean witnesses for their future role. Verse 9:51 expresses the determination of Jesus to accomplish his destiny : “Days of his taken up” is a reference to the Paschal Mystery in Jerusalem.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan (10:29-37) in the context of the greatest commandment, Jesus illustrates the superiority of love over legalism. The law of love, proclaimed in the Sermon of the Plain (6:27-36) is exemplified by one who is legally impure.

THE EPISODE OF Martha and Mary (10:38-42) emphasizes the importance of listening the words of the teacher and the concern with women in Luke. Mary was sitting at the feet of Jesus: it is a typical, remarkable sign of Jesus attributing to a woman the classic position of a disciple at the feet of the master and it reveals a characteristic attitude of Jesus towards women in this gospel.

Ch. 11 is about prayer. The disciples ask Jesus: “Lord, teach us to pray as John taught his disciples. Jesus teaches the “Our Father” in a slightly shorter form. The chapter continues with many teachings for the disciples.

Chapter 13 opens with a call to repentance. Jesus doesn’t want to automatically join a particular misfortune to God’s punishment but calls to penance and conversion in order to avert the final condemnation (Cf. John 9:2-3 about the man born blind).

Chapter 15 is deservedly famous for the parables of mercy: the lost sheep, the lost coin and the prodigal son. The last two are only in Luke. Especially the Prodigal Son exemplifies the mercy of God in teaching of Jesus as in no other place in the New Testament.

Chapter 16 contains the parable of the rich man and Lazarus which is found only in Luke. Abraham’s saying: “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead” emphasizes the importance of the law. The parable illustrates Luke’s concern with Jesus’ attitude towards the rich and the poor. The

reversal of fates between the rich man and Lazarus explains the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon of the Plain (6:20-21; 24-25).

“The kingdom of God is among you”: to the question of the Pharisees about the time of the coming of the kingdom Jesus replies: “The kingdom of God is among you”. The emphasis has been shifted from an imminent observable coming of the kingdom to something which is already present in Jesus’ preaching and healing ministry.

Chapter 19:1-10: the story of the conversion of the tax collector Zacchaeus is unique in this gospel. Zacchaeus’ attitude to riches is the opposite of the one of the rich man in the parable. He is ready to give away some of his riches for the sake of justice and goodness. Jesus calls him “a son of Abraham”, a true heir of the promises of God in the Old Testament. Underlying Jesus’ depiction of Zacchaeus as the descendant of Abraham, the father of the Jews (1:73; 16:22-31) is his recognition of the central place occupied by Israel in the plan of salvation.

THE TEACHING MINISTRY IN JERUSALEM (19:28-21:38)

19:41-44 The lament over Jerusalem is found only in Luke. By not accepting Jesus, the one who mediates peace, Jerusalem will not find peace but will become the victim of devastation.

20:22 Through this question, the agents of the Jerusalem religious leadership hope to force Jesus to take sides on the sensitive issue of paying taxes to the colonizers. The issue of not payment taxes to Rome becomes a reason of the Jewish revolt which provoked the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans (A.D. 70).

Ch. 21: The Eschatological Discourse: Luke maintains the belief in the early expectation of the end of the age, but by focusing attention throughout the gospel on the importance of the day-to-day following of Jesus, he has come to terms with what seemed to the early Christian community to be a delay in the *Parousia*. Luke separates the historical destruction of Jerusalem from the signs of the final coming of the Son of man by a period that he refers to as “the times of the Gentiles”.

21:8 “The time has come”: in Luke the proclamation of the imminent end of the age has itself become a false teaching.

The actual destruction of Jerusalem by Rome in AD 70 upon which Luke and his community look back provides the assurance that, just as Jesus’ prediction of Jerusalem’s destruction was fulfilled, so too will be the announcement of their final redemption (27-28).

THE PASSION NARRATIVE (22:1-23:56)

In Luke we find original narrative ways of touching certain subjects:

- the Institution of the Eucharist is very detailed and close to Saint Paul's early account in 1 Corinthians 11: 23ff;
- in the Agony in the garden of Gethsemane Jesus sweats blood;
- Jesus before Herod;
- only Luke recounts that "Jesus turned and looked at Peter": this look leads to Peter's crying of repentance;
- words of Jesus to the women on the way of the cross;
- the good, penitent thief and Jesus' words to him;
- the last words of Jesus on the cross as he forgives and entrusts himself to the Father (Ps. 31).

THE RESURRECTION NARRATIVE (24:1-54)

The resurrection narrative in Luke contains the Two Disciples of Emmaus, the apparition in the Upper Room and the Ascension: they all happen in one day: the first day of the week : Easter Sunday and in and around Jerusalem. A consistent theme throughout the narrative is that the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus were accomplished in fulfillment of old Testament promises and of Jewish hopes.

In the account of the Ascension, Jesus goes up to heaven blessing the disciples and the world. The account of the Ascension is repeated in the Acts after 40 days of the appearance of the Risen Jesus. The Ascension marks the end of the time of Jesus and signals the beginning of the time of the Church.

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

The Acts of the Apostles, the second volume of Luke's two-volume work, continues Luke's presentation of biblical history, describing how **the salvation** promised to Israel in the Old Testament and accomplished by Jesus **has now under the guidance of the Holy Spirit been extended to the Gentiles.**

This was accomplished through the divinely chosen representatives whom Jesus prepared during his historical ministry and commissioned after his resurrection as witnesses of all that he taught.

Luke's preoccupation with the Christian community as the Spirit-guided bearer of the word of salvation rules out of his book detailed histories of the activity of most of the preachers. **Only the main lines of the roles of Peter and Paul serve Luke's interest.**

Peter was the leading member of the Twelve, a miracle worker like Jesus in the Gospel, the object of divine care and the spokesman of the Christian community, who, according to Luke, who was largely responsible for the growth of the community in the early days.

Paul eventually joined the community at Antioch, which subsequently commissioned him and Barnabas to undertake the spreading of the Gospel to Asia Minor. The missionary venture generally failed to win the Jews of the *diaspora* to the Gospel but enjoyed success among the Gentiles.

Paul's refusal to impose the Mosaic Law upon his Gentile converts provoked very strong objections among the Jewish Christians of Jerusalem, but both Peter and James supported his position.

Paul's second and third Missionary journey resulted in the same pattern of failure among the Jews generally but of some success among the Gentiles. Paul, like Peter, is presented as a miracle worker and the object of divine care.

In Acts, Luke has provided a broad survey of the church's development, from the resurrection of Jesus to Paul's first Roman imprisonment, the point at which the book ends.

In telling this story, Luke describes the emergence of Christianity from its origin in Judaism to its position as a religion of worldwide status and appeal. Originally, a Jewish Christian community in Jerusalem, the Church was placed in circumstances impelling it to include within its membership people of other cultures: the Samaritans, at first an occasional Gentile, then finally the Gentiles on principle.

Fear on the part of the Jewish people that Christianity, particularly as preached to the Gentiles, threatened their own cultural heritage caused them to be suspicious of Paul's Gospel.

The inability of Christian missionaries to allay this apprehension inevitably created the situation in which the Gospel was preached more and more to the Gentiles. **Towards the end of Paul's career, the Christian communities, with the exception of those of Palestine itself, were mainly of Gentile membership.**

In tracing the emergence of Christianity from Judaism, Luke is insistent upon the prominence of Israel in the divine plan of salvation and that the extension of salvation to the Gentiles has been a part of the divine plan from the beginning.

In the development of the Church from a Jewish Christian origin in Jerusalem, with its roots in Jewish religion traditions, to a series of Christian communities among the Gentiles of the Roman empire, **Luke perceives the action of God in History, laying open the heart of all humanity to the divine message of salvation.**

His approach to the history of the Church is motivated by his theological interests. His history of the apostolic Church is the story of a Spirit-guided community and a Spirit-guided spread of the Word of God. The travels of Peter and Paul are in reality **the travels of the Word of God** as it spread from Jerusalem, the city of destiny for Jesus, to Rome, the capital of the civilized world of Luke's day.

The narrative theology of Luke is evident in the **gospel canticles**: the *Benedictus* of Zecharias, the *Magnificat* of Mary and the *Nunc dimittis* of Simeon. In the Acts it is plain in the several **discourses of Peter and Paul.**

Nonetheless, the historical data he utilizes are of value for the understanding of the Church's early life and development and, as **a general background to the Pauline epistles.** In the interpretation of the Acts, care must be exercised to determine Luke's theological aims and interests and to evaluate his historical data without exaggerating their literal accuracy or underestimating their factual worth.

Finally, an apologetic concern is evident throughout the Acts. By stressing the continuity between Judaism and Christianity, **Luke argues that Christianity is deserving the same toleration accorded Judaism by Rome.**

Part of Paul's defense before Roman authorities is to show that Christianity is not a disturber of the peace of the Roman empire. Moreover, when he stands before Roman authorities, he is declared innocent of any crime against the empire. Luke tells his story with the hope that Christianity will be treated as fairly.

The main points of Luke's lesson in the Acts:

1. The Kerygma: The kingdom of God is now the Gospel of the Christian Mystery: the center of the Kerygma (Announcement) is the person of Jesus Christ. The Messiah's divinity is evident from the many speeches especially those of Peter and later on Paul.
2. The proof of Christ's divinity is taken from the Old Testament prophecies: scriptural texts form the foundation of a systematic Christology. This makes sense because the first objects of their preaching are the Jews, a method that the apostles will continue using consistently throughout the book of Acts. It is only when the Jewish listeners refuse to believe and reject the good news that the apostles turn to the pagans. The apostles are the witnesses of this interpretation of the scriptures confirmed by miracles.

3. The most important and urgent problem facing the new Church was the acceptance/admission of the Gentiles. The first part of the Acts ends with the Council of Jerusalem and the victory of the openness to the wider world.
4. The life of the first Christian community is described in its essential elements: the 4 pillars (The teaching of the Apostles, The fellowship, the Breaking of Bread – The Eucharist and prayer/worship); the initial communion of goods, the forming of leadership... The sacramental life: faith and baptism, the imposition of hands to receive the Holy Spirit and the Breaking of Bread...
5. The power/energy moving the Apostles is the Holy Spirit (The Acts is called: the Gospel of the Holy Spirit). The book is full of enthusiasm, spiritual joy and the wonders of God's works.
6. The actual information of the territorial expansion of the early church is invaluable and constitutes a framework for the letters. The beginnings are in Jerusalem and the conclusion with Saint Paul in Rome is the fulfillment of the words of Jesus: "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The end of the earth is Rome and there the book ends.

DIVISION

1. The Preparation for the Christian Mission (1:1-2:13)
2. The Mission In Jerusalem (2:14-8:3)
3. The Mission in Judea and Samaria (8:4-9:43)
4. The Inauguration of the Gentile Mission (10:1-15:35)
5. The Mission of Paul to the Ends of the Earth (15:36-28:31)

PREPARATION FOR THE CHRISTIAN MISSION (1:1-2:13)

The second part of Luke's narrative opus (The Acts) is also dedicated to Theophilus.

The account of the Ascension in Acts happens after the 40 days in which the Risen Jesus proved his resurrection and gave instructions to the Eleven for the continuation of his mission after his departure. One instruction is to wait for the "promise of the Father": the Holy Spirit. After Jesus went back to the Father, the Ascension, the Holy Spirit came: the Pentecost. The one event (Cf. St. John's gospel): Resurrection, Ascension and the sending of the Holy Spirit: the Paschal Mystery, has been historicized by Luke i.e. arranged in time.

The Ascension marks the end of the apparitions (with the exception of the one to Paul), the end of the time of Jesus and signals the beginning of the time of the Church. Jesus

himself, before going up to heaven, gives the indication of the geographical expansion of the Church which is embraced by the book of the Acts (1:8): from Jerusalem to “the ends of the earth” i.e. Rome.

The death of Judas in Peter’s account is different from the Gospel (Matthew 27:5): all the same it is sudden and shameful, it looks like a punishment of God: Cf. “2 Maccabees 9:28; Wisdom 4:19.

The choice of Matthias highlights of the number 12: the number of apostles whom Jesus had chosen, signifying universality: the 12 tribes of Israel and in the new Israel, the Church made up of all the peoples of the earth. The one who takes the place of Judas must be a man and a witness i.e. to have had the experience of the public life of Jesus from the baptism to his death and burial (from the beginning to the end) and especially a witness of the resurrection (extraordinary experience).

The Pentecost. “A strong wind”: wind and spirit are associated also in John 3:8. “Tongues of fire” like in the theophany at Sinai for the covenant (Exodus 19:18).

“Speaking in tongues” (2:1-11): this sign is not the unintelligible utterances like in other contexts (more common meaning of “speaking in tongues”): each of the foreign groups present understood in his own language: a special sign only for Pentecost: GLOSSOLALIA). It has anyway a symbolic meaning: the calling of all the nations to the Gospel and eventually the gospel message will be announced in all the languages of the world: the reversal of the Tower of Babel: the beginning of the restoration of the unity of humanity as in the hymn: “Defeat our Babel with your Pentecost”.

THE MISSION IN JERUSALEM (2:14-8:3)

The speech of Peter represent the kerygma (greek for announcement/proclamation) which is about the Christian Mystery: life, death and Resurrection of Jesus: the Gospel which the listeners are invited to accept by faith and adhere by being baptized in water by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit was even called on the baptized by the imposition of the hands (8:14-17). The first speech is followed by other 4 by Peter and the last by Paul (13:16-41). Other speeches are present in the Acts and they develop what is called “narrative theology” in Luke.

2:42 –The early Christian community is built on the 4 pillars: the teaching of the Apostles, the fellowship, the Eucharist and prayer/worship: a priestly people. They used the temple for prayer and as a place to proclaim the Gospel because of the presence of many people, but they offered the Eucharistic sacrifice/meal in their homes. The temple sacrifices are now obsolete and very soon the temple itself will disappear.

They held things in common and they had a good name among the people. The picture of the early Christian community is idyllic, but very soon problems will arise...

4:12 –“There is no other name under heaven given to the human race by which we are to be saved”

4:13 – The boldness of Peter= *parresia*: the strength and courage of the primitive announcement.

Chapter 6: the problem of distributing food to the widows and the complain which arose resolves in the choice of the 7 deacons and their consecration/dedication by the imposition of the hands. The Apostles remarkably give priority to the word of God and prayer. The Deacons (servants) are assigned to distribution of food “serving at tables”, but this by no means this is their only task: Philip and Stephen are more dedicated to preaching.

Stephen, the first martyr, gives in his speech an overview of salvation History and dies praying like Jesus. Moreover, in his final moment, he sees Jesus in heaven, standing at the right of God, the Father. This is very important. This is the witness of the New Testament about Jesus, repeated other 18 times: a fulfillment of Jesus’ prophecy: Mark 14:62 : “You will see the Son of Man seated at the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven (reference to Daniel 7:13-14 and Psalm 110:1.

The death of Jesus brings the first persecution. Saul was active in persecuting the disciple of Jesus. They were forced to run away from Jerusalem.

THE MISSION IN JUDEA AND SAMARIA (8:4-9:43)

Deacon Philip, great missionary to Samaria, he baptizes, but Peter and John impose the hands for the faithful to receive the Holy Spirit and his gifts. The manifestation of extraordinary gifts is linked to the reception of the Holy Spirit, a charismatic experience which doesn’t exclude the presence of the grace of the Holy Spirit in the reception of baptism.

The episode of Simon, the magician, is meant to show that the miraculous power of the apostles like Peter is different from magic which is by self-definition self-serving or making use of special powers for selfish purpose.

8:26-38 The conversion of the Ethiopian: Christianity breaks the racial barriers with the exemplary method of missionary Philip.

9:1-19 The Risen Jesus appears to Saul on the way to Damascus. Paul is blinded and introduced to the whole message by Ananias and then baptized. He starts preaching first in Damascus and later on in Jerusalem, stating that Jesus is “the Son of God” and “the

Messiah”. Paul’s experience of Jesus is not a vision but the last of the apparitions of the Risen Christ (1 Corinthians 15:8). There are 3 versions of the episode of Saul’s encounter with Jesus (9:1-19; 22:3-16; 26:2-18), but in all three the words of Jesus are the same: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”. Paul is “a divinely chosen instrument” (9:15).

Another account is in Paul’s letter to the Galatians (1:11-2:1-10). It is difficult to harmonize the movements of Paul according to this letter and the Acts, especially the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:1-35).

THE INAUGURATION OF THE GENTILE MISSION (10:1-15:35)

Saint Peter introduces the first non-Jew to Christianity: the centurion Cornelius and his family. The episode has some remarkable features. Although Saint Paul is the apostles of the Gentiles and has the lion’s share in the book of the Acts, Luke gives pre-eminence to Peter’s action as it is narrated with many details. The leadership of Peter is undeniable in the Acts.

Cornelius and family already have started praying and receive the vision of the angel of God who gives them instruction to call Peter. Peter is still keeping the rules about eating of the traditional Judaism. The instruction he receives in the dream repeats Christ’s lesson about all food to be clean and symbol of the call of all peoples to faith in Jesus and baptism.

The Holy Spirit precedes Baptism, but the baptism by the leader of the community is seen as essential and necessary. The whole episode stresses the initiative of God. Peter’s speech contains the sentence: “In truth, I see that God shows no partiality. Rather, in every nation, whoever fears him and acts uprightly is acceptable to him”.

The Jewish Christians in Jerusalem are scandalized but they accept the explanation. The “official opening” to the Pagans will need more time and pressure. It will be the result of the Council of Jerusalem (AD 48) and the zeal of Paul and Barnabas, after the experience of Antioch and their First Missionary Journey.

At Antioch of Syria, the follower of Jesus are called for the first time “Christians” (11:14).

Prophet Agabus speaks in Antioch of the famine which is to happen in Judea. Paul and Barnabas are sent to bring help. The new churches are asked to bring help to the poor of Jerusalem, the first original Christian community. Paul is shown in Acts and in 2 Corinthians: 8-9 to be organizing a collection and bringing money to Jerusalem.

Contemporarily, there is persecution against the Christians provoked by Herod Agrippa I and his support for the Pharisaic Judaism. James, John’s brother, is the first to suffer

martyrdom among the Twelve (AD 42). Agrippa II, his son, with his daughter Bernice will meet St. Paul in chapter 25-26.

Chapter 13-14 cover the first missionary journey of St. Paul to Asia Minor. The Holy Spirit sets apart Paul and Barnabas for this mission. Antioch is now a real center of missionary activity after Jerusalem. They start from Cyprus, Barnabas' country. John Mark, Barnabas' cousin, is with them. But he decides to leave them and go back to Jerusalem (13:13). Paul is not happy about it. They preach the Gospel first to their fellow Jews in the synagogue, but then they address the Gentiles once the Jews refuse the message. The travel to Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium and Listra. The approach to the pagans, which will be expanded by Paul in his speech in Athens, is already present in ch. 14:14-19: the beginning of a Natural Theology or Theodicy. They start Christian communities and on their way back they visit them and appoint "presbyters".

The Council of Jerusalem is of the utmost importance for the acceptance of the Gentiles: it represents a "turning point". The Jerusalem Council marks the official rejection of the rigid view that the Gentile converts were obliged to observe the Mosaic Law completely. The Council, through the intervention of James, the leader of the Jerusalem community, proposes a moderate position still asking to observe some dietary avoidances: meat sacrificed to idols, of strangled animals and blood. Moreover, to abstain from unlawful marriages (*porneia*=fornication). All these practices were abhorrent to Jews. The Jewish practices most essential were: circumcision. The keeping of the Sabbath and the keeping of the dietary prohibitions. From here to the end of the book of the Acts, Paul and the Gentile Mission become the focus of Luke's writing.

THE MISSION OF PAUL TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH (15:36-28:31)

15:36-18:22 cover the second missionary journey of Paul: through the old route of Asia Minor to Macedonia (Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea), then to Greece (Athens, Corinth), then through Ephesus back to Antioch of Syria. The trip lasted about three years. Paul and Barnabas split company because of John Mark whom Paul doesn't want any more. Barnabas and Mark went to Cyprus. Paul continued with the company of Silas and later of his disciple Timothy.

16:4 One of the reasons of Paul's journey and companions was to make known to the new Christian communities the decision of the Council of Jerusalem.

16:10 the first "WE" section where Luke writes as one of Paul's companions. They are here below:

- 16:10-17 The trip to Europe: Macedonia and Philippi
- 20:5-15 Trip from Philippi to Miletus
- 21:1-18 Trip from Miletus to Jerusalem

- 27:1-28 Trip to Rome via Crete and shipwreck at Malta

At Philippi they convert Lydia who invite them to stay in her house.

17 Paul, Silas and Timothy at Thessalonica and Berea: the only place where the Jews in the synagogue are open to listen to the Gospel of Jesus and many are converted. Paul is sent ahead to Athens to avoid the anger of other Jews.

17:16-34 The famous speech of Paul to the members of the Areopagus: courage of Paul in criticizing the statues of the gods and new arguments from the theology of nature: Theodicy: example of attempt to inculturate the Gospel, interesting even if unsuccessful.

In Paul's appearance in the Areopagus, he preaches to the Gentiles in the cultural center of the ancient world. The speech is more theological than Christological. Paul appeals to the Greek world's belief in divinity as responsible for the origin and the existence of the universe. It criticizes the images. It praises the attempt to find God: a very human instinct. He speaks of God as the Judge of humanity through the prophet Jesus who is risen from the dead...At this point they lose him...

Paul at Corinth. Aquila and Priscilla, Jewish Christians coming from Rome, expelled by emperor Claudius, St. Paul stays with them because they were of the same trade: tent-makers.

18:12 Gallio, the roman proconsul of Achaia who deals with Paul, was proconsul in the years AD 51-52 as we know from another source. The date is important for the chronology of Paul's life and his letters. Gallio was the brother of Seneca, the famous philosopher and tutor of emperor Nero who was forced by Nero to commit suicide.

18:23-21:16 Third missionary journey: it refers to Paul's activity in Ephesus. There is a certain restlessness in Paul and the growing conviction that the Spirit bids him to return to Jerusalem and prepare to go to Rome (19:21).

19:11-12 Paul's miraculous power with clothes that touched his skin reminds us of Peter's shadow falling on mats (5:16).

20:17-38 The speech to the elders (17: "presbyteroi") of Ephesus at Miletus is a masterpiece of pastoral theology and a kind of last will and testament. Remarkably, Paul quotes a saying of Jesus which is not in the Gospels: "It is more blessed to give than to receive". He calls them "episcopoi" (28) whereas we would have expected "presbiteroi" (and in 1Peter 5:1 Peter calls the leaders of churches "presbyteroi" where we would have expected "episcopoi": that means that the terminology of the leadership is still fluid, not yet fixed, but the functions are already clear enough). The speech is highly emotional and provokes the tears of the elders.

21:17-28:31 St. Paul reaches Rome "the end of the earth"

St. Paul in Jerusalem meets the opposition of the Jews.

21:17-26 The opposition to Paul in Jerusalem comes also from the Christians of Jewish origin, not only from the Jews. These Jewish Christians were many and they were joining

- *From Nazareth to Jerusalem and back to Nazareth*: Infancy of Jesus, the Messiah and the Son of God in comparison with that of John the Baptist, the Precursor (1:5-2:52)
- *From Nazareth to the Jordan and back to Nazareth*: Mission of Jesus, Son of God and son of Adam in comparison with the Mission of the Baptist (3:1-4:14)
- *Program and praxis of Jesus: at Nazareth*: “Evangelize the poor, etc”; at Capernaum and in all the synagogues of Judea (4:15-44)

THE GOSPEL NARRATIVE (Luke 5:-24:53)

Part one: Evangelization of Jesus in Galilee (part of Judea) (4:15-9:50)

Section 1: Call of the first three disciples collaborators and consequent discussions (5:1-6:11)

Section 2: Choice of the twelve apostles and the teaching and miracle-working ministry of Jesus (6:12-8:56)

Section 3: Galilean mission of the Twelve and various instructions (9:1-50)

Part two: Jesus journeying to Jerusalem, a long journey (9:51-19:48)

Section 1: Mission and teaching to the disciples, confrontation with the adversaries, friends and the crowd (9:51-13:23)

Section 2: Dialogue with the people and Pharisees, instructions to the crowds and to the disciples (13:22-17:10)

Section 3: Instructions about the kingdom of God, present and future (17:11-19:27)

Section 4: Jesus arrives at Jerusalem riding a donkey, he chases away the vendors from the temple, and teaches there every day (19:28-48)

Part Three: Jesus at Jerusalem: his teachings, passion, death and resurrection and ascension to heaven (20:1-24:53)

Section 1: Approved by the people, rejected by the Leadership (20:1-21:38)

Section 2: The day of the passion and death at Jerusalem of Jesus, the Messiah of Israel and the Servant of Yahweh (22:1-23:56)

Section 3: The first day of the week: angelic announcement of the Resurrection to the women, apparition of Jesus to the two disciples of Emmaus and to the entire group, ascension to heaven (24:1-53)

THE NARRATIVE OF THE ACTS (Acts 1:1-28:31)

Prologue and narrative introduction

Prologue to Theophilus: a second book in continuation with the Gospel (1:1-2)

Narrative introduction: In Jerusalem: transition from Jesus to the Apostles (1:3-26)

Part One: At Jerusalem : birth of the messianic church and its irradiation up to Antioch (2:1-14:28)

Section 1: The birth and expansion of the messianic church at Jerusalem and surrounding area (2:1-8:3)

Section 2: The spreading of the community to Samaria, to the whole of Judea, to Antioch, with the addition of the community of the pagans without the obligation of the Jewish customs ((:4-12:25)

Section 3: First missionary journey of Barnabas and Paul: a constellation of communities with the same style as at Antioch(13:1-14:28)

Central hinge-episode: at Jerusalem, the council approve the new praxis of Antioch towards the pagans (15:1-35)

Part two: The missionary journeys of Paul from Antioch to Europe and Rome (15:36-28:31)

INDRODUCTION: General traits

The fourth gospel is the most recent and **very different** in character from the three synoptic gospels: it appears as the “spiritual gospel” and the gospel of mystagogy: symbols and sacraments (how to live out the new life given by the Risen Jesus by means of the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist), the Gospel of mature Christians. In it Jesus gives long speeches where he shows very striking definition of self, as we will see later, and explains the symbolic meaning of the miracles or signs which he performs.

All the same, the Gospel of John is reliable in the information it gives: that the public life of Jesus covers three Passover Feasts (during the first one in Chapter 2, he purifies the temple; during the second one in chapter 6, he gives the Eucharistic discourse at Capernaum; and the third one, in chapter 13, where there is the Washing of the feet, consists in the week of Jesus’ Passion and death) and consequently we can say that Jesus’ public life lasted three years.

John is the evangelist who tells us that Jesus was crucified on Preparation Day (Friday) and was taken down from the cross because of the Passover meal which was the beginning of the Great Sabbath.

It is in John that we have the most precise date which consent us to know the time of Jesus’ public life: it is in the episode of the cleansing of the temple: “The Jews then said: It has taken 46 years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?” (2:20). Since we know for certain from another source that King Herod had started to rebuild the temple in the year 19 BC then the first Passover of the public life of Jesus should be put in the year AD 27 (Luke tells us that Jesus was 30 when he started his ministry), so he would be 33 on the year AD 30, time of his death.

These historical details prove that the Gospel of John was written by an eyewitness as the tradition tells us, although dressed in a highly sophisticated theological garments which in any case enrich the figure and message of Jesus for a believer.

1. It is different, yet the **essential elements of the story of Jesus are present:**

he is born of his mother (John doesn’t name the mother of Jesus, we know that her name is Mary from the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke) (2:1) by a miraculous conception (1:12-13 refers to Jesus’ divine origin but can be also intended as of a virgin birth); he is born in Bethlehem (7:42); he grew up in Nazareth (1:45); his public ministry was prepared by the preaching of John the Baptist; he called the Twelve (6:70); he was opposed by the Jews authorities, he performed miracles, he was tried, condemned under Pontius Pilate, killed, buried and rose on the third day, appeared to the women and the disciples and called over them the Holy Spirit and sent them to forgive the sins of humanity.

2. Moreover, we have a series of “Indirect Narrations”

which seem to point to different episodes present in the Synoptic Gospels and absent in John: **Jesus’ Baptism** (1:32 “And John bore witness: I saw the Spirit descend as a dove from heaven and it remained on him”); **the Agony in the Garden** (12:27 “Now, my soul is troubled. And what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour? No, for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name”. See also 18:11); **the Transfiguration** (12:28-33 “Then a voice came from heaven: I have glorified it and I will glorify it again. The crowd standing by heard it and said that it had thundered. Others said: An angel has spoken to him. Jesus answered: This voice has come for your sake, not for mine....”); the **Confession of Peter** (6:66-69 “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life and we have believed, and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God”); **the Institution of the Eucharist** (6:53-59 “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you...”); **the Ascension and Pentecost** (20:22-23 “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you. And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said: Receive the Holy Spirit....”).

Serious biblical scholars have examined the text of John’s Gospel looking for terminology and images that are related to the Synoptic Gospels and can bring us to the original words of Jesus (*Ipsissima verba Jesu*) and have found more than seventy of them: an example is the passage in 12:23-26 as related to Matthew 10:39, Mark 8:35 and Luke 9:24 “He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life”.

The Gospel of John represents **an advanced stage in the understanding of the Mystery of Christ**: the historical facts and Jesus’ sayings are undoubtedly at the base of the narration but the theological interpretation of the facts prevails as if **everything is viewed from the fact of the Resurrection which proves Christ’s divinity**.

3. The seven signs

The Gospel of John begins with a **magnificent prologue, which states many of the major themes and motifs** of the gospel. The prologue proclaims Jesus as the pre-existent and incarnate Word of God who has revealed the Father to us. The rest of the first chapter forms the introduction to the gospel proper and consists in the Baptist’s testimony about Jesus as the Lamb of God, followed by the stories of the call of the first disciples, in which various titles predicated of Jesus in the early church are presented.

The gospel narrative contains a series of “signs”, the gospel word for the wondrous deeds, miracles of Jesus. The author is primarily interested in the significance of these deeds, and so interprets them for the reader by various reflections, narratives and discourses.

The first sign is the transformation of the water into wine at Cana (2:1-11); this symbolizes the entire creative and transforming work of Jesus.

The second sign, the cure of the royal official's son (4:46-54) simply by the word of Jesus at a distance, signifies the power of Jesus' life-giving word. The same theme is further developed by other signs, probably for a total of seven.

The third sign, the cure of the paralytic at the pool with five porticoes in chapter 5, continues the theme of water offering newness of life. In the preceding chapter, to the woman at the well in Samaria, Jesus had offered living water springing up to eternal life, a symbol of the revelation that Jesus brings; here Jesus' life-giving word replaces the water of the pool that failed to bring life.

Chapter 6 contains two signs (4th and 5th), the multiplication of the loaves and the walking on the water of the Sea of Galilee. These signs are very much connected as the manna and the crossing of the Red Sea are in the Passover narrative and symbolize a new Exodus. The multiplication of the loaves is interpreted for the reader by the discourse that follows, where the Bread of Life is used first as a figure for the revelation of God in Jesus and then for the Eucharist. A series of dialogues reflecting Jesus' debates with the Jewish authorities at the feast of the Tabernacles are developed in Chapter 7 and 8.

The six sign is presented in chapter 9, the sign of a young man born blind. This is a narrative illustration of the theme of conflict in the preceding two chapters; it proclaims the triumph of light over darkness, as Jesus is presented as the Light of the world. This is interpreted by a narrative of controversy between the Pharisees and the young man who had been given his sight by Jesus, ending with a discussion on spiritual blindness and spelling out the symbolic meaning of the cure.

And **finally the seventh sign**, the raising of Lazarus in chapter 11, is the climax of signs. Lazarus is presented as a token of the real life that Jesus, the Resurrection and the Life, who will now absurdly be put to death because of his gift of life to Lazarus, will give to all who believe in him once he has been raised from the dead.

After the account of the seven signs, the "hour" of Jesus arrives and the author passes from signs to reality, as he moves into the discourses in the Upper Room that interpret the meaning of the passion, death and resurrection narratives that follow.

The whole Gospel of John is the progressive revelation of the glory of God' only Son, who comes to reveal the Father and then returns in glory to the Father. (New American Bible)

A clear concept of "Gospel"

The author's purpose is clearly expressed in the first conclusion at the end of chapter 20: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name".

4. Jesus' self-definitions:

This is a very distinct feature in the Gospel of John. Seven times Jesus defines himself as: the Light, the Bread of life, the Gate to the sheepfold, the Good Shepherd, the Resurrection and the Life, the Way, the Truth and the Life, the Vine. The clear message which is implied is that Jesus is God, something which is very evident also from the way Jesus relates to God, the Father. This is the point of arrival also of the Synoptic Gospels, but in them it is Jesus who asks his disciples to identify him and praises Peter for doing so (Matthew 16:13-20; Mark 8:27-30; Luke 9:18-21).

5. Eschatology of the present:

"In the Synoptic Gospels, the revelation of Christ's glory is associated primarily with his eschatological "coming", his return at the end of time (Matthew 16:27 "For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each man for what he has done").

The basic elements of the traditional eschatology: the expectation of the Last Day (6:39-40; 11:24-25; 12:48), the Coming of Jesus (14:3; 21:22-23), the expectation of the Resurrection of the dead (5:28-29; 11:24) and the Last Judgment (3:36; 5:29) all are found in the 4th Gospel, but **the eschatology receives a new and double emphasis: not only in the end but here and now; it is also an inner happening and not only a future, external event.** In this way, the "coming" of the Son of Man is interpreted primarily as the coming of Jesus to this world through the Incarnation, his "lifting up" on the cross and his return to his disciples through the Holy Spirit.

In the same way, the Judgment is presented as something already taking place in the human heart and eternal life (John's counterpart of the synoptic "Kingdom") is made to be something actually present, already in the possession of those who have faith. That these "last things" should be seen as present should be not surprising, since salvation throughout history centers on Christ's historical life, death and resurrection. God's victory over evil, his salvation of the world is already guaranteed by Christ's Resurrection in glory. The return of Jesus in the Last Day will be nothing but its confirmation". (Jerusalem Bible)

6. Authorship, place and time

The Fourth Gospel is the only one that has the name of the author in it: 21:24 “This is the disciple who is bearing witness to these things, and who has written these things: and we know that his testimony is true”. These words are written by John’s disciples who added the epilogue (Chapter 21). The disciple is “The disciple whom Jesus loved” i.e. John, as it was constantly believed by the tradition, he is obviously the disciple of John the Baptist who followed Jesus together with Andrew and the writer of the piercing of Jesus side in Chapter 19:35 “He who saw it has borne witness – his testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth – that you also may believe”. This is confirmed by 15:27 “And you also are witnesses, because you have been with me since the beginning”.

The place was probably Ephesus and the date from 90 to 100.

Division:

Prologue (1:1-18): “In the beginning...”

The Book of Signs (1:18-12:50): Jesus’ Ministry

1. Proclamation of the New Order (1:19-4:54) the inaugural week and the events of the first Passover
2. The second feast (5:1-47) a Sabbath in Jerusalem; the first opposition
3. The second Passover (6:1-71) in Galilee; new opposition
4. The feast of Shelters (7:1-10:21) the great messianic revelation; the great rejection
5. The feast of Dedication (10:22-42) the decision to kill Jesus
6. Jesus moves towards his death (11:1-12:50)

The Book of Glory (13:1-20:31) Jesus’ Hour: The Passover of the Lamb of God

1. Jesus’ last meal with his disciples (13:1-17:26)
2. The Passion 18, 19
3. The Resurrection; commissioning of the disciples (20:1-29)
4. First ending of the Gospel (20:30-31)

Epilogue: The Resurrection Appearance in Galilee (21:1-25) The Risen Jesus teaches the Church.

PROLOGUE (1:1-18) In the beginning...

The concept of WORD is traditional in the Old testament (*Davar*) and the Greek term correspondent “*Logos*” doesn’t need to derive from philosophy. The Word in John is with God and is God; everything is created through him.

This reminds us of the concept of WISDOM in the O.T. Wisdom was active in the whole work of creation (Proverbs 8:22-31). And wisdom carries history to its goal: in the book of Wisdom, the qualities attributed to Wisdom are, from chapter 11 onwards, attributed to God himself, but this is because Wisdom and God, in his function of world-ruler, are the same reality.

Wisdom however is “an emanation of the glory of the Almighty...a reflection of the eternal light...an image of his goodness (7:25-26) and it is therefore distinguished from God, but at the same time is the radiance of God’s nature.

The author here , it seems, goes no further than the other wisdom writers: it doesn’t appear that he gives Wisdom an existence of its own, but the whole passage on the nature of Wisdom (7:22-8:8) is a step forwards in the expression of the traditional ideas and a deeper perception of them.

So, the teaching of the book of Wisdom represents the Jewish tradition of the Scriptures, but also the influence of the Greek philosophy, in the overcoming of a dead point: death, with the doctrine of life after death: the concept of “soul” i.e. what in man doesn’t die. Wisdom is not only an attribute of God, but almost a Person, very close to God with whom she collaborates. The relation between Wisdom and the Word of God or the Law is already stated clearly by Sirach 24:23-34 and meditated upon in countless ways in Psalm 119.

In the New Testament, Wisdom is the WORD i.e. Jesus, not only here in John 1:1-18, but in 1 Corinthians 2:7, Colossians 1:15 and Hebrews 1:1-3.

1:14 “**And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us**” The Incarnation of the Word makes God personally and visibly present. It is no longer a presence un-seen and awe-inspiring as in the Tent or Temple, nor merely the presence of divine Wisdom enshrined in Israel Mosaic Law (Sirach 24). The human nature of the Word now screens his glory as the cloud once did yet at times it pierces the veil as in the Transfiguration.

1:17 “**Grace and truth came trough Jesus Christ**”: Grace stays for “favor” and “mercy”, it is the emotional, visceral love HESED and represents the feminine aspect of the love of God (God as Mother); Truth, EMET represents something steady and unchanging: God’s faithfulness. It is the masculine aspect of God’s love (God as Father). Here, in Saint John’s Gospel, Truth is the divinely revealed reality of God manifested in the words and person of Jesus Christ: this is the ultimate and supreme truth.

THE BOOK OF SIGNS (1:19-12:50) Jesus’ Ministry

1. Proclamation of the New Order (1:19-4:54): the inaugural week and the events of the first Passover

1:29 “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world”: The description of John the Baptist by John the evangelist is very original and nuanced as it befits a former disciple as John was. John the Baptist announces Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, a unique title which contains already what will come at the end.

In this Gospel, John the Baptist states clearly and emphatically that he is not the Messiah. Then we have the deep spiritual self-presentation of John as the Bridegroom’s friend who says: He must grow bigger, I must grow smaller (3:30).

Going back to the title “Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world”: it is one of the most significant symbols of Christ. It is developed in the book of Revelation (5:6, 12) where it appears as “slain” and receives “honor and glory”.

Here, in John’s Gospel it blends the idea of “Servant of Yahweh” who takes all sins on himself (Isaiah 53) and offers himself as a “Lamb of expiation” (Leviticus 14) with that of the Passover (Exodus 12) in the ritual that symbolizes Israel’s redemption (Acts 8:31-35; 1 Corinthians 5:8; 1 Peter 1:18-20).

In the Gospel of John, the symbol of the Lamb comes during the passion, since John makes Jesus to be condemned exactly at 12 noon on the Preparation Day, which is the hour when the paschal lambs are slaughtered (19:14). Moreover, when the soldier pierces Jesus’ side, the writer who is eyewitness associates the pierced Jesus with the prophecy “None of his bones shall be broken” which refers to the Passover lamb (Exodus 12:46). The same sentence is in Psalm 34:30 and it means the protection of the Lord on the just man (19:35-36).

1:35-51 The Call of the first disciples: the titles of Jesus are already present in the passage: Messiah, Son of God, King of Israel.

1:51 “The sky opened and the Angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man”: Jacob’s staircase (ladder) in Genesis 28:12.

Chapter 2:1-12 The Miracle in Cana in Galilee.

2:4 Another translation : “Has not my hour now come?”. The “hour” is that of Jesus’ passion, death and resurrection. The miracle of the changing the water into wine is symbol of the new reality of the coming of Jesus: the new wine (life), symbol of the Messianic times: the beginning of Christ’s signs/miracles which manifest his glory (Divinity). Mary’s intercession is powerful: she speaks with the authority of Love.

Chapter 2:13-25 The first Passover at Jerusalem. “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (2:19). Jesus meant the temple of his body (2:21). Jesus, in the 4th Gospel, frequently uses terms which, in addition to their obvious meaning, possess a metaphorical, higher sense (2:20 temple; 3:4 new birth; 4:15 living water; 6:34 bread of life; 7:33-36 to depart; 11:11 to awaken; 12:32-34 to lift up; 13:9 to wash).

The body of the risen Jesus is to be the new temple (of the New Testament) : “And I saw no temple in the city (the new Jerusalem) for its temple is the Lord, the Almighty and the Lamb” (Revelation 21:22). The body of the Risen Jesus is to be the focus of “worship in spirit and in truth” (4:21-24), the shrine of God’s presence (1:14), the spiritual temple from which living water flow (7:37-39; 19:34).

Eventually, our body will be the temple of the Lord (1 Corinthians 6:19). The words of Jesus tell that the traditional temple is now obsolete. The destruction of the temple of Jerusalem by the Romans (AD 70) was final.

Chapter 3:1-21 Nicodemus and Baptism: the new Birth. The text shifts from Dialogue (1-10) to Monologue (11-15) and reflection of the evangelist (16-21).

3:14 “Lifted up” this is the way in John’s Gospel the death of Jesus by crucifixion becomes also symbol of glorification.

3:15 “Eternal Life” means God’s life in us, the quality of life which starts in the world but blossoms in eternity. Here, it takes the place of “the kingdom of God”

Chapter 4:4-42 Jesus and the Samaritan woman. Jesus’ self revelation continues with his second discourse to the Samaritan woman and the theme of replacing the worship in the temple with the worship “in spirit and the truth”. Water is again as at Cana and with Nicodemus, the symbol of new life.

Meeting at the well is a feature of the story of the Patriarchs: *Genesis* 24:10-27 Abraham’s servant (Eliezer?15:2) looks for a wife for Isaac, Rebekah; *Exodus* 2:11-22 Moses at the well and Jethro’s daughters. Wells and springs play a significant part in the life and religion of the patriarchal era (*Genesis* 26:14-22 Isaac re-opens the wells of Abraham; *Exodus* 15:22-27 Mara, the bitter water and the wood; *Exodus* 17:1-7 the waters at Meriba from the rock , spring water symbolizes the life that God gives, especially that of the messianic age: *Psalms* 36:8-9 water, light, life (Christ), *Zechariah* 14:8 it symbolizes also the life imparted by the divine Wisdom and by the Law (*Psalms* 13:14; *Sirach* 15:3; 24:23-34).

In the New Testament, this symbolism is carried forward in the Gospel narrative: living water is the symbol of the Spirit (*John* 7:37-39: the water flows from the heart of Jesus). In *Revelation* 7:13-17, The Lamb will guide the Saints to the springs of water; and at the

conclusion: *Revelation 22:17* “The Spirit and the Bride say: Come! And let him who hears say: Come! And let him who is thirsty come, let him who desires take the water of life without price”.

The Spirit who makes a person a new creature (3:5) is also the inspiring principle of the new worship of God. The worship is “in Truth” because it is the only worship that meets the conditions revealed by God through Jesus who is the Truth.

Jesus is sent by the Father: this is a topic of primary importance in the Gospel of John.

4:11 “Kyrios”: Sir/Mister but also translation of ADONAI which stood for Yahweh: this is post-resurrection title for Jesus.

4:20 Mountain GERIZIM: where the Samaritans had erected their temple.

4:43-54 Second sign: the healing of the son of the royal official in Capernaum by means of the living word of Jesus. The order is given from a distance.

2. The second feast (5:1-47) a Sabbath in Jerusalem; the first opposition.

Jesus’ self-revelation continues with the third sign: the cure of the paralytic by Jesus’ life-giving word. The reality signified by the symbol of the water prevail here over and above the symbol.

5:14 Jesus never drew a one-to-one connection between sin and suffering (John 9:3; Luke 12:1-5); but Jesus exhorts people to be good (John 8:11) because bad people may expect God’s punishment as it is in the tradition of Wisdom literature.

5:18 Hostility of the Jewish leaders because of the words of Jesus who puts himself on the same level as Yahweh (5:17) not minding about the Sabbath rest. Jesus justifies at length his position= he acts and does what traditionally is attributed to God: to give life and to judge. Those who believe in Jesus have eternal life: present, realized eschatology. Responsibility of those who refuse to believe.

5:39 “Search the scriptures, even they testify on my behalf”

5:46 “If you had believed in Moses, you would have believed in me, because he wrote about me”

3. The second Passover (6:1-71) in Galilee; new opposition

6:1-15 The 4th sign: the multiplication of the loaves: this is the only miracle present in all 4 Gospels and it has a precedent in Elijah multiplying the barley loaves (2 Kings 4:42-44).

6:16-21 the 5th Sign: Jesus walks on the waters of the lake. The God of creation: “It is I” reminds us of “I am”, the name of God. This we will find repeatedly in John’s Gospel.

6:22-71 The Eucharistic Discourse in Capernaum: the Bread of Life, replacement of the manna. Up to verse 50, the “Bread of Life” is symbol of God’s revelation in Jesus; 51-59: it is the Eucharist.

4. The feast of Shelters (7:1-10:21) the great messianic revelation; the great rejection

Chapter 7 and 8: the Feast of the Tabernacles (Shelters) and seven controversies and dialogues. The tension between Jesus and his enemies is high: many times he states or it is stated that they wanted to kill him.

1. For healing on the Sabbath
2. “Come to me and drink”
3. About the origin of the Messiah
4. The forgiving of the woman caught in adultery (8:11)
5. Jesus proclaim: “I am the Light of the world” (8:12); he also present himself with the words of God’s name (8:24; 8:28; 8:58; 13:19; 18:5-8). Jesus also states: “Abraham, your father, rejoiced to see my day: he saw it and was glad” (8:56). Let us remember: “For if you have believed in Moses, you would have believed in me, because, he wrote about me” (5:44). Jesus claims the support of the Scriptures since the most important patriarchs and fathers of the faith testify on his behalf.
6. Jesus, ambassador of the Father (8:31-39);
7. Jesus and Abraham (8:39-59).

Chapter 9: The cure of the man born blind on a Sabbath. Jesus is the Light of the world (8:12; 9:5)

9:2 Jesus deny the automatic relationship between sickness and sin (Cf. Luke 12:1-7).

9:39-41 These words spell out the symbolic meaning of the cure.

Chapter 10 Jesus is the Good Shepherd. The words of Jesus are a commentary of the lack of faith of the Pharisees “the hired hands”. Another symbol to identify Jesus. It states the Jesus is God because it takes over the most important image of Yahweh in the O.T.: shepherd: *Psalms* 23; 80:1; *Genesis* 48:15; 49:14; *Micah* 7:14.

10:17-18 The sacrifice of Jesus is free and voluntary: he is in perfect control of his life and death.

5. The feast of Dedication (10:22-42) and the decision to kill Jesus

10:22 Feast of the Dedication of the Temple after the restoration of the Maccabees AD 164. Jesus' body takes the place of the temple (10:36 "consecrated" like the new temple).

6. Jesus moves towards his death (11:1-12:50)

The 7th sign, the greatest, the resurrection of Lazarus. Jesus is "The Resurrection and Life". This story is only in John. In Luke (*Luke* 16:19-31), we have the parable of the rich man and Lazarus where Lazarus is asked to come back to earth but it is impossible.

11:49-53 The official decision to kill Jesus and the unwanted prophecy of Caiaphas.

11:55 The last Passover during which Jesus' "hour" will come and the Paschal Mystery will be accomplished.

12:1-11 the Anointing at Bethany. The identity of Mary, here she is the sister of Martha and Lazarus. But in *Matthew* 26:6-13 and *Mark* 14:3-9, the woman is unknown, in the house of Simon the Leper, town the same, time the same, framework of the story the same. In *Luke* 7:36-48, the episode is apparently different, but house of Simon, the Pharisee and the gestures of the woman are the same. Personally, I like to follow John and see in Mary's gesture a continuation of her reverence for Jesus person (love) which is witnessed by Luke in *Luke* 10:38-42.

12:12-16 Solemn entrance of Jesus in Jerusalem: it is the crowd and not the disciples who prepared it (12:6).

12:20 "Greeks": they are non Jews, Gentiles, but proselytes to Judaism, some with circumcision others only with interest and appreciation for the Jewish monotheism.

12:23-36 The "Hour" of Jesus, of his Passion, Death and Resurrection. The image (parable) of the grain of wheat introduces the axiomatic sentence which goes with it: "Whoever loves his life loses it and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life". This sentence is the same as in the Synoptic Gospels (*Matthew* 10:39, *Mark* 8:35, *Luke* 9:24). John adds the how: in eternal life.

12:27-33 The agony in the garden in John and perhaps the transfiguration (Indirect narrative).

12:34-43 The unbelief of the Jews is paralleled to the unbelief of the crowd to the words of Isaiah. 41 As for Abraham and Moses, "Isaiah saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him". This is a commentary by the evangelist. The others concerning Abraham and Moses are said by Jesus himself.

12:44-50 Jesus shouts to challenge to believe and explains the unbelief: a spiritual blindness, a choice not to see. Jesus did not come to condemn (12:47 and 3:16-17).

The Book of Glory (13:1-20:31) Jesus' Hour: The Passover of the Lamb of God

1. Jesus' last meal with his disciples (13:1-17:26)

13:1...Solemn beginning of the Book of Glory (13-20): Jesus will love humanity to the end, fulfilling the task the Father has entrusted to him, before going back to the Father. The washing of the feet and the discourses precede the account of the passion to interpret them for the Christian reader. This is the only extended example of esoteric (i.e. reserved for a small group) teaching of disciples in John's Gospel.

13:1-20 The Washing of the Feet: it takes place during the Last Supper. In John, it takes the place of the Institution of the Eucharist. It is presented as a "pattern" (model) of the Crucifixion: it symbolizes cleansing from sin by sacrificial death. It is like a dramatization by Jesus himself of the passage in Luke 22:27-30 where there is also the image of sitting at table in the kingdom: connection between Eucharist and Washing of feet.

13:17 it contains the first Beatitude in John's Gospel: the Beatitude of active love. The second we will find in the episode Thomas, after the resurrection: the Beatitude of Faith (20:29).

13:23 "One of his disciples, the one whom Jesus loved was reclining at Jesus' side (close to Jesus' breast)". The disciple is not given a name but is understood as John, the writer of the Gospel (21:24). He is present in 18:15; 19:26; 19:35; 20:2; 21:7; 21:20.

13:31-38 Introduction to the two Farewell Discourses and Priestly Prayer of Jesus. These seem to be Johannine compositions including saying of Jesus at the Last Supper or on other occasions, modeled on the similar farewell discourses in the O.T. (Moses, Joshua, David) and N.T. like Peter's and Paul's in the Acts. The introduction speaks of Jesus' departure (13:1 and 13:33 and 36) and return (14:3 a rare reference to the second coming of Jesus (*parousia*) in John's Gospel).

14:8 "Show us the Father" is Philip's request: pathetic if we think of God's prohibition of images which prompts the Gentiles to challenge the Jews in exile: "Where is your God?" as in *Psalms* 42:3 and 10. Here, Jesus is the "image of the invisible God" (*Colossians* 1:15). The uniqueness and vital importance of the Incarnation.

14:16 "Another Advocate" Jesus is the first advocate

14:31 This seems to end the discourses, but then Jesus continues.

15:1-16:4 *Discourse of the union of Jesus with his disciples.* His words become a monologue and goes beyond the immediate crisis of the departure of Jesus.

15:1-17 The symbol of the vine is present in the O.T., usually it represents Israel: Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:8-17 (in 80:15 Call to Yahweh to visit this vine...); Wisdom describes himself as a vine (Sirah 24:17).

16:13 “the things that are coming” meaning the Passion and Death of Jesus.

17:1-26 *The Priestly Prayer of Jesus*: Jesus prays to the Father for himself (1-5), then he intercedes for the disciples who are there, at that moment (6-19) and for those in the future (20-21). Pope Benedict XVI, in his book “Jesus of Nazareth”, writes that the Priestly Prayer is modeled on the Day of Atonement (Expiation), Leviticus 16: first Jesus prays for himself, like the High Priest does, then for the disciples. He “consecrates” himself for them so that they on their turn may be “consecrated in truth” (17-19). Consecration=to be totally set apart for God, also sacrificed.

17:3 Only here Jesus calls himself: Jesus Christ, may be catechetical addition.

2. The Passion 18, 19

In John’s Passion, Judas doesn’t kiss Jesus and there is no account of the question of the High Priest to Jesus about his divinity, but the reason of Jesus’ death is the same as from the words of the Jews to Pontius Pilate in 19:7.

18:28 The Jews take Jesus to the Praetorium in the morning of Friday (Preparation Day 19:31). They do not enter “in order not to be defiled so that they could eat the Passover”: in the evening it would be the Great Sabbath already. The Synoptic Gospels give the impression that the Thursday Night supper was the Passover meal (Mark 14:12). John’s chronology is more accurate. May be Jesus anticipated his Passover Meal with his disciples when he instituted the Eucharist.

18:28-19:16 Jesus in front of Pontius Pilate. The trial with Pontius Pilate is much developed in John’s Gospel. The trial in front of Herod is missing. The dealing of Pontius Pilate with Jesus is like a play/drama with seven scenes. The division in scenes is given by the movements of Pilate going out to speak with the Jews and coming in to speak with Jesus.

19:5-14 Jesus is presented to the crowd as king and made sit on the chair of judgment in the *Lithostrotos* (stone pavement). By the way, archeologists have unearthed such a pavement in the fortress Antonia in Jerusalem. John tells us that it was noon on *Parasceve*/Preparation Day for the Passover (verse 14). This was the hour when the priests began to slaughter the lambs in the temple (Cf. Jesus, the Lamb of God 1:29). This is the hour of Jesus’ death sentence. He will actually die at 3pm as in all the Gospels (In Mark Jesus is crucified at noon but dies at 3pm). The way John describes the conclusion of the trial shows that Jesus is the true King (King of love) and judge of the world.

In John we have the last words of Jesus to Mary and John, then “I thirst” and the last “It is finished”. In Matthew and Mark, we have only the cry of Jesus. “My God, why have you abandoned me”. In Luke the other last words: “Father, forgive them...”, “Today, you will be with me...” and “Father, into your hands...” These are the 7 words of Jesus on the cross.

19:31-37 The piercing of Jesus’ side (Cf. What we wrote for John the Baptist crying: Behold the Lamb of God...).

19:30 “He handed over his spirit”: double nuance of dying and passing on the Holy Spirit (Cf. 7:39 “There was of course no spirit yet, because Jesus had not been glorified”). Typical of John: “he handed over...”. In Matthew: “He gave up his spirit”: Jesus is in control (Matthew 27:50). In Luke and Mark: “He breathed his last”.

19:38-41 In John, Nicodemus brings the spices and they bind the body of Jesus with the burial cloths and the spices according to the Jewish burial customs. In the other gospels, the spices are prepared but they bury provisionally without. We can assume that even in John the burial was hurried and not definitive. On Sunday morning, this is what the women intended to do: to wash, to anoint and to wrap the body of Jesus for good.

3. The Resurrection; commissioning of the disciples (20:1-29)

In John, the sign of the empty tomb is developed from Luke 24:12 and it is already a proof of the resurrection in the faith of John, the beloved disciple. The apparitions are also more developed in line with Luke.

20:17 “Stop holding on me” Jesus is going to the Father for his glorification (Ascension) and to start giving the Holy Spirit and sending the apostles in mission (20:21). In John, everything happened in the first Sunday evening.

Moreover, the apparitions have 5 characteristics: 1. They are unexpected; 2. The initiative belongs to Jesus; 3. Jesus identifies himself; 4. The disciples are happy to see the Lord and now they understand. 5. He sends them to mission.

The understanding of the disciples at the resurrection is a quality leap: for the two of Emmaus, they see the full *kegygma*; Mary Magdalene is invited to pass from simple human love to supernatural love in recognizing in Jesus the redeemer, the Lord; Thomas is called to faith and Peter to pastoral love.

Epilogue: The Resurrection Appearance in Galilee (21:1-25) The Risen Jesus teaches the Church.

Chapter 21 is an addition by John’s disciples, but it is present in all manuscripts.

Introduction

1. The book of Revelation can be understood only against the historical background that occasioned its writing. It is a genre which is called “apocalyptic” and it represent a literature of resistance in times of difficulty or crisis. In this case, it is a work of resistance to the cruel persecution unleashed by emperor Domitian (AD 81-96).
2. The resistance is expressed by visions of symbolic images which have to be interpreted and explained with reference to historical figures or ideal concepts. It is not helpful sometimes to visualize the symbols, since their meaning is mostly allegoric and their visualization may result repugnant even when concerned with positive or glorious figures. Most of the representations are inspired by similar allegoric messages in the books of the Old Testament, especially Ezekiel, Zechariah and Daniel.
3. Symbolic descriptions are not to be taken literally nor have to be visualized: they have to be interpreted and explained as much as possible. Especially the vindictive language of the book of Revelation have to be understood symbolically: the cry for vengeance of the Christian martyrs is a literary device to arouse a feeling of horror for apostasy and rebellion that will be severely punished by God.
4. The perspective is eschatological (ultimate salvation and victory is placed at the end of the present age, when Christ will come again at the *Parousia*), yet the victory is presented as already happened at the end of a decisive fight against Satan. The defeat of Satan is followed by the everlasting reign of God. The book ends with the vision of the heavenly Jerusalem and the invocation to Christ to come.
5. Much of the book is difficult to understand and heavy on the side of punishment, but the many passages which are clear are gloriously beautiful and in line with the rest of the New Testament revelations. We can see the book of Revelation as a strong and beautiful conclusion of the book of God’s word which is the Bible.
6. The book of Revelation remains valid and meaningful for Christians of all time in the face of apparently insuperable evil, both from without and within, all Christians are called to trust in Jesus’ promise: “Behold, I am with you until the end of the age” (*Matthew 28:20*). Those who remain faithful and steadfast in their faith and confidence in the Risen Lord need have no fear. Every kind of suffering, contradiction, persecution, even martyrdom: all will end with the victory of Christ. This is the enduring message of the book: it is a message of hope and consolation and a challenge for those who dare to believe.
7. The author is named John. He doesn’t say that he is the apostle. Many of the ancient Fathers of the Church believed that he is, the same as the author of the Fourth Gospel and the letters. The time is the same. The geographical area is one

traditionally attributed the John, the apostle. Modern biblical scholars think that the actual author is probably a disciple of John the apostle.

DIVISION

6. PROLOGUE (1:1-3)
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NOTES

1. PROLOGUE (1:1-3)

The Prologue spells the source of the prophecy, the content and the audience: all to be included in the Epilogue which has the same themes and expressions. The Prologue and Epilogue give an extraordinary sense of unity and accomplishment to the book and an urgency which the reader cannot fail to be impressed with.

1:3 “Blessed is he who reads aloud the words of this prophesy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written therein; for the time is near”. This is the first of seven beatitudes:

14:13 “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord...”;

16:15 “Blessed is he who is awake and keeps his clothes ready...”;

19:9 “Blessed are they who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lord”;

20:6 “Blessed and holy is he who shares in the first resurrection”;

22:7 “Blessed is he who keeps the words of this prophecy...”;

22:14 “Blessed are those who wash their robes as to have the right to the tree of life and enter the city...”.

1:3 “The appointed time...” of the second coming of the Lord Jesus.

I. LETTERS TO THE CHURCHES OF ASIA (1:4-3:22)

1:4 “Asia” : Asia Minor, present day Turkey.

1:4 In Exodus 3, God is “The One Who Is” (probably stressing the dimension of eternity as a continuous present, a concept which befits God in Himself, in eternity). Here we look also at the past and the future: the Divine Name is enlarged to embrace the past and the future: it is God in the dimensions of salvation history which stretches in time.

1:17 Christ is the First and the Last: the beginning of all creation and the purpose, the end of all (Cf. Colossians 1:15 ff, Acts 22:13).

1:19 Here we have the 3 parts of the book of Revelation: 1. The Vision (1:10-20); 2. The situation of the Seven Churches (chapter 2 and 3); 3. The events in Chapter 6-22.

(Chapter 4 and 5 describe the heavenly worship and the vision of the Lamb and the book with the seven seals: it is like an anchorage in eternity).

2:7 The Tree of Life is blossoming in the Heavenly Jerusalem (22:2).

2:11 The “second death” is the eternal damnation (20:6, 14; 21:8).

2:13 The cult to the emperor to whom Satan has given the throne.

2:14 Cf. *Numbers* 25 and 31. It is a compromise with idolatry (adultery/fornication= idolatry).

2:17 “The hidden manna”= food of life and “The white stone” is a kind of ID with the new name which is given in baptism. It is secret like new name of the Messiah (19:12).

2:20 Jezebel is the symbol of syncretism with the pagan cults.

2:27-28 Echoes of *Psalms* 2 and the “Morning Star” is a share in the victory of the Risen Christ who is “The Morning Star” (22:16).

3:5 The elect whose names are in the Book of Life will be acknowledge by Christ in heaven (*Matthew* 10:32).

3:7 “Key of David”: to enter the city of David, Jerusalem. The key is the symbol of power (*Isaiah* 22:22).

3:8 “Open door” Cf. Acts 14:27 “God has opened the door of faith to the pagans”. It means opportunity of believing, being converted and living.

3:18

- –gold= God’s grace
- -white garments= symbol of upright life
- -eye ointment=healing grace to remove spiritual blindness

3:20 Christ invites all to the messianic banquet in heaven (*Isaiah* 25:6; *Luke* 14:15; 22:30).

II. GOD AND THE LAMB IN HEAVEN (4:1-5:14)

4:1-11 Description of heaven. God is on the throne but no name is given or image of God (mystery, transcendence).

4:4 The 24 Elders represent the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles (kingship and priesthood): Cf. 21:12-14.

4:6-8 The four faces represent creation: wild animals, domesticated animals, birds and human beings. Christian tradition sees the symbols of the 4 gospels: lion (Mark), ox (Luke), eagle (John) and human being (Matthew). The creatures are cherubim.

15:1 The Scroll: God’s plan for humanity. The symbol of the numbers: 4 signifies the world; 6 imperfection; 7 perfection and totality; 12 the tribes of Israel, also the New Israel, meaning the whole of humanity called to salvation; or the 12 apostles; 1000 immensity.

15:6 Horns are the symbol of power; eyes the symbol of knowledge.

VI. THE SEVEN SEALS, TRUMPETS AND PLAGUES, WITH INTERLUDES (6:1-16:21)

A series of seven disasters begins as each seal is broken (6:1-8:1) followed by a similar series as seven trumpets sound (8:2-11:19) and as seven angels pour bowls on earth causing plagues (15:1-16:21). These gloomy sequences are interrupted by longer or shorter scenes suggesting the triumph of God and his witnesses (chapter 7, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14).

6:1-7 The first rider (on white horse) is a conquering power; the second rider (red horse) is a symbol of a bloody war; the third (black horse) is the symbol of famine; the fourth (pale green horse) is the symbol of death itself with hell. Verse 8 gives a summary.

6:12 The sixth seal is opened: the Judgment of God: symbolic description of the cosmic upheaval of the Lord’s Day, in answer to the martyrs’ prayers.

7:1-17 The interlude of two visions precedes the breaking of the seventh seal: the first vision contemplates the elect receiving the mark of belonging to God (seal) as protection;

the second vision portrays the faithful Christians before the throne of God, to encourage those on earth to persevere even unto death.

8:1-13 The breaking of the seventh seal produces seven symbolic disasters each announced by a trumpet blast.

8:2-5 Short liturgy: the prayers of the Saints obtain from God the punishment, represented by the censer thrown and the burning coals: the seven angels with the seven trumpets execute the punishment on earth, sea and sky.

8:11 “Wormwood” : an extremely bitter and malignant plant symbolizing God’s punishment.

8:13 The eagle, by crying three times “Woe” announces the next three plagues. The final “woe” announces the last plague, released by the seventh trumpet blast, which includes also the plagues of Chapter 16.

9:1 “A star” stays for an angel (1:20) and the abyss is locked by an angel (20:1), but here the avenging angel opens the abyss and the locusts come out to punish the inhabitants of the earth.

9:13-21 An allusion to the invasion of the Parthians living east of the river Euphrates.

9:20 “The works of their hands” stays for the idols.

Chapter 10:1-11:14: The interlude which precedes the sounding of the seventh trumpet, includes two scenes: the small scroll (10:1-11) and then the measuring of the temple and the two witnesses (11:1-14).

10:10 “Seven thunders”: God’s voice announcing judgment and doom (*Psalms* 29:3-9).

10:8-11 The scroll contains the announcement of the last judgment. It is sweet because it predicts the final victory of God’s people; it is sour because it also announces their suffering. The image is from *Ezekiel* (3:1-3).

Chapter 11:1-14 The Two Witnesses

11:1 The temple and the altar symbolize the New Israel and the Christians.

11:2 The court of the Gentiles represents that part which is victim of the persecution of Nero (AD 63-67) who is the “beast from the abyss. “Two” because in this way their witness is valid. Most probably (and most beautifully) Peter and Paul.

11:8 The Jerusalem that rejects God = Rome.

Chapter 12:1-14:20 The central section of Revelation portrays the power of Evil (the dragon) in opposition to God and his people. First, the dragon pursues the woman about to give birth, but the child is saved. Then Michael and his angels cast the dragon out of heaven (12:7-9). After this, the dragon tries to attack the boy by attacking member of the Church represented by the woman (12:13-17). A beast, symbolizing the Roman empire, then becomes the dragon's agent (13:1-10). A second beast arises symbolizing the Anti-Christ (13:11-18). This is followed by a vision of the Lamb and the proclamation of the imminent judgment upon the world with the image of the wine of God's wrath (14:1-20).

12:1-6 The Woman is symbol of God's people of the Old and New Testament. The desert is the traditional refuge of the afflicted. The boy is the Messiah, Jesus.

12:15 "water from the dragon": it changes like a sea-monster (*Psalms* 74:13-14).

13:1-10 This wild beast represents the Roman Empire: the 7 heads are the emperors.

13:3 A popular legend had that the emperor Nero would come back to life, after having died of self-inflicted wound (AD 68). Here is Domitian (AD 81-86) who continues the persecution like Nero.

13:6 "Blasphemies": the emperors wanted to be called Gods.

13:11-18 The second beast represents the false prophets who accompany the false Messiah (First Beast). Christians had either to worship the emperor and his image or suffer martyrdom.

13:18 -666: each letter of the alphabet in Hebrew or Greek has a numerical value. The most likely candidate of the 666 number is CAESAR NERO, the Greek form of whose name in Hebrew letters gives the required sum.

14:1-5 The Lamb and companions. "Virgins": free from idolatry which is described as adultery and fornication.

144 000: the number represent the whole Christian people called "The Israel of God" (*Galatians* 6:16). $12 \times 12 \times 1000 = 144\ 000$ (12 tribes, 12 Apostles, and infinity) (Also in the beginning of James' letter : "The Twelve Tribes of the Dispersion" (*James* 1:1) represent all the Christian people).

14:6-13 The three angels proclaim imminent judgment on the pagan world and the fall of Babylon (pagan Rome).

14:10-11 "The wine of God's anger": the image is from the Prophets: *Isaiah*, *Jeremiah*. Eternal punishment in the "pool of burning sulfur" is also reserved to the Devil, the Beast and the False Prophet (19:20; 20:10, 21:8).

14:14-20 Reaping the harvest and treading the grapes symbolizes the doom of the ungodly (*Isaiah* 63:1-6).

15:1-16:21 The Seven Seals: the final punishment, preceded by the Victors and their canticle (the canticle of Moses).

15:2 “The sea of glass with fire”: glory obtained by sacrifice.

16:12 “The kings of the East” : the Parthians. They gave trouble to the Romans, they were good archers and obtained a great victory in AD 62 against the Romans. Here they gather with the others for the final battle at Armageddon (Megiddo: the most ancient city, many times destroyed and rebuilt).

III. THE PUNISHMENT OF BABYLON AND THE DESTRUCTION OF THE PAGAN NATIONS (17:1-19:10)

The punishment of Babylon is now described as a past event and under the image of the great harlot who leads peoples astray into idolatry.

17:3 “Scarlet Beast”: the Roman empire.

17:11 “The beast”: Nero who was thought to have died and to have come back to life.

17:12-13 Perhaps, the kings of the Parthians who will accompany Nero to regain power. The Lamb and his companions will conquer them (19:11-21).

17:16 Inspired by *Ezekiel* in the 16 chapter about the corruption of Jerusalem (the allegory of idolatry (16:37)). The ten pagan kings unwittingly accomplish God’s will.

18:1-9:4 A lamentation (dirge) over the fall of Babylon(Rome) as if it had already happened. Old Testament vindictive language. The section concludes with a joyous canticle of the future glory of Heaven.

19:4 “Amen. Alleluja”: ‘Alleluja’ is found only here in the New Testament: an exclamation of joy and praise in the Hebrew Psalms, important in Jewish liturgy.

19:5-10 A victory song, sung by the entire Church, celebrating the marriage of the Lamb, the union of the Messiah with the community of the believers.

19:11-16 Symbolic description of the exalted Christ.

19:12, 13, 16 : the names of the victorious Horseman:

- 12 transcendent name because God,
- 13 Word of God: he reveals the Father,
- 16 King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

19:17-20 The invitation to the birds of prey to come to devour the flesh of the enemy is already in Ezekiel 39:4, 17-20.

20:1-6 “one thousand” means a very long period of time from his victory (his resurrection) and the Second Coming/the end of the world.

20:12 “Scrolls” =records of the actions of individual people; “Book of Life”: the roll in which the names of the redeemed are kept (21:27).

VI. THE NEW CREATION

21:1-22:5 A description of God’s eternal kingdom in heaven under the symbol of New Heaven and a New Earth (*Isaiah* 65:17-25; 66:22; *Matthew* 19:28).

21:22 “No temple”: Christ is present throughout the life of the Church: “Its temple is the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb.” “When two or more are together, I am in their midst” (*Matthew* 18:20); “I will be with you to the end of the age” (*Matthew* 28:20); “Neither in Jerusalem nor on this mountain, but in Spirit and in truth” (*John* 4:21).

VII. EPILOGUE (22:6-21)

The book of Revelation ends with an epilogue consisting in a series of warnings and exhortations, forming an INCLUSION with the Prologue, by resuming its themes and expressions (1:1-3).

22:7 “I am coming soon”: Christ is the speaker, the urgency exemplifies what was announced in the beginning.

22:17 “The Bride” is the Church.

22:20 “Come, Lord Jesus!” in Aramaic: “Marana Tha! An invocation probably echoing an early liturgy. Cf. 1 Corinthians 16:22. If the words are divided differently (Maran Atha: The Lord has come), it becomes a confession of faith in the incarnation. The first rendition is more likely, given the corresponding prayer in Greek.

The Epilogue is the passionate conclusion of the book: the reality of the persecution and the faith in God’s justice, the vision of the falling of Babylon and the victory of the victims become an act of faith in the future.

The fervent prayer for the Second Coming of Jesus as Judge of the universe and the One who will usher the new dimension of eternity gives relevance to the beautiful heavenly liturgies contained in the book.

The punishment of the damned is the vindication of the prophetic message throughout the Bible. God is all in all, the ultimate destination of humanity and the New Heaven and the New Earth and the Heavenly Jerusalem are the undeniable content of the Whole Book of God, the Bible, (The Word of God) and humanity's destiny and call to glory, to life eternal in the bosom of the Trinity.

In this sense, the Book of Revelation is a fitting conclusion of the whole Bible.

CHAPTER BY CHAPTER PROSPECT

Prologue:	1:1-3
Vision of Glorious Christ	1:4-20
Letters to the 7 churches	2,3
God in his throne in heaven	4
God gives the scroll to the Lamb who was slain	5
Breaking of the 6 seals:	6
Invasion of Parthians and consequences: war, Famine, plague	
Persecution of Christians (also 13, 16:6, 17:6)	6:10-11
God's faithful are preserved and eventually rejoice in Heaven	7:1-8 (14:1-5) 7:9-17 (15:1-5)
Breaking of the 7 th seal: the seven trumpets	
The prayers of the Saints	8:1-5
God wants to save even the enemies, He Sends plagues so that they may repent	8:6-13, 9 (16)
They do not repent; they are hardened in their sin	

So God destroys them	
The Angel announces the Last Punishment.	10
The seer eats the small scroll	
The Two Witnesses, the 7 th trumpet, the hymn of the saved	11
The Woman and the Dragon	12
The Beast	13
The companions of the Lamb. The Day of Judgment is announced	14
The hymn of Moses and of the Lamb	15-16
The 7 bowls of plague	
The great Prostitute	17
Lament over Babylon	18
Hymns of victory in Heaven	19:1-10
Defeat of the Beast by Christ in glory	19:11-21
Prosperity of the Church	20:1-6
New assault of Satan and his annihilation	20:7-10
Judgment of the dead	20:11-15
Kingdom of Happiness, Death is destroyed	21:1-8
The Church, the New Jerusalem, still on earth	21:9-27
Nations will come, bringing their treasures... “others must stay outside: dogs, murderers...”	22:1-15
EPILOGUE: “Marana Tha! Come, Lord Jesus!”	

REVELATION'S OVERVIEW (New Jerusalem Bible)

We cannot understand the REVELATION without taking into account the historical conditions that gave birth to it. It is first and foremost a TRACT for the times, like the apocalypses (particularly Daniel) that preceded it and on which it draws. It was written during a period of disturbance and bitter persecution, to increase the hope and the determination of the infant Church. Jesus had said: "Be brave! I have conquered the world" (John 16:33); how therefore could God permit this mortal attack to his own Church?

John's answer begins by recalling the classical themes of the Prophets, notably that of the "Great Day of Yahweh" (Amos 5:18). When the chosen people had been enslaved by the Assyrians, the Chaldeans and Greeks, when they had been scattered abroad and nearly annihilated by persecutions, the prophets had promised: the day is coming, and soon, when God will liberate his people from their oppressors, and restore their independence, and help them to conquer their enemies, after he had punished them and brought them to the point of extinction.

When John wrote THE REVELATION, the Church, the new chosen people, had just been decimated by persecution: Cf. 6:10-11; 13; 16:6; 17:6; Rome and its empire (the Beast) was only a tool, but a tool wielded by Satan, Cf. 12; 13:2,4, the great and only enemy of Christ and his people.

In the opening vision, John describes God as emperor, enthroned in Heaven; He is master of human destiny, Ch. 4, and to the Lamb he gives the scroll that foretells the doom of the persecutors, Ch.5; the vision that proclaims a foreign invasion (the Parthians) and its familiar concomitants, war, famine, plague, Ch. 6.

During this, God's people will be preserved, Ch. 7:1-8 (Compare 14:1-5) and eventually rejoice triumphantly in Heaven, Ch. 7:9-17 (Compare 15:1-5).

God, however, wants to save their enemies as well, so, instead of destroying them immediately, he warned them as he had warned Egypt and its Pharaoh, by a series of plagues, Ch. 8-9 (Compare 16).

The persecutors are only hardened in their evil determination and God is forced to destroy them, Ch. 17. Their aim was to corrupt the world and get it to worship Satan (an allusion to the Emperor-worship in pagan Rome).

After this comes a lament over fallen Babylon (Rome) Ch.18 and hymns of victory in Heaven, Ch. 19:1-10. There is a second vision of the destruction of the Beast (Rome, the persecutor), this time by Christ in glory, 19:11-21, that begins an era of prosperity for the Church, 20:1-6, which is to end by a new attack by Satan, 20:7ff, followed by the

