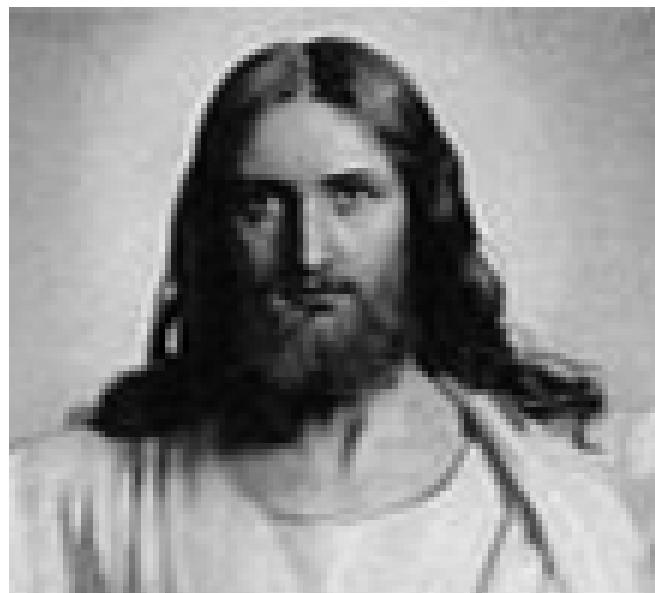


GOD'S LOVE IN OUR LIVES

DIVINITY NOTES FOR TANZANIAN HIGH SCHOOLS

BY BRO. RIKARDO MARIA, UNWA (2018 EDITION)



ATTENTION, PLEASE: YOU HAVE BEEN SENT A "BIBLE BANGER"...

**You may say: "I am too tired".
But the Lord says: "I will give you rest" (Mt 11:28).**

**You may say: "I cannot go on".
But the Lord says: "My grace is enough for you" (2Cor 12:9).**

**You may say: "I cannot figure things out".
But the Lord says: "I am the way" (Jn 14:6).**

**You may say: "I am not able".
But the Lord says: "God is perfectly able to enrich you with every grace, so that you always have enough for every conceivable need" (2Cor. 9:8).**

**You may say: "I cannot manage".
But the Lord says: "Give, and there will be gifts for you" (Phil 4:19).**

**You may say: "I am not smart enough".
But the Lord says: "You exist in Christ Jesus, who for us was made wisdom from God" (1Cor. 1:30).**

**You may say: "I am afraid".
But the Lord says: "Every hair on your head has been counted. So there is no need to be afraid" (Mt 10:30-31).**

**You may say: "I am always frustrated".
But the Lord says: "Don't worry about tomorrow" (Mt 6:34).**

**You may say: "I cannot forgive myself".
But the Lord says: "My child, your sins are forgiven" (Mk 2:5).**

**You may say: "I feel all alone".
But the Lord says: "I shall not fail you or desert you" (Heb 13:5).**

**You may say: "Nobody really loves me".
But the Lord says: "You must love one another just as I have loved you" (Jn 13:34).**

**You may say: "It is impossible".
But the Lord says: "Things that are impossible by human resources are possible for God" (Lk 18:27).**

OBJECTIVES

- To deepen the awareness of the religious dimension of life as contained in God's revelation and Christian history.
- To hold Gospel values as basis for judgments and choices in living in a changing world.
- To better understand the Christian faith, knowing how God revealed himself in human history and appreciating his powerful love present in the Church.
- To develop the capacity to deeply communicate with God.
- To help good relationships within the society, putting into practice what acquired from the studies.
- To prepare for a model life according to God's word and plan on men and women.
- To lay an adequate academic foundation to those who will pursue religious studies at higher levels.

TEXT

The Revised Standard Version **Bible (RSV)** remains the main text recommended for the subject.

NOTES

These notes are only a help to understand the biblical text according to its origin and environment. They keep to essentials and give you a general idea. They are not concerned to involve you in every detail but to show your way around. You can always come back according to your set time.

How to use them:

1. First humbly pray in order to understand God's word.
2. Read attentively questions and answers in the introductions to every book.
3. Re-read their most important concepts: to help you in identifying them, they are written in bold font.
4. Pay particular attention to the lateral boxes.
5. Read one by one the observations which help read the text of the relevant book of the Bible.
6. Read the quotation itself in the Bible.
7. Re-read its interpretation.
8. Try to narrate what you have read.
9. Think how you and we all should apply the relative message in daily life.
10. After ending all the important quotations of a biblical book with their interpretation, re-read its introduction's questions and answers.
11. Try to summarise the answers.
12. Attempt at least one relevant study question among those proposed at the end.

How to answer the questions:

In answering a question which wants you to comment a quotation, first you have to fully identify its statement, for example who, when, where, why and to whom it was spoken. Then remark what is special with it and its place in the whole Bible's teaching on the matter. Finally, explain your opinion on its relevance or application to today's similar situations, without going to much far from the words' context.

In answering a question which refers to the teaching of a whole book from the Bible, you have to express it in the best way in relation to its time of composition, destination, purpose, themes etc. Then remark what is special with it and its place in the whole Bible's teaching on the matter. Finally, explain your opinion on its relevance or application to today's similar situations, without going to much far from its context.

Be always precise in using religious terms.

NATIONAL EXAMINATION

The examination will test the candidates' ability to:

- comment on biblical texts and concepts
- recall important events applicable to Christian daily life
- use biblical examples and teachings in solving problems so to live the principles that govern the persons and the community

The examination will comprise **two papers**, namely: 114/1 Divinity 1 and 114/2 Divinity 2.

Divinity 1 will be of 3 hours duration and will consist of two sections:

Section A will consist of three (3) essay questions from **Historical Books**, out of which the candidates will be required to answer two (2) questions. Each question will carry twenty (20) marks. Section B will consist of five (5) essay questions from **Prophetic Books**, out of which the candidates will be required to answer any three (3) questions. Each question will carry twenty (20) marks.

Divinity 2 will be of 3 hours duration and will consist of two (2) parts:

Part I will focus on the **Four Gospels** and will consist of four (4) essay questions, out of which the candidates will be required to answer three (3). Each question will carry twenty (20) marks.

Part II will focus on the **Apostolic Age** and will consist of three (3) essay questions, out of which the candidates will be required to answer two (2). Each question will carry twenty (20) marks.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- The African Bible
- The New Jerusalem Bible
- Christian Community Bible
- Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church
- The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church by the Pontifical Biblical Commission
- The Bible and Morality by the Pontifical Biblical Commission
- Jesus of Nazareth by Pope Benedict XVI
- The Jerome Biblical Commentary
- The New Jerome Biblical Commentary
- How to Read the Old Testament by Etienne Charpentier
- How to Read the New Testament by Etienne Charpentier
- The Gospel of John – A Commentary by M. Mullins
- Messengers of God - Divinity One by G. Fihavango
- Christ and Christianity - Divinity Two by G. Fihavango & J. A. Simalenga

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

PAPER ONE: THE OLD TESTAMENT

Settings

Israel's faith and life

Prophecy and prophets

Some historical books (1210-560 BC)

The book of Judges: Uneven leaders for God's unshaped people

The books of Samuel: The rise of the kingdom

The books of Kings: From glory to ashes

Some books named after prophets (760-518 BC)

The book of Amos: God's demand of social justice

The book of Hosea: Bonds of God's faithful love

The book of Isaiah: Faith and history

The book of Jeremiah: Kind prophet called to root up and tear down

The book of Ezekiel: The new society on God's land

The Second Isaiah: God's servant and the new exodus

The books of Haggai and Zechariah: The task of restoration

PAPER TWO: THE NEW TESTAMENT

Settings

Jesus' life and message (6 BC – 30 AD)

Jesus' origins

Jesus' words and deeds

Jesus' identity

Jesus' last days in Jerusalem

Jesus' resurrection

The apostolic age (30-100 AD)

The four Gospels

Some material common to all Gospels

Some material peculiar to each Gospel

The Gospel of Mark: Jesus, the Christ, Son of God

The Gospel of Matthew: Jesus, new Moses who taught his Church the true perfection

The Gospel of Luke: Jesus, kind but rejected prophet come to save everyone

The Gospel of John: Jesus, God's Wisdom become our way, truth and life

John's Gospel compared to the Synoptics

Acts of the Apostles: The Church's witness for all peoples to the end of time

Some epistles by Paul

Paul

First letter to the Thessalonians: Waiting for the Lord

Letter to the Galatians: From slavery to freedom

First letter to the Corinthians: Christian life in a multinational city

Letter to the Romans: Salvation through faith in Christ

AT THE END OF OUR COURSE

INTRODUCTION

"In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins" (1Jn 4:9-10).

❖ *What is the plan of God for man?*

God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness **freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life.** In the fullness of time, God the Father sent his Son as the Redeemer and Saviour of mankind, fallen into sin, thus calling all into his Church and, through the work of the Holy Spirit, making them adopted children and heirs of his eternal happiness.

❖ *Why does man have a desire for God?*

God himself, in creating man in his own image, has written upon his heart the desire to see him. Even if this desire is often ignored, God never ceases to draw man to himself because only in God will he find and live the fullness of truth and happiness for which he never stops searching. By nature and by vocation, therefore, **man is a religious being, capable of entering into communion with God.** This intimate and vital bond with God confers on man his fundamental dignity.

❖ *How is it possible to know God with only the light of human reason?*

Starting from creation, that is from the world and from the human person, **through reason alone one can know God** with certainty as the origin and end of the universe, as the highest good and as infinite truth and beauty.

❖ *Is the light of reason alone sufficient to know the mystery of God?*

In coming to a knowledge of God by the light of reason alone man experiences many difficulties. Indeed, **on his own he is unable to enter into the intimacy of the divine mystery.** This is why he stands in need of being enlightened by God's revelation, not only about those things that exceed his understanding, but also about those religious and moral truths which of themselves are not beyond the grasp of human reason, so that even in the present condition of the human race, they can be known by all with ease, with firm certainty and with no admixture of error.

❖ *What does God reveal to man?*

God in his goodness and wisdom 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 this plan, all people by the grace of the Holy Spirit are to share in the divine life as adopted "sons" in the only begotten Son of God.

❖ *What are the first stages of God's Revelation?*

From the very beginning, God manifested himself to our first parents, Adam and Eve, and invited them to intimate communion with himself. **After their fall, he did not cease his revelation** to them but promised salvation for all their descendants. After the flood, he made a covenant with Noah, a covenant between himself and all living beings.

❖ *What is the full and definitive stage of God's Revelation?*

The full and definitive stage of God's revelation is accomplished in his Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, the mediator and fullness of Revelation. He, being the only-begotten Son of God made man, is the perfect and definitive Word of the Father. **In the sending of the Son and the gift of the Spirit, Revelation is now fully complete,** although the faith of the Church must gradually grasp its full significance over the course of centuries.

❖ *Why and in what way is divine revelation transmitted?*

God "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4), that is, of Jesus Christ. For this reason, **Christ must be proclaimed to all** according to his own command, "Go forth and teach all nations" (Mt 28:19). And this is brought about by Apostolic Tradition.

❖ *What is Apostolic Tradition?*

Apostolic Tradition is the transmission of the message of Christ, brought about from the very beginnings of Christianity by means of preaching, bearing witness, institutions, worship, and inspired writings. **The apostles transmitted all they received from Christ and learned from the Holy Spirit to their successors,** the bishops, and through them to all generations until the end of the world.

❖ *In what ways does Apostolic Tradition occur?*

Apostolic Tradition occurs in two ways: through the living transmission of the word of God (also simply called Tradition) and through Sacred Scripture which is the same proclamation of salvation in written form.



Adam and Eve
ashamed after
original sin.

❖ What is the relationship between Tradition and Sacred Scripture?

Tradition and Sacred Scripture are bound closely together and communicate one with the other. Each of them makes present and fruitful in the Church the mystery of Christ. They flow out of the same divine well-spring and together make up one sacred deposit of faith from which the Church derives her certainty about revelation.

❖ To whom is the deposit of faith entrusted?

The Apostles entrusted the deposit of faith to the whole of the Church. Thanks to its supernatural sense of faith **the people of God as a whole, assisted by the Holy Spirit and guided by the Magisterium of the Church**, never ceases to welcome, to penetrate more deeply and to live more fully from the gift of divine revelation.

❖ Why does Sacred Scripture teach the truth?

Because God himself is the author of Sacred Scripture. For this reason **it is said to be inspired and to teach without error those truths which are necessary for our salvation**. The Holy Spirit inspired the human authors who wrote what he wanted to teach us. The Christian faith, however, is not a "religion of the Book", but of the Word of God – "not a written and mute word, but incarnate and living" (Saint Bernard of Clairvaux).

❖ How is Sacred Scripture to be read?

Sacred Scripture must be read and **interpreted with the help of the Holy Spirit and under the guidance of the Magisterium of the Church** according to three criteria: 1) it must be read with attention to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture; 2) it must be read within the living Tradition of the Church; 3) it must be read with attention to the analogy of faith, that is, the inner harmony which exists among the truths of the faith themselves.

❖ What role does Sacred Scripture play in the life of the Church?

Sacred Scripture gives **support and vigour to the life of the Church**. For the children of the Church, it is a confirmation of the faith, food for the soul and the fount of the spiritual life. Sacred Scripture is the soul of theology and of pastoral preaching. The Psalmist says that it is "a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Ps 119:105). The Church, therefore, exhorts all to read Sacred Scripture frequently because "ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ" (Saint Jerome).



The Virgin Mary,
woman of faith.

❖ How does man respond to God who reveals himself?

Sustained by divine grace, **we respond to God with the obedience of faith**, which means the full surrender of ourselves to God and the acceptance of his truth insofar as it is guaranteed by the One who is Truth itself.

❖ Who are the principal witnesses of the obedience of faith in the Sacred Scriptures?

There are many such witnesses, two in particular: One is **Abraham** who when put to the test "believed in God" (Rom 4:3) and always obeyed his call. For this reason he is called "the Father of all who believe" (Rom 4:11-18). The other is the **Virgin Mary** who, throughout her entire life, embodied in a perfect way the obedience of faith: "Let it be done to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38).

❖ Why is there no contradiction between faith and science?

Though faith is above reason, **there can never be a contradiction between faith and science** because both originate in God. It is God himself who gives to us the light both of reason and of faith.

❖ Why is faith a personal act, and at the same time ecclesial?

Faith is a personal act insofar as it is the free response of the human person to God who reveals himself. But at the same time it is an ecclesial act which expresses itself in the proclamation, "We believe". It is in fact the Church that believes: and thus by the grace of the Holy Spirit precedes, engenders and nourishes the faith of each Christian. For this reason **the Church is Mother and Teacher**.

❖ In what way is the faith of the Church one faith alone?

The Church, although made up of persons who have diverse languages, cultures, and rites, nonetheless professes with a united voice the one faith that was received from the one Lord and that was passed on by the one Apostolic Tradition. She confesses one God alone, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and points to one way of salvation. Therefore **we believe with one heart and one soul all that is contained in the Word of God, handed down or written, and which is proposed by the Church as divinely revealed**.

❖ What does Bible mean?

Christians have called Bible (from the **Greek word "Βίβλια", Biblia, meaning "Books"**; when this plural noun was taken over into Latin, it became singular as it is in many modern language) the collection of **73 books accepted by the Church as inspired by God, i.e. written through the Holy Spirit's help**. Many

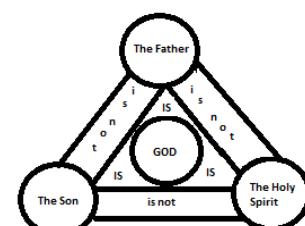


Diagram of the relationships
between the only God's
three Persons.

Protestants accept 66 of them, but not 7 books of the OT and some sections of a few others (in the 16th century they were printed at the back of the others books; by the 19th century they disappeared at all). In the Bible itself this collection is better called "Scripture" or "Scriptures". This means that **it is God's word written for us, but there can be words of God which are not written**, like the events happened or the words spoken before its composition. It was the **ancient Church discerned these very different books as unique**. In doing so she was also defining her own identity: they were to function as a mirror in which she could continually rediscover herself and assess the way she responds to Jesus' message and transmits it.

❖ How have we to understand the Bible?

These books are the shared treasure of all believers. The authors did not write as private, independent subjects, but as members of a living faith community, in a historical movement led forward by God. The Scriptures emerged from within the pilgrim people of God and within this same subject they are always in the present. That's why **their interpretation takes place in the Church and within her traditions of faith**. The meaning of any passage can never be a purely academic affair: it becomes most intelligible in those humans who have been totally seized by it. So, **the saints are the Bible's true interpreters**, because they have lived and suffered through it. Dialogue with the faith's understanding of earlier times, must be matched by a dialogue with today's men and women in order to grasp how the biblical message responds to current issues. Privileged hearers of God's word are lowly people, for their lack of power and human resources force them to trust in God alone and in his justice. But in the last resort, it is the Church's authority which has the duty of securing the authentic interpretation.



One of the Bible's oldest existing texts: a papyrus of around 200 BC.



An OT scroll as it is still used by Jews in worship.



The first printed Bible, edited by Johannes Gutenberg in Germany (about 1455).

❖ What does the change of language mean?

The passage from one language to another necessarily involves a change of cultural context where concepts are not identical and symbols have a different meaning. Written in the common Greek of Jesus' time, the whole NT is characterized by such dynamic of ensuring that God's message takes root in a great variety of ground. **Switching Jesus' Palestinian message into Jew Greek-like culture, it displays its aim to transcend the limits of a single cultural world**. Because his message can at the same time both challenge and enrich value systems and behaviour norms of each place and time.

❖ Is the Bible a past book?

The Bible comes from a real past, but not only from then: **it comes from God and leads through time into eternity**. In teaching us how to live out the covenant between him and his people, it reveals a God who is formless and invisible, though personal, loving and willing to be known. To hold the Bible's words and deeds, we have to go back almost twenty or thirty centuries. Sometimes words mean something different from what they appear to say. The language of science informs through words with a quite precise sense, while that of relationship uses symbols to evoke images and feelings in people who have had the same experience. When we read anything from the Bible, **we have to ask whether it is providing exact information or acting as a symbol**. In the latter case, we must then ask what it meant at the writer's time, otherwise we will make incredible mistakes.

❖ How are we to interpret the Bible?

Bible itself (2Pt 3:15-16) says **its interpretation can be difficult**, and the passage of time has increased the problem. The more we use it, however, the easier we find it to see what is the imagery used

and what meaning it conveys. Reading is a matter of grasping a text so that it tells us something that will make us live today, but we cannot make a text say virtually anything by just rushing straight into it, quickly throwing our feelings on to it. **We have to study it methodically, never thinking we do know it very well.** Addressing men and women of the past, God used all the possibilities of their language, while accepting that his word be subject to the limits of their culture. For, just as the Word of God became like men in every way except sin, so too his words became human in every way except lie. Refusing the historical character of God's revelation means going far away from its true sense and the full truth of his Son's Incarnation. **A literal interpretation**, without efforts at understanding the texts in their historical origins and development, **does end in confusing the godly core of the message with its human limitations.**

❖ *When did the Bible's interpretation start?*

The Bible is not a book fallen at once from heaven, but a library whose books were rather written and then gathered throughout many centuries within God's people. So it proposes **different perspectives in dynamic tension with one another.** We have to read the Bible as an overall unity expressing an intrinsically coherent message, notwithstanding its multiple historical layers. One of its features is that its apparent disorganisation offers many ways of interpreting the same events and reflecting upon the same problems. Nobody can exhaust the meaning of the whole, which is a symphony of many voices. The Bible urges us to avoid excessive simplification and narrowness of spirit. Jesus too lived within a particular context, and the NT presents different ways of understanding and following him. **It is not always easy to select his Gospel's essential values valid for all persons everywhere and in every age.** But we must constantly seek and insert these values into our own historical situation in order to live them as we are, particular persons at a particular time and in a particular place. For God is not trying to give us some abstract knowledge that doesn't concern us deeply, but he wants to show us the real ground of all things and thus the true direction we have to take in our day-to-day lives. Because these values do affect and change our personal lives, **sadly, we can be unwilling to be drawn in what they require.** Our temptation is to reduce God's word, which again and again surpasses our capacity to understand, in order to bend it to our own criteria. Yet we are required the humility to leave it intact: believing means submitting to its loftiness and slowly growing into it.

❖ *Is the Bible a systematic book?*

The Bible **doesn't contain an instant answer to each and every question.** Indeed, at first, the Bible (above all the OT) is disconcerting. Many know that it is the Christians' holy book, so expect to find in it God's word in a pure form, a kind of catechism or handbook of morality. But opening it... they find stories about the past of a tiny people, which are often quite insignificant if not immoral, with wars, murders, rapes or an out-dated morality. If it tells marvellous stories, they are so different from our ordinary, everyday life. In fact, Israel's history was as common as our life today, in which unbelievers don't discover any trace of God. **It is a world we have to enter for ourselves, an adventure to which we are summoned: that of a people seized by a passion for God.** Reading the Bible should lead us to reread our existence by faith. If we do, we shall discover that God still does speak to us and act for us. Our whole life will be full of wonder.

❖ *What may be a summary of salvation history?*

Salvation history begins with a project of love by God for humans. His flexibility moves it forward after every refusal by them. Its many **different steps of love appear to be a history of failures**, beginning from the first moment (original sin) and continuing through the blood of Abel and of the prophets who went to speak to the people, until its end with the greatest love on the cross of God's Son. Then that history turns around, for precisely there, love wins: **he who was rejected by us humans becomes our saviour.** When a grain dies, it bears much fruit.

Bible's books are usually referred to through almost uniform **abbreviations.** First comes a short form of the title, then a figure indicating the chapter and another (separated from the first by a colon) indicating the verse. A hyphen is used to indicate several chapters or verses. This system started in 1226 when archbishop Stephen Langton divided each book into numbered chapters. Then in 1551 the printer Robert Estienne numbered almost every phrase of these chapters: hence our modern division into verses. Both divisions don't always match the meaning of the text, so you don't have to take account of them to understand it. However, they are very practical, because all Bibles have adopted both. So to indicate a passage, it is enough to give the reference.

PAPER ONE

THE OLD TESTAMENT

CONTENT

- Israel's faith and teachings; prophecy and prophets in Israel.
- The Judges, the establishment of monarchy in Israel and the prophetic mission of Elijah and Elisha with reference to historical books (Judges, Samuel and Kings).
- Some books named after prophets: Amos, Hosea, Isaiah 1-12, Jeremiah 1-45, Ezekiel 1-24, Isaiah 40-45, Haggai and Zechariah 1-8.

Before visiting a country, we usually learn something about its people's ways of life, how they think and talk, so that we don't feel too lost and don't commit too many blunders. We may also look at a map, and bring ourselves up to date with the political, economic and social situation. The OT is still foreign to us, even if we know some passages. So, we need know quickly what it is and how it came into being.

"They are Israelites, and to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ" (Rom 9:4-5).

SETTINGS

❖ What is the Old Testament?

The OT is the first part of Christian Bible, the one **written before Christ**. The word "Testament" is a translation of the Greek word "Διαθήκη", Diatheke, which means also "**Covenant**", i.e. Agreement. Truly the OT is the agreement between God and his chosen people, the Israelites. **It is called Old in relation to the New, which is its fulfilment**, like the Old is the foundation for the New. We should avoid contrasting them: their unity is best described as **continuity, discontinuity and surpassing**. Holy Scripture is one insofar as the Word of God is one, his plan of salvation is one, and his inspiration of both Testaments is one. The Old Testament prepares for the New and the New fulfills the Old; the two shed light on each other. Unless we understand the OT we cannot understand the NT.

❖ What issues does the Old Testament address?

The OT was redacted more than two thousand years ago, but **it addresses our own life issues** (justice, freedom, friendship, family, sex, sin, suffering, death etc.). It presents especially **God's infinite love and patience** toward us, his unthankful creatures who, from the very beginning, have refused to walk the way indicated by him and chose their own false ways. The OT gives us a clear understanding of **our separation from him and it directs us to the Saviour**, Jesus Christ. His own person and mission sum up all the beneficial energy of God's giving and forgiving.

❖ What is the cultural setting of the Old Testament?

OT cultural setting has much in common with African way of life. So we understand better than many others the nomadic life, the importance of wells, the dangers of drought, famine and such illnesses like leprosy. Close to African view, the Bible doesn't present the Israelite as a totally autonomous person, but always as **a member of his people**, that is fit to teach and to approve right conduct. There are differences in each one's roles, but it is essential for every member **to obey its laws and take part in its worship**. Formation primarily refers to relationships both within and outside the community: eventually, it is founded on that love which surpasses personal interests and holds all humans together. Today's selfishness that menaces the very structure of any communities is contrary to Bible's view. People less marked by Western civilisation can realize God's message more easily.

❖ How have we to consider the parallels between Israelite and African traditional practices?

Many Israelite practices have parallels in our traditional culture, like God's consultation (through dreams, sorts, forecast mediums and necromancy), polygamy, bans and taboos. The Bible presents them as they were, not as rules for us, so we cannot use them to uphold their African parallels. Let's always remember that God's revelation took place gradually in the context of history and that the **OT reflects an early stage in the growth of Israel's religion**. To understand its fruitful nature, we must pay attention to the way the NT re-read the OT in the light of Jesus' full revelation.

❖ Is the Old Testament relevant for today Christians?

There are many reasons why the OT is relevant for today Christians. We need to read it to understand the NT. On a more existential level, it is a deep reflection upon our own life. Moreover, the promises it announces have not yet been fully realised. We honour the OT as true word of God: "All Scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2Tim 3:16). Even though the OT contains matters imperfect and provisional, it bears witness to the heavenly pedagogy of God's saving love. Its books are **a store of magnificent teachings on God and of sound wisdom on**

human life, as well as a wonderful treasury of prayers.

They were written, above all, to prepare for the coming of Christ, not primarily through isolated prophecies and precepts, but through the whole living (and to our eyes chaotic) series of events from Abraham to John the Baptist. That history, with its interplay between God's and humans' freedom, is as such the promise of the Saviour of the universe. About the OT Jesus said, "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; **I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them**" (Mt 5:17). The proper interplay of OT and NT was and is constitutive for the Church. She always has to overcome two opposite dangers: a false legalism of the sort Paul fought against and a repudiation of the OT. Jesus' death and resurrection has set up a radically new context, which sheds fresh light upon OT texts and causes a change in their significance. This fuller sense is the texts' **deeper meaning intended by God** but not clearly expressed by their human authors.

❖ What is the basis of OT texts' deeper meaning?

Its basis is the fact that the Holy Spirit, Bible's principal author, could guide them to choose terms which would express a truth whose depth they didn't perceive. At times a biblical author, re-reading an earlier text, gave it a new meaning so as to make it respond to new situations. In fact, **from its very beginning the Bible has been itself a work of interpretation and actualization.** Older texts were read with new eyes in new contexts. They became Holy Scripture by being read anew, tacitly corrected and given added depth and breadth of meaning in continuity with their original sense. In this process God's Word gradually unfolded its inner

potentialities, already somehow present like seeds, but needing new challenges in order to open up. **This process was not linear, but it moved in a single overall direction to Jesus Christ.** After his resurrection, "beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself... 'everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled'" (Lk 24:27,44).



Abraham, God's friend, was blocked by him while sacrificing his son Isaac.

❖ Through whom was Israelites' freedom restored?

After more than 400 years there, Israel's descendants got freedom again under **Moses** (about 1250 BC). In the desert, at Mount Sinai, the only true God, who sent him, presented himself and gave Ten Commandments as conditions for a covenant with him. They had to separate themselves from other peoples in order to follow him only, accepting the "way of life" he indicated: the "Torah" (i.e. "Instruction"). They, however, failed early and continued to do so, worshipping false gods, especially after they did enter Canaan (about 1210 BC), accept local agricultural cultures and follow immoral fertility rites. During **Judges'** difficult years (about 1200 to 1050 BC), Israel's national identity almost disappeared.

❖ How did the Israelites get their first Kings?

It was under **Samuel** that the God's people got the first King, Saul (about 1030-1010 BC), in order to be united. After he disobeyed the Lord, his success declined and he was eventually killed in battle. His son in law, **David** (1010-970 BC), defeated all enemies and established Israel as a powerful kingdom, whose capital city was Jerusalem. Under his son, Solomon (970-931 BC), the people built a marvellous temple, lived in peace and prospered, but grew sad with heavy taxes and forced labour. After his death, Israel's northern tribes rebelled and got another King, who was not David's descendant as that of Judah and fellow Southerners.

❖ What were the sorts of Northern and Southern kingdoms?

These twin kingdoms remained separate for more than 200 years during which the Israelites continued



The Fertile Crescent, the original place of both human civilisation and salvation history.



At Mount Sinai, God gave Moses on two stones the written conditions for a covenant with Israel.

to mingle with pagan nations. God sent many **prophets** to reproach their sins against him and the poor. Finally, the northern tribes were taken into **exile** by the Assyrians (722 BC), and then the Southern ones were taken to Babylon (586 BC). The difference between their sorts was that the northern tribes didn't come back, while some people of the Southern ones did so after about 50 years, beginning anew (538 BC) in the land which God promised to their fathers forever. Because the prophets had proclaimed a radical redemption of the people and a salvation which would include all nations in a new and everlasting covenant. From the people of Israel and from the house of King David, would be born the Messiah, Jesus.

❖ *What was Jews' progress after returning to their country?*

Under the Persians (539-333 BC), these Jews rebuilt the temple and the wall around Jerusalem; moreover reinforced their fidelity to God and his **Law** (in Hebrew, Torah; in Greek, Πεντατεύχος, Pentateuchos, i.e. Five Books: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) which was sanctioned in about 400 BC. Afterward many Jews accepted also the books of the **Prophets and other Writings**, especially the Psalms. Between the years 333-63 BC the Jews were under Greeks' political dominion and cultural influence, but when King Antiochus IV tried to convert them by force to paganism, they rebelled and gained freedom under the **Maccabees** (145-63 BC). An unfortunate dispute led to Rome's supremacy upon the Jews, though they had also local kings, such as Herod the Great (37-4 BC) and his descendants, many of them bearing his name. It was in this environment that **Jesus** was born. This event gave the whole history a totally new orientation.

The Israelites who better preserved their identity in exile were those from the southern kingdom, called Judah like its prevalent tribe. So, their name Judeans, later shortened as **Jews**, became equal to Israelites. Along with these names, is also used the older one, Hebrews.

OT CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE

All years are BC; almost all of them are only approximate

- 1850: Abraham's arrival in Canaan
- 1700: Israel and the twelve tribes' patriarchs in Egypt
- 1250: Moses leads Israelites' exodus from Egypt and then gives them God's law at Mount Sinai
- 1210: Joshua invades Canaan
- 1200: Philistines, repulsed by Egyptians, occupy the Palestinian coast
- 1200-1050: Israel's twelve tribes settling in Canaan, now and then freed and leaded by a Judge
- 1030-1010: Saul first King of all Israel
- 1010-970: King David's warring reign; he moves the capital to Jerusalem
- 970-931: King Solomon's peaceful reign; construction of Jerusalem's Temple
- 931: A political split causes two twin but rival kingdoms: Israel in the North, Judah in the South
- 870: Prophet Elijah appears to save the true faith under Israel's King Ahab and his wife Jezebel
- 850-795: Prophet Elisha's long activity
- 760: Amos sent to prophesy in the North
- 750-725: Hosea prophesies in the North
- 740: Priest Isaiah is called to prophesy in Jerusalem; he will do so for more than forty years
- 733: The Assyrians, called on by King Ahaz of Judah, strip Israel of Galilee and Transjordan
- 722: Samaria itself, Israel's capital, is captured by the Assyrians who deport the people to Mesopotamia
- 716-687: King Hezekiah tries a religious reform extended to the North for sake of national unity
- 701: The Assyrians subject Judah, but eventually God saves Jerusalem as prophesied by Isaiah
- 626: Priest Jeremiah is called to prophesy; he will do so for more than forty years
- 622: Discovery of the Book of the Law; King Josiah's religious reform and editing of earlier books start
- 609: King Josiah's death is the beginning of Judah's end
- 597: Jerusalem captured by the Babylonians who deport many influent Jews to Mesopotamia
- 592-570: Priest Ezekiel's prophetic activity in exile
- 586: Jerusalem destracted with its temple; fresh deportations to Mesopotamia
- 586-538: In exile, Israel's traditions are gathered and committed to writing
- 550: Second Isaiah comforts the exiles
- 538: The Persian King Cyrus after taking Babylon permits the Jews to return
- 520-515: Building of the second Temple as pushed by prophets Haggai and Zechariah
- 458-398: Ezra's and Nehemiah's missions to Jerusalem: Torah's definitive edition is proclaimed
- 333: Alexander the Great conquers Palestine; the Greek-like culture expands and divides the Jews
- 285: Beginning of the Greek translation of Torah and other Jewish books in Egypt
- 167-164: Antiochus IV Epiphanes' persecutes the Jews; Maccabees' revolt starts
- 145: Jonathan Maccabee confirmed ruler of Judaea and South Samaria; Pharisees and Sadducees emerge
- 63: Syria and Palestine come under Romans' domination
- 50: Writing of the last (Deutero-canonical) book of the OT
- 40-37: Herod the Great becomes king by Rome's designation; he will rule until his death (4 BC)
- 20: Herod starts the Temple's rebuilding; it will end in 63 AD, just 7 years before its destruction

ISRAEL'S FAITH AND LIFE

"You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him" (Jn 4:22-23).

❖ *What was the importance of history in Israel's faith?*

More than any other religion, **Judaism and Christianity are solidly grounded in history, presenting a God who revealed himself by acting our salvation on this earth, not only by giving us his words from the heaven.** The Bible is not an exposition of timeless truths through symbolic narration, but the written testimony to a series of interventions by God in human history. His revelation was so rooted in Israel's life that no point summarises the whole experience. It was only in reference to concrete situations that statements were made, with a depth of conviction and passion which matched the urgency of the needs. So the Bible doesn't teach just a philosophy or ethics, but **narrates past events having lasting value for anyone's life.** It is not a history book in the modern sense, and it includes several literary genres, but it bears witness to a historical reality. The great events of worldly powers are written in history books, but the history of humans' feelings and moral choices is written directly in God's heart; that is the history which will last forever. This is where faith and life are located.

In order to exist, every society has to create a literature. A nation has its laws, its proverbs, its celebrations, its stories about the past, its epics, its poems and its songs. So, the fact that Israel existed as a people gave rise to a whole **literature of different genres.** Each one has its own kind of truth. We should ask what literary genre a particular text is, and what kind of truth it conveys. Don't read the creation stories as scientific accounts!

❖ *What was God's main act in the OT?*

According to Israel's faith, humans come from God and return to him: so history is not the vicious cycle of an unending starting again as Pagans view it. Of course, it is not linear: there are strengths and weaknesses, joys and failures, lights and trials. Yet, for people of faith the road always lies ahead, open to surprises from God's love and, at last, flowing into endless communion with him. If indeed history is the result of many known and unknown forces, it is God who guides events to fulfil his project of salvation. Among his many interventions in history, **we must always remember Israel's basic experience: the saving Exodus from Egypt and the covenant with God at Mount Sinai.** Israel's faith was built upon these events narrated, meditated on and given a meaning in the Pentateuch. **It was the prophets' duty to explain again and again their implications for God's people.** His acts, begun in OT time, peaked and were **summed up in Jesus' life, death and resurrection.** They are messages which God keeps on to address to the Church and to the whole world.

❖ *What was God's main name in the OT?*

The Israelites lacked the logic developed by Greek philosophy and were weak in abstract theory. In Hebrew **"to know God" is to personally meet him,** and this is possible only if his name is known. "Name" is used where modern languages use "person" or "self". To have no name is to lack real existence. To know the name is to know the reality named. God's knowledge is disclosed by him in his name. To reveal one's own name is to give something of oneself. In some sense he has made himself accessible and, therefore, assumed the risk of any relationship. By his own name, he is proclaimed as the One who did reveal himself to the Israelites, rescue them and start a covenant with them. **His distinct name implies he is a personal being** whose essence and traits can be shared by nobody. God's name, often in the form **YHWH** (read: Yahweh) or briefly YH (Yah), **entails his active presence among his people.** But the closer he is, the more our misuse can disfigure him. This is why the Israelites refuse to utter it so as to avoid degrading it to false gods' level. This name, mysterious and difficult to translate, **from the very first time was rendered as "Lord".** So he is called in the NT, and we keep following this tradition. **As this divine title has been given to Christ,** OT believers' dispositions towards God are now directed to Jesus as well: belief in him, hope in him, love for him and obedience to him.

Myths are humans' first reflections. They take great questions that we ask ourselves and project them on an unreal world, in the form of a story presenting gods, goddesses and heroes, instead of discussing them in profound and difficult books. Bible's writers took up this language too to express their own thoughts based on the faith in a sole God who intervenes in history to free all humans.

❖ *What was the basis of Israel's faith in only one God?*

God's existence and uniqueness were not considered in the OT, because Israel had no pattern of thought in which these questions could be asked and answered. In the ancient Near East the existence of divine beings was commonly accepted without question. Before the VI century BC Israel had no clear denial of the existence of gods other than the Lord. Their rejection was implied by treating them as insignificant. **Whether or not there were many gods, there was only one Lord.** This fact was evident from his name, which belonged to no one else, and from his unique relationship to the Israelites. His election and covenant imposed upon them demands made by no other god upon his/her people. The most striking was that **they should worship no god but him; they could neither ask nor fear anything from any gods.** This was a forceful departure from the pattern of the Near East, where no god was conceived of as being the only sponsor of his/her worshippers and

excluding reverence for other gods. It was not only the ban of rivals, but the faith that **humans and nature were the Lord's domain**. He alone created all and he alone directs their operations. The Israelites asked neither about the Lord's origin (it would be to deny that he is totally unique) nor about gods' origin (it would be to admit their reality). They honoured the God they knew because his action could be recognised in specific present events, though his being there could be discovered only by meditating on the past ones.

❖ *How was the Lord represented?*

While every god of the Near East was visually represented, **the Lord's uniqueness was furthered by images' ban**. Its base was the conviction that he did resemble nothing, because he was above and beyond the whole universe. That ban was ever more striking because it **contrasted OT practice of speaking of the Lord in human terms**. The attribution of our features, feelings and behaviours to non-human beings is common to all cultures. The Bible uses any verbal images for the Lord: he speaks, hears, smells, laughs, hisses, whistles, strikes, writes, walks; he feels delight, joy, anger, hatred, love, disgust, regret, compassion. Philosophers dislike this language as imperfect, but it emphasises God's personality. What makes OT anthropomorphism worthy of special attention is the difficulty of reconciling it with the explicit denial that the Lord was like any creature: he is God and not human, **he is spirit and not flesh**. OT authors were aware that figures of speech have limits and may hold back a truly spiritual idea of God. Yet, in some respects, anthropomorphism permits an understanding of God impossible through a more refined and abstract discourse. After all, our words cannot express his reality. Philosophers risk of taking their ideas about God as adequate while they too are infinitely far from the "Totally Other". **The Bible accepts humanising God to avoid the risk of thinking of him as an abstract idea or an impersonal force.**

❖ *What does "the living God" mean?*

The Lord's common label is "**the living God**", in contrast with gods identified with their lifeless and man-made images. Positively, it affirms that **he has life, power and personality**; he is attentive and responsive in giving and sustaining life. From the beginning, his constant effort was to tell us: "I am God with you, I am God for you". His involvement in the Israelites' history, with the election, the covenant and the saving acts by which he makes them a people that is his own in a special way, are favours arising from personal kindness. Their relations are presented as those of a father to his children or a husband to his wife. They require a personal response and not only an official one: external worship without inner commitment is vain. The Lord's total demands can be met only by total submission. **Personal communication becomes possible:** the Lord speaks to Israel, and Israel can speak to him. In prayer OT speech attains an intimacy and an urgency with no parallel.

❖ *What about nature and its forces?*

The OT shares the ancient idea of nature, yet does not attribute personality to its distinct forces: no separate gods correspond to them. **The Lord does not lie within nature:** he is identified neither with it as a whole nor with any of its part. His lacking of sexual features is a striking example of OT unique concept of God, for sex as the source of life is vitally involved in other ancient beliefs and much of their ritual aim to pass on to the worshippers gods' sexual energy. For Israel the Lord **is the source of life but not through sexual processes**. Consequently, sexual morality is far more demanding in Israel than among her neighbours: any excess would go against the holiness of a God who is above sex.

❖ *What was the relevance of the concept of creation?*

The Bible expresses the creative process in several ways corresponding to different phases of development of this concept without match in Near East's beliefs. Creation is the beginning of history, the first of the saving deeds of the Lord, for he takes care of the poor who cry out in desperation. He listens and intervenes, eventually sending his own Son to destroy the sin, source of any evils. So, **creation and nature are integrated in the salvation history** wrought by God and culminated in Jesus' resurrection, start of the new creation.



❖ *What was the main social consequence of this concept?*

The main social consequence is that **God possesses all the world because he created it**. It was he who entrusted the earth to humans, **so no one may claim exclusive possession**, thereby creating situations of disparity. **God wants a society based on equality and solidarity, where freedom, land and money are a resource for all** and not just for a few, as happens now more than ever. This was the goal of the jubilee's, the tithe's and the first fruits' laws: the resources' distribution based on brotherhood and justice.

❖ *What was the importance of the covenant?*

God and Israel were united by a blood-tie. The covenant has a special place in understanding God's relationship with his people. In the ancient Near East gods might be used as witnesses and guarantor of covenants between humans, but **only the Bible uses this concept about God and us. Over and above creation, he shows his infinite goodness welcoming his creatures to intimacy with himself:** once offered, this free gift of God asks humans for a total yes. He waits for their free choice, and whenever their answer his "no", he opens up a new path of love. Time and again he offers them covenants and rewards the right behaviour.

After the great flood, God accepted Noah's sacrifice and did an everlasting covenant with all human beings on earth. Its symbol would be the rainbow.

particularly by the choice of Israel as his partner. For the covenant is not an assurance which allows people to live in any way they like: it is a responsibility. Biblical ethics must be understood in the context of covenant: much more than a code of behaviour, it is an offered journey toward full freedom. Likewise, **fault and forgiveness are not just juridical matters** of charging and condoning debts. The exit from Egypt, at once followed by such covenant, was Israel's founding event, interpreted by faith in God's involvement. Like in political alliances between unequal partners (vassal contracts) he obliged himself toward Israel (grace) just as he obliged her towards himself (law). This dynamism found its typical expression in the words, "**I shall be your God and you will be my people**"; their being scattered in both OT and NT clearly indicates it as a **major issue**. Decisive for this relationship are Jesus' person, work and Passover. In him God united himself to our humanity so intimately that he now is not only present to us but dwells in us and we share in his own life. This is the new and eternal covenant achieved in Jesus' blood, which deletes our sin with forgiveness and makes us definitively children of the good and merciful Father.

❖ *What was the external sign of covenant for male Israelites?*

Circumcision, a rite of passage done on men at the start of sexual maturity, was widely practiced in Egypt, but not in Mesopotamia. God counted Abraham's faith as uprightness before his circumcision. Arriving in Canaan Joshua needed to circumcise all men, but later Jews considered it the bodily sign of Moses' covenant. This symbol of identity became important in the exile, when they lacked temple, land and king. Some prophets, however, demanded an inner circumcision by obediently accepting God's word. Following the law, Jesus was bodily circumcised when 8 days old, but Paul admitted only new moral life as qualifying for salvation and God's worship.

❖ *Where had God to be worshipped?*

From the Patriarchs' time **God was especially worshipped where he had manifested himself**. At Moses' time Mount Sinai, place of God's main self-revelation, was seen as his dwelling-place. Later **the Tent, which housed the Ark of the Covenant begun there, became the sign of God's invisible but permanent presence and guide** among the Israelites and a place where asking his answers. This Ark was a small portable box containing the Ten Commandments' two stone tables, a vessel of manna and Aaron's rod. The Israelites carried it all along the forty years they travelled through the desert. After they conquered Canaan and became a sedentary people, it was established at Shiloh. King



Moses and his servant Joshua worshipping God in front of the Ark of the Covenant.

David transferred it to Jerusalem and his son Solomon into its marvellous Temple, which became the house of God's glory and the centre of Israel's national life. The ark was lost in 586 BC when the Babylonians destroyed them for the first time. Every adult male had to go up to the Temple three times a year to participate in the due sacrifices, so that **Israel would remain God's pilgrim people, always journeying toward him and receiving its identity and unity from the encounter with God in his only Temple**. After the exile, however, common people had access to its courts, but not to its inside. Because many gathered there, it became an economical centre which made the high priest very

rich, for the trade done there was unfair. Jesus reminded strongly its main aim as a house of prayer. Eventually his risen body became the focus of worship in spirit and truth, the Temple from which living waters flow and through which anyone can reach God. Following his prophecy, the material

building was definitely destroyed by the Romans before the end of his own generation (70 AD).

❖ *What was the right way to worship God?*

Exodus' essential movement was from servitude to service: Israel was aware that God freed them from slavery in Egypt and that from then on they might freely put themselves at his service. This service consisted primarily in a daily life led in covenant with God and expressed in worship. The right way to worship God (through feasts, sacrifices, vows, fast, legal purity) is an important topic in the OT. It manifests a **growing care to uphold the true purpose of worship, i.e. communion with God**. Many OT texts agree that he doesn't need sacrifices, though the people do need them to express praise of God and loyalty to his covenant. Finally all worship was fulfilled in Jesus' loving obedience on the cross.

❖ *What was the importance of prayer?*

The basic religious expression is prayer, that turning of mind and heart to God to seek his face, i.e. a direct, inward contact with him. It has to be constantly revived and each affair of everyday life has to be related back to it. Prayer must not be an occasion for showing off before others; it requires the discretion that is essential to any relation of love. All the same, it is also an element of common worship by a group having the same faith. **In prayer the totally personal and the communal must always pervade each other**. On every page of the OT we encounter prayer: God speaks to humans and they answer him, also by using words which express other believers' experiences of encountering with God, like the Psalms. The ideal place for Israelites' prayer was the Temple, with one's face turned toward the Holy Place. When distant, they did the best they could by looking toward Jerusalem and using apposite evening and morning prayers. A standing posture was usual, but we also read of people kneeling in prayer or casting themselves down in adoration. Jesus' talking with his Father fulfilled any prayers and opened wide the way to him. He is wholly "Son" and also through prayer he invites us all to become God's children by totally belonging to him.

❖ What was God's day?

Sabbath's origin as week's end is not clear. Ex 16:22-30 suggests it existed before Sinai's Covenant, and Gen 2:2-3 traces it to the creation itself. Such claims, based on no historical memory, stress its value for Israel's life and thought. **It is not just a day on which to rest up for another week of work, but a holy day offered to God in a special way, in imitating his own rest after creating the world.** In it all can join his rest: master, slave and animal are united in his freedom. Initially, Sabbath law was simply stated; then were added two main motives: Dt 5:14b-15 stresses **humanitarian factors** connected with the vision of God as liberator, while Ex 20:11 focuses on **worshipping him as Lord of the whole creation.** During the exile, when other feasts' celebration was impossible, the Sabbath became the Covenant's distinctive sign: keeping it showed faithfulness and assured salvation, while the contrary meant apostasy. Then it received tighter restrictions: by NT times, they were painstaking. The dispute over what does and does not belong to the Sabbath is at the heart of Jesus' differences with his fellow Jews. It concerns deeper questions about man and about the right way to honour God. Jesus invites all who labour and are heavy laden to himself, the Lord having authority on the Sabbath, because he is now the rest, the way we can act like God. Finally, **Jesus fulfilled its meaning in his resurrection, our true liberation and start of the new creation.** So, his followers called Sunday "Lord's day", whose importance grew in parallel to their separation from the Jews. In the end, the week's structure was overturned, setting out from the day of the Risen meeting with his assembly. This revolution only happened because that day totally changed the world: Jesus' resurrection began a new life.

❖ What was Passover?

All Jewish feasts have a triple basis: the first was composed of celebrations of nature religion, connected with human search for God through creation; this then became commemorations, which make present God's past saving actions in history; finally, recollection increasingly took on the form of feasts of hope for his coming definitive salvation which will reconcile the whole of creation. In the same way, **Passover was at first a yearly festival of nomadic shepherds for the well-being of their flocks.** Occurring at the time of this pre-Israelite feast, **Exodus gave it a new meaning, as memorial of the liberation from Egypt.** The Jewish Passover hence **became an anticipation of the Christian one,** when God's Lamb, Christ, was sacrificed (on the cross) and eaten (in the Last Supper).



Two altars with relatives offerings (incense and animals) and the laver in the right.

❖ What were other feasts of Israel?

Other three feasts set by all Pentateuch's calendars are: in spring, the feast of the Unleavened Bread; seven weeks after Passover (fifty days, hence its Greek name "Pentecost") the feast of Harvest; in autumn, the feast of Ingathering of grapes and olives, called the feast of Shelters (or Tabernacles), because during the week's event the people lived in huts made of branches to recall Israel's camps in the desert. Later were added: the religious New Year, the Day of Expiation, Purim, Dedication and Nicanor's Day. **Jesus both participated and fulfilled them so to become he himself our true feast.**

❖ What were the sacrifices in the OT?

Altar and sacrifice are related: the first is the place where the second is offered, whether it is an animal, cereals or incense. Like the Temple, the altar had deep meaning for the Israelites. Because it was also a sign of God's presence, it needed blessing and could be served by priests only. **The sacrifice as central act of worship took different forms:** holocaust (burnt offering), communion sacrifice (peace offering), sacrifices of expiation, showbread and cereal offerings, and perfume offerings. When the Israelites sacrificed human beings, especially children as their neighbours did, they met with God's wrath. The prophets condemned also as close to superstition external worship lacking the heart's proper dispositions. Eventually **Jesus fulfilled any sacrifices offering himself** as God's lamb on the cross to expiate our sins and giving us his own body and blood to bring true peace and communion.

❖ Who had the duty of offering sacrifices?

Before priestly rituals were limited to Jerusalem, there were sanctuaries all over Israel. If a sacrifice was made there, priests' participation was expected. This role increased under the Kings, as the sense of the holiness of God's house extended to the altar. Priests' main duty was **the care of this house, serving God and helping people to approach him.** Their activity of **stating his mind to who wished to know it in time evolved into responsibility for his Law.** Levites were particularly desired as priests, and eventually any priest was required to be a male descendant of Aaron. In typical distinction from Pagans, Israel had no priestesses, but this didn't mean women's exclusion from the religious community. **Jesus' priesthood was linked to King Melchizedek's one, not to Aaron's.**



❖ What was Israel's faith about spirits?

Jews thought of God as a king surrounded by his ministries, the loyal

The priest Eli in typical garments with the little Samuel.

view too, we are surrounded by different spiritual powers whose status is between God and man. They are everywhere: some are good and God use them to do various things in nature and to humans; others, however, cause misfortunes, diseases and even death. Some are believed can help fortune-tellers, mediums and medicine-persons, while witches and bad magicians can tame spirits to harm other persons. Many people go to these specialists to get help against evil spirits, to know and control the future, etc. The Bible speaks of **evil spirits as angels who rebelled against God**. He, whose power is unlimited, left them partially free to deceive the humans. So the individual and even communities seem to be hopelessly at the mercy of such powers. **Pagan worship and foretelling are related to them.** Jesus drove them out of many people and gave his disciples such authority. The liberation from fearing them was and is a leading reason in attracting people to the Church.

❖ *What was the balance between community and individual?*

Throughout the Bible **the community cannot be overlooked, yet the individual should not be swallowed by it**, because without him/her there is no community. This is very important in Africa, whose traditional ideal was to preserve this balance. Our freedom has always to consider the whole society's interests because nobody can exist without others, and the community has to look after the single to take on his/her social duties. This view challenges modern trends to overlook solidarity. We are not personally responsible for our relatives' deeds, but we cannot simply forget, for example, any injustice done by them: we must repair the harm and work for reconciliation. There is need for an education which promote solidarity and shared responsibility. Anyone should acknowledge the positive role of the religions, and especially the biblical one, in **leading to way of acting which transcend individual interests**, to readily accept sacrifices for others' sake, to sobriety and other virtues which develop in us the ability to live as one. They move from "what is best for me" to "what is best for everyone". Nobody has to be left over.

❖ *What about family?*

Gen tells us that the most beautiful thing God made was the family, creating man and woman and giving them everything. He entrusted to a family all the love he put into his marvellous world. From the very beginning God said: "It is not good for man to be alone". We can add: it is not good for woman to be alone, it is not good for children, the elderly or the young to be alone. **In family we all learn what it means to love and to be loved, and thus what it actually means to be a person.** God likes best of all to see families which are united, which love, which bring up their children, helping them to grow, families which build a society of goodness, truth and beauty. We have to help one another in this challenging task of being a worldwide family, where no one will feel alone, unwanted or homeless. God's Son came into the world in a family open to love, that of Joseph and Mary. Jesus himself was not a chronic bachelor, far from it! He represented the messiah's age as a wedding, and spoke of himself as the bridegroom. **He took the Church as his bride** and laid down his life for her, so that we could always know that he is God with us, his beloved family. **This is the basis and aim of his strict requests about sexual behaviour.**



by the dead and the not-yet born.

❖ *How did Israel see sin?*

Sin is present in this world from the fall of the first two humans who, tempted by Satan, tried to become like God against the truth of their being his creatures. Afterwards, people usually try to get the most out of the world and what life has to offer now, to seek heaven on earth without any scruples while doing so. Such sin, however, breaks not only the moral and social order, but primarily the personal relationship with God. Because this is similar to marriage, sin is seen as adultery. Man is a relational being: if his basic relationship with the Lord is disturbed, then nothing else can be truly in order. How to overcome guilt is every human's central question; religions' history revolves around it. God cannot simply ignore humans' disobedience and all their evil deeds: what is wrong cannot just be left to stand; it must be dealt with and overcome. **Sins go against the order of creation and deform the world** placed under the humans. Balance can be regained only through actions which restore it, but we alone cannot do so. **Through Jesus' faithful and obedient love God himself confront evil. In this way his mercy brings back humans to their earlier condition of being loved by him**, and repairs the damage inflicted to the world. Jesus is the face of God's mercy: his words, but above all his life and works, testify to this.

❖ *How did Israel's faith explain pain?*

The Bible sees pain as an intrusion into this world created good by God. Satan can cause it with God's permission. When humans began to sin, suffering appeared in its many forms: conflicts, sorrow, death etc. It can be seen as **God's punishment** for individuals and societies designed to correct their behaviour, but also as **a means whereby they are tested, purified and led closer to him** in a relationship of dependence and friendship. More important, God's mercy cannot remain indifferent to the suffering of the oppressed, to the cry of those subjected to violence or slavery. Such distressing reality which afflicts every era often makes us feel powerless, tempted to think of something else. God, however, does listen and get involved in order to save, raising people able to hear the groan of suffering and to work in favour of the oppressed. Eventually he himself in Jesus takes on any pains. In the new world there will be none of them.

❖ *What about death?*

According to the Bible, **death is consequence of Adam and Eve's original sin**. Living within time, humans face it as the biggest enigma: they worry, for what awaits them is hidden. The Israelites, moreover, lived out the drama of seeing death as the end of their loving relationship with God. **In their religion's earliest phases, the only hoped reward of virtue was a long life and many descendants.** In the end all, both good and bad, were thought going down to a place of darkness, silence, impotence and inactivity, in total contrast to life, because there it was impossible to praise God. However, **creation's and covenant's ideas gradually led Israel to believe that God could not be defeated by human mortality:** he could not leave in death's power those who trusted in him. So, in the Maccabees' period, persecution's victims were sustained by **faith in bodies' resurrection and eternal life** with rewards and punishments after death. Jesus resolutely confirmed this truth, pointing to God and to his power beyond worldly existence. No earthly life but eternal communion with the Father was his top value.



A human skull,
traditional
symbol of
death.

PROPHECY AND PROPHETS

"In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world" (Heb 1:9).

❖ *What is prophecy?*

Though we are concerned with OT prophets, we need consider prophecy in general. This term means the **mediation and interpretation of heavenly mind and will to humans**. From about the 5th century BC the Greek word "Προφῆτης", prophētes (literally, "**who speaks on behalf**") was used to name who made gods' mind known to others. This role was one of **public religion**; a different name were given private fortune-tellers believed to know hidden things (as in African traditional societies). Showing to Israel the way of faith, Deut 18 brands all methods of seizing control of the future as an "abomination", though the story of Saul's downfall (1Sam 28) shows how difficult it was to manage without them. In times of great material insecurity and of spiritual and moral crisis, OT prophets brought to God's people his message of conversion, hope and consolation. Like a whirlwind they unsettled the false tranquillity of those who had forgotten or forged the Lord's word. They discerned events in the light of his promises and enabled the faithful to glimpse the signs of dawn amid dark shadows. For biblical prophecy normally deals with today, **applying the revelation to present needs**, though on occasion it can throw light on future events, in order to prepare people for what is to come. Lately prophecy was identified with forecast, but OT prophets spoke of the future only to direct people in the present. They avoided the role of soothsayers, for their task was not to report on the events of the next day to satisfy human curiosity or need for security. Going far beyond, **they showed God's face, and in so doing they showed faith's path to him.**

❖ *What are the means of prophetic communication?*

Religions seem important because they inform about what is to come, and so show humans the path they have to take to avoid grief. This explains why **most religions produced prophecy**, either continuously or at some stage in their development. **The ways are the same of OT: ecstasies, visions, locutions, dreams and forecast practices.** Faith in Bible's inspiration doesn't deny any non-Israelite prophecies being result of genuine religious experience, since **prophecy is a charisma which doesn't prove a person's correct faith or morality**. So, Balaam's statements (Num 22-24) were true prophecies from God, although he was enemy of the Lord's people. Moreover, **prophecy is temporary: the same person may predict both truth and falsehood**, depending on whether he/she speaks after God's Spirit or not.

❖ *What can be said of prophecy in the ancient Near East?*

The main analogies to OT prophecy, of course, were in the ancient Near East, of which Israel was a tiny part, depending on culturally superior peoples of that area (chiefly of Mesopotamia, Egypt and Canaan). Throughout there was a **common pattern** of special persons looking to dreams for revelation and using forecast devices to inquire the protecting god's mind in order to control the future. This need was widely felt: "Shall I go?". So, King David was escorted by his prophet Gad in order to ask God (1Sam 22:5), while the priest Abiathar brought with him the *ephod* to give David **yes-or-no answers** (1Sam 23:6-12). In his fatherly efforts, God respects the necessary stages to lead people to greater maturity; at times he accepts to speak to us through primitive and ambiguous means. Israelites, however, **came to regard such divination as superstition**, and titles initially honoured ("dreamers" etc.) got a negative overtone.

❖ *What did set apart Israelite prophecy?*

Near Eastern pattern's prevalence explains both origins and characteristics of Israelites' prophecy. As far as their religion was alike those of other peoples, it expressed itself in similar institutions. To the extent, however, that Israel's faith in only one God was unique its prophets also were unlike any others. So, OT classical prophecy had no foreign parallel, either in form or in content. Israel broke with the ancient pattern producing persons who **not only spoke from national institutions but judged them** and became their moral conscience (2Sam 12:1-5).

❖ *What was the origin of Israelite prophecy?*

Am 2:11 traces Israelite prophecy's origin to Moses, nation's founder: it means that **prophecy began with Israel itself**. The seventy elders uttering praises in euphoric state (Num 11:24-30) were what was first meant by the Hebrew term *nabi'*. Over the years it came to be applied to any inspired person or simply to anyone under God's special protection (e.g. Abraham, Aaron, and Miriam). Eventually, the LXX translated consistently it by the Greek word *prophētes*, thus relating Israelite prophecy to the greater human culture.

❖ *Were euphoric prophets present throughout OT time?*

In the OT, euphoric prophets continued long. A major role of such persons, as also of Nazirites (Num 6:1-21) like Samson, was **to fuel nationalistic and religious commitment**. Their signs were like those of 18th century BC Mesopotamia, and of Canaanites in Elijah's times (1Kgs 18:19-40). Usually they acted in groups (1Sam 10:5-13; 19:18-24) being called "**sons of the prophets**", i.e. "prophetic fellowships' members" or "prophets' disciples", for they were often learners under some noted prophet, like Elisha. They could also live apart, **near holy places** as "cult prophets" at disposition of individuals, **or serving a king**

and the nation as "court prophets". They often wore a characteristic dress of haircloth (2Kgs 1:8; Zech 13:4; Mt 3:4par) and bore other distinctive marks (1Kgs 20:38,41; 2Kgs 2:23; Zech 13:6). The climate for prophecy was often induced by a device (2Kgs 3:15) or by mutual contagion through music and dance. It transformed the person in "**another man**" (1Sam 10:5-7) without self-control. His behaviour could become strange (1Sam 19:23-24), either violent or noisy, so that he could be called "madman" (2Kgs 9:11). In old times **little distinction was made among psychic deviations, whether originated in inspiration from God, obsession by the evil or mental illness** (1Sam 16:23). That's why prophecy was hardly compatible with respectability (1Sam 10:10-13). A similar state could be the means of true religious experience, in which a person could receive messages from God and deliver them to the people, but it could also cause delusion and superstition. Prophets' schools were like today's revival movements, where awakened people try to be more faithful to God. At times, however, Satan misleads them to divide the Church, especially if they assume negative attitudes facing fellow Christians and their leaders.

❖ Were ecstasies a proof of true inspiration?

Ecstasies were not sure criterion of inspiration. The false prophet Zedekiah used the "spirit of the Lord"'s possession by himself and his fellow ecstasies against Micaiah, who apparently lacked it and only attributed his own prophecy to a vision, by which he knew Zedekiah's experience to be of a "lying spirit" (1Kgs 22:5-28). Likewise, ecstasies were common in Jeremiah's time (Jer 29:26), but he never appealed to any possession of a prophetic "spirit", only offering the **witness of the Word itself which would be received by hearts in tune with it** (Jn 5:37ff). When the false prophet Hananiah forecasted the imminent end of the exile (Jer 28:1ff), Jeremiah could offer little in denial except **his certainty of the truth** of his own contrary prophecy. He would have preferred to forecast as Hananiah did; yet, he could not, for such was not God's word. His explanation seems strange; actually he didn't say that every prophet of doom is to be believed while who predicts peace is to be rejected, but that **who really knows God does discern true prophecies, for they comply with his whole revelation**. Who was aware of the people's sins had to know that Hananiah's prophecy could not be true.

❖ Who did first speak about "false prophets"?

This term was introduced by the LXX. The Hebrew Bible has not it, but only *nabi'*: this word's ambiguity causes the irony that **some of the most acid blames by prophets concerns prophets and priests**. Indeed, in Israel the false prophets were seen as prophets. Some of them might simply forge prophecy, but we must not think that above all they knowingly and wilfully pretended to be what they were not. Rather, they were **misled by their forecast devices or went wrong in judgment, confusing their own hopes with God's true word** (Isa 28:7; Jer 23:5ff). Moreover, the same person might alternately prophesy truth and falsehood, because every prophetic word is a distinct gift from the Lord. So, Deut 18:21-22 gives us a raw criterion of discernment, but Deut 13:2-6 restricts it, for **a person can give a wonder to pervert people**. Because of this, false prophets are said to be used by **God to test his faithful** (Jer 4:10; 1Kgs 22:19-23; etc.). This danger lasts until today (Mt 24:23-24), for the distinction is not always clear: both false and true prophets appear in the same situation claiming to be God' interpreters. Jesus' criterion is **to consider their fruits, for false prophets corrupt God's work** (Mt 7:15-20). Moreover, Paul proved his own authenticity arguing that he was not pleasing humans but suffering for the true Gospel.

❖ Who were the classical prophets in Israel?

This term denotes **the characteristic Israelite prophets**, whose work differed from Near Eastern pattern and has been recorded in the OT. The best known are those of the **8th, 7th and 6th centuries BC** whose names are used to call biblical books. In a roughly chronological order, they are: **Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, Zephaniah, Jeremiah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Ezekiel**. All of them, except Hosea, were from Judah, though Amos indeed continued the northern **tradition begun by Samuel, Elijah and Elisha**. Classical prophecy was not limited to them, however, for many anonymous prophets supplemented their writings: **one of the greatest was the exilic prophet whom we call the Second Isaiah**. There were too others whose words we have in small part or not at all, such as the woman Huldah (2Kgs 22:14-20). We don't even know the names of some; of others we know the names only, such as Uriah (Jer 26:20-23).

❖ What was the importance of prophets' special call from God?

They **didn't choose to be prophets**, and sometimes they tried to refuse God's call or needed encouragement seeing themselves unable. His word compelled them and they had to speak it. At some point in their lives **each received God's impressive call which was often the key of their work and thoughts**, not only their entitlement to prophecy. Their highly original personalities were as many diverse instruments through which the Lord spoke. While they had a shared teaching on the Lord's religion it is easy to distinguish one of them from another. **Their similarities derived from common ideals and traditions. Their mediation of the Word, however, was quite personal**. They rarely cited one another or even acknowledged one another's existence. **Their authority in speaking came from their serene confidence of having God's mind** and being bearers and interpreters of his word.

❖ What were the prophets' roles?

The prophet is sometimes called "**man of God**" (1Kgs 12:22; 2Chr 11:2). This doesn't mean that he is a godly person, but that he is spiritually related to the Lord, **sharing in his mystery and power** and being given his Spirit. He is "**messenger of God**" (Hag 1:13), who gets a leak from the Lord, and then stresses it is he who wants to say through him (Am 3:1). So, disobeying his authority is defying God himself and

people can be punished for this disbelief. He is “**agent of the Lord**” to his covenant people, for having been **commissioned to proclaim God’s word by his Spirit entered into him**. He is a “**watchman**” who takes his post on the watch-tower **to warn Israel** of the approach of punishment in consequence of her idolatry and wickedness (Isa 21:11-12; Eze 3:17). He serves also as “**intercessor**” who prays for Israel (1Sam 7:5; 12:19-25). Finally, Jeremiah is called “**tester**” who separates the dross from the precious metal (Jer 6:27) for he has to discern what is good and what is bad in the people's behaviour.

❖ *What was the distinction between prophets and priests?*

The Bible **often cites prophets and priests together, for their functions were similar**. Samuel is called “seer” and heads a band of ecstatic prophets (1Sam 9:11-26), yet some of his main duties are priestly (to bless the sacrifice on the “high place” and to preside at the sacrificial meal). Both priests (1Sam 14:3) and prophets (1Sam 28:6) used forecast devices and often were equally associated with a holy place. In Israel, however, **the priesthood was inherited as a permanent role, whereas prophecy was a personal and possibly temporary charisma**. Several prophets were priests (e.g. Jeremiah), but it was not necessarily so (e.g. Amos). Usually prophets had outstanding characters. A weak son could be priest and do his worship duties, but not be prophet.

❖ *Who is the Spirit of the Lord?*

In both Hebrew and Greek language, the same word signify both wind and spirit. It is **God’s breath, a sensible expression of his presence and power**. It moves suddenly: **we can neither foretell its direction nor control its strength** (Jn 3:8). It is faint, almost immaterial, but **universal and compelling in its scope**. Hence, it is a very apt symbol of God. Jesus revealed himself as the donor of the Holy Spirit as our new supporter; in the OT, however, the Spirit was known not as a person but as a principle of action, especially of those activities affecting Israel precisely as God’s people. It belonged properly to him alone: he gave it to people **to enable them to fulfil missions beyond their capacity**, as for Moses (Num 11:17), but **it never became part of their nature**. The Spirit was frequently **associated with prophets’ statements**, because visions and ecstasies were areas of its activity.

❖ *Who is the prophetic Word?*

Through his Spirit God gives us his Word, just as through our breath we convey our thoughts. A true prophet follows the Holy Spirit and wishes only to speak Spirit-bearing words. He waits in silence until God inspires him to hear the Word and declare it. In a special way, the Virgin **Mary was filled by Holy Spirit and so bore the Word**. Our concern with prophets is not only interest in an ancient religious fact. Reading their books, we don’t study archival records, but the living Word of the living God. **Prophecy not only was, but still is, the Word uttered by God through his Spirit. The symbolic actions, common with the prophets** (Ahijah, Isaiah, notably Jeremiah and Ezekiel, but also Jesus), **are not only signs but efficacious works. The same is true of their statements:** once come from the prophets, they live a life of their own. **The Word is greater than any prophets**, as they are the first to acknowledge. Moreover, they identify themselves with that Word, are personally involved in it, **live for it and are ready to die for it** instead of trying to please people. So, it is not only the words they speak and the actions they perform that tell of God, but their whole lives, as signs of his will in their own persons (Hos 1-3; Isa 8:18; Jer 16; Eze 4:3; 12:6-11; 24:24). If we are to take in God’s message, **we must take it in as the prophets did**. Humanly speaking, they failed, for their message went too much against general opinion and the comfortable habits of life. But it was through failure that their word has become efficacious.

❖ *What part did the prophets play in the spiritual development of Israel?*

While opposing syncretism (i.e. to mix different religions) and secularism (i.e. to set faith aside in order to be like other nations), the prophets were decisive in Israel’s spiritual development . They strove to keep the nation faithful to the true religion transmitted by Moses, but were also **God’s instruments to further his revelation**. Each one made his own contribution to the **three main themes of OT theology**: monotheism, morality and salvation.

Monotheism: for centuries the Israelites accepted that other nations had their own gods who were no concern of them, for the Lord demanded their exclusive respect. The shift to asserting the existence of one unique God, master of nature, persons and events, was effected by prophets: they had a direct experience of him, transcendent and mysterious, though his kindness and wedded love make him near to us.

Morality: an ethical view was implied in Moses’ Ten Commandments, but the prophets stressed it: sin is what divides humans from God, who is pure holiness. Parallel with this ran a deepening awareness of faith’s demands: the prophets cleansed worship refusing a false reliance on rituals without spiritual values. They first linked adoration of God with respect for others’ rights, making social justice a basic theme. It was the experience of Israel’s history guided by God which led all of them to a special regard for the poor and the strangers. Thus worship and justice were closely associated: by then adoration of God and care for one’s neighbour are inseparable expressions of the same faith.

Salvation: the prophets read the signs of their times and showed the way forward They warned all without fear or favour, but stated that sinners’ punishment was not God’s last word. The Israelites might repeatedly betray him, yet he would remember his promises. Whatever the crisis, the survivors were always considered as the nucleus of a holy nation, assured by God of a great future. To establish and rule his perfect kingdom, he would have his earthly agent, the “Anointed One” of Davidic origin. This hope survived their exile’s hard lesson which ended any ambition to political power. Jesus fulfilled all prophecies by transcending them, because the prophet is God’s instrument only, so his message may exceed the historical

context and even his own understanding: it may remain concealed until the future shows its full meaning.

❖ *Are OT prophets challenging today?*

OT prophets attacked social wrongs, for every Israelite was supposed to be free and to possess a portion of the God-given land. But social and economic evils caused many to become landless and to be sold for a pair of shoes. This challenges us, because **God's desire for justice and his concern for the suffering have not changed.** Knowing how brutally dictatorships trample upon humans and do despise, enslave and struck down the weak and how cruelly capitalism degrades them to the level of commodities, we need to hear once more OT prophets' voices which cry out and awake our asleep consciences showing anyone God's agenda in society at large. Faith does bring us closer, make us neighbours to others, awake our commitment to them. If faith does not draw us into solidarity, it is weak, deceitful or dead. May our efforts help the growth of greater respect for each person, endowed with basic and immutable rights ordered to his/her integral development and social peace. Alongside their shortcomings, the Israelites remained religious, but the prophets attacked false spiritual security, **superficial worship** and empty traditions not related to right behaviour. We Christians have the same temptations: even today there are people who go to church but continue with unjust ways of life. Some in their worship aim to economic gain. At times Christian festivities end in luxury while poor lack food. We have to re-check this reality in the light of the prophets' message.

❖ *What does the Bible show about prophecy?*

The whole Bible shows that **prophecy is a key element in God's bringing his people to maturity.** **Both true and false prophets abounded also in later times, within and without the people of God.** The Catholic Church has never officially called "prophet" anyone not so named in Scripture, but it is plain that God spoke through saints Francis of Assisi, Catherine of Siena and many others, often through experiences like those of biblical prophets. Prophecy powerfully shows that **he really speaks to us, highlighting his nearness and concern.** It increases our trust in the living and caring God, who is willing to guide us even in ordinary situations. We need this to face today culture, which keeps him far from everyday life and decisions. We need obedient prophets who faithfully speak the word given to them by God for the orderly growth of the Church. The matching part to this is **a people who hear God's word with respect for his Lord.**

SOME HISTORICAL BOOKS (1210-560 BC)

"Time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets - who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, received promises, stopped the mouth of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight" (Heb 11:32-34).

❖ What books do follow the Pentateuch?

In the Hebrew Bible, the six books which follow Pentateuch are Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings. They form a collection called by the Jews "**Earlier Prophets**", because they present God's first messengers after Moses and because the authors were not reporters, but spiritual men looking for the meaning of past events in order to get light for the present and hope for the future. We Christians call them (and a few others) "Historical Books", because they tell on the events of the period **from Israelites' entry into the Promised Land to the first years of their deportation to Babylon**. But we imagine too easily that an historian is no more than a tape recorder giving an exact rendering of words and action. Indeed, a text is also a product of the conditions of when and where it was written. So, these books' authors were less interested in exact records, no matter how politically and socially important, than in **explaining Israel's disaster**:

with this goal they did select, arrange and modify varied sources. They narrate events from **a consistent standpoint, that of Deuteronomy**, Pentateuch's last book and the most theological of the whole OT. Its message's summary is: one God, one people, one temple; Israel's faithfulness to God's covenant would yield his blessing, while **sin would yield his curse**, ending in exile.



A sight of Canaan / Israel / Palestine's land from a satellite. God promised to Abraham's descendants this narrow corridor between the Mediterranean Sea and the Arabian desert. They took in cultural elements from both Egypt and Mesopotamia. In order to fight, these nearby superpowers necessarily had to move through that corridor, causing troubles to God's people.

❖ What is the book of Joshua about?

Deuteronomy provides the basis for the principle of Israel's election by God, and outlines his direct rule as result. Joshua's book proceeds to show **how the chosen people took the land promised by God to them as his gift**. Moses led them from Egypt to Canaan's border, but didn't enter this new land: it was Joshua's responsibility to direct its invasion and division. The book of Joshua describes this settlement as a marvellous epic, above all to teach that the conquest was a gift by God. The Hebrews had conquered the country, but it was God who allowed them to do so. Judges' book shows that the conquest was not simple, but Joshua's does **idealise and simplify this complex history, centring all events on his heroic figure as God's agent**. It falls into three parts: the conquest of the territory, its partition between the 12 Israelite tribes, and Joshua's last days.

THE BOOK OF JUDGES: UNEVEN LEADERS FOR GOD'S UNSHAPED PEOPLE

❖ Who were the Judges and what is their book about?

This book derives its title from its main characters, **twelve occasional leaders for God's people in difficulty**. The name "judges" may mislead, because this loan-word means "**rulers**" **more than administrators of justice**". After their military victory, they could also solve social conflicts and perform religious roles on the basis of the Covenant with God, but among the six major judges, only Deborah is described as delivering justice.

- While modern judges are law's specialists who get the office through study and training, the biblical ones were inspired by God.
- While modern judges have appropriate buildings and monthly salary, the biblical ones had no such things.
- While modern judges interpret and implement the State's laws as approved by the Parliament, imposing penalties to wrongdoer, the biblical ones were tribal rescuers whose role was to guide God's people against oppression.

❖ What was Judges' historical context?

Judges' context was **a transition time with much political, cultural and religious uncertainty**. **Israelites' control of Canaan was not full**. They were a group of scattered pastoral tribes whose only bonds were a common ethnic feeling and the worship of the Lord, their saviour, in the Ark of the Covenant's shrine at Shiloh. With the entry to the Promised Land, **Israel was confronted by other people, much more culturally advanced**. For more than two thousand years these people had an urban civilisation, developed agriculture, established commercial relations within and beyond Near East. This civilisation, brilliant but pagan, would be a constant stumbling block for the Israelites' faith. In adopting local ways of life particularly farming they faced the new practical matter of ensuring abundant crops. Then **their**

assimilation of Canaan's culture extended to worship its gods (especially Baal, god of storm and rain, and the naked Astharoth, goddess of war, love and fertility) through attractive rites in many "high places", aimed at obtaining fertility for land and flocks. Israel believed in a God who had intervened in her history, bringing her out of slavery and guiding her into Canaan. That was all very well, but now she had settled down: the people got towns and fields, and they had to make a living. For that, **it seemed safer to rely on the experienced local gods**. So, Moses' age declined quickly after Joshua's death: Israel failed to live according to the central demands of the covenant with God and followed **cruel and sexually free customs of a natural religion**. But whenever they forgot him, other nations oppressed them. When they repented, however, he did come to save his people. In clear continuity with the Exodus event, **he was always ready to get involved on the victims' side**. Later, Jesus' life and ministry would be the peak of humans' liberation by God.

❖ Who were Israel's enemies during Judges' time?

During this troubled age **the Canaanites, original owners of the country, became a permanent threat and a living temptation for God's people** because the Israelites didn't drive out or eliminate them as he said. On the contrary, they sometimes agreed with and married them. They were also attacked by the Moabites, the Ammonites, the desert tribes of Amalekites and Midianites, and especially the Philistines. **At any one time these peoples oppressed only one region**, and against them each part of Israel tried to defend its own land. The twelve tribes' disunity was evident mainly in the war among themselves (all against Benjamin).

❖ How did God use the Judges?

God used the Judges to recall the Israelites **to the faith of their covenant with him**: "You shall have no other gods besides me" (Ex 20:3; Deut 5:6). Without considering their human ability, he gave the Judges **a personal "charisma" (i.e. "special divine gift") to rescue specific tribes**, though later they were made national heroes. Othniel is associated with the defeat of Cushan-rishathaim in the South. Ehud, a Benjaminite (ironically, Benjamin means literally "son of the right hand" yet his left-handedness contributed to his success) killed the Moabite king, Eglon. There is a passing reference to Shamgar and his laying of 600 Philistines. Deborah summoned Barak to gather an army from Naphtali and Zebulun on Mount Tabor and fight against Sisera in the Plain of Esdraelon/Jezreel. Gideon with an army from Manasseh, Asher and Zebulun achieved victories over Midianites and Amalekites. Jephthah led the men of Gilead against the Amalekites. The mighty Samson is described as engaging in various exploits against the Philistines, before being blinded and then dying when he brought down the building in which he had been forced to entertain his captors. **There was no line of succession among them**: each was a new helper chosen by God.

❖ Can we relate the Judges each other chronologically?

The narrative extends **from the heroic conquest to the beginning of Samuel's ministry (about 1200-1050 BC)**. The book is almost our only source of knowledge about this period, but it doesn't provide the material for constructing a continuous history of it, because ancient Eastern writers had not concern for precise time-order as today's historians. **No set date may be proposed** for any events (except Barak's victory which could be placed about 1125 BC): so, there is no way to relate them to each other chronologically. The total of the various judges' period of leadership as mentioned in the book is more than 400 years, for **events are presented as consecutive when in fact they were often simultaneous**.

❖ What are the differences between "major" and "minor" Judges?

In the book, among two introductions (1:1-3:6) and two appendices (17:1-21:25), we read about the twelve judges (3:7-16:31). There is an evident difference between the **detailed stories of six "major" judges** individually chosen by God for a mission of rescue and the **brief notes on six "minor" judges** pictured as having some sort of administrative role, but this split is not useful to value them historically. They don't match the twelve tribes of Israel, for Reuben, Simeon and Levi provided no judges, while Shamgar was not an Israelite at all. Some news about them were preserved only in the North or in the South, while others were differently remembered in both.

THE SIX MAJOR JUDGES

Othniel
Ehud
Deborah
Gideon
Jephthah
Samson

THE SIX MINOR JUDGES

Shamgar
Tola
Jair
Ibzan
Elon
Abdon

❖ How were these stories elaborated?

All these stories were combined after the northern kingdom's fall in 722 BC and **revised by spiritual men deeply influenced by the Deuteronomy**. Meditating on the nation's events, they extracted a **religious lesson**, though it doesn't correspond totally to the historical reality. Since **the external oppression only arose because of the people's unfaithfulness** (2:11-15; Deut 28:15-68), **liberation could only come through their return to God** (Deut 28:1-14; Jos 2:18). Because of the unity of all commandments of God, where the first three are about humans' relationship with God and the other seven about relationship between themselves, any break prepares for others. This was the case for the Israelites: following their apostasy, **the last five chapters want us to know that finally they violated every commandment. A reason given is that there was no king, so everyone did what he wanted**: such explanation anticipates Samuel's books.

❖ What vicious cycle did the Israelites experience under the Judges?

Israelites' situation was very sad, for it followed a **repetitive and predictable cycle**: 1) they deserted the true God for false gods; 2) God allowed them to suffer by nearby tribes in order to bring about their conversion; 3) Israel truly asked God for help; 4) God sent a rescuer, under whom all was well; 5) after his death the old pattern of infidelity reappeared (2:18-19). What is striking throughout is **God's constant love and concern**: he answered the Israelites as soon as they turned to him; despite their past unfaithfulness and what he knew would happen again, **he raised up unlikely people as rescuers**. The judges were not morally perfect. Moreover, to slay an enemy chief or kill Philistines is no longer a religious act for us, but we have to keep in mind their time and their environment, whose ethics were very low. Regardless of their limits, however, **faith enabled them to be used by God** in order to awake the people's passivity and to prepare for a new phase of their history (Heb 11:32-34; 12:1). Looking at daily news we may think nothing can be done, except caring ourselves and the little circle of our family and friends. We, however, by God's help can do a lot to produce the needed change. The future is in great measure in our own hands, through our ability to organise and carry out creative alternatives to the present system. From such seeds of hope, patiently sown in our world's forgotten fringes, great trees will spring up to give it oxygen. **God, who knows our littleness, does call us to commit ourselves** out of love for men and women, for children and the elderly, for peoples and communities, whose pain we have seen and heard, and whose names and faces now fill our hearts.

❖ What relevance has Judges' book in today Africa?

African nations, emerged from lengthy oppression, do know how hard it is to achieve true and mature independence. Surely God is the defender of the oppressed. But **our constant fall back into the same mistakes is not how we should respond to him**. We can read Judges' events in the light of politico-economic cycles in Africa: poverty, aid, mismanagement, then again poverty, aid, mismanagement. Another cycle is often applicable: dictatorship, revolution, liberation, then again dictatorship, revolution, liberation. We have to think **how to avoid the repetition of the same errors**. We need also to learn **how to face other cultures**, especially if they do appear superior to ours, but drive us far from God. We must **not sell our identity and faith in order to get material progress**, though communications media would impose a certain cultural uniformity through alienating ideologies and examples of consumerism. Let's say no to old and new forms of colonialism, let's say yes to an healthy encounter between peoples and cultures, where faith has a relevant role. Trust in Baals is not so obsolete: they have simply changed their name. Christians may easily experience similar conflicts in themselves: they do believe in a God who got involved in history by his Son, but what has this faith to do with economic necessities? Is it not safer to rely on natural powers (one's bank account, one's own skills and power)?

❖ A help to read the text:

TWO DIFFERENT INTRODUCTIONS

Judg 1:1-2:5: This picture of Israel's conquest and its results is seen from a southern point of view, alternative and more precise than that of Joshua's book: here we learn that his campaigns to conquer the promised land were not complete and many parts of the country were never subjected. Moreover, the conquest was the result of each tribe's individual effort. So, Judges' book first reflects on conquest and non-conquest of the land and then presents the fights of Israel's many generations to get sure control of it and.



Deborah, prophetess and judge in the late 12th century BC.

Judg 2:6-3:6: This introduction expounds the theme which will be repeated in every great judge's story and explains that after a good leader's death the people go astray. When Joshua's generation died off, God's great deeds were forgotten. This failure had many causes, but marriage with non-Israelites is singled out as focal. Even today the strict relationship between husband and wife may bring bad or good influences on both.

DEBORAH

Judg 4:1-24; 5:1-22; Deborah is among a few women known in the Bible as prophetesses (after Miriam, Moses' sister, and before Huldah and Noadiah) and one of the four women associated with a poem (after Miriam and before Hannah and Mary, Jesus' mother). Her record shows that everyone has a role in the society, and women are capable of leadership. She directed Barak to defeat Sisera's army. True to her prophecy that a woman would triumph, it was Jael who killed him, using his sleep as a cover for her attack. Because people have to do their part, God encourages them and supports even the weakest like these two women made his instrument of salvation. This principle applies to our work too in today's world: "God's weakness is stronger than human strength".

GIDEON

Judg 6:1-24, 33-40: Gideon, called by an angel to fight the Midianites, at first rebuked him. Then he tested God over and over. After getting both signs he asked for, he accepted to be leader, not by the people's choice, but by God's commission. Our baptism is also a vocation to serve God's people, in spite of our littleness.

Judg 7:1-8:3: Faith casts out fear. God tested Gideon's 32,000 men, first for fear and then for alertness. With this big army the Israelites would say, "Our own hands rescued us". Few soldiers implied that the battle was fought by the Lord himself. Always he removes ground for our boasting. Using military intelligence, Gideon's 300 soldiers through sound and light effects seemed more numerous than they were and overcame an army of 130 000. We also must not rely on our strength but on God's power. We will win because he has

promised to be with us, and lead us. Christ has won for us.

Judg 9:1-21: Gideon's son Abimelech seized the royal power his father had refused, after butchering his 70 half brothers on a single stone. This adventurer died himself when a single stone was dropped on his head. Before that, Jotham, his youngest half brother, rebuked him and mocked the monarchy using as example good trees which refused to rule over the others, until a bad one accepted to do so. Stories in which plants or animals are used to provide a moral for humans are common everywhere: this is the first example in the Bible. Its teaching is that usually someone worthless likes to be leader. This earliest tentative king shows how many people use any means to get public offices for personal gain.

JEPHTHAH

Judg 11:1-11,29-40: Jephthah as a child was victimised for being a harlot's son, but as an adult gangster was set to get back his own. When he dictated the terms of his requested leadership against the Ammonites, he made sure that God was also aware with how he was to be treated as both civil and military ruler. He first tried to make pace with the enemy, recounting the events of the past, the sources of tensions, and then asking for a peaceful settlement. Dialogue is necessary in pursuit of peace and justice, but his efforts did not succeed. Before the battle, however, he made an undue vow, and obeying it after his victory he sacrificed his only child, a nameless daughter, though human sacrifices were not allowed by Moses' Law. Everyone should think before taking a serious promise.

SAMSON

Judg 13:1-25: Samson's fantastic cycle includes long accounts of his birth and death, framing three love stories. It is different from other judges' stories because its first part focuses on the angel's annunciation to Manoah's barren wife of her son, who had to be consecrated to God as a Nazirite from the moment of his conception: this would be the source of his charismatic strength. He depended on it, without becoming a leader. His story is placed strategically at the climax of Judges' book: it is the story of Israel summarised in the life of a single man. Moreover he forerun the greatest Saviour of all, Jesus Christ having been raised up by God, announced by an angel, conceived miraculously, rejected by his people, handed over to pagans in order to consummate his saving work in his death.



Samson's last event.



Gideon
thanks God
after getting
a sign he had
asked for.

◊ Study questions:

1. Judges' book sees the breaking of God's first commandment as the main problem. Explain why, and then say if it the same in our country today.
2. Give an account of Judges' historical circumstances and of their roles' relevance to their fellow Israelites. What would today's Christians learn from them?
3. By giving at least five points, clearly analyse the major characteristics of Judges' period and then provide three practical applications we can obtain from it.
4. "Judges' book portrays the moral and political ruin of people who neglected their religious heritage and compromised their faith with the surrounding Paganism". Justify this statement by giving at least five points.
5. "These are the nations which the Lord left, to test Israel by them..." (Judg 3:1). How does this situation parallel our presence in today's world? How are we Christians expected to live in a pluralistic environment?
6. Compare and contrast Bible's judges and Tanzanian judges.
7. Narrate Gideon's call and then say if and how today youth may be called by God to liberate his people.
8. Narrate how Gideon was called to be a judge, and then point out what of his attitudes we still need.
9. Gideon had to test his people twice before engaging in war because they were many. Narrate how God required him to test them, and then explain what his request means for us Christians.
10. Give a summary of Gideon's victory against the Midianites, and then write down the lesson which a good Christian can learn from it.
11. How can the instructions given by God's angel to Manoah and his wife be useful today if observed by pregnant women?
12. In Judges' book, women played important roles (for good or for bad). Briefly describe the roles of five of them and then relate them with women's contemporary empowerment.
13. "Jephthah was a judge faithful to the Lord, but his vow and sacrifice could not please God". Discuss this statement and then write down what you have to do before promising anything to him.
14. What is the main lesson about God which you got reading Judges' book? How could you use it when talking with your friends?
15. Analyse five events which prove the seriousness of Israel's sin as reported in the appendix to Judges' book (17:1-19:30).
15. Explain the cause of Israel's disunity in Judges' book pointing out at least five examples. What can cause disunity in our country?

THE BOOKS OF SAMUEL: THE RISE OF THE KINGDOM

❖ *What do Samuel's books tell us, and who are their three main characters?*

These two books cover **the rise of the kingdom from Samuel and Saul to almost David's death (1070-972 BC)**. These three men are the main characters, and the books are named from the older one. The first book opens with Samuel's emergence as prophet to all Israel who eventually instated the monarchy first under Saul and afterwards under David. The second book narrates about David's reign, closing on the eve of the transfer of power to Solomon. All this stresses the continuity of salvation history: on God's behalf **it was the last Judge, who did choose the first Kings.** In the Hebrew Bible these two books constitute one single work, but the Greek version divided it. There are five sections: Samuel (1Sam 1-7); Samuel and Saul (1Sam 8-15); Saul and David (1Sam 16-2Sam 1); David (2Sam 2-20); Appendices (2Sam 21-24).

❖ *What are our problems with Samuel's text?*

Samuel's text is among the most **corrupt** in the Bible. After Babylonian exile there evidently existed **several versions** of it, combining or putting side by side various sources and traditions about the beginning of the kingdom, for or against it, from the North and from the South, from prophetic circles and from court officials. Who collected them didn't try to harmonize them, so there are **repetitions and contradictions**.

❖ *What were the relations between Israelite tribes at the start of the kingdom?*

During this period **Israelite tribes' loose confederation became a powerful body** under a central authority. Philistines' expansion, supported by their monopoly in iron, did endanger Israel's very existence and require her unity. Saul first appeared as a judge, but his recognition by all tribes started the monarchy. Despite the **far reaching effects of David's forty years in power** - whose master stroke was the capture and choice of the Jebusites' city of Jerusalem as political and religious capital, acceptable to both north and south - **national unity was not really achieved**. The difficult relations between Israel and Judah already pointed to the kingdom's split.

❖ *Why David was considered the ideal king?*

These books reveal **the conditions in which God's kingdom might be expected to function on earth** and the difficulties it would experience. **The ideal was achieved by David, despite his sins.** A complex figure, he had the most varied experiences. When he was young he shepherded his father's flock. Then passing through dramatic events, he became king of Israel and pastor of the people of God. Profiting from the fact that the superpowers of the Near East were weakened at that time, he did win every war and expand his empire to all the lands promised to Abraham, from the Euphrates River to Egypt, with many states paying him tribute. A warrior throughout his life, he was at the same time an **ardent man of prayer**, who knew what it meant to implore and to praise the Lord. The connection of the Psalms with him is therefore important. Firm in his quest for God, he stood on his law. He betrayed seriously his love, but was always ready to repent. As a humble penitent he received God's forgiveness, and accepted his punishment which marked his life with suffering. Thus David with all his weakness was a king "after God's heart". He stressed the true religion and maintained justice among his people. It is notable the **likeness between David and Jesus, king and shepherd** of God's holy nation. In a certain way, Christ's mystery was foreshadowed in him. On the other side, the promise of the coming of a good king (Messiah) followed the failure of the kings in David's line.

❖ *How did the events lead to the concept of 'God's kingdom' under David's leadership?*

With monarchy's emergence, no village escaped its effect, and **no aspect of Israel's life and self-understanding remained as before.** By establishing the Ark of the covenant in Jerusalem, David bound God's presence to the monarchy. Moreover, from Nathan's prophecy onwards, God's promises to David and his house nourished the hope in the Messiah, the chosen Saviour. From then on **the concept of God's kingdom under Davidic leadership stands up** in Israel's faith. God's kingdom (the later equivalent "Kingdom of heavens" derived by Jews' fear of naming God) is a theme which runs through the OT, with its **basic conviction that he is the sovereign Lord of the whole universe.** It was Jesus, however, who gave it its full meaning: while the Jews waited a political and national kingdom he taught it was not a particular territory over which God's people would reign, but his powerful presence in all those who would accept his authority on their lives. Through him, son of David, the kingdom has arrived to overcome Satan's worldwide power and transform anything. Who believes in Jesus does enter this kingdom and receive its blessing: the Holy Spirit and sins' forgiveness. The kingdom is already present, but will be fully established only after the general resurrection at Jesus' glorious return from heaven.

❖ *What balance of powers did God establish in Israel?*

At the first kings' time, **the prophets (Samuel, Gad, Nathan) got importance:** 1 and 2 Samuel present the interplay of these spiritual personalities with the earthly force of the kings, evidencing its implications for Israel's survival as God's people. It was the prophet who had to legitimate on behalf of God the institution of the kingdom and to correct kings' conduct. Moreover, while the kings had authority on the society, they had to be subject to God's word brought by the prophets. Several time we read about kings obeying prophets. This challenges us to reflect on the role of Church's leaders in today society. What would be the advantages of political rulers' following God's word?

❖ What relevance have Samuel's books in Africa?

The king was as central and vital to some African societies as it was in Israel, where he represented the nation and determined its relation to God. 1 and 2 Samuel recall often kings' holiness, i.e. their designation by God. For kingship was seen as **a service imposed from heaven for the people's welfare**. Today too we **need leaders who are true servant of God** and use their status according to his will to meet people's needs. We cannot forget the evil done by Hitler, Stalin, Idi Amin and others who misused their power. The passion and hope with which the Israelites accepted their first kings recall Africa's early days of independence with a desire for unity and prosperity. **The kings' failure**, shortcomings and compromises, along with the internal and international conflicts that arose, have many modern parallels. The difficulties experienced by the chosen people can **create realism and courage** in us.

❖ A help to read the text:

SAMUEL'S EMERGENCE

1Sam 1:1-23: Samuel's story begins with the classic situation of an oppressed woman, the barren Hannah. She went to Shiloh's temple and asked a son, promising to consecrate him to God's service. Her prayer was answered. The story stresses that Samuel was a special gift from heaven; in return, his life was given to God beyond the requirements of Moses' Law. In the Bible barren women bore unusual children: so Sarah bore Isaac, and Elizabeth bore John the Baptist. The unusual birth was thought to be symbolic of the child's importance later in life. New life for his parents marks the beginning of new life for the whole Israel.

1Sam 1:24-2:10: Hannah is a model of thanksgiving: she fulfilled her vow and praised the Lord. Her song asserts the Lord's power to care for the last ones inverting historical processes. His caring compassion extends throughout people's lives. He is reliable until the end. History is, above all, to be understood from his perspective.

1Sam 2:11-36: This section contrasts the evil conduct (greed and sexual sins) of priest Eli's sons with the spiritual growth of the little Samuel. The result was the condemnation of Eli's house and the passage of the leadership to Samuel, for the Lord said he would honour only those who honour him.

1Sam 3:1-21: God's word was infrequent at the time of Samuel's call in the temple, so it was difficult for him and for Eli to recognize the Lord's voice. Samuel had to be called four times before he realised - with some help - that the Lord wanted to tell him something as a new beginning in his relationship with Israel. Amid so many voices it is difficult also for us to discern God's one. But he is not deterred by our deafness, he keeps on insisting in his call. Eli was responsible for his sons' sins and accepted the punishment.

1Sam 4:1-22: God punished his people through the Philistines who did defeat the Israelites and capture the Ark of the Covenant. It didn't help unfaithful people, though they believed it would act somewhat magically. This was a sign of failure to have a true relationship with God, apart from institutional crisis of the old tribal organisation. Thinking about the Church's defeats, we have to ask ourselves: "Is God's word alive in our hearts? Does it change our lives, or is it like the ark which comes and goes without enter our hearts?"

1Sam 5:1-6:4: The Philistines are pictured more as religious rivals than as political opponents. Eventually, in a war conceived as being the battle between the true God and Dagon, the Ark troubled the Philistines, so they had to send it back to Israel. The overthrow of Dagon's image, found prostrate before the Ark in the posture of a slave before his master, expresses strongly God's power.

1Sam 7:3-17: As it was for the previous Judges, in time of oppression the Israelites accepted to repent and God gave them a liberator against the Philistines. It was Samuel who entered in scene as God's messenger, summoning the people that the cause of disaster was their worship of other gods. As mediator he communicated God's will to the people and their request to God. As intercessor he prayed for them asking God to forgive their sins. He also acted as a military leader in war and as a civil one administering justice at Ramah. He is depicted as a wise and faithful judge, successful in battle, but it was God's action which was decisive as "rock of help" (in Hebrew, "Ebenezer").

MONARCHY'S ESTABLISHMENT

1Sam 8:1-22: Samuel's sons took bribes when judging people: the Bible speaks many times about such problem. Their perversion prompted Israel's demand for a king. This was not only a wish to copy other nations, but also a desire for effective and permanent leadership to meet real challenges, like Nahash's invasion. Yet, it appeared to others a refuse of God's kingship and of Israel's identity as a holy nation chosen by him. For them, to accept monarchy was to accept the very unjust power of a legal state from which Moses had emancipated Israel. Samuel warned about the negative outcome, describing how the kings would oppress them to get wealth at the expense of others. His prophecy was fulfilled in different ways (e.g. Saul took David as his harpist, David took Uriah's wife and killed him, Solomon put the Israelites to forced labour and laid a cruel economic burden on them, Ahab took Naboth's vineyard killing him). So, it teaches us to be careful in choosing government structures and persons. History shows how many sins and suffering are caused by bad leaders. The only good leadership is that which follows God's will.

1Sam 9:1-10:1: By God's revelation Samuel met and anointed Saul to be commander of the Lord's people, setting the stage for his election as first king. He was the handsome man in all Israel, but presented himself as a member of the humblest of all the families of the least of Israel's tribe, Benjamin.

1Sam 11:1-15: Like judges in the past, Saul reacted with indignation against the Ammonites and appealed to unity in order to defeat the aggressors of his people. Some mocked whether he could rule them



Following her vow, Hannah presents her child Samuel to the priest Eli.

but God's Spirit empowered him to win. Thus all acknowledged that the Lord had chosen him.

1Sam 12:1-25: In the third national assembly conducted by Samuel, both the traditions (of people's demand and of God's initiative) are brought together to validate the kingship. The condition is that king and people remain obedient to the Lord as Samuel did. This will be their only source of security. But if they will turn away, both will be swept away.

1Sam 15:1-23: This story prepares David's rise. Saul offended God several times going against his oaths and offering unlawful sacrifices. During Amalekite War he disobeyed the Lord in order to please the people, following human thoughts and customs; so God rejected him as his agent. Starting with Adam and Eve, disobedience is the real sin. Obedience is what his Son, King Jesus, did during all his life. For us, obedience to God is to believe in Christ and do what he commands: to love even our enemy.

DAVID'S RISE

1Sam 16:1-13: This passage gives to the youngest son of Jesse the legitimacy taken from Saul. It is effective because it claims David's authority in the most naïve and direct way possible, as an act of simple designation by the Lord, without pleading or explanation. It has no sequence in the book, but aims to explain that David's following success was due to God's Spirit within him. Whenever God has to choose somebody for a great mission he seems to take pleasure at upsetting all the logical rules of common sense. If one listens in faith to the Lord's voice, one learns to look anything through God's eyes.



The young David with Goliath's head.

1Sam 17:1-58: The story of the young David killing an imposing and terrifying Philistine (called Goliath) shows that God punishes those who put down his name and that he uses simple ways or people to accomplish great mission at the condition that they have faith in him. David did know and say that the Lord was the one who was fighting for Israel and that he could save with no sword and no spear.

1Sam 18:1-20:17: After the women praised David more than Saul, the king became jealous of his success and popularity. In contrast, his son Jonathan loved David like his own soul, giving a good example of strong friendship without envy. Saul's daughter Michal married him. This inclusion within the royal house would be essential when David would seek legitimacy as king. Both children helped him when the king resolved to kill him due to unfounded fears. David was forced to seek refuge with the Philistines and to build a personal power base among Judah. So, Saul's hate served the interests of David, who appeared innocent in his rather passive rise to the throne. He waited with patience the fulfilment of God's promise accepting long trials. The Lord's ways are different from ours. Many times he puts a person in a low position as training for a highest post.

1Sam 22:1-23: This collection of short notices prefaces the stories of David as a guerrilla leader and explains how he got all priests' support.

1Sam 26:1-25: This story is repeated to defend David narrating how strongly he respected the Lord's anointed one. Saul's blessing over him is the last word between them. It allows the narrator to achieve their leaving on a relatively peaceful note, with David totally justified by the very man who had sought so long to take his life. But he went his way for he didn't trust Saul at all. David's complaint to the king reflected the closed association between God and the promised land: he saw his exile from Israel as forced exile from the Lord, equivalent to serving other gods!



The dead Samuel appears to Saul and prophesies his imminent death.

1Sam 28:3-25: As Saul was afraid before Goliath, so he was again fearful before the Philistines because the Lord had dumped him and didn't answer his inquiries. In pain, he turned to a forbidden medium to ask the dead Samuel. But the spirit confirmed he was facing final defeat. This story aims to explain that his death in war was decreed by God. Even today many fall into temptation of consulting others rather than God when in difficulties. What would they do had they been answered like Saul, "Tomorrow you will be dead?"

1Sam 31:1-13: The Philistines beat the Israelites at Mount Gilboa killing Jonathan and causing a mortal wound on Saul. To avoid torture and shameful death he chose suicide, so infrequent among Israelites. It is the concluding drama of his gradual downfall (as it would be with Judah Iscariot). The political consequences are reported, but the recognition of Saul's successor is yet to come.

DAVID RECOGNIZED AFTER SAUL'S DEATH

2Sam 1:1-27: Saul's death removed any threat from David, but he didn't rejoice. As a poet, he delivered a tribute to Saul and Jonathan. It demonstrate the greatness of Israel's poetry at a very early age.

2Sam 2:1-11: David was appointed king in Hebron but only over Judah (the south), while Ishbaal, Saul's son, was appointed king of Israel (the north).

2Sam 4:1-5:10: Gradually, David overcame the other side. When King Ishbaal and his strong man Abner were killed without David's guilt, he was offered the lead of the north. After a treaty with the elders of Israel he moved his residence to Jerusalem, a personally held stronghold between Judah and Israel that however remained distinct entities. This city would eventually become the whole world's religious centre.

2Sam 6:1-23: The Ark was been neglected since its

Two features of **Hebrew poetry** are:
Imagery: rather than develop abstract concepts, the poet prefers to accumulate concrete images.

Parallelism: the two parts of a verse often take up the same idea, but with expressions which are complementary or in opposition.

failure to assist the Israelites against the Philistines. Bringing to Jerusalem this ancient symbol of Israel's unity, ritually gave David legitimacy and power. Joining the celebrations he danced with vigour before the Lord uncovering himself. Then with characteristic simplicity he defended his humble approach against his wife's blame. If you can shout out when your team scores a goal, how cannot you leaving behind your self-control a little to sing the Lord's praises?

2Sam 7:1-29: Nathan's dynastic prophecy made permanent David's kingship. After building his own expensive house, David wished to build the Lord's one. The prophet approved before consulting God, but at night he was inspired to say the contrary. We also have to pray in order to know God's will, without confiding in our own skills. The strong promise transmitted by Nathan is fundamental in both Jew and Christian faith about a royal Messiah. The Lord's commitment was absolute: in the case of failure on the part of David's successors, a failure which began with Solomon, God would punish them as a simple correction confirming his fatherly attitude. A striking prayer by David affirmed God's role in electing forever him and his house, because this covenant was a pure gift, not depending on human dispositions. Its accomplishment went far beyond what both he and Nathan intended, for they were thinking of an earthly kingdom, while God gave David a descendant who was really to reign without end: Jesus.

DAVID'S PROBLEMS

2Sam 11:1-26: Bathsheba's story illustrates David's dark side which infected his family and placed it under threat. His picture is a mirror of the brokenness present in all humans. God's will on earth is not necessarily carried out by blameless persons or angels. A sin caused other sins: lust of eyes, adultery, hypocrisy, murder... Even today many sexual sins end in death (AIDS, abortion etc.). After killing Uriah, a foreigner but mighty and reliable man, David took his wife thinking he had resolved the problem. Many people do sin and then think they are safe if fellow humans don't know it.

2Sam 12:1-25: Nathan's simple and beautiful parable of the ewe lamb drew to true penance David, the king according to God's heart. We cannot get out of sins by themselves, but God doesn't leave us in our dramatic situation. As a human, David did err but was ready to repent when blamed. Nathan, after prophesying calamities, ends announcing hope: God's last word is always a word of forgiveness. Eventually Bathsheba's son Solomon, who showed this pardon, would come to power instead of his elder brothers.

2Sam 15:1-30: According to Nathan's prophecy, tensions outside David's house gave way to problems within. His son and heir Absalom, after getting mercy for killing his half-brother Amnon who had raped his sister, developed for four years a gradual following until he was proclaimed king in Hebron. The coup d'état occurred with surprising ease. It was not the first time that David was the hunted one! He tested God's will by ordering immediate flight from Jerusalem without the Ark: his return would confirm that God sanctioned him not because he possessed the Ark. At the same time, his clever strategy was to leave a few followers behind to remain in contact with him.

2Sam 16:5-13: David's mildness facing Shimei's curse expresses his acceptance of God's punishment. It prepares for Jesus' meekness in front of his enemies.

2Sam 18:6-19:8: David's heartbroken mourning for his rebel son's death causes our sympathy but not his supporters' one. Joab spoke for the troop and for security; David responded honouring the winners.

2Sam 24:1-25: The last four chapters give a variety of information about different periods of David's life to widen the scope of the problems he faced: famine, warfare and plague. They show how God's goodness guided him in all those problems. In the census' story the delicate balance between governing (which needed a survey as basis of taxation and military enrolment) and remaining submissive to God (who would help his people anyway) was first upset by the plague and then resolved by David's fulfilled prayer for his sheep, which is the story's peak. The value of the information from the census was immediately nullified by many deaths. So David learnt not to hope in the mass of soldiers who could die at once. It was only the Lord to shape Israel's life. David, guided by the prophet Gad to offer a sacrifice, refused to take the place and the oxen for free, seeing that he could not offer something without cost. A true offering has to hurt one's heart. Jesus, the good shepherd born during a census, offered himself to bring peace to all.

❖ Study questions:

1. "I have asked him of the Lord" (1Samuel 1:20). Tell the story behind this statement and say if you yourself have ever rejoiced in seeing your prayer fulfilled. How?
2. Discuss Samuel's rise in relation to the decline of priest Eli's family, and then compare that situation with today Church's reality.
3. It was difficult for Samuel and Eli to recognise the voice calling the boy. Narrate this story and then explain how you try to hear God's call.
4. In 1Sam 4-7 there is a story about the Israelites' great defeat by the Philistines, the capture of the ark of covenant and the Philistines' consequent afflictions. Narrate briefly the story showing eight scenarios and then give two lessons you have learnt from it.
5. "There is a cry for good leadership today". Discuss this statement with reference to the situation in Samuel's time by giving eight points.
6. In 1Sam we read about two different opinions regarding the legitimacy of asking for a king other than God. What they were and what can we say today about the need of having political leaders?
7. When Samuel warned his people requesting a king, he had foreseen how kings would mistreat them: justify this statement with reference to both the books of Samuel and Kings by giving at least five examples of how this became true; then give at least three examples of abuses in Tanzania which resemble the outcome of Samuel's prophecy to the Israelites of his days.
8. The first two kings of Israel sinned against the Lord. The first was rejected by God from being a kin while the second was not. Justify this assertion by giving at least eight points.

9. "There remains yet the youngest, but behold he is keeping the sheep" (1Sam 16:11). Narrate the story behind this statement, and then explain God's preference for the little ones today.
10. Narrate how Samuel anointed David king over Israel and then say what you have learnt from the way God chose him.
11. Describe David and Jonathan's friendship and then explain what it can teach your fellow young people.
12. King Saul came to hate David very much. What was the reason? Describe five occasions where Saul attempted to kill David. Present at least five evils done by modern people in aspiring to leadership.
13. "Saul has slain his thousands and David his ten thousands" (1Sam 18:7). What was Saul's reaction to these words and its consequences? Narrate a similar situation of which you were witness.
14. What factors did influence David's becoming an outstanding king? What lessons can modern leaders learn from him?
15. Describe David's behaviour in bringing the Ark to Jerusalem and then explain what it means for you.
16. David planned to build God's temple, but his idea was rejected by God. Give at least five reasons for this rejection.
17. In his dealing with Bathsheba, King David did several sins. What were they and what have we to learn from this story?
18. Narrate how King David acknowledged his fault and accepted a severe punishment for having ordered a census. Is it a bad thing for our government to take it?
19. "King David was good at administering justice in the nation, but failed to bring peace and order to his own family". With reference to 2 Samuel chapters 3 and 13: a) identify and explain three occasions which prove David's failure in family matters; b) give two points to show how his failure applies to many of today's parents.
20. "From David we got the promised Messiah". Explain with reference to Nathan's prophecy (2Sam 7:12 ff) and then say how this could happen if we remember David's problems in 2Sam 11-12. What can we learn from this today?

THE BOOKS OF KINGS: FROM GLORY TO ASHES

❖ *What were the sources of Kings' two books?*

Kings' books, which are a single book in the Hebrew Bible, openly mention as sources the Kings' Annals, but there were others very different, notably Elijah's and Elisha's accounts and narratives involving Isaiah. Where these sources' use has not interfered, **events are uniformly reported:** each king is treated singly, with hardly changing formulas of introduction and conclusion which always includes a judgment on his religious behaviour. Its criterion is clearly Deuteronomy's law on the one temple, with exclusion of the "high places", i.e. the earlier spaces for sacrifices in hill tops used also in pagan worship. That book's discovery under Josiah (with the reform it inspired) is the climax of this story, which **wants prove Deuteronomy's basic teaching**, i.e. that the nation is blessed if it respects God's covenant, punished if it doesn't.

JUDAH		ISRAEL	
Rehoboam	(931-913)	(931-910)	Jeroboam I
Abijah	(913-911)	(910-909)	Nadab
Asa	(911-870)	(909-886)	Baasha
		(886-885)	Elah
		(885)	Zimri
Jehoshaphat	(870-848)	(885-874)	Omri
		(874-853)	Ahab
Jehoram (Joram)	(848-841)	(853-852)	Ahaziah
Ahaziah	(841)	(852-841)	Jehoram (Joram)
Queen Athaliah	(841-835)	(841-814)	
Jehoash (Joash)	(835-796)	(814-798)	Jehu
Amaziah	(796-781)	(798-783)	Jehoahaz (Joahaz)
Uzziah	(781-740)	(783-743)	Jehoash (Joash)
		(743)	Jeroboam II
Jotham	(740-736)	(743)	Zechariah
		(743-738)	Shallum
Ahaz (Jehoahaz I)	(736-716)	(738-737)	Menahem
		(737-732)	Pekahiah
		(732-724)	Pekah
Hezekiah	(716-687)	722	Hoshea
Manasseh	(687-642)		
Amon	(642-640)		
Josiah	(640-609)		FALL OF SAMARIA
Jehoahaz II (Shallum)	(609)		
Jehoiakim (Eliakim)	(609-598)		N.B. The names of the most important kings
Jehoiachin (Jeconiah)	(598-597)		are in boldface. Variant or alternative names
Zedekiah (Mattaniah)	(597-586)		are put in parentheses.
FALL OF JERUSALEM	586		In the list the shifting back and forth of the
			column indicates new dynasties in the North.
			No one of their kings descended from David;
			this lack of legitimacy caused instability: 8 out
			of 19 were killed.

❖ How do Kings' books evaluate them?

Continuing Samuel's story, these books assess all Kings of both Israel and Judah by religious rather than by political standards. David and Jeroboam I are models: the first as a good servant of the true God, the second as one who perverted his people to adore the Lord through a golden calf, that was Baal's symbol. By sharing Jeroboam's sin (two golden calves' temples), all northern Kings are judged guilty; eight of Judah are praised as faithful to God, but **only Hezekiah and Josiah win ample approval.**

❖ How do Kings' books begin and end?

The books **begin with a stable and united kingdom under a strong king living near a glorious temple and end with their total destruction and mass deportation.** After Solomon, there were two separate kingdoms which fought against each other, though they shared the same traditions and the certainty of being God's people who were given by him a country. For a great deal the superpowers, Egypt and Mesopotamia, were weakened. But after Assyria grew stronger, it took Samaria (722 BC) deleting Israel's northern kingdom. The tiny southern one, spread over the hills around Jerusalem and into the Negeb desert, remained alone for 136 years, always hoping in a reunification. In 612 BC the whole Near East applauded Assyria's downfall by the Babylonians, failing to realise that it was only a change of masters. Eventually King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, after three attacks (in 605, 597 and 586 BC) completely destroyed Jerusalem, carrying all but the poorest Jews into the land from where Abraham was called. Others flight to Egypt from where their fathers had been set free. The last story, King Jehoiachin's release from prison (560 BC) is a dawning of liberation for the exiles. The books were written or revised a short time after this favour: the Jewish remnant's return to Jerusalem (538 BC) had occurred, the author would have referred to it.

❖ What are the three main situations in Kings' books?

Kings' time is the one that we know better in the OT. These two books mainly cover in chronological order Israel's religious history from David's last days to Jerusalem's destruction (972-586 BC). Besides tracing this decline **from glory to ashes**, they point out its reasons, presenting a God actively involved in men and women's affairs, who reveals himself through both human beings and historical events. During these **four centuries** there were three main situations:

(a) **the united monarchy** (all Israelites remained under Solomon as they had been under his father David);

(b) **the twin kingdoms** (from Israel's rebellion against David's family until her deportation to Assyria);

(c) **the surviving kingdom** (Judah's affairs until her own defeat and exile by the Babylonians).

Notwithstanding the evident decadence, during these four centuries, **through trials, persecutions and difficulties of all kinds, Israel's faith matured** to the point of reaching, in the best prophets, an excellence and clarity which only Christ would enhance. The greater part of the OT was written during these centuries.

❖ What was the author's aim?

We cannot say who the author was, but far more important is knowing his audience and intention. Because nobody writes history simply to record facts without a purpose: if pre-independence books tended to justify colonialism, post-independence books want to defend native rule. The author planned **to point to the exiles idolatry's evils as cause of their troubles** so that they would learn from their past. He stressed God's faithfulness showing that, while the Israelites under their Kings were unfaithful, **God remained loyal and patient long after their betrayal of covenant's obligations.** He convinced them that their bad situation was due to their own sins, but pointed also to the future by showing that **God would fulfil his promises if they would repent.** Though the chosen people's thanklessness and the two sections of the nation's successive destruction seemed to frustrate God's design, **a few faithful people remained to secure the future.** So, let us read these books as they were written: as **a salvation history.**

❖ What are the themes of Solomon's story?



King Solomon offering sacrifices while dedicating Jerusalem's temple.

When Solomon came to the throne (971 BC) there was no military threat from neighbours. The long record of his forty years in power gives firstly a detailed account of his excelling wisdom, his riches and his buildings' magnificence. **Jerusalem temple's construction and dedication are central** in his story, for then there was a land, a king and a temple where God made himself present to his people. Because there was peace, the literature developed: learned people had an important place in Solomon's court and started to writing down memories, laws and reflections. After that we see his failure, for he played the great lord too much, acting like any other king of the time, not as God's representative. The Bible credits him with 700 wives and 300 concubines: among them, the Egyptian Pharaoh's daughter and other foreigners brought their gods into YHWH's holy city. Solomon's age was one of **both organisation and exploitation.** The latter increased the hostility between north and south. He succeeded in containing a revolt, but it broke out after he died (931 BC). Under his incompetent son, Rehoboam, the kingdom split in two politically and religiously. The united kingdom had lasted only 70 years.

These books are mainly concerned with religious matters, such as the covenant's observance, the temple and the relations between kings and prophets. These latter's role in Israel's history is fundamental. Because **many of the best prophets lived during the monarchy's period**, we have to read 2Kings inserting in it the relevant sections of the books of Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, Zephaniah, Jeremiah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Ezekiel. **Through them God continually faced his sinful people** to call them back to his ways. Prophets' word could be an assurance of victory (1Kgs 20:13), a promise of peace (2Kgs 7:1), a threat (1Kgs 22:17) or a condemnation (2Kgs 1:3-4). In every case **it was God who made known beforehand his plan** which would reach completion necessarily. History is to be understood in the light of **his word, judging, saving, fulfilling**. Throughout 1-2 Kings there are many realized prophecies. The point is clear: God is in charge of history and "reveals his counsels to his servants the prophets" (Am 3:7). Their **constant call to be faithful to the covenant and to God**, the supreme ruler, is still of major importance.

❖ *What was Elijah's most important contribution to Israel's faith?*

In Canaan the Israelites were tempted to search sure fruitfulness for their fields through worshipping local gods which were only personification of natural forces. Fertility rites were especially condemned by the Law and the prophets. Among them, **Elijah stood out as the restorer of Moses' faith. His name means "the Lord is my God", and his life developed according to it**, totally given to kindling in the people thankfulness to the Lord as the only God, though invisible and mysterious, above and beyond all natural forces. Idolatry raged especially in the northern kingdom during Ahab's reign, when the Israelites beside the Lord worshipped Baal, a knowable god whom they believed could guarantee their prosperity in exchange for sacrifices. Backing two religions at once was like limping on both feet, as Elijah put it. **He blamed their ambiguous behaviour** and demanded exclusive loyalty to the Lord, recognized for what he is, absolute and transcendent. In a dramatic scene on Mount Carmel he faced Baal's prophets who found themselves forced to extreme actions, in the vain attempt to subject their idol to their own will. On the contrary, **he asked with simple faith the fathers' God to show himself** in all his mercy, faithful to his reality **as the living Lord who converts the people's hearts**. After the Lord's undeniable answer, the Israelites could no longer doubt: though they had seemed to be lost, they found again the path of truth, rediscovering themselves as God's chosen people, bound to him through a covenant. After Elijah's definitive disappearance, his importance grew more and more in Jewish tradition. Though he left no writings, Elijah with Moses are the two greatest figures of Jewish faith. Luke will present Jesus as the new Elijah.



Elijah departs from the earth leaving behind Elisha to continue his prophetic witness.

❖ *Who was Elijah's most important follower?*

Doubtless, among the prophets' brotherhoods, **Elijah's most important follower was Elisha**. He inherited his spirit but, unlike him, was consulted by the powerful and **played a prominent part in contemporary affairs, inside and outside Israel**, during at least fifty years of activity. In this way he **carried on his master's war against paganism** as God ordered him on the Mount Sinai. In a time of tension with the Arameans of Syria, he is associated with the substitution of their king Ben-hadad with Hazael against king Jehoram, Ahab's son. Most importantly, Elisha is credited with the anointing of the commander Jehu to become king in Israel. This man, after killing Jehoram and his mother Jezebel, wiped out Baal's worship. **This revolution extended to the south** with the killing of queen Athaliah, Ahab's daughter (or sister), and the restoration of David's dynasty and of the Lord's cult.

❖ *What relevance have Kings' books in Africa?*

A new colonialism treats poor countries like parts of a machine, cogs on a gigantic wheel. It reduces them to mere providers of raw material and cheap labour, denying them the right to an integral development. That is inequality, and inequality generates a violence which nobody can control. But when discussing the causes of today's problems of so many African countries, we need too **examining ourselves as nations and as individuals** to discover what is right and wrong locally before blaming foreigners. **Unless we correct ourselves, things will never become better**. The lesson illustrated in Kings' books that "**power corrupts**" is obvious in ancient history, in modern Africa as in the world in general. The divisions and disasters brought about by corruption are a warning for the present. Big projects can also be a source of pride and lead to the downfall of the nation.

❖ **A help to read the text:**

SOLOMON'S REIGN

1Kgs 1:11-35: When David was aged, his eldest surviving son, Adonijah, wanted the throne, but it was Solomon to be chosen and acclaimed king. Personal arguments opposed the two party, but Nathan's masterful plan stirred David to action by playing upon his pride and upon the safety of his beloved Bathsheba and her son. Through the prophet's mediation, it was again God to choose the lesser one.

1Kgs 2:1-12: Before his death, David charged Solomon to walk on the Lord's way, but also to deal mercilessly with problematic people. His orders reflected a strong sense of morality and justice according to the ideas of the time, seeking to promote lasting peace in his son's reign.

1Kgs 3:3-28: Once Solomon had sacrificed to God in Gibeon, he got a dream in which was granted a wish: ~~than he asked wisdom rather than long life, riches or power. His judgment in settling the case of an~~

infant in dispute between two harlots shows how he merited his wisdom's fame spread among other nations. But his reign ended with foolishness. Jesus proclaimed himself greatest than Solomon and taught us to first seek God's kingdom and righteousness, for all other things will be ours as well.

1Kgs 8:1-30, 41-43, 54-61: David's desire to build a big house for the Lord was fulfilled by Solomon in seven years. When the Ark arrived in the temple and the priests who had been carrying it returned outside, a dark cloud filled the building, for God intended to dwell there forever with his glory. The king's prayer portrayed the temple as the one place to which all Israelites in all circumstances could have recourse for appeal to God, though he acknowledged for sure that the Lord could not be confined in a temple, while it is impossible to be contained in the heavens. Jesus prayed and taught in the (second) temple.

1Kgs 10:1-13: The queen of Sheba (today Yemen) visited Solomon with precious gifts to test his wisdom. His replies left her breathless, and she was further impressed by his servers and wasteful dinners. The unusual insistence on the success of a king who was ultimately unfaithful to God's covenant is probably explained by the author's aim of showing the exiles what glory Israel could have retained had her kings been faithful. If truth be told, Solomon imposed heavy taxes and even failed to pay debts he incurred in using wealth extravagantly. Jesus noted that flowers are more beautiful than him in all his magnificence.

1Kgs 11:1-43: One difference between David and Solomon was their foreign policies. While the father used his military skill, the son employed political and economic alliances strengthened by marrying Pharaoh's daughter and other foreign women. God had forbidden marriages or covenants with outsiders, let them turn the Israelites' hearts to other gods. Solomon had over 700 wives and 300 concubines, a sign of his power: they made him to worship their gods and to build temples for them opposite Jerusalem. Because he sinned against the Lord, external as well internal enemies began to emerge. He was told that his empire would not last: only a part of it would be given to his descendants because of God's faithfulness. After Jeroboam's aborted rebellion, Solomon died and his son Rehoboam became king.

THE TWIN KINGDOMS' BEGINNING

1Kgs 12:1-19: When Rehoboam went to Shechem to be acclaimed king by all Israel's leaders, the assembly asked him to lighten the heavy yoke laid upon them by his father. Following his young friends' unwise counsel, he refused forcefully. The result was the permanent division of God's people in two kingdoms. So, Ahijah's prophecy was fulfilled, but as we know, unity is strength, division is weakness.

1Kgs 12:20-33: Jeroboam, after being acclaimed king of the northern tribes, perverted their faith. He realised that a religion centralised at Jerusalem, his rival's capital, did threaten his own authority. So he established two temples at Bethel and Dan (the very edges of his kingdom), putting golden calves there to represent God's presence and appointing non-Levites to the priesthood. This was the famous sin of Jeroboam, which caught all his successors, though they came from different families.

ELIJAH'S PROPHETIC ACTIVITY

1Kgs 16:29-17:24: Under the wicked King Ahab of Israel the Lord's prophets were killed. Against the cultural colonisation by his foreign wife Jezebel to increase paganism, God sent Elijah to tell Ahab that no rain should fall until he would say so, for only the Lord controlled rain, and not Baal, worshipped as the god of storms and fertility. While the people starved, the prophet was feed by God with the family of a poor widow of Zarephath, who believed his words and gave him the little food she had. Afterward, Elijah called her son back to life, though they were out of the Lord's own land.

1Kgs 18:16-46: After three years and six months of famine, when Elijah went to Ahab, they traded insults. Then the prophet challenged Baal's worship demanding all Israel to attend at Mount Carmel. There Elijah said he would sacrifice a bull to the Lord, as his 450 opponents would sacrifice another to Baal, stating that the true God would respond by combusting the animal. After no response from Baal, Elijah got fire from heaven on his bull and killed Baal's prophets. In the wake of this decisive victory, he announced a storm.

1Kgs 19:1-21: Fleeing Jezebel's reaction, Elijah went to the mountain of Moses' revelations. There he too had a special experience of God. Answering Elijah's desire to resign his mission, God named his successor, Elisha, who would fulfil the anointment of Hazael and Jehu as kings of Syria and Israel to punish Ahab's family. On a high mountain both Moses and Elijah appeared with the transfigured Jesus to his apostles.

1Kgs 21:1-29: The king was supposed to be the one who do justice, but Ahab was really corrupt in all spheres of his rule: politics, religion, military and business. In a series of three stories which focus on his tragic death, this second one concerns an internal matter rather than wars with Syria. Naboth owned a vineyard inherited from his fathers and protected by the law. By a hypocritical use of fasting and religious assembly, Jezebel forced Naboth's death in order to get the vineyard for his husband. According to the law Ahab was doomed to death. Elijah's notice of the sentence led the king to a sincere use of fasting and penance. Then God deferred his dynasty's end until the next generation. Indeed, three of Ahab's children had royal power, but none was succeeded by descendants.

1Kgs 22:1-38: Ahab's death and Israel's defeat, foretold by an anonymous prophet in 20:42, were announced again by Micaiah and realized during a dreadful campaign. After 400 prophets predicted victory, the messenger sent to Micaiah tried to influence him to foretell that way. But the truth stands alone, it doesn't depend on the witnesses' number. He appeared to do so in order to amaze Ahab. Indeed, the king asked him for truth, but he was not able to bear it when given by Micaiah, though denying the truth is denying oneself. This dramatic conflict between prophets presents the problem of their authenticity. In the end, only fulfilment could show who of them spoke truly on behalf of God.

ELISHA'S PROPHETIC ACTIVITY

2Kgs 2:1-15: Here starts a set of stories focused on Elisha and his extraordinary powers. It aims to present the prophets as leading figures throughout Israel's history. The sudden departures which were a feature of Elijah's story reached their peak when he left the earth without a trace. Though usually a charisma is not inherited, for it is God's free gift, Elisha wanted to be known as Elijah's main successor. The



Elisha raising the Shunammite woman's son.

Lord granted his daring request by allowing him to see what was hidden from human eyes.

2Kgs 4:1-44: These are the first four of ten stories aimed to evoking wonder at Elisha's unique powers: a widow's troubles, the Shunammite woman's son, the poisoned food and the multiplication of breads.

2Kgs 5:1-27: The fifth story widens the perspective of this miracles' sequence by depicting Elisha's use of his powers to heal a pagan enemy's leprosy. At first, Naaman's pride and mistaken belief about how a prophet ought to operate almost aborted his healing, but eventually he proclaimed his faith in the God of Israel. Many Christians too think he should help them their way, instead of accepting his ones. Let the Lord be God and direct us as he wants. Elisha refused any payment, knowing himself to be only God's instrument. On the contrary Gehaz, Elisha's servant, trying to get Naaman's gifts, ended up rather with lifelong affliction: who trifles with a prophet deserves punishment. Jesus taught his apostles to give freely what they received by God freely.

2Kgs 9:1-37: Carrying out the only remaining of the three commands given to Elijah on the Horeb, Elisha sent one of his disciples to anoint the commander Jehu in order to strike down Ahab's family and to avenge on Jezebel the blood of the Lord's servants. The marvellous presentation of Jehu's bloody rebellion is concerned with portraying it as sanctioned by God.

2Kgs 11:1-21: Matching the northern revolution, this in Judah against Queen Athaliah (who had seized cruelly the power) restored God's covenant and also David's rightful line in the person of the child Jehoash.

2Kgs 13:14-25: Even in death Elisha continued to be the channel of God's life-giving powers, initiating a symbolic act which enacted and anticipated Israel's desired military penetration into Syria. He left no successor, but when the body of a dead man accidentally touched his bones, it revived, for though the prophet was died, God's power was still active.

N.B. The following chapters of 2Kgs will be proposed in connection with the relevant prophetic books.

❖ **Study questions:**

1. "King David's instructions to his successor Solomon (1 Kgs 2:1-46) were in two opposite directions: obedience to the Law and murder". Give at least five points to justify or correct such statement and three points to show how OT's morality was far from NT's one.
2. According to Solomon's prayer of dedication, what could be the occasions for the people's appearing before the Lord? What others would you like to add to his list?
3. Present Solomon's ten achievements and ten failures.
4. Discuss reasons and consequences of the splitting up of Israel's kingdom into two after Solomon's death, and then relate them to today Christians' divisions.
5. Explain four reasons for the division of Israel into two kingdoms after King Solomon's death. Then compare that situation to today's religious and political situation in Tanzania by writing four points.
6. Narrate how Elijah challenged courageously Baal's worship to guide Israel again to the true God. What prophetic stand do we need take in front of the spread of perverted beliefs and morals in the 21st century?
7. What lessons can modern Christians learn from Elijah's fear after killing Baal's prophets and from the action he took as a result of his fear?
8. 1 Kings 21:1-23 narrates the story of the murder of the innocent Naboth by King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. By giving five points, explain how the story relates to the Tanzanian society of today.
9. The case of Ahab and Naboth is not unique. Report it and then propose how it can help our contemporaries to follow justice.
10. "In time of trouble, Elisha's name was an outcry for help". Discuss this statement by using eight of the miracles performed by him as recorded in the Second Book of the Kings.
11. Elisha's miracles were intended to reveal God's power present in his messengers. List at least five of them, and then explain the attitude of people performing or seeing miracles today.
12. Naaman reacted against Elisha's method of healing him. How would you use this story to explain the importance of sacraments such as baptism?
13. "King Jeroboam I is considered responsible for the fall of Israel into captivity two hundred years later". Justify this statement by giving at least five reasons.

❖ **Revision questions:**

1. Monotheism was Israel's faith, but interaction with outsiders polluted it. Narrate how this happened and then say how globalisation is both facilitating and distorting Christianity in Tanzania.
2. Israel was forbidden marriages with other peoples; what are the original motivations of such prohibition and its relevance for today Christians?
3. Clarify the temple's importance for the Israelites, and then say how we Christians have to see our places of worship.
4. Israelite kings were often inquiring of the Lord before undertaking any important venture. Explain their ways and what we have to do in our days.
5. By giving at least eight facts from the books of Samuel and Kings, explain how David, Solomon and Rehoboam caused Israel's division and then show how a similar situation can endanger Tanzania's unity.

SOME BOOKS NAMED AFTER PROPHETS (760-518 BC)

"We have the prophetic word made more sure. You will do well to pay attention to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts"
(2Pt 1:19).

❖ How did prophets' messages become books?

We call "writing prophets" those after whom some biblical books are named. However **the prophets were first and foremost speakers, preachers, not writers**. Their books' contents are of different kinds: prophetic sayings, narratives told in the first and others in the third person. These three types are not mutually exclusive; indeed, narrative sections frequently include either prophecy or speech. **The passages in the third person point to an author other than the prophet**, such as Baruch (Jer 25:3; 36:4). To him Jeremiah dictated the words he spoke in God's name over a period of twenty-three years, but Baruch added biographical narratives (Jer 36:32). Similar situations may lie behind other prophets' books, though part of their legacy may have been preserved by their followers' oral tradition (Isa 8:16) together with memories of their life. **Prophets' books were kept alive by spiritual groups** who found in them the food for their faith and life. **Under God's inspiration they added similar words**, either to adapt the books to the needs of a new generation **or to improve them**. **Sometimes the additions were notable, especially those to Isaiah's book.**

OT PROPHETIC BOOKS AS FOUND IN CHRISTIAN BIBLES

MAJOR

Isaiah
Jeremiah (+ Lamentations and Baruch)
Ezekiel
Daniel

MINOR

Hosea
Joel
Amos
Obadiah
Jonah
Micah
Nahum
Habakkuk
Zephaniah
Haggai
Zechariah
Malachi

THE BOOK OF AMOS: GOD'S DEMAND OF SOCIAL JUSTICE



Amos, the first writing prophet.

❖ Who was Amos?

Amos is the first prophet whose statements have come down to us in the form of a book. By profession he was a breeder of livestock and a grower of mulberry figs, **belonging to no prophetic group**. A popular preacher with a vigorous wording, he stressed that it was God's direct intervention which led him, **a Southerner, to preach to northern Israelites**, mainly at Bethel schismatic temple. In performing his duty Amos **obeyed God's call** facing with courage the opposition until he perhaps was expelled. He brought to his **short prophetic work (about 760 BC)** the **strength of character** (rough, direct, proud, rich in imagery) shaped by the harsh environment of his native Tekoa (on the border of the desert), and a **perception of the corrupt life** of Israelite society as clear as few residents could have.

❖ What was Israel's situation at Amos' time?

Amos spoke harsh words to a smooth season, for he prophesied under Jeroboam II, whose long reign brought prosperity. Politically, it was **the calm between the storms**. Economic conditions were relatively favourable to upper classes, but the people often lived in abject poverty and oppression. There were poor who failed to get even food, so they entered into debts and became victims of the rich, who were even able to pervert justice in the court. We read about needy bought for a pair of sandals. Moreover there was moral and religious degradation. Rich people lived wastefully, built fine palaces with ivory beds, used expensive lotions and enjoyed refined music near a mass of shanties. Amos saw under the surface and realised that the true health of a civilisation could not be measured only in term of economic prosperity and military might, but must be **assessed from its morality**. Especially justice is essential to any society and is required by God. We must never allow the culture of prosperity to make us incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor, weeping for others' pain, and sensing the need to help them, as though all this were someone else's responsibility and not our own.

❖ According to Amos, what was Israel's main sin?

Amos said little against other gods because those who took advantage of their poor brothers continued to adore God and to observe the Sabbath, seeking to conceal social injustice by fake religious practices (8:4-8). For him **Israel's main sin in the worship was its separation from concern for the fellow citizen**. Amos' originality was the force with which he restated pure faith's demands against empty formal religion, arguing that fine liturgical shows and sacrifices cannot satisfy God, for his covenant's distinctive feature was the link between the relationship to him and that to one's neighbour. The gloom portrayed in Amos lies not in his proclamation of judgment, but in the social evils that invited it. The ultimate reason for God's judgment is his distress at the poor's oppression. Moreover, **the Israelites' deaf ear to the prophets who blamed them was a particularly grave offence**, since it amounted to reject God himself; its fitting

punishment would be a loss of his leading Word (8:11-12). In brief, four interrelated themes were central for Amos: (a) judgment; (b) social justice; (c) worship; (d) hearing of the Word.

❖ *How does Amos represent God?*

For Amos, God is everything and humans nothing. He is no longer just a national God: he also watches over the morality of other nations. He can do this because he is Creator. Amos formulated without any hesitation his weighty doctrine of the **all-powerful and universal Lord, eternally just who would punish the nations** (1-2), **but also Israel**, for his blessing required greater morality (3:2). The “**Day of the Lord**” (in the Bible this key term occurs for the first time here) will be one of darkness and not light (5:18 ff). **Amos’ message, the least hopeful** among those of all classical prophets, was directed in particular against the leaders (king, priests and upper classes), who lacked compassion and failed to adhere to the covenant, though the whole people would be affected. As reaction, **God would summon Assyria** (6:8-14), a nation always in the prophet’s mind. Amos was so sure of Israel’s destruction that he started her funeral’s song. Yet he kindled a spark of hope for the small “**remnant**” (in 5:15 this term is used by a prophet for the first time): some of the people will be saved from the disaster.

❖ *How is Amos’ central theme relevant today?*

The evils of Amos’ time are still experienced in today’s world, for humans are always the same. The issues he addressed vividly appear in many African countries: corruption, stealing, unjust wages, poor’s oppression account for the instability of our continent and other Third World regions. The rich do get richer at the expense of the needy, educate their children abroad and build luxury houses with stolen money, remain in power at all costs and leave the people in misery. So **Amos’ loud and clear message keeps on speaking** to each successive generation with the same immediate relevance and urgency: **God demands justice. Humans and nature must not be at the service of money.** Let’s say no to an economy of exclusion and inequality, where money rules and kills. The economy should not be a mechanism for accumulating goods, but the proper administration of our common home. A just economy must create the conditions for enabling everyone to enjoy a childhood without want, to develop their talents when young, to work with full rights during their active years and to have a dignified retirement as they grow older. Such an economy is not only desirable and necessary, but also possible: **we can achieve the integral progress of each human and the whole person.**

❖ **A help to read the text:**

2Kgs 14:23-29: Following his own religious perspective, the writer gives minimal attention to Jeroboam II’s long and successful reign.

Am 1:1-2:16: After two introductory verses, we read eight generally uniform forecasts. Amos’ hearers would have enjoyed the revelation of doom against six nearby nations (who had drifted away from humans’ moral rules) and even more so against Judah (who had forgotten the Lord’s law). However, the series doesn’t end with the seventh as would be expected, but reaches its peak with the statement against Israel, whose worst sin was the attempt to obstruct Nazirites’ charismatic activities and prophets’ proclamation of God’s word which is the source of true religion.

Am 3:1-8: Amos’ audience didn’t understand why this man who was not a priest, nor a prophet by profession, had come to preach to them, interfering in things which, for them, had nothing to do with religion. Perhaps today he would have been denounced for threatening national peace. His series of questions about cause and effect, ends with the claim that his word comes from the Lord, is the consequence of God’s action upon him.

Am 5:1-17: This third summon to hear God’s word explains that worshipping him in holy places is not enough to get his blessing; what is required is a righteous life. It is bracketed with laments, for judgment would be God’s last word.

Am 5:18-6:14: Amos gave three warnings to those desiring to see the Lord’s day, to those secure in their assets and to the idle rich. To the first ones, he said the day when God would decisively defeat his enemies would be against Israelites too who broke the covenant. To the others he said human security and the goal of personal pleasure could not stand up on the day people would account for their ways of life.

Am 7:1-9:10: The book concludes with five visions, the last one being a peak. The structure of the first part of visions 1 through 4 is identical: God shows the prophet something, asks what he sees, and then explains its meaning. In the first two visions the prophet’s prayer can stop the Lord’s wrath. But in the last three, after time passed without changes in Israel, punishment is certain as result of her refuse of mercy. It brings grief to God and to the prophet. In the midst, priest Amaziah confronted Amos for preaching in the temple without permission and for upsetting the people whose donations gave him a comfortable life. Self-centred religious leaders would react today in such a way against a person similar to him, whose aim was not to get an income, but only to answer God’s personal call.

AMOS’ FIVE VISIONS

- Locusts
- Fire
- Plumb line
- Basket of mature fruits
- Destruction

❖ **Study questions:**

1. According to Amos and others, the Israelites didn’t neglect religion, but perverted it. Explain how they did so and the relevance of these prophets’ statements to our Church today.
2. There were four basic elements that the Lord was not comfortable with Israelites’ worship according to Am 5:1-27. Analyse them showing God’s reasons then and explaining how those elements may discomfort him in today’s Church.

3. "Amos' ministry was concerned about the troubles of the poor. Using at least five evils he denounced, discuss this statement in relation to the current situation in Tanzania.
4. Amos is known as prophet of social justice. Describe the unfair practices he condemned and state if there are people like him today.
5. Relate the central theme of Amos' book to Tanzania's socio-economic and political situation. Give at least eight points.
6. Amos attacked Israelites' sins which can be categorized into three groups: social and economic evils, religious evils and political leadership's evils. Briefly point out ten evils from each category and then make a comparison to contemporary Christian society's evils.
7. "Tanzania needs fighting against corruption". Relate this war to Amos' cry during his days.
8. "The Israelites were eagerly waiting for the "Day of the Lord", but Amos' prophecy was contrary to their expectations". Justify the statement by giving at least eight points.

THE BOOK OF HOSEA: BONDS OF GOD'S FAITHFUL LOVE

❖ Who was Hosea, and what was his main teaching?

Hosea was a **native of the northern kingdom** and focused his prophetic work (about 750-725 BC) on its difficult situation. It was a **sad period for Israel** with the winning advance of Assyria, internal rebellions (four kings being assassinated in fifteen years) rapid economic decline and rising religious and moral corruption, including homicide, perjury, theft, and sexual sin. Like his contemporary Amos, Hosea charged the ruling classes severely, for the kings, chosen against God's will, toyed with **human policies** as pagan leaders did. They, their aristocratic supporters, and the priests had led the people away from God's Law. He too attacked **injustice and violence**, for many were poor because of the ruling classes' selfishness. However, he insisted more on the evils of **apostasy as the origin of society's bad symptoms**, for Israel's faith was being perverted by external influences to worship Baal and other gods. For this he harshly condemned both prophetic and priestly circles. The loss of the true essence of the ancestors' faith was the gravest issue of the time. To counter it, Hosea came as **spokesman of the living God, demanding an undivided heart**. He declared that unless they repent of these sins, God would allow their nation to be destroyed, and the people to be taken into captivity. He favoured the judgment form for his statements, holding up the **threat of exile and final destruction**, which would be fulfilled literally after few years. The capital of the Northern Kingdom, Samaria, fell in 722 BC. All the members of the upper classes and many ordinary people were carried off to live as prisoners of war.



Hosea with some of his words quoted in Matthew's gospel.

❖ What were Hosea's two major themes?

The two major themes which run throughout Hosea's book appear at first mutually exclusive: **God's unending love** towards a sinful Israel and **his judgment**. But the latter is only the result of refused love and seeks to educate rather than destroy. Its aim is the **return to the original situation of mutual love** between God and his people.

It has been traditional in all civilisations to use a female as a symbol for a nation. The **sad experience which, by God's will, Hosea underwent with his unfaithful wife Gomer, and his desire to be with her again**, also at God's request, reflected what Israel did to God out of ingratitude, and how he, despite this, repeatedly showed unlimited kindness. The prophets often performed symbolic actions, but Hosea's very life was symbolic. His mercy towards his wife was a **living image of God's love for his people**, easier to understand than abstract ideas. This **prophet at once loving and strong was the first to describe their relation as one of husband and wife**: Israel, the bride of God, had become a harlot, arousing her divine husband's anger and jealousy. Hosea had an inexorable view of his people's sinfulness: they have no trust, no tenderness toward one another, no knowledge and love of God. Even when they seemed to return to God, Hosea saw this as artificial repentance and highlighted the **patient love of God** who would punish her, but only to bring her back and restore her to the joys of their first love.

❖ What was Hosea's marriage experience?

First, **God directed Hosea to marry a woman of ill-repute**, and he did so to symbolise the covenant between God and Israel. Because she has been unfaithful to God by following other gods and breaking the commandments which are the terms of the covenant, **Israel is represented by a harlot who goes against marriage's obligations**.

Second, Hosea and his wife, Gomer, had a son. God commanded that he be named '**Jezreel**'. This name refers to a valley in which much blood had been shed in Israel's history, especially by the kings of the Northern Kingdom. The naming of this son was to stand as a prophecy against the king's house that they would pay for that bloodshed.

Third, the couple had a daughter. God commands that she be named 'Lo-ruhamah', '**Unloved**', to show that, although he would still have pity on the Southern Kingdom, he would no longer have pity on the Northern one; its destruction was imminent.

Fourth, a son was born to Gomer. It is questionable whether this child was Hosea's, for God commanded that his name be '**Lo-ammi**', 'Not My People', or more simply, '**Not Mine**'. This name of shame had to show

Also God said that "I am not your 'I am"'; in other words, God changed His own name in connection with his current relationship with Israel.

Chapter two describes **a divorce. It seems to be the end of the covenant** between God and Israel. However, it is probable that this was again a symbolic act, in which Hosea divorced Gomer for infidelity, and used the occasion to preach the message of God's rejection of the Northern Kingdom. He ends this prophecy with the declaration that **God will one day renew the covenant**, and will take Israel back in love.

In Chapter three, at God's command, Hosea seeks out Gomer once more and has to buy her back. He takes her home, but refrains from sexual intimacy with her for many days, to symbolize the fact that Israel will be without a king for many years, but that **God will take Israel back, even at a cost to Himself**.

❖ *What is the book's outline?*

This book expresses God's agony over Israel's betrayal. Chapters 1-3 give an account of Hosea's marriage with Gomer which is a metaphor for the relationship between God and Israel. Chapters 4-14 spell out the allegory at length through statements judging Israel for not living up to the covenant. Following this, the prophecy is made that someday this will all be changed, that God will indeed have pity on Israel. No further breakdown of ideas is clear. 4:9:9 show exactly why God is rejecting the Northern Kingdom (what the reasons are for the divorce). 9:10-11:11 is God's lament over the necessity of giving up the Northern Kingdom, which is a large part of the people of Israel, whom God loves. He promises not to give them up entirely. In Chapter 12, the prophet pleads for Israel's repentance. Chapter 13 foretells the destruction of the kingdom at the hands of Assyria, because there has been no repentance. In Chapter 14, the prophet urges Israel to seek forgiveness, and promises its restoration, while urging the utmost fidelity to God.

❖ *How did Hosea influence later prophets?*

Hosea **influenced a lot later prophets to insist on a religion of the heart, with God's love as its motive force.** Sinai's law seems more like an agreement between spouses, and sin is more like adultery, prostitution, a failing in love. He contributed also to a greater **awareness of marriage as God wants it**. In the OT there were polygamy and divorce; nevertheless it shows a development towards monogamy. It is only on the basis of such a high ideal of reciprocal and exclusive love and fidelity that Hosea and other prophets who followed him could pronounce the covenant of the Lord with Israel as an eternal and unbreakable union between husband and wife. Jesus drew this view's ultimate consequence and excluded divorce. In an age when basic values are often neglected or distorted, the family merits special attention, since it is the basic cell of society. **Families foster the solid bonds of unity** on which human coexistence is based, and, through children's bearing and education, they ensure the future and the renewal of society. Everybody must ask himself: do I show **faithful love** in my relationship with God and others? Do I make such efforts as Hosea's to get back my wife, friend, community member, who has slipped out of my hands?

❖ **A help to read the text:**

Hos 1:1-3:5: These chapters recount the prophet's central experience, but not as a continuous love story: they move from accusation through punishment to reconciliation. Hosea's three children were given by God names which emphasized their function as signs of his own intentions: Jezreel (a plain where there was a bloodshed), She is not pitied, Not my people. Afterward they were summoned by God to bear witness against their mother, but were also subject to judgment. In the end, their names were totally changed or given a new, positive meaning. The wife herself was restored and promised to know the Lord.

Hos 4:1-10: Here starts a series of sayings of judgment (with occasional words of hope) directed now at particular classes, now at the whole people. The first three verses are a general introduction: the list of Israel's sins recalls Moses' Ten Commandments. When God is not loved, corruption fills the gap and the nature suffers with man. Priests and prophets are condemned for failing in their duty to teach God's ways.

Hos 5:1-7: A new charge against leaders (here judging elders) but also the people ready to follow them.

Hos 5:15-7:2: The Israelites seemed to realize that it was God who punished them and that he alone could save them. But they still counted on external worship without submission to the commandments, thinking they would please God by offering a few costly sacrifices which they chose rather than real love which shows itself in obedience. Their evil did block their salvation although God would it. It is Hosea's characteristic the struggle between God's will to save and his justice.

Hos 8:1-14: This is a new proclamation of Israel's inevitable punishment. After a warning, comes the condemnation of the political and religious split from Judah, the alliances with foreign powers and finally gods' worship. As a wild ass wandering alone, Israel had no sense of what she was doing and nobody guided her. So she had to go back to Egypt, i.e. to being oppressed again. Also Christians who like sin do renounce their freedom to return to a condition of slavery.

Hos 11:1-11: This is one of the high points of the OT revelation of God's fatherhood, which especially prepared for Jesus' message. As a parent loved a child so too the Lord loved Israel intimately and persistently from the beginning, when she was a young nation in bondage. He taught his people to walk and led them by love, not by whips. But the Israelites were like a lost son, who the more the father called him, the more he went away. Reflections about Israel's perpetual indifference to her privilege give way to an impassioned proclamation of love. Though Hosea depicts God as a loving father, he does not reduce him to a man: the Holy One's love is perfect: he cannot stop loving since love is his very nature.

Hos 13:1-16: These judgment sayings emphasize that Israel has to wait the last punishment, death, instead of simple defeat and exile, for Hosea's efforts to have the people realizing their situation have failed.

Hos 14:1-9: The book closes on a note of hope, based on the certainty that God will not cease to love his people. This proclamation has two parts: the prophet's summons to return to God (2-4), and God's

answering promise (5-9). Hosea used a similar structure in 6:1-3, where true repentance was lacking; here it is serious and will cause humans' reconciliation with God and nature.

❖ **Study questions:**

1. "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice". These words pronounced by Hosea were used several times by Jesus to reply Pharisees' criticism against him. Interpret their meaning and then, considering today Christians' attitudes, say if we have to learn again the message brought by them.
2. Write at least five points to support the validity of Hosea's marriage to a prostitute.
3. In relation to Hosea's book, how can a Christian couple ensure a successful marriage in the contemporary society? What dangers may it face if they do like Hosea and Gomer?
4. God ordered Hosea to marry a harlot and have children of harlotry (Hos 1:2). In two points, show the importance for Hosea to have such kind of family; then explain three dangers which can face families having a marriage of such kind in our modern society.

THE BOOK OF ISAIAH: FAITH AND HISTORY

❖ *Who was Isaiah?*

Isaiah was born in about 765 BC of a Jerusalem upper-class priestly family and was highly educated. His wife is called prophetess and his two sons had symbolic names. He was very influential in the kings' palace as their advisor. His long ministry in and around the holy city **extended over about forty of fifty years under the ever increasing threat by Assyria** and its plans for world empire. At first he was mostly worried with the moral corruption resulting from prosperity. Then he tried in vain to discourage the young King Ahaz from following human means to confront Damascus' and Samaria's alliance against him. Afterwards, under the pious King Hezekiah, Isaiah pleaded time and again for trust in God, not in a military alliance with Egypt and other states. Finally, when Assyria ravaged Palestine against the regional revolt, Isaiah supported this king's resistance, assuring him of God's help, and the capital was in fact saved. We know just a little about him after this success, but according to Jewish tradition, he was killed under King Manasseh, the worst descendant of David.

ISAIAH'S TWO SONS

Shearjashub = A remnant will return

Mahershalahashbaz = Quick spoils, speedy plunder

❖ *What was Isaiah's revelation?*

In about 740 BC he received **his prophetic call while in the temple**. The powerful vision he had there **left a lasting mark on him and influenced all his teaching** (like Paul's vision near Damascus would mark him forever). It was a revelation of **God's transcendence, holiness and majestic power**. In the light of these awesome attributes, he became painfully aware of **humans' sinfulness and total dependence** on God, that everything was under his wise and powerful control, including the mighty foreign nations. He was **the prophet of faith**: in times of crisis all he prescribed is trust in God and in no one else. For him it was a sign of weak faith on the part of Israel to go looking for help from Egypt or Assyria. Only the Lord could provide protection. Relying on human resources was based on pride, the principal sin against God's rule over history. He has a plan which he carries out with supreme wisdom and power. All human plans to the contrary are hopeless. **The oppression of the poor was also against God's holiness**: that is why Isaiah preached so strongly against social injustice as to reclaim sincerity in divine worship.



Isaiah's call.

❖ *What is the prophet Isaiah best known for?*

The prominent part played by Isaiah in his country's affairs made him **a national figure**, but he was also a **gifted poet**. Brilliant style and fresh imagery made his work **the finest in the biblical literature**. However, his greatness lied above all in the religious order. Although his prophecies were mainly threats against Israel and Judah for unfaithfulness, he was **the greatest messianic prophet**, announcing that **a descendant of David would eventually come and rule** over the remnant of the people who would be spared God's punishment. He would establish peace and justice on earth and spread the knowledge of God.

❖ *What three distinct periods in Israel's history does Isaiah's book cover?*

Such a religious genius inevitably marked his time and produced disciples, who preserved his sayings and added to them. His book is the result of a long process of composition, putting together various collections. It covers **three distinct periods in Israel's history**. The first part (Isa 1-39) contains mainly what belongs to Isaiah himself; the second (Isa 40-55) is attributed to a different person, referred to as Second Isaiah, who prophesied toward the end of the Babylonian exile; the last (Isa 56-66) is named Third Isaiah and comes from a prophet who inherited Isaiah's and Second Isaiah's spirit and religious outlook for a new situation, that which followed the exile.

❖ *How does Isaiah's message must be complemented?*

Isaiah's call showed him that, although the Lord revealed himself, he still remained far off. This concept of the all holy and transcendent God is found in practically all African traditional religions. That is why our

balanced and enriched by the experience that it is God who always makes the first move in our life, without being hindered by our imperfections. It is Jesus' teaching that God is a loving Father close to us, whom we can approach in prayer without fear. We are called to share the joy of knowing we are chosen and saved by his mercy, so as to be free and strong for witnessing that faith gives us a new direction.

❖ Who was another prophet contemporary to Isaiah?

At Hosea and Isaiah's time, Micah, too, attacked the corruption that was destroying Israelite society, the greed of wealthy and powerful, the venality of priests and prophets, the dishonesty of merchants and the worship of pagan gods. He claimed that **the nation's evils were centred in the capital cities**, Samaria and Jerusalem, which were especially liable to God's punishment. Only after that would restoration come about: Jerusalem would become the religious centre of the world and Bethlehem would give birth to a greater David who would rule over all of God's people. Micah saw such a **glorious future** for Israel.

❖ A help to read the text:

Isa 6:1-13: Isaiah narrates how he was made a prophet though aware of his unworthiness. He saw God as king, yet not as a nationalistic god, since his sway extends throughout the earth and his hand falls heavily upon his own people. This point was important in those years' international crisis. The vision of the Lord's holiness (i.e. transcendence and otherness) qualified Isaiah to speak of him, and the lips' cleansing prepared him for the commission to do so, though only few would listen to his message. God is not frightened off by human sin: he can purify people to make them fit to transmit his message. Isaiah found that, by entrusting

himself to the Lord's hands, his whole life was transformed. But Israel's failure to convert would be the result of refusing to hear the Lord's word and to see what he is about to do. All the same Isaiah had to prophesy until there would be nobody more. Today's preachers are required the same persistence, despite peoples' refuse to convert.

Isa 1:1-31: This chapter introduce the whole book by collecting statements from various times in Isaiah's ministry as to summarise his teachings.

Isa 2:2-4: When Isaiah uttered this words, Jerusalem was in danger of being destroyed. He however promised three things: the city would become the centre of interest of the whole world, people without number would come there to know the Lord's word, universal peace would be the fruit of practising it. Isaiah shows the difference between his days, when God's law was rejected even by his own people, and the ideal future, when it will be accepted by all nations and cause permanent peace. Christians see this prophecy's realisation starting in Jesus, who founded this new era. But it is like a little child, needing to grow with our collaboration.

Isa 5:1-24: This skilful song of the Lord's vineyard hints at unanswered love, contrasts the care he lavished with his people's sinful response (social crimes), and speaks of judgment to come. The owner is God; the valuable vines are the Israelites rescued from Egypt and transplanted in the good land of Canaan; the removed stones are the nations that previously inhabited it; the expected fruits are the good works God demands from his people: faithfulness to the covenant, social justice and love for the poor. The Church in Africa too is like a tree planted by the Lord. After many years of Christianity how is it possible that so many kinds of injustices are practised by Christians and even by their leaders? The following six woes may be directed against the same group as the allegory (i.e. the court officials responsible for administrating the justice and advising the king about policy) or against enemies of social justice, large land-owners who grab land unjustly, food-lovers, the Lord's ridiculers, distorters of justice and cunning manipulators.

UNDER KING AHAZ

2Kgs 16:1-9: The evil King Ahaz is presented as a negative foil for his exemplary successor, Hezekiah. Ahaz could not depend and trust on God, but turned to other gods. Even today a person who is not in right relationship with the Lord, does go to other powers like witchcraft for help in facing problems.

Isa 7:1-17: Here we read about two meetings between Isaiah and Ahaz in the context of the attack by Syria (Aram) and Israel (Ephraim) on Judah to force it into a coalition against Assyria. In both cases Ahaz, terrified by the danger, did reject Isaiah's prophecy of hope and submit to this last country, whose king really moved against the first two, but also turned from defender to conqueror of Judah. As foreseen by Isaiah, Ahaz had to suffer great humiliations and to pay heavy tributes. For he refused to ask any sign, God gave it no longer to persuade him, but to confirm in the future the truth of the prophet's words. It was a child promised to guarantee the continuity of David's dynasty and for this reason called Immanuel (= "With us is God"). The promise perhaps was fulfilled first with the birth of Hezekiah, a good king who represented God among his people, but especially with the birth of Jesus, the true God with us.

Isa 8:23-9:7: Within months, Assyria occupied Galilee, the northernmost part of Israel, and deported the first tribes (Zebulun and Naphtali). Isaiah prophesied however that it would be the first part to see God's salvation. Then he described Immanuel and the liberation his coming would cause. He is the Lord's gift to his people, is of kingly house, and has four titles, each of which is too much honorific for a human leader and is related to God. It was the Lord's zeal that would do this in Jesus, as Matthew's gospel remarks.

Isa 10:5-16: Assyria, unaware agent of God's will, has to be punished because guilty of exceeding his commission and of pride. When the Lord finished using her as his instrument against his people, he would turn against her as fire which consume a forest.



Isaiah's words written on a wall of United Nations' headquarters in New York.

Top 11.1.16. This statement agrees with many elements of Torah's thought (including interest in David's

line, Jerusalem and wisdom) and denotes a going back to the charismatic tradition so long an ideal in Israel. The prophet worked with different kings and saw how they failed. Ahaz's son too didn't meet all the expectations of Isaiah, who therefore projected his hopes in a future king from Jesse's stump empowered by the Lord's Spirit and his multiple gifts to fulfil a mission otherwise beyond his forces. Under him perfect justice would lead to perfect peace and harmony in the whole of creation (depicted as a new paradise). Then he would be a rallying point for all the nations. This stress on harmony touches on today situation, calling leaders to rule with justice and wisdom and to be peace-makers. Africa's obvious collapse is due not only to foreign exploitation, but also to its own inadequate leadership. The Church should be a model to civil rulers showing a governance which is not wealth-orientated but is a service, especially to the poor.

2Kgs 17:1-41: The definitive loss of the northern tribes was a key turning point of the nation's history. Israel fell first, not only because she grew politically and militarily weak, but for being the most corrupt. Her sister Judah, however, though shocked by the event, didn't learn the lesson as she was supposed to do; so she also faced destruction and exile. This important chapter focuses not so much on the event itself, which is too much simplified, as on its decisive reasons according to Deuteronomy. It also points to the following religious development in that territory, which caused permanent contrast between the Jews and the mixed people emerged there, not longer called Israelites but Samaritans, like the land itself was called Samaria instead of Israel.

The **Samaritans** emerged as a people after the Assyrians' conquest of the North Kingdom. Assyria's policy was to move the subject tribes into other regions of its empire in order to dissolve their identity. The Mesopotamians transferred to Samaria intermarried with the Israelites left behind. When Jews returned from Babylon and started to rebuild the Temple, they refused these Samaritans' help. So this mixed population organized their own religion as alternative to the Jews' one. Until today they do accept only the Pentateuch and Mount Gerizim is their only place of worship. The NT shows how most of them believed in Jesus.

THE KINGDOM OF JUDAH ON ITS OWN UNDER KINGS HEZEKIAH AND MANASSEH

2Kgs 18:1-8: Hezekiah's presentation highlights the differences between him and his father. He receives full praise as another David (the standard against whom the historical books measure all kings) because his reform stressed centralisation of worship in Jerusalem's temple. Yet it was guided by other motives (religious unity reinforced social and political unity). His far-reaching building program was also linked to military aspirations.

2Kgs 20:1-11: This incident shows God's readiness to reverse previous notices in light of the human response, like the prayer Hezekiah made in his own behalf claiming to be blameless. He asked so because he believed God's reward or punishment were to be got during earthly life, being it the only one. But we Christians wait for the eternal one and believe it is God's grace which makes us deserve what we cannot deserve. Isaiah functioning as a doctor is the only case of a classical prophet engaging in miracles in Elijah and Elisha's style. The king's request of a confirmatory sign was not rebuked by the prophet, in contrast with his father's refusal to ask it: then, asking for signs is not necessarily a mark of disbelief, just as refusing to ask them can be an expression of unbelief.

2Kgs 20:12-19: Babylonian King Merodach-Baladan, a serious threat to Assyrians' domination, tried to involve Judah in a coalition against them. Pleased by this attention, Hezekiah wanted to show he had much to offer as an ally. His forgetfulness of God as the only source of security caused a corresponding punishment: in 597 and 586 BC everything he was so willing to display to the Babylonians would go to them and his offspring would end up as their servants. We should be careful in disclosing our treasures, even the spiritual one, to everybody. Hezekiah accepted God's decree without trying any appeal neither in person, nor through Isaiah: his resignation evokes Judah's final years, when intercession was not even attempted in front of God's decision to destroy Jerusalem.

2Kgs 18:13-19:37: This long account of Hezekiah's Assyrian crisis is introduced by a summary about his submission to the enemy advancing against him. Very different are two parallel sequences which follow, each consisting of military challenge, heavenly response, and notice of its realization. Hezekiah appealed to God directly in Solomon's temple, begging him to show that he was not a powerless, unreal divinity. The response came through Isaiah as a lengthy poetic judgment against the Assyrians, who boasted thinking the Lord was weak like the gods of all the nations they previously conquered, without knowing they were only his instrument. In our own life, where do we take our problems? Let's follow Hezekiah in praising the living God and asking him to help us in difficult situations. But we should remember to go before him in sackcloth, i.e. repenting our sins.

2Kgs 21:1-26: Judah faced many years of subjection to Assyria under the long reign of Manasseh, who undid his father's reforms, corrupted the temple itself, restored idolatry, divination and human sacrifices, and shed very much innocent blood. The charges against him as the Jeroboam of Judah are similar to those against Israel in chapter 17, implicating that the southern kingdom faces the same doom. Nameless prophets help us to understand Judah's remaining history. Their judgment fixed it, though its realization would take almost a century. The situation didn't change in the brief reign of Manasseh's son, Amon. When his servants killed him, it was again the people to make king a descendant of David, the eight-year-old Josiah.

❖ Study questions:

1. Compare Isaiah's call and answer with those of today's Christians.
2. Isaiah can be called "Holiness' prophet". By giving eight points, explain how the concept of Holiness characterises his call and prophecy.
3. "We will eat our own bread and wear our own clothes, only let us be called by your name; take away our

reproach" (Isa 4:1). What is the main issue Isaiah presents in the context of this statement by women? Give at least five examples of other extremes of humiliation they experience in the modern context.

4. In Isa 5:1-7 there is a parable (or song) of God's vineyard. Describe it by giving three arguments and then interpret it by giving three points. Finally, explain how it can be applied today by giving four points.

5. Isaiah 7-8 narrates the signs given by God in relation to the war by Syria and Israel against Judah. Explain them and their importance for us Christians.

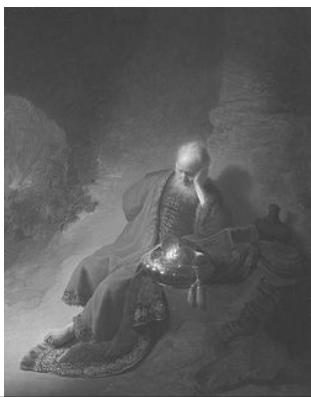
6. In times of crisis people can get confused. God sent Prophet Isaiah together with his son Shear-Jashub to assure King Ahaz that his enemies' plans would not be materialised. What was the national crisis that faced this King and how did he react to Isaiah's message? What should political leaders do when facing critical situations?

7. Explain five evils committed by the people of Judah which Prophet Isaiah denounced and then relate them to what is happening in our societies today.

THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH: THE KIND PROPHET SENT TO ROOT UP AND TEAR DOWN

❖ Who was the first writing prophet of the 7th century BC?

The last decades of Judah's kingdom were among the most troubled times in the ancient Near East, with the fall of the great Assyrian Empire and the rise of an even greater Babylonian Empire which ended David's monarchy. Such phase required a continual flow of light from God through his messengers: the first was Zephaniah. Judah's sins had arrived to a peak under the kings Manasseh and Amon, who adopted the worship of their overlords, the Assyrians, even setting up idols in Jerusalem's temple. Almost all followed them until the first years of King Josiah. Zephaniah's answer was to proclaim the coming of the Lord's Day of judgment, but he concluded promising restoration for those who repent. Because destruction was reserved for rebels and proud, its effect would be cleansing and formation of a people very much smaller, but pleasing to God. **A humble and lowly remnant would be saved**. This teaching started the **spirituality of the Lord's poor**, which reached its height in Jesus' beatitudes.



Jeremiah was the most troubled OT prophet.

❖ Who was Jeremiah?

We know **Jeremiah more than any other OT prophet**, for his message mingled with his personality: he spoke from his very life, what he did, experienced and felt. Born of a **priestly family** from Anathoth, a village near Jerusalem, he was **very affective**, a feature not well matched with the **difficult mission** he received while still a young man (around 626 BC). But he knew the duty God expected him to perform, so during his **more than forty years of ministry**, he never tired of reminding the people of their covenant commitments, warning the incompetent kings that their **unfaithfulness would bring God's punishment** on the whole nation.

❖ What troubles do Jeremiah's Confessions witness to?

Jeremiah didn't want his people to suffer God's punishment. He thus faced a dilemma: **it was difficult for him to threat punishment, but keeping silence would mean certainty of it**. The so called Confessions of Jeremiah form a moving witness to the **inner crises** he experienced as a **meek prophet called to root up and tear down**. Patriotism is costly: one suffers either from foreigners or from one's people. **Jeremiah identified himself with his people and suffered most from them who refused to hear the message of doom**, though it was true. Kings, priests, false prophets and the population in general - all rejected his warnings and even physically harassed him. So, this man of peace was almost ever at war: no other OT prophet suffered so much. The only years of serenity for him were those of Josiah's religious reform which followed the discovery of a book of the Law in the temple (622 BC). It stopped with the king's tragic death (609 BC) which was a great blow to the faithful: why should someone who trusted in God meet such a lamentable end?

❖ How were Jeremiah's sufferings not in vain?

Jeremiah's inner and outer **sufferings helped his spiritual growth** by cleansing and opening up his whole being to God. So he started a new style of prophecy, based on **dialogue with God**, where he did struggle with him, search, plead, pray, curse etc. His words are very direct and acute in stating the nature of Israel's faith and in denouncing several deviations. He understood that a true conversion was humanly impossible; **God himself had to change the hearts**: only then could the **new covenant** bind forever the people to him. This prophecy was a reality he experienced in his relationship with God through a **truly inward religion**. This is why his spirituality is so appealing to Christians.

❖ What did Jeremiah eventually do?

After the fall of Jerusalem (586 BC) and its people's deportation, with women raped, small children dashed against the rock, warriors impaled or burnt alive, eyes gouged out and heads cut off, Jeremiah stayed behind, but he saw clearly that **the hope rested in those gone into exile**. After the murder of his friend Gedaliah, appointed governor of Judah by the Babylonians, a number of Jews fled to Egypt, taking Jeremiah with them by force. He spent the rest of his life there, where the tradition says he was **killed by**

❖ *Why was Jeremiah Jesus' best anticipation?*

Jeremiah was **Jesus' best anticipation by his life of celibacy and suffering** in God's service. It may have inspired the servant's description in Isa 53. Humanly speaking **his mission was a total failure in his lifetime, but his legacy was appreciated after he died.** When events proved him right, his message was remembered. **Thanks to him, the people who endured catastrophe could make sense of it, enduring the exile in faith and hope by seeing the good effect that their dramatic events might have: to be occasions for discovering God's love that invited them to a new life.** The persistence of his influence shows that his work and words must often have been studied, meditated and interpreted. His spiritual children's contribution can be seen in the book's composition, which must have undergone many stages, for it has many doublets and lacks chronological order, while the Greek version is one-eighth shorter than the Hebrew text.

❖ *How can Jeremiah be an inspiration and a challenge for Africans today?*

Today's Africa needs, both in civil society and in the Church, true leaders who fully identify themselves with their people. This kind of persons has not marked a lot Africa's recent history. Jeremiah, with his genuine patriotism and **his firm commitment to his mission, should be an inspiration** and a challenge for the people of our continent, where he shed his blood for having loved his people to the end. **Love is expressed more by actions than by words.** Do we love our people or are they still something anonymous that does not involve us, something remote that I am not committed to? Do we really love our country, the community which we are trying to build, or do we love it only in the abstract, in theory? Do we see a university degree as synonymous with more money or higher status in the society? Or is our education a mark of greater responsibility in the face of today's problems, the need of the poor, concern for the environment?

❖ *Who were Jeremiah's other contemporary writing prophets?*

After almost three centuries of Assyrians' terrible dominion, their capital city was destroyed by Babylonians (612 BC) to its many victims' common joy. Nahum, a poet of great skill, cheered at this imminent **ruin of Nineveh as the act of a just God** ruling nations' affairs and faithful to his own people. His prophecy raised Israel's human hopes, but they were short lived, for Jerusalem's fall followed close.

Another contemporary, Habakkuk, prophesied after the Babylonians got control of the entire Near East but before they sacked Jerusalem in 597 BC. His problem was: **why does God punish his people through a worst people?** He had no complete answer, but his dialogue with God made an important and original contribution which has retained its validity: that even in silence **God does continue to direct history** to what he has determined for it. So the good people must hold fast to their faith in him, for it will receive the reward of life. **While oppressed, the just lives by faith.** Paul gave this teaching a top place.

❖ **A help to read the text:**

UNDER KING JOSIAH

Jer 1:1-19: After the introduction we find a dialogue between God and the hesitant young Jeremiah and his two early visions: a rod of almond and a boiling pot. The dialogue, which will continue throughout his life, bears mainly on the personal effects of his prophetic call, while the visions insist on his mission's object. Jeremiah's vocation is a deep experience narrated like other appointments by God which stem from a mysterious encounter with him. Every Christian is called to be a prophet; but at times we are afraid to speak out the truth, to denounce injustices and behaviours contrary to the gospel within the Church too.

Jer 2:1-13,20-25: In a lawsuit, northern Israel is compared to a stubborn ass for neglecting God's covenant. More clearly than any other prophet, Jeremiah preached its breaks and God's decision to remake it. Amid many images about the enormity of evil within the nation, not even found among pagans, is this of God as the source of living water in contrast to the false gods that are but broken cisterns.

Jer 3:1-5,19-4:2: This section works out the conditions for a settlement with God. Its unity is maintained through the constant use of the key word "to return", which in religion evokes both aversion from sin and conversion to the right. The Lord ask Israel if she could return to her husband after playing harlotry with many lovers. This is legally impossible, but comes through sincere repentance and by God's mercy, a situation which creates a new spirit in the people.

Jer 4:3-8,13-31: Here starts a long poem about Judah's punishment through a fast invasion. In order to avoid the final judgment already at work, Jeremiah invites the people to conversion. It requires much more than the restoration of forsaken practices: presenting it as heart's circumcision, he proclaims the primacy of inner dispositions over the exterior ones, for the heart is seen as the seat of intelligence and will. Jeremiah shares in the suffering of his people he has to condemn and prays for them.

2Kgs 22:8-23:4,21-30: This book's account of Judah's last important king is centred on year 621, when some form of Deuteronomy was discovered in the temple. Josiah only seems to have appreciated its import. He consulted God through the prophetess Huldah and ordered its public reading and the following pledge of fidelity. The whole reform climaxed in a national celebration of Passover in Jerusalem. It failed because it depended on Josiah's action and didn't penetrate the people's spirit. Despite all his good deeds, he died in battle so that under his unable sons the previous divine words against Judah might become true.

UNDER KING JEHOIAKIM

Jer 7:1-28: These different sayings on related matters – temple and worship – were proclaimed under King Jehoiakim, Josiah's son. The people thought in a magical way that the lodging of the Ark of the Covenant, God's throne, could not fall to the enemy; for the same reason, the whole country would be safe

though they kept doing anything evil. Jeremiah told them this hoped protection was conditional: first the covenant's moral prescriptions would be followed. External practices and sacrifices had no value if not informed by a sincere devotion. To confirm his words he dared to report the destruction of Shiloh, Israel's main temple under the Judges. Applying this example to us, it is not enough to be baptized, to pray or to faithfully observe the Lord's day. More important is to practise what we celebrated in our churches, lest they be changed into hiding place for evil doers, like Jesus himself said in the temple quoting Jeremiah's words.

Jer 26:1-24: Jeremiah's temple speech caused a general scandal and a charge against him. Defending himself, the prophet said he was sent: the words were not his but God's. For them he was ready to suffer anything like every true prophet. But the civil leaders stood against the religious authorities that required a death penalty. They argued that a century before, the reaction to Micah's similar words was totally different, guiding to Hezekiah's religious reform and Jerusalem's salvation. The prophet Uriah's killing shows the danger from which Jeremiah escaped. May be the Jews did not consider these OT parallels when they charged Jesus of blasphemy for his prophecy about the temple's destruction and then wanted him to be killed asking his innocent blood to be upon themselves.

Jer 11:18-12:6: God revealed to the prophet a plot by his relatives against his life. The shock urged him to reflect on his mission and on existence's meaning. In face of his unjust sufferings he uttered the first "confession" out of six. In it he asked God why would the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer, in contrast with OT theology. He saw himself as a gentle lamb led to slaughter, an image eventually used for Jesus.

Jer 12:7-13: God's lament about Judah been ruined by a recent invasion (commissioned by Babylon's king to neighbouring nations) expresses his sorrow for punishing a people he loved so much.

Jer 13:1-11: This may be an allegory or a symbolic action, like many others by prophets. Its meaning is clear: the prophet is God himself; the rotten loincloth represents his people; the corruption by Euphrates' waters symbolizes the consequence of alliances with Mesopotamia as a betrayal of the covenant with God.

Jer 14:17-22: A war is crushing Judah, personified as a girl mortally wounded. Her plague's description is followed by a collective lament.

Jer 15:10-21: God answers a new complaint by Jeremiah renewing his call and mission once he has overcome the inner crisis caused by his loneliness. Whatever one feels can become an object of prayer, as shown by the prophet's very special way to address the Lord, which may sound as contempt. God understood him, but reminded him that at his call he did not promise him that he would not meet opposition, but that he would always support him. Jeremiah was urged to return, because he went too far. We find here the definition of prophet as one in whose mouth God has placed his own words for the people.

Jer 16:1-15: The prophet delivers God's word not only through symbolic actions but also through his life, as Jeremiah's celibacy which was a public curiosity. It could not have been his personal choice, but an order from his Lord in order to dramatise that the existing families would disappear violently. Moreover the prophet had to participate neither in mourning nor in feasts, because soon there would be no such social events among the Jews.

Jer 17:5-10: Two sayings, on true justice and on the human hearth as the root of evil, uphold the interior's primacy in religious life.

Jer 18:1-20: This chapter and the following two refer to the prophetic meaning of some experiences of Jeremiah with two new confessions. First a visit to the potter's enlightens him about how God works with his people considering their free will and being ready to change curse in blessing and vice-versa. But the prophet has no hope for their salvation, because their evil hearts block the way of conversion. The following prophecy of doom borrows from nature some examples to explain how abnormal idolatry is for God's people.

Jer 19:1-5,10-20:6: Another symbolic act shows the prophetic word's dynamism. Crushing a flask was supposed to bring about the destruction of those whose names were written on it. However it was not a magic action because God alone would realise the curse. The narrative is upset by terrible prophecies on Topheth (i.e. fireplace). The priest Pashur tries to overcome the prophet's action, but he, filled with God's strength, proclaims his word even more forcefully.

Jer 20:7-18: Jeremiah's precedent dispute caused his most dramatic interior crisis, as expressed in his last two confessions, where he first accuses God of deceiving him and curses his own birthday. This proves that his prophetic call and mission were not simply human experiences. In the midst of constant, strong contradictions, however, he keeps faith in God's loyalty, becoming an example to all those called by him to carry out a special mission.

Jer 25:15-17,27-38: Eventually, Jeremiah does act as "prophet to the nations" according to his call's words: in the vision of the cup of wrath God's punishment extends to the whole world, though it start with his own city.

Jer 36:1-10,21-32: His prophetic authority, once recognized, was progressively rejected by the people and all levels of officials, including the king. This chapter about the scroll of year 605-604 is almost a film of the scene. Jehoiakim tried to disable Jeremiah's written prophecies by cutting and destroying them in the fire. His scorn contrasted his father's response at the reading of the Book of the Law. But at the prophet's dictation, Baruch wrote again the scroll adding a new statement against the king.

UNDER KING ZEDEKIAH

2Kgs 24:1-17: The first Babylonian siege of Jerusalem began late in 598. During it Jehoiakim's death left his son Jehoiachin to save the city by surrendering it in March 597. The winners removed to Babylon Judah's whole leadership in order to break any resistance, and installed as king Zedekiah, Josiah's other son, who promised submission. What followed were ten years of madness, following false prophets' illusions.

Jer 22:10-23:8 The verses against three of the last kings of Judah reveal the main causes of the imminent final disaster. But when we would expect to read a prophecy against Zedekiah, the last king,

Jeremiah changes the perspective and proclaims a new era. Like earlier prophets, he predicts the restoration of David's dynasty, not so much on political grounds as on the level of the Covenant's religious and moral obligations. The future king's name is a word-play on Zedekiah's.

Jer 23:9-17,21-29: After the kings, Jeremiah attacks again the prophets, another class of leaders who have done wrong in order to please the people. His statements show the main criteria to identify the authentic transmitter of God's word. A prophetic appeal is first of all a call to conversion.

Jer 24:1-10: This vision of two baskets of figs has the usual structure: the vision itself, a question from God, the prophetic meaning. Many thought that the deported obviously were greater sinners than those remained in the Holy Land. Surprisingly, the exiles of 597 are those who will form the new Israel, while Zedekiah and the others who remained at home are condemned as bad offerings. Exile is an appeal to conversion: it is there that God change his people's hearts.

Jer 27:1-20: Through the new prophetic act of making thongs and yoke bars and putting them in his own neck, Jeremiah tried to bring all Jews to submit to Nebuchadnezzar as planned by God. Revolting against him as urged by false prophets would cause only death by sword, famine and pestilence. They hoped the end of the exile would be near, but Jeremiah insisted that it would last an indefinite time.

Jer 28:1-17: Hananiah proclaimed his statement in true prophets' style, but contrary to the message of Jeremiah, whose answer attempted to discern true and false prophecy, demanding readiness to convey God's word, even when it will not please the hearers. With great conviction, Hananiah did a counter action to nullify Jeremiah's one: he broke the yoke to say victory and freedom would replace submission. Such reaction left Jeremiah dumb, but after receiving God's answer, he announced Hananiah's death for speaking on behalf of God without being sent. This prediction's fulfilment two months later showed Jeremiah to be the true prophet.

Jer 29:1-14: False prophets announced in Babylon its domination's imminent end. Then Jeremiah wrote a letter to exhort the exiles to settle in that foreign land and to work for its welfare, because they would remain there for a long period. But their future would be better than that of those left in Judah. His advice meant God could be worshiped in Babylon too, and he could protect his people even outside the Holy Land. Jeremiah had to prophesy once more these prophets' terrible punishment.

2Kgs 24:17-25:2: Again at Egypt's urging, Zedekiah revolted against Babylon, causing Jerusalem's final siege from January 587 to the summer of 586, with an interruption during the first summer.

Jer 32:8-10,26-44: In those hardest times, when people saw no hope, Jeremiah prophesied in action Judah's future restoration through the purchasing of a field in his own village. If he bought it in an occupied section of the country, it was because one day he or his relatives would be able to use or sell it, and the life would continue as normal. The almighty Lord would confirm his everlasting covenant.

Jer 37:15-38:28: Jeremiah was put into prison by nationalists who did not accept his political realism and saw him as a traitor. Time and again, however, King Zedekiah consulted him, but secretly, thus showing his full character. He received the same answer from the Lord: Jerusalem would not avoid Babylon's control. Even if the king was sure of it, his fear of the officials prevented him from taking a personal decision. After the prophet had pleaded not to be sent back to prison, he was placed instead under house arrest. During Jerusalem's last days Jeremiah was also thrown into a muddy cistern, for the true power was in officials' hands. They wanted to cause his death without bloodshed, but an African noble saved him.

Jer 30:1-3,12-17; 31:7-14: These two chapters concern hope for northern Israel, with a later edition extended to Judah: God will bring back his people to their land in dances and music and give them unity and full prosperity. So they had to take positively their punishment, for the Lord's mercy would heal them.

Jer 31:31-34: These words are the top of the OT. It is the only time that it names the "new covenant", in contrast with Sinai's, when God's law was written on stone tables. The heart as writing material is Jeremiah's creation: it means that humans' very inner nature will be created anew with the power to fulfil God's plan. The effect of his decisive action ("I will put my law in them") will be that "they shall all know me": all will have

an intimate relationship with him which includes the practice of righteousness. By forgiving their iniquity God will give his people a tendency to live in line with his law. Jeremiah, however, doesn't indicate the means by which God will produce this change. Jesus sealed this new covenant in his own blood.

AFTER JERUSALEM'S DESTRUCTION

Jer 39:2-14: After Jerusalem was taken by the Babylonians, its houses and the temple were set on fire, many surviving religious and civil leaders slain and other deported, but Jeremiah was liberated and given the possibility of choosing his sort, for he didn't side with the nationalists. He however didn't want to take advantage of this freedom for his personal interests and decided to stay with his suffering people.

Jer 42:1-16: After the killing of Gedaliah, Jew governor of Judah on behalf of the Babylonians, the people's remains asked Jeremiah what would they do, but their decision was already definitive. The ten days of God's delay in answering prove that true prophecy doesn't depend on human insight.



Jeremiah writing after Jerusalem's destruction.



The Jews leaving Jerusalem during its destruction.

wounded country he was forced to go in Egypt where he would see and blame the undying idolatry of his people.

❖ **Study questions:**

1. When called by God, Jeremiah tried to refuse. Explain why most of the people in the Bible showed unwillingness to answer similar calls and what the vocations' situation is today.
2. Briefly explain what were the major themes connected with Jeremiah's call and why he was seen as a traitor by his fellow countrymen.
3. Compare Micaiah the son of Imla with Zedekiah the son of Chenaanah and his fellow 400 pseudo-prophets. How can you use his story to discern today's true and false prophets?
4. At Passover the Israelites recall their redemption from Egypt. What was the importance of Josiah's renewed celebration of this feast, and what do we Christian celebrate at our own Passover?
5. Prophet Jeremiah helped King Josiah in his reforms, as any good citizen has to do. Briefly point out at least ten reforms done by this king, and then mention at least five reforms done in our country's history.
6. Why didn't Josiah's religious reform live on after his death? From that experience, what have we to learn in trying a renewal of today Church?
7. Explain what Jeremiah's confessions are. His sufferings cause our compassion, but also teach us. What do you think can they offer to our Christian witness in the world?
8. Illustrate with biblical examples how Jeremiah related to at least three Kings of his time, and then give two lessons which the Church's leaders in Tanzania can learn from him as they relate to the State.
9. Describe Jeremiah's prophecy about the New Covenant giving at least five points. How do we Christians understand them?
10. Through Jeremiah (ch. 31), God promised a new covenant. Show five differences between it and the implied old covenant.
11. What lessons do you get from Jeremiah's call and ministry?
12. Describe five prophetic symbols which Jeremiah applied in presenting his message.

THE BOOK OF EZEKIEL: THE NEW SOCIETY ON GOD'S LAND

❖ *Who was Ezekiel?*

Ezekiel's name occurs only three times in the Hebrew Bible. Everything we know about him comes from his book. He was a priest: this explain his special interest in God's temple, covenant and law. He was among about 8,000 prominent people of Jerusalem taken as exiles together with King Jehoiachin when Nebuchadnezzar captured it for the first time (597 BC). **Babylon's environment shaped his prophetic ministry** (about 592-570 BC). Like many exiles, he had a quite good standard of living and in his house Judah's elders used to meet. From there he preached the message received from God **for the exiles and for those remained in Israel's land**. They thought the deportation would end soon; so Zedekiah, their new king who had pledged loyalty to Babylon, rebelled, causing another siege of Jerusalem (588 BC). After two years **the city and its temple were burned**, and Zedekiah, whose eyes had been put out, was also taken to exile with many more Jews. These most dramatic events of the OT were **what Jeremiah and Ezekiel had predicted**, saying Judah's first defeat was God's punishment, but an ever worse fate lied close at hand for those left in Jerusalem unless they repent instead of considering themselves the covenant's true faithful. After the holy city's destruction, Israel's hope would remain alive among the exiles, for God as the master of history could protect them in Mesopotamia as in their homeland. He could be worshipped in that unclean land too.



Ezekiel's call.

❖ *What did both prophets believe?*

Ezekiel was familiar with Jeremiah's prophecy, possibly even in a written form. Both believed God would **a deep faithfulness to his covenant under foreign rule rather than an independence war** built on human pride and political reasons. Both believed Babylon was an instrument of God's justice and **the exile would purify the Israelites** bringing them to a higher religious level. Moreover, both had the same attitude to individual responsibility for guilt and to **God's love to restore the covenant in a new way**.

❖ *How did Ezekiel differ from other prophets?*

Like other prophets, Ezekiel was called to urge faithfulness. Like Hosea and Jeremiah, he considered covenant's breaches as adultery and prostitution. He developed certain traditional themes: a) God's lordship over all nations and events; b) his holiness (transcendence); c) the insistence on both moral and cultic integrity; d) the conviction that God will restore Israel out of a totally free gift of grace. But he was **unique in the way he expressed God's will for his people**, combining prose and poetry, wordy sermonizing and dramatic presentation, prophetic statements and legal reflections, detailed historical descriptions and highly imaginative allusions, strange symbolic actions and allegories, sober judgments and wild visions. This led to **great wealth of material and breadth of thought**. Though Ezekiel is the most **clearly organized** among

❖ Why did Ezekiel's message bring hope to the people?

In the exile, with no traditional institution (land, king, temple) to support Israelites' faith, they questioned, "Is God still with us here?" Ezekiel answered that **God had not dumped them, so there would be a new society on his land**. With Jerusalem's fall, Ezekiel turned from preaching doom to words of hope. His book divides exactly into two halves: chapters 1-24 contain words of judgment against Israel, but 25-48 propose a strong religious concept of Israel as **God's obedient community, whether politically independent or not**. For this reason Ezekiel is often seen as the father of modern Judaism, which stresses the study of Torah instead of sacrifices. The **pledge of a new heart and new spirit are a high point of his view of salvation based only on God's grace**, who promises to restore and renew his people, not because they deserve it but for the sake of his own name. To a crushed, deported and demoralized people, Ezekiel's third vision **announces the resurrection** which God's Spirit will give them who, like dry bones, have no more hope of living. This promise will include the whole Israel, by cancelling the division caused by her leaders' thirst for power and riches. The reunion of her two parts under **a new David** will become witness of God's plan of love for all humans. Afterwards he describes a river of fresh water flowing from the temple down to the Dead Sea, where it turns the lifeless salt waters into a place where fish abound and trees grow in large quantities on the shores. This top vision expressing **God's miraculous life-giving power** inspired John's description of the living water issuing from the throne of God and of the Lamb.

❖ Why was Ezekiel primarily a visionary?

Like many other prophets, Ezekiel marked his messages as received from God by the usual formulas, "The word of the Lord came to me saying... So says the Lord... Statement of the Lord..." However, as it was with Elijah and Elisha, he mostly presented God's message in action by the formula, "**The hand of the Lord was upon me...**" followed immediately with his effect. Ezekiel received many prophecies in trance, seized by the "spirit" and by "the hand of the Lord". He is identified as prophet of the Spirit of God for his frequent use of this characteristic term. In contrast with the Spirit's power, he is called by God "son of man" to stress his weakness and dependence from the Lord. His book contains **only four formal visions but these are an important part** of it and admit us to a fantastic world. They are **the source of the apocalyptic tradition** culminated in John's book of Revelation. Created in a painful time, this genre kept an air of suffering. It expressed a certainty at the heart of this anguish: God would intervene at the end, when evil reaches its climax. In contrast to his gift of pictorial imagination, applied also to his allegories, Ezekiel's **style is monotonous and very poor** when compared with the strong simplicity of Isaiah and the compelling warmth of Jeremiah. His art excels in inspiring **fear before God's mysteries**.

EZEKIEL'S FOUR VISIONS

1-3: God's glory and living creatures, meaning that he acts in the whole world in every human sphere.

8-11: Temple's end caused by horrible worship in it.

37: The dry bones, meaning that God acts to restore life.

40-48: The stream from the new temple, meaning that God will establish a new relationship with his people.

❖ What can suffering Africans learn from Ezekiel's faith in God?

If we could view our people's misery with Ezekiel's faith, it could have the same **purifying effect** that he foresaw for his fellow exiles. Suffering is never good in itself, but it can become an effective tool of salvation. His vision of the dry bones' valley may be the tragic picture of many African countries today, distressed by wars, famine, AIDS and social evils. **God's Word and Spirit can restore life** to them. But just as God used Ezekiel to speak his life-giving word to the dry bones, he wants us to work to remove the evil and promote life in all its dimensions. The prophet denounced Israel's bad rulers who abused their office; then announced **God's plan to care his flock himself as a good shepherd** but also to appoint over them a new David from his offspring. Ezekiel suggests so his expectation of the Messiah. We cannot help but thinking of today leaders in Africa and elsewhere and hoping to get better ones. African Christians, notably Church leaders and pastoral workers, must give **witness first of all through their life style**, which in fact is the truest prophecy.

❖ What healthy balance can Ezekiel teach us Africans?

Ezekiel combined the role of prophet with that of priest, whose ruling interest was the temple. The result was a **healthy balance between external worship and heart's religion**. Community celebrations, so meaningful to Africans, are good, but they should never exempt from a personal relationship with God.

❖ A help to read the text:

Eze 1:1-3:21: This introduction sets the book's major themes: the presence of God's glory in the exile events, the prophet's call to be a watchman who both sees ahead what God is about to do and stirs up the people to respond, the accountability of each person for his actions, and the power of God's word to act despite the people's refusal to listen. The scene shifts from the magnificent vision of God's throne to an emphasis on hearing: Ezekiel has to speak only what the Lord has said. Eventually his word will prevail on human stubbornness.

Eze 5:1-4: After other three symbolic actions announcing the people's impending punishment (the drawing of Jerusalem's siege on a brick, his laying on his left side 390 days, the bread made of mixed grains and baked on human manure), this of shaving the beard (representing dignity) affirms the coming of God's sword to ruin Israel through a foreign power. It involves the threat of total degradation, with no part of the people spared, and so causes the listeners to ask about the next events. The following three statements

answer what and why they will happen. All three use the formula "plague, famine and sword" to indicate the ways in which the people would be killed; and all decisively state they come from God's wrath.

Eze 5:5-17: The first statement is against Jerusalem. It was originally a special place for meeting God, but its unfaithfulness has been total, so the punishment will be horrible, with parents eating their children.

Eze 8:1-11:25: These four chapters form a unity: the vision of the temple's end. God's presence cannot continue among his people when they continue to rebel against him as Ezekiel is made to see. Chapter 8 is a vision of idolatry and sin with a formal accusation of Israel. In chapter 9 God's sentence is carried out by seven agents. Chapter 10 completes this judgment with God's rejection of the temple and its worshippers: his glory leaves Jerusalem so that the city may be destroyed. Finally, chapter 11 repeats the accusation but ends with a prophecy of restoration for the exiles who become aware of their sins and repent. The Lord will also grant them a new heart and a deep devotion to his plan in favour of all humans.

Eze 12:1-16: Because the people didn't believe Ezekiel's terrible forecast, he acted out the siege and capture of Zedekiah and then explained his prophetic action.

Eze 13:1-16: This is the condemnation of prophets who proclaimed a trick message of hope: they spoke not God's will but the empty promises of security that people wanted to hear so to not have to convert.

Eze 14:12-23: This statement's heart is that nobody can be saved by another's goodness; more specifically, no past good deeds in Israel will save this unfaithful generation. If there are innocent ones among them, only those will be spared. It's the important principle of individual responsibility.

Eze 16:1-63: This chapter, the longest in the book, involves two distinct but related allegories (the adulterous wife and the three sinful sisters) followed by a word of hope which integrates the lesson of both. The subject remains Jerusalem throughout, and the purpose is to make known its guilt in rejecting obedience to God for other gods. He will let the foreign nations in which she trusted be his wrath's instrument against her for she was worse than Samaria and Sodom. But all the three will be restored.

Eze 17:1-24: This allegory of the eagles is followed by its interpretation and another allegory. The blend of natural fables with historical judgments on the situation under Zedekiah allows Ezekiel to include the promise of future restoration as possible. But both obstinate resistance to Babylon and alliance with Egypt are only illusions. It is God, the master of history, who will grant in due time his people's rebirth.

Eze 18:1-32: Individual responsibility is treated in three stages: father, son and grandson; neither righteousness nor iniquity will be transferred from one generation to another. A man who turned from iniquity became upright, while who left his righteousness became guilty: the just God will judge accordingly. Afterward Ezekiel takes up the case of the lot of those who repent, a problem made urgent by the preceding arguments. While seemingly directed to evil done in the homeland, the message's audience is formed by the exiles, and its purpose is to start a reform stressing personal adherence to the Torah even if there is neither holy land nor defined community that can be held collectively responsible for its practice.

Eze 20:27-44: At the end of a remarkable indictment which charges the Israelites with unfaithfulness even from their slavery in Egypt, God promises to renew the exodus and the purification in the desert. Then he presents the plan for a new order in the holy land, when true worship and fidelity will be based in Israel's recognition that it was God who saved them out of the exile.

Eze 24:15-27: Ezekiel was forbidden to do any sign of grief at his wife's death. This was a strong warning to the people, who were not to mourn for Jerusalem's loss because it would deserve its punishment. Up to that time the prophet would be dumb. When he would received news of the city's fall he could at last speak freely and proclaim a new message.

♦ Study questions:

1. With at least seven examples from the Bible, explain why Ezekiel is called "prophet of God's Spirit".
2. In five points, discuss the issue of shared guilty and individual responsibility of one's sins as presented by Prophet Ezekiel.
3. "The fathers have eaten the sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge". Contextualize the reasons why God through Ezekiel forbade this proverb.
4. Describe Ezekiel's allegory of the faithless woman and relate it to our society.
5. Explain what Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones (37:1-28) meant for his contemporary and what its relevance is for us.

THE SECOND ISAIAH: THE NEW EXODUS AND GOD'S SERVANT

♦ Who was the 'Second Isaiah', and what did he prophesy?

We call Second Isaiah a distant disciple of Isaiah, great prophet like him, who, toward the end of half century of exile (starting in around 550 BC), **consoled God's oppressed and discouraged people. They had lost everything: land, king and temple. Would they also lose their faith in God?** According to the traditional criteria, he could not compete with other gods, for a god who had no land and could not be worshipped was not a god at all. Surprisingly, it was during this period that the Jews learned to understand fully what was different and new about their God: that in fact he was not just the god of one people and one land, but quite simply God, the Lord of the universe, to whom all heaven and earth belong; the God who has no need of sacrifices of goats and bulls, but who is truly worshipped only through right behaviour. The priests presented the exiles once again with their traditions. But it was Second Isaiah's chapters (Isa 40-55) to clearly show this **great theological development**, teaching positively **there is only one God**, whose wisdom and providence are immeasurable: nations' gods are not gods at all as their impotence demonstrates. These truths were presented in an **exalted style and urgent rhythm**, emphasising the

imminence of salvation. Second Isaiah's Book of Consolation announced good news: Babylon's imminent fall and Israel's liberation. To contrast Jerusalem's past trials with its coming re-establishment, the prophet used traditional imagery: the barren woman become fertile and the repudiated wife taken back. But more than earlier prophets he stressed that she would be returned to favour, offering a vision of the future splendours. He spoke of the **coming restoration of Jerusalem in a new exodus** that would be more glorious than the first. It would be **like a new creation**, because only God's power could accomplish it. His word is powerful enough to change humans: it is like a messenger who doesn't return until he has fulfilled his mission. So strong was his faith in the God of history that he saw every event would contribute to Israel's redemption. He would even use pagan nations to save the Jews, and eventually **unbelievers would become part of his people** in a universal unity expressed for the first time.

❖ *What do his four 'Songs of the Servant' describe?*

Worship's spirit got new life through Second Isaiah's hymns, laments, and proclamation of the Word. In particular, he composed **four special poems known as the Songs of the Servant**, because they describe a perfect God's servant, greater than any single Israelite of the past, destined to preach the true faith, to be a light to the nations, to bring back the scattered people, **to expiate their sins by his death and to be glorified by God**. The first song (42:1-13) contrasts the Persian King Cyrus' military advances and the **gentle servant's peaceful means** and then ends with a new song to God's victory which the whole world is called to join. The second (49:1-16) emphasises certain aspects of his duty: predestination, a mission not only to Israel whom he is to re-gather, but also to the nations, to whom he must bring light, **new and streaking teaching** to cause salvation. To this it adds mention of a failure, of his trust in God alone and of a final triumph. Afterward it resumes the theme of the marvellous highway of the return to Jerusalem and stresses God's maternal love: his richness cannot be expressed only through maleness. In the third (50:4-9), the servant appears more like a sage, a faithful disciple of God, charged in his turn to teach God's fearers (i.e. all pious Jews, but also those who walk in darkness) using the gift of speech he has received through his obedience to God's word. Thanks to his courage and God's help, **he will endure persecution until his final triumph**. The fourth (52:13-53:12), in dialogue form between God and the kings or the peoples, again takes up the theme of suffering: the persecutions the Servant patiently endures scandalise the viewers, but are in fact sins' reparation. What in their eyes is **failure, for God is success**. Just because the servant is the victim of hate, injustice and violence, he frees even his own persecutors from their iniquities. We don't know who was the actual person the author was referring to, but some Jews interpreted them as concerning the future Messiah, and finally **Jesus identified himself as the Servant** (Mt 12:17-21). The whole Church tradition has seen this prophecy perfectly fulfilled in his Passover.

❖ *How can Second Isaiah's teachings be a message of hope for Africans today?*

Africans conceive God as **the all-powerful Being who controls nature as well as the future** of nations and individuals. This concept sometimes leads to resignation to luck, but rightly understood it is close to Second Isaiah's, meant as a message of hope in a difficult situation which **doesn't aim to discourage human initiative and self-help**. His teachings on God as creator, which refer not so much to his initial act of creation as to Jerusalem's renovation after the exile, can complement the strong African belief in the Creator. In the widespread economic, social, political and religious chaos that many African countries experience it is consoling to know that God's power was not limited to the origins, but can **transform our contemporary world for the better**. Even though Africans believe in one supreme Being, some Christians do consult witch doctors if they don't find solutions to their problems: it is here that **the prophet's inflexible monotheism is needed**. Moreover, his universalism is fundamental for Africans, because it **calls us to overcome tribal oppositions**, though our own traditions also forbid hate and slaughter against other peoples.

❖ **A help to read the text:**

Isa 40:1-11: This advance of Second Isaiah's Book of Consolation synthesises his message. It is a joyous song for several voices announcing that the nation's dependence is over. Verses 1-11 focus on the glorious procession to Jerusalem about to take place under the leadership of God himself, presented as a good shepherd. The long road linking Babylon to Jerusalem doesn't cross the desert amid them, but skirts it all the way. The mysterious voice, however, announces that the exiles will be returning to their fathers' land across the desert, by a wide, flat and comfortable road. In the NT, John the Baptist identified himself with this voice preparing the Lord's coming, while Jesus did the same with the good shepherd.

Isa 40:12-31: These verses shift attention back to Babylon and the exiles, uncertain in their faith, who are challenged by a few questions about God's majesty, whose greatness is contrasted to idols, lifeless human productions. Some did listen to the prophet's message and return to Jerusalem, but the majority stayed behind for they didn't have either the courage or the strength to begin a new life.

Isa 41:8-20: In the context of the victories of Cyrus of Persia, these prophecies of salvation offer to Israel, called God's servant, reasons and final result of the Lord's acts. They express his affection for his oppressed people. They should no longer fear because he is their saviour and is coming to defend them, doing for them what a relative does for a fellow clan member in trouble. This comparison is very meaningful to Africans whose clan ties are very strong. When the only God is one's relative there is absolutely nothing to fear. Then we hear a marvellous song on his redemptive work performing a new creation.

Isa 41:21-29: God summons the false gods to appear before him and then condemn them. Their inability to forecast the future and to act on world events proofs their emptiness.

Isa 42:1-13: Almost all the verses of this first song of God's servant are applied to Jesus in the NT.

Isa 42:14-25: Israel is helpless: this trial by God follows his complaint that he deserted his people in Jerusalem's destruction and successive exile. The prophet reminds them why this happened: it was not God who, deaf and blind to Israel's fate, drew down disaster on him, but Israel who had been deaf and blind to the earlier prophecies of doom and not responded through repentance, because he didn't realize neither what was happening to him nor why it was happening.

Isa 43:1-13: This poem on the new exodus interprets the return from exile as a new creation. In it God addresses his people with exceptional tenderness, promising to save and reunite them. After that a new trial against idols and their worshippers summons the restored Israel as witness: though she is deaf and blind to the events of her own history, they show God's uniqueness.

Isa 43:14-21: Babylon will be destroyed. This other masterwork of poetry and theology continues the theme of the new exodus, even more glorious than the first one. For God never forgets humans but keeps showing his love by performing surprising deeds. We only have to open our eyes to see them.

Isa 43:22-44:8, 21-23: In this prophecy of blame, exceptional in Second Isaiah, God appears forcefully as Israel's saviour, while the servant has become a burden even to God, yet is chosen, forgiven and redeemed to the joy of the whole earth.

Isa 44:24-45:13: Resumption of the theme of God's omnipotence, about to be manifested in Jerusalem's rebuilding, and the part he has given the pagan Cyrus to play, who is named here for the first time. Even today God can use non believers too for his plans of salvation, though believers cannot understand his ways.

Isa 45:14-25: We have here one of Second Isaiah's key ideas: the universalism, which foresees a future gathering of the pagan nations round Jerusalem to worship Israel's God. Also the polemic against false gods here attains most clearly such universal call to salvation.

◊ **Study questions:**

1. Explain Second Isaiah's teaching on gods other than Israel's Holy One, and then identify five modern forms of idolatry which are a danger to faith today.
2. How did God use Cyrus to save his own people? From this fact, what can we argue for contemporary oppressed people?

THE BOOKS OF HAGGAI AND ZECHARIAH: THE TASK OF RESTORATION



Zerubbabel presenting to King Cyrus the plans for Jerusalem.

God's mercy and the renewed possibility of praising him. It was an experience of overflowing joy, smiles and cries of exultation, so beautiful like a dream. "The Lord has done great things": this is what the nations said and what Israel proclaimed.

◊ *What was Israel's prophecy after the Babylonian exile?*

The Babylonian exile's great wonder this disaster cleansed Jews' faith instead of ruining it. Thanks to Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Second Isaiah, through the exile, the Jews were granted a new vision of God's plan which notably influenced Israelite prophecy's final stage, when temple and Torah became the lasting realities that would continue to bond Israel after the prophecy halted. Clearly, this period's prophets lived on the earlier ones' ideas, lacking much of their vigour and spontaneity. The great expectations for a glorious new era had not yet happened, so that the people's faith weakened again. These prophets tried to revive their hopes, but also to introduce a more spiritual form of worship, opening the Judaism to become all nations' religion. A continuing struggle against false leaders is pictured.

◊ *Who were the post-exilic prophets?*

In chronological order, the post-exilic prophets were Haggai, Zechariah, the so-called Third Isaiah (nameless authors of Isa 56-66), Malachi, Obadiah, Joel and the so-called Second Zechariah (nameless author of Zech 9-14), not to mention many prophets intervened in editing older books (especially Isaiah). Israelite prophecy's disappeared as unremarkably as it had begun; we don't know who the last OT prophet was. In the final two hundred years BC the wisdom writers consciously carried on the tradition inherited from prophecy, without, however, claiming to possess its charisma.

❖ Who was Haggai, and what was his task?

Haggai was **one of the first prophets after Jews' return** from Babylon, where he spent most of his lifetime. **The restoration was difficult**, and the majority of the people lived in poverty. The work to rebuild the temple went slowly, and many lost interest and energy for the project. During four months of 520 BC Haggai exhorted the people and their new leaders (the governor Zerubbabel and the high priest Joshua) **to resume the building of a house where God would dwell** among them and then disappeared. The four brief speeches composing his book are entirely concerned with this: he wanted to know whether Israel was going to rebuild her national life with or without God. Always a valuable question! He explained that, since the temple was still neglected, the Lord frustrated the misplaced efforts of the farmers; its rebuilding, however, would usher in an age of prosperity. Though unimpressive, **this new temple would overcome the glory of the old one**. Thanks to Haggai (and his fellow prophet Zechariah), the work of building began again and was completed in 515 BC. His teaching on the importance of worship and offerings provides a necessary **corrective to any misunderstanding of other prophets' words** which stressed more the need of living by God's will.

❖ Who was Zechariah, and what did he stress in his prophecies?

Zechariah, a responsible member of the post-exilic Jew institution, started his mission **the same year as Haggai**, and continued for two years. Their background and message are largely the same, but Zechariah stressed more the **importance of God's action as world's only Lord**, and the **need of purifying priesthood and worship** to prepare the Messiah's age. Whereas Haggai promoted immediate action and held out a hope quickly to become reality, Zechariah promoted principles to assure right action when needed, and held out a **hope for an age not at hand**. Moreover he presented his message through symbols and night visions, with dialogues between God, an interpreting angel and himself. He wrote down **eight visions**, each of which details some warning or instruction. From vision to vision there is a certain orderly progression, especially if the following statements are considered. God assures Jerusalem's future in the first, and the condition necessary for it in the seven.

❖ What can we Africans learn from the experience of the Jews after their return to home?

When African countries became independent from colonial powers, **there was a lot of optimism** that a new era of freedom and prosperity had finally dawned. For today's common people this has not happened: **we feel as disappointed as the Jews** after their return to home. The prophets' message to their people is therefore equally relevant to us. We must not lose **hope in a better future** and we should continue **striving to bring it about**. It must, however, include not only material prosperity but **mainly moral and spiritual values**, without uncritically dumping those traditional in the name of modern civilisation. A growth which is merely economic risks always of creating new divisions and conflicts, of the wealth of some being built on others' poverty. Prosperity understood only in terms of material wealth tends to become selfish, to give free rein to consumerism and to be unconcerned about others. As it becomes more prevalent, it opens the door to the evil of corruption, which brings so much discouragement and damage in its wake.

❖ A help to read the text:

Hag 1:1-11: What we see here is a question of priority. The people returned from Babylon had provided houses for themselves but were neglecting God's honour and glory, which should be put above all else: his dwelling place was still in ruins. Their excuse was based on bad economic conditions as reason of delay in building the temple. Haggai turned this argument on its head: it was failure to build it the cause of the economic difficulties themselves, and so the time for building was indeed over. They had to receive in their midst the God of covenant, by rebuilding his temple, symbol of his presence and blessing for all. The same is seen today among Christians who don't play their part in the Church with the claim that they are poor.

Hag 1:12-15: Haggai's preaching was effective. Work on the temple began only three weeks after his initial rebuke and call. Because the people, by their change of heart, had met God's basic condition, the way was opened to a new attitude on God's part too: he would lead them from hardship to blessings.

Hag 2:1-9: Older Jews discouraged the people by comparing the rising new temple with Solomon's splendid one. The prophet's reply focused on their different glory: despite the smaller size and the relative poverty of the material, its rebuilding would be contributed even by foreign nations. It announced Messiah's age: indeed it was in this second temple, restored by Herod, which Christ taught. Moreover, he replaced the earthly temple with his own person.

Hag 2:10-19: Since the altar was rebuilt (538 BC), worship continued on the temple's site, but Haggai points the lesson resulting from the priests' declaration that sin is more contagious than holiness: the nation is unclean, so its sacrifices, and finally the altar, are too. This is why God allowed agricultural failures before the restart of building. But now their cause has been brought to an end.

Hag 2:20-23: This universal prophecy is addressed directly to Zerubbabel, the last member of David's house involved in Judah's leadership. He is elected to a notable function in salvation history. This promise, associated with traditional hopes of a king from this house, was not fulfilled in the sense Haggai may be intended it, but in a more marvellous way in Jesus, who was a descendent of both David and Zerubbabel.

Zech 1:1-6: The book starts with a call to conversion through listening to God's word. It is characteristic of Zechariah, with an appeal to past examples to be pondered in the present. More Jews need to return, not only from Babylon to Jerusalem, but also from wrong ways to God. If they rebuild his temple and purify themselves from what angers him, then he will return to dwell among them. Rebuilding only is not enough: the mere presence of the temple did not help their fathers, though they magically thought so.

Zech 1:7-17: First vision: the four horsemen's purpose is to patrol the whole earth to see if it is at peace. It is, except for Judah, which still suffer the exile's effects. An angel asks if seventy years of punishment are not enough, and then God promises restoration and prosperity to Jerusalem.

Zech 1:18-21: Second vision: the four horns, symbols of strength, are the nations that devastated Judah. The four blacksmiths are God's agents of those nations' destruction, probably symbolising the forging of weapons against them.

Zech 2:1-13: Third vision: the Lord comes to his people to rebuild them, including those from other nations who turn to him.

Zech 3:1-10: Fourth vision: the high priest Joshua represents the remnant returned to Jerusalem and especially the priesthood that serves in the restored temple. His soiled clothes are replaced with the clean dresses of high priesthood to symbolise the cleansing of guilt and sin and the restoration of the priesthood and its functions in preparation for Messiah's coming. Satan (whose name means adversary) appears not as an agent of evil but as a member of God's heavenly court whose function is to accuse people of their sins.

Zech 4:1-14: Fifth vision: the lamp-stand signifies God's presence, but most attention is given to the olive trees, symbolising Zerubbabel and Joshua, the political and religious leaders of Judah. As suppliers of the oil for the lamp-stand, these two anointed serve the Lord's purposes among his people.

Zech 5:1-4: Sixth vision: the huge flying scroll symbolises God's judgment on all sinners.

Zech 5:5-11: Seventh vision: all sin, symbolised by the woman in the bushel basket, will be removed from Judah and sent flying to Babylon (Shinar) which is so sinful that Wickedness is said to be worshipped there, in contrast with God's temple which is being built in Jerusalem.

Zech 6:1-8: Eighth vision: the four chariots are the four winds, meaning God's control over the whole earth.

Zech 8:1-23: This file of ten short prophecies deals with Messiah's age, a time of simple, peaceful happiness under the blessing of God, present in Jerusalem. What Jews had to do was obeying the Lord, speaking the truth, being just in judgment, not devising evil in their hearts, nor loving false oaths, all things hated by God. In the end the view becomes universal, with the holy city as religious centre for all nations.

❖ Study questions:

1. By giving five points, explain the circumstances which made Haggai and Zechariah deliver their prophecy. Show its relevance in today's life by giving at least three points.
2. Both Haggai and Zechariah were sent by God to stimulate the Jews gone back to Jerusalem in doing the task of restoration. Explain their absolute priority and their reasons for that; then say if it is relevant to our own existence today.
3. Recalling Haggai's four speeches, what would you tell a person who doesn't give alms with the claim that he is poor and therefore has nothing to contribute to the Church? Give at least five points.
4. Describe Zechariah's vision of the Horsemen (1:7-17) and then explain what it signifies.
5. With reference to Zechariah 3:1-10, show what his vision of Joshua's clothes getting changed means in today's context.
6. Interpret Zechariah's vision of the golden lamp-stand and the two olive trees (4:1-14) by giving five points, and then relate it to the situation in Tanzania today by giving three points.
7. "Both civil and religious leaders should cooperate and work together in building up their country and humankind at large". How can you relate this truth to the vision of the Golden Lamp stand with two olive trees in Zech 4:1-14?
8. By giving five points, describe Zechariah's prophecy of the future messianic rule.

❖ Revision questions:

1. God chose and sent some people as prophets to the nation of Israel. What was their mission? How is prophecy needed in our time? Give five points for each question.
2. Many prophets contested Israel's feasts and rituals. Refer the challenges from at least one of them and then discuss if it is right to use their words in order to refuse religious assemblies, songs, fast etc.
3. Giving examples from the OT, say how prophecy and prophetic work are relevant to your life.
4. Using the OT, how would you try to discern today's true and false prophets?
5. Show five differences between true and false prophets' essential characteristics.
6. The prophets courageously condemned the evils which threatened Israel's people. Discuss a few of them and of those they could address in our country and in our world today.
7. Give eight points to evaluate how Isaiah's and Hosea's family lives played a significant role in their ministries.
8. Identify and explain at least five Messianic prophecies as presented in the book of Isaiah.
9. "To some extent, Isaiah was the prophet of Jesus' birth and the second Isaiah was the prophet of Jesus' death". With relevant quotations, examine this statement and then explain the importance of both in confirming your faith in the Christ.

ZECHARIAH'S EIGHT VISIONS

- | |
|--|
| Four coloured horses and horsemen |
| Four horns and blacksmiths |
| The surveyor of a rebuilt and prosperous Jerusalem |
| Joshua, the high priest |
| The lamp-stand and the two olive trees |
| The flying scroll |
| The woman in the bushel basket |
| The four chariots, crowns and leaders |

PAPER TWO THE NEW TESTAMENT

CONTENT

- Christ's life and teaching as presented in the four Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John.
- Significance of these features for the understanding of Jesus' person and mission.
- Peculiarity of John's Gospel as compared to the Synoptic tradition.
- The apostolic age: the Acts of the Apostles, Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, letter to the Galatians, first letter to the Corinthians and letter to the Romans.

SETTINGS

"Our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not in a written code but in the Spirit; for the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2Cor 3:5-6).

❖ What has God said in and through his Word?

"In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son" (Heb 1:1-2). **Christ, the Son of God made man, is the Father's one, perfect, and unsurpassable Word. In him he has said everything;** there will be no other word than this one. "In giving us his Son, his only Word for he possesses no other, he spoke everything to us at once in this sole Word and **he has no more to say** because what he spoke before to the prophets in parts, he has now spoken all at once by giving us the All Who is His Son. Any person questioning God or desiring some vision or revelation would be guilty not only of foolish behaviour but also of offending him, by not fixing his eyes entirely upon Christ and by living with the desire for some other innovation" (St. John of the Cross).

❖ Why will there be no further revelation?

The Christian disposition, therefore, since **it is the new and perfect Covenant**, will never pass away, and no new public revelation is to be expected before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ. Yet even if **Revelation is already complete**, it has not been made completely explicit; **it remains for Christian faith gradually to grasp its full meaning** over the course of the centuries.

❖ What is the New Testament?

The Word of God, which "is God's power for the salvation of everyone who has faith" (Rom 1:16), is set forth and displays its power in **a most wonderful way in the writings of the New Testament** which hand on the final truth of God's Revelation. Their central object is Jesus Christ, God's Son made flesh: his acts, teachings, Passion and glorification, and his Church's beginnings under the Spirit's leadership. So, they conveys to us the ultimate truth of divine Revelation. Within the New Testament **the four Gospels of Mathew, Mark, Luke and John are the heart of all the Scriptures** because they are the principle witness to the life and teaching of Jesus. As such, they hold a unique place in the Church.

❖ What are the books of the New Testament?

The NT contains **27 books written by inspiration within a period of less than one hundred years after Jesus' life**. They form the second of the two portions into which the Bible is naturally divided. These books fall into **three different literary forms**: 5 historical books (4 Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles), 21 letters and 1 prophetic book (Revelation). All of them were written in Koivn, Koine (i.e. that time's Common Language), the form of **Greek known and used by most of the Roman Empire's people** to whom the first Christian missionaries carried the Good News. It had a great influence in diffusing the Greek culture first in the Near East and Egypt, and eventually also in Rome. It also made easier Gospel's diffusion.



Emperor Augustus' (30 BC - 14 AD) most famous sculpture

❖ What was the situation at the time of Christ's birth?

"When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, to ransom those under the Law, so that we might receive adoption. As proof that you are children, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying out, 'Abba, Father!'" (Gal 4:4-5). **All what preceded this event was only God's preparation of his Son's birth, which occurred, then, when the most fitting circumstances prevailed.** Like concentric circles three cultural spheres influenced Jesus, growing in intensity as their geographical area diminished: **the Roman, the Greek and the Jewish, representing respectively political, intellectual and religious factors.** Jesus did live and operate in an environment compounded of these three. We need to know it in order to understand the New Testament and its people.

❖ What was the political setting of the NT?

At that time **Rome ruled an immense empire, rich and unrivalled**. To it were subject all the countries around the Mediterranean Sea, called by the Romans "mare nostrum".

peoples; its enduring organisation was taking shape in the very generation in which Jesus was born. The empire was divided into administrative districts more or less closely attached to Rome: some were governed by a proconsul, others by a legate, some were entrusted to a prefect or procurator, some retained an appearance of autonomy, like Palestine with Herod's family. A century of social turmoil and civil war ended with Octavianus' victory in 31 BC. He was regarded non just as a politician, but as a divine saviour who ushered the world in a new era: for this reason he was rewarded the title Augustus, i.e. one worthy of adoration. He rescued the state, skilfully giving it the government that held it together for the next five centuries, inaugurating Europe's longest period of peace, security of law and a high level of prosperity. For the first time, there was a great expanse of peace in which everyone's property could be registered and placed at the service of the wider community. There was effective communication and the movement of populations was common: Roman roads made it possible to travel quickly to any destination; many ships transported goods and passengers on rivers and above all on the Mediterranean. Taxes were levied on all inhabitants and justice was the same for all Roman citizens. Other free men were considered foreigners and enjoyed fewer rights. The fate of the extremely numerous slaves (two out of three inhabitants in certain large city) varied greatly depending on their master's feeling or their situation (craftsmen, cooks, doctors and the like). Moreover, millions of inhabitants subsisted in misery, brutality was usual, charity seemed absent. Small associations of all kinds developed to escape depersonalization. It is difficult to calculate the population: that of the whole empire has been estimated at about 50 million. For the great cities, figures have been produced like 1-2 million for Rome or Alexandria, half a million for Antioch, Tarsus, Corinth or Ephesus. Jerusalem had only 50,000 inhabitants, though this tripled or quadrupled at the time of the great festivals.



Augustus' Empire around Jesus' life.

❖ What was the intellectual setting of the NT?

While Rome held political sway, the intellectual sphere was dominated by an admixture of Greek and Near East influences that made up the so called **Hellenism (i.e. Greek-like culture)**. Being practical men, the Romans too recognized the cultural superiority of Greece and reshaped their society along Greek lines. Moreover, Greek language became universal and made possible trade ideas, and among them the message of salvation. Jesus passed his entire life in a prevalently Jewish environment (which kept on speaking Aramaic, while Hebrew remained the worship's language), but it was already penetrated by Hellenism, especially under Herod's dynasty.

❖ What was the religious setting of the NT?

Christianity originated in a Judaism thoroughly purified of idolatry. Between the return from exile (538 BC) and Christ's time (6 BC - 30 AD) **Jews' faith and hope developed**, especially about angels and demons, resurrection, coming of a new world focused on the **Messiah, usually expected to be a warrior** who would free them of hated foreign rulers. By Jesus' time Jews' majority accepted these beliefs. There were only about half a million Jews in their land, Judaea, but other seven were dispersed outside, forming 8-10% of the population of the empire. They tried to convert everyone and were restless because of the fear of corruption of their unique faith. In the beginning of Rome's domination, they enjoyed a special status: they were exempt from military service and were **permitted to practice their religion**. But its complete fusion with Jews' whole life complicated their status beyond even Rome's genius for government. Later, they were required to be loyal to the state and also to worship the Roman emperor. Those who didn't do so had to suffer. In the conquered provinces, people felt that the national gods had failed because they could not defend their people against Rome. They looked elsewhere for a meaning in life: to philosophy or to mystery religions, where was believed that initiation brought salvation. To many Christianity appeared a such kind of religion, also because many speculated at the time that the world's ruler would emerge from Judah.

❖ What were the Jews' most important institutions?

The Jews' most important institutions were: **the only temple of Jerusalem**, heart of their religious, political and economic life, where crowds of pilgrims went from everywhere for the great annual festivals and where thousands of sheep and cattle were sacrificed every year; and **the many synagogues built everywhere** for local worship, teaching and government as well, and which attracted many non-Jews too.

Synagogues don't figure in the OT, and there are different opinions about their beginning. They certainly did exist in the postexilic period and do so until today, everywhere Jews are present. The Greek root of their name indicates they are simple meetinghouses, places where people gather. Men and women sit in opposite sides, and leaders sit in front. There is no altar because the religious services, done at least every Sabbath, don't include sacrifices (which need the Temple) but prayer, devout reading, meditation and instruction. Any believer could preach there. Jesus went regularly to synagogues where he did read the Bible and teach the people.



A scroll in today's synagogue of Cologne (Germany).

❖ *What were Jewish sects' distinctive beliefs?*

From the 2nd century BC to 70 AD the main Jewish sects were:

1) the **Sadducees**, powerful people of Jerusalem who accepted only the Torah and emphasized its rituals; their strong holds were the about 7000 priests of the temple who claimed to descend from Zadok, David's high priest; political opportunists, they collaborated willingly with the Roman forces in order to stay in power; they were very harsh to Jesus and to developing Christianity;

2) the **Pharisees**, i.e. "separated ones", so called with reference to their strict observances of ritual purity: their societies were mostly composed of small people with no theological mastery; they were not many (may be only about

Scribes were specialists of copying and explaining the Law, fully qualified scholars who by ordination had received Moses' official spirit mediated by succession. They formed a closed order of men learned in the Torah. Some of them were priests, but the majority were lay people and Pharisees. As incumbents of the teaching office, they questioned Jesus and as members of the Sanhedrin eventually took part in his trial and condemnation. Jesus saw in them a lack of humility, selflessness and sincerity. His most serious charge against them, however, is that they didn't practise what they demanded. Against their casuistry which defeated God's true will contained in the law of love, Jesus brought out its full seriousness in the powerful antitheses of the Sermon on the Mount.

6,000) but influential because of their moral efforts against the hegemony of Hellenism which was threatening Israel's identity; they upheld the divine authority of the prophets and other OT writings with the new beliefs present in them, but also developed an extensive oral tradition on Torah's interpretation and application which they forced upon the people as a heavy burden; though their movement first helped to save Judaism, it became dangerously rigid and restricted, despising common people, but some of them had a very open attitude to Jesus and his disciples; their strong holds were the many synagogues throughout the world;

3) the **Essenes**, who rejected temple's worship and the whole Jewish life; many of them were preparing themselves in the desert for the imminent end-time with the coming of two Messiahs (one priest, another king) and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit; they lived very strictly; some even didn't marry; the earnest religiosity of their writings is moving and has many contacts with Jesus' message.

❖ *Who were the most important political parties in Israel?*

About politics, the pragmatic **Herodians** supported the local dynasty submitted to Roman dominion, while the nationalistic **Zealots**, i.e. "the enthusiasts", opposed any collaboration with the colonists and many times fought for Israel's total liberation. Very few years had no bloodshed, because they resorted to terror and violence.

Herod the Great tried to kill the child Jesus
His son Herod Antipas killed John the Baptist
His grandson Herod Agrippa I killed the Apostle James

❖ *What does the NT show about prophecy?*

After two hundred years of God's silence, which led Israel to a vivid desire of hearing his word, John the Baptist, a prophet and more than a prophet, started a new period of prophecy, culminating in Jesus' ministry. The Spirit's outpouring announced for the Messiah's time and promised by him was fulfilled at Pentecost. The early Church's strong missionary outreach, closely linked to prophets' ministry, was a logical consequence of Joel's prophecy that in the age to come **the Spirit would be sent to all believers**.

NT CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE

Many years are only approximate

- 7 BC: John the Baptist's birth
- 6 BC: Jesus' birth in Bethlehem; King Herod the Great tries to kill him; the child Jesus refugee in Egypt
- 3 BC: Jesus' family returns to Nazareth, Galilee, where he grows up
- 27 AD: John the Baptist starts to preach and baptise around the Jordan river
- 27 AD: Jesus too, after being baptised by John, starts to preach throughout Galilee and Judaea
- 29 AD: Herod Antipas kills John the Baptist
- 30 AD: Jesus killed on the cross at Jerusalem; after his resurrection, the Holy Spirit comes to his Church
- 36 AD: Jews' persecution against Greek-speaking Jew Christians; Stephen is killed; Paul is converted
- 44 AD: King Herod Agrippa I kills James of Zebedee; Peter leaves Jerusalem
- 46 AD: Paul's missionary journeys to Asia Minor and South-east Europe start
- 49 AD: Apostles' Council at Jerusalem about converted Gentiles and Moses' Law
- 51 AD: Writing 1Thessalonians, Paul begins the NT books; he will add 12 other letters
- 62 AD: James the Lesser stoned to death by Jews in Jerusalem
- 64 AD: Caesar Nero starts Rome's long persecution against the Christians (Peter and Paul die there)
- 65 AD: Mark writes the first Gospel, followed by Matthew and Luke in 80-90
- 70 AD: During the 1st Jewish War (66-73), the Romans destroy Jerusalem and his Temple
- 80 AD: Growing polemics between Jews and Christians; the latter are expelled from synagogues
- 90-100 AD: John of Zebedee writes or completes his 5 books; he is the last Apostle to die

JESUS' LIFE AND MESSAGE (6 BC – 30 AD)

"There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

◆ What does history say about Jesus?

From the 18th century researchers have attempted to present Jesus as he can be historically known. It is not his person and life's full reality, because historical research by its nature can at most establish high probability but never final and absolute certainty over every detail. Also, our **sources about him are fragmentary**, and what is more **his mystery is so deep!** If the distinction between historical and real is true for any ancient figure, it is truer of Jesus. At one level he fits the category of history, in so far as he was a real person, living in concrete circumstances, surrounded by historical characters; moreover, everybody who studies the Gospels, whether or not he is a believer, finds enough solid evidence of their historicity, more than that we have about other ancient figures; finally, Jesus has enormously marked human history, as attested by the worldwide use of his emergence to start counting all years, before and after him. At another level history cannot assess him, because the major part of his truth is beyond its competence: his coming from the Father, his inner life and awareness, his resurrection and glorification, and his promise of salvation with the second coming. So, a faith based only on what is critically certain would be rather slim. However, we cannot escape the question of the historicity of his key events. NT message is not simply an idea; essential to it is the fact that these events actually occurred in this world. So, the quest for the historical Jesus helps giving concrete content to our faith statements about the Christ against any tendency to evaporate him. This quest reaffirms what the world sees as the scandal of the Word made flesh: the **shocking identification of God's full revelation with a Jew carpenter of 1st century Palestine.** We believe him is true man and true God, though we cannot ultimately define the interplay between the two. It was this person, with all his mystery, who impressed his disciples as well any people who met him; it keeps on impressing anyone who starts a living relationship with him. Because he is man, all of us belong to him and he to us; in him humanity starts anew and reaches its goal.

JESUS' ORIGINS

◆ What were Jesus' origins?

Jesus' provenance is both known and unknown, seemingly easy to establish, and yet not exhaustively. John grandly starts his Gospel by proposing Jesus' eternal being God's Son, the primordial source from which all things come. On the human side, **Matthew's and Luke's Infancy Gospels share twelve elements about Jesus' origins.** This concordance, in spite of using different traditions and having distinct theological visions, attests to their truth. According to both, he was born under King Herod the Great (37-4 BC). His mother was Mary, a virgin of 15 or 16, no older, who had not yet come to live with his spouse, Joseph, a carpenter who earned his daily bread. He was not involved in the child's conception, which happened through the Holy Spirit. In spite of this, his ancestry is traced through his legal father, who came from a branch of David's house. An angel announced this Saviour's coming birth, which took place in a cradle near Bethlehem, after Mary and Joseph began living together. From the start, he did not belong to what is worldly important and powerful. Simple shepherds informed by angels were the first witnesses to this event occurred in near obscurity. They represented God's first love: the poor whom Jesus would bless. They acknowledged him by his own sign: true poverty. Jesus' circumcision, on the eighth day after his birth, incorporated him into the people of the covenant, submitted to Moses' law and admitted to Israel's worship, in which he would participate throughout his life. His presentation in Jerusalem's temple on the fortieth day showed him to be the firstborn Son belonging to the Lord and handed over to him, ready to be sacrificed. Eventually their poor family settled in Nazareth, an obscure hill village in South Galilee, in the outskirts of the Roman Empire and of Israel as well. They had first to leave for Egypt because of Herod's hostility emerged when wise men from the East, representing all humans' journeying toward Christ, came to pay homage to Jesus as the newborn king of the Jews. His whole life would be under the sign of persecution.



The newborn Jesus, a homeless, received poor shepherds' homage while lying in a manger as the food that give us true life.



Jesus at home in Nazareth.

◆ How did Jesus live his youth?

During the greater part of his existence Jesus shared the condition of humans' vast majority: a daily life spent without evident greatness. **He grew up in a family and was by profession an artisan** working or building with hard materials, most likely a carpenter. Living for **nearly 30 years in Nazareth**, Jesus absorbed the human condition, welcoming it in his permanent communion with the Father and in his mission's

preparation. The only event that breaks the Gospels' silence about this hidden period is his been found in Jerusalem's temple when he was 12 years old: then he suggested his being God's Son. He remained in Jerusalem not as a rebel against his

parents, but precisely as the Son of the Father, ready to obey him straight to the cross and the resurrection on the third day. Jesus' legal father doesn't appear during his public ministry; presumably, he had died. In contrast, his mother is mentioned, as well four brothers and a few unnamed sisters (from the first centuries AD debate has raged over their precise relationship: siblings, children of Joseph by a previous marriage, cousins). Jesus' relatives didn't follow him during his public ministry, though later had a leading position in Jerusalem Church. Nothing explicit is ever said in the NT about Jesus' marital status; however, in front of various references to his parents, brothers and sisters, the total silence about a wife and children indicates that **he didn't marry**. The mocks occasioned by his unusual celibate status may be the original setting for his saying about eunuchs.

❖ What kind of education did Jesus get?

Jesus was honoured as "Rabbi", but at his time this title's use was looser than later on. His opponents wondered how he could know Scripture when **he never got technical training in Moses' law under a recognised teacher**. He could read and understand Biblical Hebrew, but ordinarily he used Aramaic, the common language of Galilean peasants. At times they would use Greek for trade, but it is unlikely that Jesus regularly used it in his teaching. All in all, nothing in his early life did prepare his fellow townspeople for the surprising career he was soon to undertake: hence the shock and scandal that greeted him when he returned home after starting his preaching trips.

JESUS' WORDS AND DEEDS

❖ Who did prepare Jesus' ministry?

About 27 AD, under the Roman emperor Tiberius (14-37 AD), John, the son of Zechariah, a temple priest was preaching in the Jordan river valley to call Israel to repentance and to an once-and-for-all cleansing in view of God's imminent, harsh judgment. This strict ascetic and reformer with traits of the OT prophets (especially Elijah) and possibly he lived for some time in the Essenes' community, yet **his appearance was something of completely new**. His baptism was different from their usual religious ablutions, for it could not be repeated in order to express a totally new life direction forever. Moreover, John proclaimed that his own role was to



Jesus was baptised by John in the Jordan River.



Crowds went to the Jordan river to see and hear John.

prepare a path (Is 40:3) for another coming after him who would baptize with the Holy Spirit. In that time's highly charged atmosphere, John's person and message produced an extraordinary impression: at last there was a prophet again, and his life marked him out as such. This meant that **God's hand was again plainly acting in history**. So, crowds came to be baptised openly confessing their sins.

❖ Why did Jesus go to be baptized by John?

Jesus, having reached adulthood, emerged from obscurity **joining the crowds to be baptized**: this very fact shows that he accepted John's mission and message as well his own mission as God's lamb or suffering servant who would take away the world's sin. **In this act of humble solidarity Jesus anticipated the cross by taking his place among sinners in order to bring all humans' burden** according to the Father's will. This is why Jesus used the word baptism to refer to his death. The Gospels speak of Jesus' forty days of fast, solitude and temptations in the desert immediately after his baptism.

❖ How did Jesus begin his ministry?

Some of **Jesus' first and closest disciples were John's former disciples** and he initially imitated John by baptizing: this occasioned some rivalry between their groups. He continued also the **Baptist's end-time message, but with a shift**. John stressed the fearful judgment and punishment to be inflicted on sinners; Jesus emphasised instead the joy of salvation, just now breaking. He no longer pointed to another who had to come: he himself was the fulfilment of God's promises, the good news to believe in, the one to whom entrust the heart and the whole life. Jesus didn't wait people near the Jordan, but went to them, preaching and healing everywhere, always moving about. He was usually in the midst of the crowd, a humanity marked by suffering, toil and problems. These poor people came together to hear him, a voice capable of guiding and enlighten them. They followed him because they knew **how deeply moved he was by human suffering and how impartial, thoughtful and true were his words**. These had something special that left no one indifferent: **they had the power to change hearts and projects**; they were demonstrated by his liberating and renewing action which did heal physical and spiritual wounds. Whoever truly wishes to heal man must see him in his wholeness and must know that his ultimate healing can only be God's love.



Jesus preaching on the shore of the lake.

❖ *What was Jesus' basic message?*

Jesus walked the Holy Land's roads **joyfully proclaiming the arrival of God's rule of justice, love and peace with the consequent need to repent** for all Israel, not just for lonely individuals. He presented God's kingdom as a symbol with many hints. He had in mind a spiritual kingdom, already existing at the time and progressive; so, from the very start, he formed a community of missionary disciples to make visible love and brotherly solidarity as beginning of this totally new situation. Kingdom didn't refer to a specific territory or era, but to an action: God's definitive intervention with a transforming power superior to his creation of the world. He had always been king of Israel and of the universe, but all humans (the Jews among them) had sin and come under Satan. Faithful to his promises, **God was to assert his rightful claim over his rebellious creatures**, soon establishing his rule fully and openly. Jesus was the kingdom in person, for he brought to all the presence of God who cares for everyone, better than any good father or mother caring for each child. In Jesus, God is now the one who acts and rules, without worldly power, but through the love that reaches to the end (to the cross). This kingdom applies to man in his being's depths, and it opens him toward the true God. Jesus taught it belonged to the poor and lowly, and its message was a good news especially for them, because **the Father was pleased to reveal to the little ones its secrets. He himself lived in poverty**, experiencing tiredness, hunger and thirst.

❖ *How did Jesus present God?*

Jesus didn't present God as a distant and fearsome king, a remote power without a name. The heart of his good news was to state that **the divine ruler delighted in revealing himself as a loving Father who rejoices over regaining his lost children and whose power is his love**. His kingdom doesn't come with display of force, but works quietly in this world. It can be discovered only in Jesus and in the characteristics virtues of which he was an example. A whole list of them is found in his beatitudes. The definitive lot of humankind, when evil will have been vanquished, remains a future experience, but its outline contributes to define how humans would live already in the present. Hence values and virtues that match us to God's will, to be fully affirmed in the future, must be practised now, as far as possible, in the sinful and imperfect circumstances of the present.

❖ *How did Jesus transmit his message?*

A skilled speaker and teacher, Jesus exploited many forms of speech from Israel's tradition: most prominent was his use of parables. In the OT, they were a very elastic form of wisdom speech that included proverbs, metaphors, allegories, taunt-songs, bywords of reproach and prophetic statements. Continuing this pattern, **Jesus employed strange sayings and stories to call a sinful Israel to decision in the critical end-time**, mocking his overconfident hearers, destroying their false security and opening their eyes. With a tone of urgency the parables warned that delay was dangerous, for any moment might be too late. The audience had to risk all on a decision to accept Jesus' message. No cost was too great, for **soon this sinful world's conditions would be reversed**: the sorrowful would be made happy, but the self-satisfied would be made miserable. Far from pleasant stories, Jesus' parables were at times strong attacks on Israel's whole religious world. They promised a new world through **a revolution produced by God**, not humans. Indeed, Jesus' parables speak about his kingdom as present in seed form, for which is to come is already here in a hidden way. Moreover, they already communicate something of it to those who accepted being challenged by and drawn into his message. This turnaround or **conversion in people's lives was harsh yet necessary** to be saved. Again and again, Jesus' words exceed humans' capacity to understand: believing means submitting to this loftiness and slowly growing into it. The possibility of refusal is very real, for the parables lack the necessary proof.

The Hebrew equivalent of the word **parable** means very much more than comparison: it is a simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving his mind in enough doubt around its precise application to tease it into active thought. Parables' original aim and meaning were sometime lost during the transmission in the early Church. We need to ask him again and again what he wants to say to us in each parable.

Sayings by Jesus may be put into a story which serves as a framework for it: this story, whether miracle, controversy or anecdote, is there only to set off the saying. Otherwise they are floating, because people have remembered them but not the context in which Jesus spoke.

❖ *What were Jesus' most characteristic deeds?*

According to the mentality of Jesus' time, there should be a clear division between saint and sinner, between pure and impure. But he had a very different attitude: his compassion was one of the things that upset his contemporaries the most. From his ministry's beginning he disconcerted people by welcoming society's outcasts: lepers, demon-possessed, all the sick and the excluded. His relationships with all those who approached him were entirely unique: he did listen, understand, protect, heal, comfort and give hope. His person

Exorcism aims to expel evil spirits from persons and places. **Healing** concerns physical sickness. Both achieve a real defeat of evil and of the Evil One's power over human body and person; such liberation is associated with God's kingdom. Jesus cured the suffering without drugs. In his hands whatever became a medicine, as his word was. Just as in his time, so today some are interested in exorcisms and charismatic healing, while others are not. Jesus used both to get attention as well as to express God's love, compassion and power to save his people.

was nothing but love, a love given gratuitously. Everything in him spoke of mercy; nothing in him missed compassion. In special way, he made God's forgiveness visible and tangible in his whole life: **Jesus acted out the loving embrace of a God welcoming sinners home.** He delighted in associating with his days' religiously marginalized or lost, i.e. not only common people who didn't know well the Scriptures, but also toll collectors and other Jews considered to have left the covenant. This practice put Jesus in a constant state of ritual impurity according to strict law-observant persons. Because his message was one of joy that the end-time banquet was at hand, he anticipated it in the meals he shared with sinners without requiring them to follow Jewish procedures of repentance and sacrifice. In keeping with this festive mood, he didn't practice and teach regular voluntary fasting. This way distinguished him from the Baptist, and was probably a major reason why zealous Jews opposed him as an "eater and wine-drinker".

❖ *How have to be understood Jesus' miracles?*

Jesus' miracles must be understood in this context of giving godly joy and making Israel whole again. Surely, his contemporaries saw him as an exorcist and a healer. His extraordinary deeds were never denied in antiquity, even by his enemies, who referred them to the power of the devil, while he credited them to God's Spirit. They were not simply kind actions done to free individuals from the earthly evils of hunger, injustice, illness and death, but concrete ways of stating and effecting God's triumph over evil's powers in the final hour of this world. The miracles were **signs and partial realizations of what was about to come fully in God's kingdom.** Nevertheless he didn't come to resolve all problems here below, but to free humans from the sin, which thwarted them in their call as God's children and caused all forms of slavery. Jesus showed himself to be a physician of bodies, but especially of souls. The sick recovered health, but also dignity, joy and hope. Miracles were signs which encouraged faith; this is way they were always accompanied by words that enlightened to bring out a true conversion. Taken together, Jesus' words and deeds affirmed that the kingdom was in a sense both future and yet already present in and through his own ministry.

Miracle stories usually have five points:

- An introduction which presents the case
- A request for intervention which shows the faith of who asks
- Jesus' intervention
- The result
- The spectators' reaction: joy, admiration, fear

❖ *How did Jesus approach Moses' law?*

In the light of God's free offer of forgiveness and salvation in the last time before judgment, Jesus specified how those who converted should live, demanding them a total commitment and the practice of virtue. As a true Jew **he basically affirmed Moses' law as God's will, but rejecting any fragmentation of it** into countless petty norms. Because world's end-time corresponds to beginning-time, Jesus **radicalised the law by reaching back to God's original will** in creation and in giving the law. Jointly Jesus, without excluding external good works, **internalised the law by reaching into the human heart** to purify this source of all actions. In this process, sometimes he simply deepened or broadened the thrust of the law (e.g. equalising angry words with murder or impure thoughts with adultery), sometimes he arrived to overturn the letter of the law (e.g. prohibiting divorce and oath, or even dumping food laws). Moreover, his ethics **pointed to an ever greater perfection.** He did not focus on justice's minimum requirements as Moses' law had done, neither did he point to a maximum. Simply, no limits were set: so totally new horizons opened wide: "You must therefore be perfect just as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48). Christ proposed such ideal not fully attainable in this life and certainly **not within the grasp of human by his own efforts.** While the Torah presented a very definite social order, giving a juridical framework for war and peace, for just politics and for daily life, there was nothing like that in Jesus' teaching. He offers no concrete program for structuring society, but his call to perfect charity, which is not of this world, must be the goal of all strivings on the earth. It should be seen as a principle of dynamic evolution, a **law of constant progress in relationships with God and all humans.** As a result, Jesus' follower is made constantly aware of his own weakness and sinfulness, but without pessimism or despair. Finally, his own law was totally different from Moses' one but it was precisely by being such that the new fulfilled the former.

❖ *What did Jesus' authority in fulfilling Moses' law show?*

We are struck by Jesus' presentation of the relationship of the two Torah in a series of antitheses: "It was said ... but I say to you". Many people's alarm was precisely over the fact that a man dared to speak with God's own authority. Remarkably, Jesus didn't found his surprising teachings in the prophets' validating claim ("The word of the Lord came to me, saying...") or in scribes' appeal to earlier authorities ("Rabbi X said in the name of Rabbi Y...") or in contorted arguments from a chain of biblical texts. On the contrary, he **asserted to know directly God's will in any given situation:** he summed up this claim in his characteristic solemn affirmation using "Amen" not as a response but as an introduction to a new statement: "Amen, I say to you..." Someone who spoke like this was no longer a prophet in the traditional sense, an ambassador and trustee of another; he himself was the reference point of the righteous life, its goal and centre. He understood himself as the Torah, God's Word in person. Perfection, the state of being holy as God is holy, as demanded by the Torah, now consists in following Jesus. His "I" is accorded a status that no teacher of the Law can allow himself: he openly claims to be on the same level as the Lawgiver. But his "I" does by no means revolve around itself alone. The only requirement to be admitted into his new family is joining him in doing the Father's will, thereby attaining to the heart of the obedience intended by the Torah. In this way, he has brought Israel's God to all nations, so that they now pray to him and recognize OT as the

word of the living God without feeling themselves bound to the letter of the Law, as a catalogue of concrete social forms fixed for all times and for all people. He frees humans to discover what of earthly order does accord with God's will and then to work out their own juridical arrangements. This universality, Abraham's faith extended now in Jesus' Church to all nations, is the prophesied fruit of the Messiah's work.

❖ *What was Jesus' most peculiar moral teaching?*

When asked which is "the greatest of the commandments", Jesus pointed to two biblical precepts founded on one value, the most important, love. They open up a limitless moral programme. He stressed **unrestricted love of God and neighbour, indeed, even love of enemies**. All his sayings that deal with obligations toward others show how Jesus highlighted the need to use mercy without measure, love without limits. Such fierce moral demands made sense and were possible only in the context of the proclamation of the end-time which he claimed to bring. **Such commands were doable only for who had experienced through him God's merciful forgiveness and unconditional acceptance.** Radical demand flowed from radical grace. If through Jesus religion became a matter of grace, then ethics became a matter of gratitude. These new morals derived from the fact that **the future kingdom had already invaded and transformed the lives of those who accepted the good news of its coming.** Both Matthew and Luke present the beatitudes – starting with that of the poor and ending with that of who suffers persecution – as a sort of synthesis of Jesus' moral teaching and behaviour. They are not a code of abstract norms and duties, but by presenting the right conduct, the art of living, the road to happiness, they reveals at the same time God's future action, and so God himself.

❖ *What was Jesus' position in contemporary Judaism?*

Jesus, seeing the crowds who followed him, realised that they were tired and without true guides and he felt deep compassion for them. As Jew he had points of contact with almost every branch of Judaism, but was totally identifiable with none, since he foresaw a radically new situation for Israel. The coming of the kingdom explains why he didn't directly address and take stands on burning political and social questions: **he didn't propose the reform of contemporary society, but announced its end.** Nevertheless, his freeing behaviour about the law and religious outcasts could not help but have social implications. Throughout his lifetime Jesus was a **layman**. The mortal struggle between him and his opponents had elements not only of Galilean versus Judean, of the poor versus the rich, of the charismatic versus the institutional, of the end-time versus the worldly, but also of the laity versus the priests. **This helps to explain why Jerusalem's priests were most prominent in killing him.** They had already flexed their muscles against John the Baptist and his possible challenge to their monopoly on religious authority. This attitude became an ongoing embarrassment to them. It is not surprising then that Jesus did take a stand in relation to temple, their centre of power and influence, using it as the setting for a significant amount of his teaching and healing activity during the pilgrimage feasts. Probably beforehand the dramatic cleansing of the temple was a programmatic announcement encouraging a radical review of the earlier means of mediation between God and Israel. Beginning with the temple and its sacrificial worship, through the succession of Jewish feasts, **Jesus did show how he fulfilled and surpassed the OT institutions,** opening up their meaning in the context of his own identity and mission.

❖ *How did people follow Jesus?*

Jesus did not leave anyone indifferent. As soon as he appeared, friendly and hostile groups formed. Some people, **struck by Jesus' personality, readily accepted his call in a stark way by leaving their families and ordinary livelihood** to travel with him, receive his teaching at length, assist his needs, and share his ministry. Contrary to the custom, at least **some were directly called to do so by Jesus** and attached permanently to his person. Noteworthy is his matchless summon, "Let the dead bury their dead", an example of his radical call to break certain commandments for the sake of the kingdom. Very singular were also his **easy approach to women**, his inclusion of them in his travelling staff, and his willingness to teach them. In him nothing reflects his days' discrimination against them. On the contrary, his words and works always express the respect and honour due to them, and they followed him in the good and in the bad times. Their faith and love for Jesus was an essential element of his community, as would be vividly shown at the foot of the cross and at the resurrection. He came down to earth to live and die for love. He called both men and women to live the new commandment: "Love one another as I have loved you". The women, however, have a special ability in understanding such message.

❖ *What is the aim of choosing twelve Apostles?*

Out of those literal followers Jesus **formed a special inner group called the Twelve**, whose names vary slightly in their four NT lists. Simon, whom Jesus called Peter (i.e. Rock of his Church), held the first place in this group as the one entrusted with the keys of the kingdom. The Apostles were young, though a few not so much. John was very young. Astonished by Jesus, they hurried to inform their friends of their discovering. Later however they did not behave very well. They had a wide range of temperaments and came from a variety of Israel's cultural backgrounds and approaches, though none of them belonged to the leading circles. This helps understand how difficult it was to gradually initiate them into Jesus' mysterious new way overcoming many kinds of tension. They personify the Church of any ages and her difficult task of

JESUS' TWELVE APOSTLES

First, Simon called Peter
Andrew
James son of Zebedee
John
Philip
Bartholomew
Thomas
Matthew
James son of Alphaeus
Judas Thaddaeus
Simon the Zealot
Judas Iscariot

purifying and unifying all in Christ. Jesus' choice of precisely twelve men symbolized his mission to gather the scattered twelve tribes of Israel back into one holy people in the end-time, thus fulfilling OT prophesies. He didn't choose eleven men making himself the twelfth member of the group, but he stood above and over the nucleus he was creating as **the exemplar and concrete realization of what he was calling all Israel to be**: the restored people of God in the last days. Within this context, it makes perfect sense that Jesus gave the Twelve a share in his authority and sent out them on a limited mission to their fellow Israelites. There is no contradiction between Jesus' end-time perspective and his assignment of specific roles to certain people in renewing Israel: the Essenes had done the same. Later he sent other 70 or 72 disciples, an intimation of the Gospel's universal character. Afterward the Church came into existence because the Jews as God's chosen people didn't believe in Jesus. Their "no" leads to the new phase in salvation history to which the Lord's death and resurrection and the Gentiles' Church belong.

❖ *What people did Jesus try to reach?*

Not all who accepted Jesus' message followed him on his journeys. **Others retained their ordinary forms of living while implementing his message** in their daily lives and giving him also financial support and hospitality. He could count on disciples resident in and around Jerusalem too, a point which supports John's presentation of **Jesus visiting the holy city a number of times throughout a multiyear ministry**. Granted Jesus' desire to re-gather the whole people of God, it would have been strange if he had not visited the capital of the nation often. Synoptic presentation of a ministry in and around Galilee, with only one visit to Jerusalem at the end is due to Mark. The fact that Jesus saw his own task in terms of regathering Israel explains why **he undertook no programmatic mission to the Samaritans or the Gentiles**. Yet he didn't avoid any contact with these groups and was willing at times to perform exorcism or miracles for them. In fact, he prophesied that in the final great reversal, **Gentiles would be included in the banquet with the Patriarchs, while unbelieving Israelites would be shut out**.

JESUS' IDENTITY

❖ *How did Jesus understand himself?*

Jesus had no identity crisis nor desperate need to define himself: he was quite sure of who he was. Unfortunately, no one else was: friends and foes alike tried to understand him using various categories and titles, but without complete satisfaction. God was always at the centre of Jesus' message, yet precisely because he himself was the Son, his entire preaching was at the same time a message about his own mystery. **Jesus made himself the key figure in the end-time drama he announced and inaugurated**. It was through his preaching and healing that the kingdom was breaking in. His hearers would be judged on the last day according to how they reacted to Jesus' words in that moment of decision. He would be the criterion used for the final judgment, and the judge himself. That alone involved **a huge claim to a unique status and role at the peak of the whole history of salvation. He put himself on an equal footing with God, an idea to which he could only slowly lead people**.

❖ *What was Jesus' fundamental self-awareness?*

Jesus enjoyed a deep experience of God as his own Father: his communion with him was his personality's true centre. He recognised him in himself and saw everything and everyone in the Father's light. He dared to address him with the intimate Aramaic word 'Abba' ("Dad", "My own dear Father") which was used in addressing human fathers, but not God: its religious usage was unknown and probably offensive to Jews. The Gospels, especially Luke, often note that Jesus prayed, in solitude or at night, at mealtimes, at the time of important events. He prayed for his killers, for Peter, for his disciples and those who would come after them, but also for himself. These prayers show that he was in permanent touch with the Father, who never left him on his own, and whom Jesus knew that always would hear him. From this total confidence in and abandonment to God sprang Jesus' amazing behaviour and teaching which made the disciples repeatedly able to sense in him the presence of the living God himself. He **invited his disciples into his childlike relationship to God in order to fulfil completely his plan of love for mankind**. In its light Jesus hinted to himself as "the Son", claiming mutual and exclusive knowledge between the Father and him. He called himself so especially in reference to his tragic death, the last in the line of rejected prophets. It was in such a context that his transfiguration took place on a



Jesus' transfiguration at night on a mountain.

mountain before three apostles, privileged to see him as the only one who truly can speak face-to-face with the Father. It was the dialogue of love within God himself, the dialogue that God eternally is.

❖ *Can we place Jesus in his time's Jewish categories?*

1st century **Jews' hopes varied widely** and no description of the end-time agent of God was normative; indeed, some groups expected no such agent. Jesus fits into many categories, but no one fits exactly. **He fits no title, though many titles converge on him**.

* Jesus acted like "a prophet", though different from the Baptist, at a time when no other assumed that solo Jesus went further



Jerusalem's Temple during Jesus' life.

behaving as the end-time prophet, empowered by God's Spirit to proclaim Israel's final chance to repent. Jesus referred to himself as a prophet indirectly, and especially in a context of rejection. Since in his time there was a growing spirituality concerning OT prophets as unwanted figures and often as martyrs, Jesus implicitly was announcing his tragic death. Many were waiting for "**the prophet**" announced by Moses (Dt 18:15) and greater than him. They could acknowledge that Jesus' teaching did not come from any school, but from his totally unique intimacy with the heavenly Father.

* The title of "**Messiah**" is more difficult to discuss, since there was no one concept of what a/the Messiah should be; indeed, some expectations had no relation with a special "anointed one". Because Jesus saw himself as the end-time prophet anointed with the Spirit, in that sense he would be a Messiah. His disciples thought of him as the royal David's son Messiah, but when Peter confessed him as such, Jesus reacted with great reserve. Even his enemies interpreted him in this sense; it is confirmed by the charge on which they brought him before Pilate: being "King of the Jews".

* The peculiar name "**Son of Man**" goes back to Jesus and fits exactly with his method of speaking in riddles and parables so as to lead gradually to the hidden reality than can be discovered only through following him. It didn't exist as a title in Judaism before him and didn't appear in any Christian statements: it occurs almost exclusively on Jesus' lips in the NT, though it is present in all of the Gospel traditions. He could use this enigmatic designation to surprisingly present himself as the powerful kingdom's lowly messenger, who would be vindicated by God in the future. Indeed, the three predictions of the Son of Man's destiny in John have him being "lifted up" in a double, inseparable sense: on the cross and into the heaven.

First crowds followed Jesus enthusiastically, but their expectations were so ambiguous, filled with nationalistic hope, that he disappointed them. They felt oppressed not so much by their sins as by their everyday sufferings, their lack of freedom, the wretched conditions of their existence. So, they gradually left him in parallel with the growth of pressure from his opponents. These rejected his attacks on their religious system, with the Temple at its centre, his way of behaving towards sinners and women, his very free interpretation of Moses' Law. Unless Jesus' person and words radically surpassed his time's hopes and expectations, there is no way to explain why he was crucified or why he made such an impact.

JESUS' LAST DAYS IN JERUSALEM

❖ Where did Jesus go to end his life?

In the first months of 30 AD Jesus went with his disciples from Galilee to Jerusalem for the last time. It was a physical ascent for it was going up to the Temple, but it was moreover a spiritual ascent towards his self-offering on the cross, "loving to the end", which is the real mountain of God. After his greatest sign, **Lazarus' raising** on the fourth day after his death, Jesus symbolically claimed Messiah's status **entering David's city seated on an ass' colt**. This solemn entry, full of allusions to OT texts, manifested the kingdom's coming which he was going to accomplish by the Passover of his death and resurrection. Such action, which he wanted be understood as fulfilment of prophecies, forced Israel's capital to choose for or against Jesus, its final prophet. Both deeds contributed to priests' decision to strike at him during this visit, as opposed to his earlier stays.



Jesus' entrance in Jerusalem.

❖ How did Jesus understand and face his death?

Jesus' attitude toward death is important for Christian faith. A first, general principle is that usually a person dies as he lived. Except sudden reversals, his way of dying flows from and explains his way of living. Founding his existence on total confidence in and surrender to God, who was coming to rule as Father, Jesus' message and behaviour consisted of radical love for God and neighbour, of humble service and sacrifice for others, even for enemies. **Jesus was indeed the "man for others" whose whole life interprets his death and vice versa.** In view of the mounting opposition against him, he would have been very inexpert not to foresee the risk of a violent death when visiting the capital at Passover, when the great festal crowds would make easier a lynch-mob. Besides, **Jesus as the end-time prophet had to consider the prospect of martyrdom and its meaning:** 1st century Jews thought martyrs' blood had an atoning power for Israel's sins. More concretely, John's killing by Herod Antipas turned this theology into a real possibility for Jesus. Using the image of the killed prophet or the Lord's servant, he spoke of his approaching death as part of God's mysterious plan to save Israel. When Peter defy this idea, Jesus rebuked him in the strongest terms: "Get behind me, Satan!" So, he entered Jerusalem to take his last step with which he summed up his whole existence, giving himself without reserve, keeping nothing for himself, not even life. For more clarity on how Jesus understood his death, we must turn to the Last Supper with his friends.

❖ What was the meaning of Jesus' Last Supper?

On Thursday sunset, as the 14th of Nisan (Preparation Day) began, **Jesus had a last meal with the Twelve** at the home of a Jerusalem supporter. Though the official Passover meal was to be held on the next evening, this supper had at least some Passover touches. At the beginning and the end respectively, **Jesus used bread and wine to represent his coming sacrifice** which he accepted to restore Sinai's covenant and bring in God's kingdom. He saw this supper as the last in a whole series of meals he shared with disciples and sinners alike in order to anticipate God's communication of forgiveness and salvation. This

supper was a pledge that, **despite his apparent failure, God would vindicate Jesus even beyond death** and bring him and his followers to the end-time banquet. Hence he insisted that the disciples all would share his one cup rather than drink from their own cups: they were **to hold fast to him as he died**, so that they might share his triumph in the kingdom. He offered himself to them, putting his Body and Blood in their hands, so as to be with them always. Jesus' final meal was also a teaching moment: once again, he urgently set forth the heart of his message, the new commandment of loving each other as he loved them. Jesus then prayed, turning his pain into an offering to the Father in order to give mankind God's eternal life.



Jesus' hearing at night by the high priest.

prefect of Judea (26-36 AD), Jesus was held in custody by the priestly authorities. Peter, who had followed him at a distance, was confronted by priests' servants and in a panic denied his relationship to Jesus though he quickly repented. **At least a hearing and perhaps a trial resulted in formal charges** against Jesus which were presented to the prefect. The religious accusations (threats against the temple, or teaching contrary to the law, or leading the people astray as a false prophet, or claiming transcendent status) were summed up under the label of blasphemy, broadly understood. Pilate, however, would have been interested only in political crimes, and so Jewish authorities translated their concerns presenting Jesus as a revolutionary, a false claimant to the throne. **In a country where there was no firm boundary between politics and religion, "King of the Jews" was the charge on which Jesus was condemned**, as an advertisement above his head on the cross proclaimed. The separation - essential to his message - of politics from faith was ultimately possible only through the cross, this total loss of all external power. Only through faith in the Crucified One does the new people of God arise, following the new manner of God's dominion in the world. All through history, people look upon Jesus' disfigured face and recognise in his powerless love the glory of God come not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for all of us.

Sanhedrin was the supreme Jewish Council who administered the law. It consisted of 70 members not counting the high priest who was its president. At Jesus' time they were priests, scribes, elders and other respected citizens from both main Jewish sects, Pharisees and Sadducees. Under Rome's dominion the Sanhedrin had authority to arrest, judge and punish Jews in relation to certain religious and civil matters, but not to carry out sentences of death.

♦ How did Jesus die?

At the end of the Roman trial, almost certainly on 7th April 30 (if not, on 3rd April 33), **Jesus was condemned to die on the cross**, the worst form of death, that reserved for slaves and criminals. **First he received the scourging**, a cruel mercy, intended to hasten death. So weakened was Jesus that he could not carry his crossbeam; thus, the soldiers pressed into service one Simone from Cyrene (in North Africa). The execution took place **outside the city walls at Golgotha** (Skull Place). Two robbers or revolutionaries were crucified along with Jesus. Mockery and abuse, narrated at various points during the trial, were also hurled at Jesus as he hung on the cross. The only sympathetic witnesses were some female disciples from Galilee, with Jesus' mother and his beloved disciple. Although the crucified sometimes lingered for days, **Jesus' death occurred quickly**; hence there was no need to hasten it by breaking his legs, as the two were done. Haste was important, since at sundown would start Passover which that year coincided with Sabbath. The special solemnity reinforced the general Jewish rule that

JESUS' SEVEN WORDS FROM THE CROSS

- "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" (Mt 27:46)
- "Forgive them, Father" (Lk 23:34)
- "Today you will be with me in paradise" (Lk 23:43)
- "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Lk 23:46)
- "He is your son... She is your mother" (Jn 19:26-27)
- "I am thirsty" (Jn 19:28)
- "It is finished" (Jn 19:30)

obtained from Pilate the corpse for (temporary?) burial in a tomb he owned nearby, while **Mary Magdalene and other Galilean women witnessed it**

♦ How was Jesus arrested?

After eating, Jesus led his disciples to a small plot of land on or at the foot of the Olives' Mountain. His agony there had link with the apparently contrasting Transfiguration. While he was praying, he didn't conceal his deep human distress in facing a violent and unjust death, but with absolute trust handed over himself to the Father. Afterwards **he was arrested by an armed band leaded by Judas**, one of the Twelve. The group was under the control of the high priest Caiaphas (18-36 AD), though there was Roman participation. **Jesus rejected armed resistance**, he gave up himself, while his disciples fled in shameful confusion.

♦ What were the charges against Jesus?

Between the arrest and the trial before Pontius Pilate, the religious accusations (threats against the temple, or teaching contrary to the law, or leading the people astray as a false prophet, or claiming transcendent status) were summed up under the label of blasphemy, broadly understood. Pilate, however, would have been interested only in political crimes, and so Jewish authorities translated their concerns presenting Jesus as a revolutionary, a false claimant to the throne. **In a country where there was no firm boundary between politics and religion, "King of the Jews" was the charge on which Jesus was condemned**, as an advertisement above his head on the cross proclaimed. The separation - essential to his message - of politics from faith was ultimately possible only through the cross, this total loss of all external power. Only through faith in the Crucified One does the new people of God arise, following the new manner of God's dominion in the world. All through history, people look upon Jesus' disfigured face and recognise in his powerless love the glory of God come not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for all of us.



Jesus on the cross in Mary and John's presence.

corpses were not to be left hanging overnight, lest the Holy Land be defiled. Jesus' body would be disposed of hastily in a common grave; but **Joseph of Arimathea, an influential Jew,**

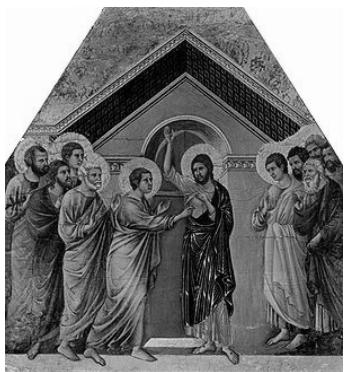
JESUS' RESURRECTION

❖ Was Jesus' resurrection an ordinary historical event?

No one said that he/she saw Jesus in the process of being raised, but that they saw the risen Jesus. **His resurrection was an event surpassing time and space as he entered into eternal life:** it takes place within God's mystery between him and the Father. By its very nature it lies outside history's range: it breaks open history and ushers in a new dimension that is definitive. All the same his resurrection happened at a precise moment in history and left an indelible mark upon it. Therefore it can be attested by witnesses as an event of an entirely new kind, which surpassed all that could be imagined. The empty tomb and other effects of the resurrection do belong to our world. The following are also historical facts: that there were witnesses who boldly claimed that Jesus appeared to them after his death, that they included first women and then disciples who had deserted him out of fear and then did a incredible turnaround after his shocking death, that they were capable of propagating his Church, and that some of them laid down their lives to defend the truth of their meetings with the risen Jesus. How we do react to these facts and to the historical Jesus brings us beyond practical investigation into the sphere of religious **choice of faith or unbelief.**



Jesus' apparition to Mary Magdalene.



The risen Jesus shows his wounds to his disciples.

❖ How can we believe that Jesus is alive?

Being Christians is not the result of good ideas but of an **encounter with a living person: the glorified Lord.** Like the search for his corpse, the quest for the historical Jesus is overtaken by this faith experience: his relations with his disciples do continue. For all those who believe in him, Jesus is not only the Risen One: he is the resurrection and the life itself. In him, our time is taken up into eternity. **His new form of life is a universal event.** The gospels recall his earthly story in this eternal light. Interest in him has sense because he is the Living One immersed in every epoch, hence also in our own. **He not only was, he also is, and we shall be with him forever.** Jesus is our reliable travelling companion in the today and the now of our lives, while introducing us to unknown horizons of life beyond death. If he would not have been raised, we could still piece together from the Christian tradition a series of interesting ideas about God and humans, a kind of religious worldview: but the faith itself would be dead. Jesus would be a leader who despite his failure remains great and causes us to reflect, but his authority would extend only so far as his

message is of interest to us. Only if he is risen has anything really new occurred that changes the world and humans' situation. Then **he becomes the criterion on which we can rely.**

❖ What are the main reasons for being Christians?

Resurrection and love are two distinct reasons for being Christians: his resurrection as a new dimension of being human, a decisive evolutionary leap in quality produced by God in Jesus and promised to all; his love as a way of life that distinguishes God's children and by now unfolds a future of hope for the world. Both come together: resurrection is love's triumph over death. If we truly love God and our fellow humans, in Jesus we too shall live forever. The Risen is the beginning of a new creation where love rules every relationship. **Jesus' Church is the home of those who believe in him as the spring of brotherhood among all humans.**

In the NT there are **two different types of Resurrection testimony:**

- some "narrate" very different traditions about encounters with the risen Jesus and his words in those appearances; in them women play a key role, preceding men; just as there were only women standing by the cross, apart from John, so too the first encounter with the risen Lord was destined to be for them.
- out of these narrations, "confessions" grew to express Christian identity, condensing the essentials in short, fixed phrases that establish the kernel of what happened and that insist on their binding character. In these official confessions only men are named as witnesses, for in Israel women's testimony was considered unreliable.

The meaning is like this: the Church's juridical structure is founded on men (Peter and his fellow apostles), but in the day-to-day life it is women, and laypersons at large, who are constantly accompanying Jesus to the cross, and so it is they who foremost come to experience his resurrection.

THE APOSTOLIC AGE (30-100 AD)

"With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all" (Acts 4:33).

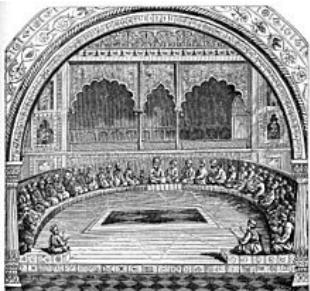
❖ What did follow Jesus' resurrection?

After Jesus' resurrection his followers banded together. Due to his Passover, on the next feast of Pentecost (i.e. Fiftieth Day), amid the Spirit's creational wind and Sinai-like fire, **God renewed his covenant that would now affect all peoples.** Jesus' resurrection and the Spirit's coming enabled the disciples to discover Jesus' mystery as the Son of God. Their memories of the few years they had spent with him took on a new importance, and they began to try to reconstruct them. At once they started to proclaim to Israel the good news: "God has made this Jesus whom you crucified both Lord and Messiah" (Acts 2:36). Christian faith is based on this event, so meaningful that the disciples had to use a variety of images in their attempts to express it. **They called for faith in Jesus as the risen Son of God and the only means of salvation.** After the initial success among Palestinian Jews, the community gradually became aware of its worldwide mission. So, that news was spread "**from Jerusalem to the end of the earth**" (Acts 1:8), addressed first to Diaspora Jews and then to other nations (the so-called Gentiles). This progress had two related outcomes: the **Gentiles' integration into a new people of God** breaching any ethnic wall and the **refusal by the Jews' majority.**

❖ What were the features of Jerusalem Church's life?

Acts 2:42 mentions **four features of her life pattern: prayer, breaking bread (i.e. eucharist), Apostles' teaching and shared goods.** Indeed, these latter caused the first recorded dispute within the community: Jerusalem's Christian Jews of both Hebrew and Hellenist languages and cultures were now quarrelling about temple worship and the basic Jewish customs (circumcision, the Sabbath, food laws and purity regulations). May be the latter were trying to force the first to conformity by shutting off common funds from the Hellenist widows, who depended totally on these. Their meeting about the question had major consequences, because its **acceptation of pluralism facilitated the missionary thrust.** Cultural and theological differences deemed less important than their common belief in Jesus. The Hellenists were given their own administrators, i.e. the seven (Stephen and others). Such and similar **structures' gradual development was seen as part of God's guidance** for the Church in reply to prayer.

Although there were Jesus' followers who had not received his baptism, the whole NT suggests that it very fast became a standard feature of Christian life. As a visible action it helped to designate who belonged to Jesus. The wide distribution of the term "communion" in NT books shows that the baptised felt strongly they had much in common. The name became the most popular, i.e. **"Church" ("assembly")**, reflects the Exodus in which Israel came into being: though in the four Gospels this name appears on Jesus' lips only twice, he is presented as her builder, founder or cornerstone. Col and Eph direct our attention to her as body of Christ, his bride whom he "loved and gave himself up for her", "the fullness of him who fills all in all". 1Tim and Tit make her structure a leitmotif: while the apostles were disappearing and false teachers were emerging, the remedy was regular Church order, with supervisors (bishops), elders (priests) and deacons in the place of older charismatic figures. At the beginning of the 2nd century, bishop Ignatius of Antioch's letters could refer to "the Catholic Church" and show this threefold order as universal.



At Jesus' time, the Great Sanhedrin was the Jews' supreme court; it had sessions in the Temple twice a week.

❖ What was the Christians' situation among the Jews?

At first the Twelve were persecuted by the Sanhedrin, but eventually they won an unwilling tolerance. They remained Jews, though being an amazing group within Judaism as the witnesses to the risen Jesus. Possibly in 36 AD "a great persecution of the Church" took place, in which Stephen was killed. It was against Hellenists, not Hebrew Christians, and therefore presumably was motivated less by belief in Jesus than by their new understanding of Moses' Law which paved the way for Paul's teachings. This **persecution caused the Greek-speaking Christians to leave Jerusalem and to start a widespread mission.** Their acceptance of Gentiles in the Church without first imposing them to become Jews provoked concern and even dissent among Hebrew Christians. In the short interval when Judea was not ruled by Roman prefects, the new king, Herod Agrippa I (37-44) supported the Pharisees, largely persecuted Christians and put to the sword James, son of Zebedee. Official Judaism gradually rejected Jesus' followers.

❖ What were the different attitudes about Gentile converts and Moses' law?

Jerusalem Council (probably in 49) debated about Gentiles' conversion. This issue caused among Christians **at least four diverse attitudes** as attested in NT writings: **1) Conservative Jew Christians** (Pharisees who believed Jesus or circumcision party) wanted Gentiles into Christianity provided they first became Jews. **2) Peter and James** agreed that they would be converted without circumcision, but insisted on Gentiles' observance of certain Jewish laws. **3) Paul** assumed the tremendous task of crushing Judaist Christians' resistance devoting his life to emancipate Christianity from those bonds which threatened to

strangle it holding it fast to its Jewish soil. He nowhere expressed his view of the Law's demands on Jews who believed Jesus, but resisted any imposition on Gentiles as contrary to Gospel's freedom and to the truth that salvation depends on Jesus' cross, not on Law's observance. Stressing love's primacy, however, he taught it hinders anyone from causing weak faithful to sin by going against their conscience which wants them to follow the Law. **4) In time emerged a harsher break with Jews** (Heb 8:13 says the new covenant has made the first outdated, and Jn 15:25 reports Jesus calling Torah, "their law"). It is remarkable that **communion withstood this wide range of differences** facing problems they had to solve like every generation.

❖ *What did happen in the last third of the 1st century?*

The First Jewish War (66-73) was not only Jews' war against Romans, but also a cruel civil war between rival factions. **The Christians, following Jesus' ethics of love and non-violence, refused to join the national revolt against Rome's domination.** Even before the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem they withdrew across the Jordan to Pella: this furthered their alienation from Israel. The resistance's outcome was the **total destruction of Jerusalem and its temple** by the Romans (70). It brought home a truth of tremendous import. The native heart from which Christianity had sprung was not to remain its permanent headquarters. The Lord's word was fulfilled: Judaism was now actually rejected. For the Jews, this meant **the definitive end of their sacrifices and a decisive break with the past.** The OT had to be reread anew. Afterward, Judaism took a different form: religious practice shifted to synagogue worship and a more intensive study of the Torah. The influence of the Jerusalem Sanhedrin, headed by the high priest, waned. An academic Sanhedrin of 72 Pharisee elders in Jamnia (or Jabneh, south of modern Tel Aviv) took over its authority trying to save Jews' identity limiting pluralism: Essenes and Sadducees became only bad memories; **the Christians eventually were excluded from synagogues.** Without this umbrella, their faith became, under Roman law, an illicit superstition more exposed to **official persecution: it was started (64) against them by the emperor Nero.** This contributed to their **growing polemic** against "the synagogue of Satan" and the Jews whose father was the devil. At the same time, no longer could Jewish Christianity prove dangerous to the Church's new spirit and universalism because the very soil from which it would have to draw the strength for any successful opposition was that of the homeland, now in ruins.



The second Temple's end (70 AD). Until today the Jews hope there will be a third one.

❖ *How did the Church herself change at that time?*



Peter's crucifixion in Rome.

After the **killing (62-67) of the early Church's three prominent figures (James in Jerusalem, Peter and Paul in Rome)**, many issues took a different turn. The direction became more pastoral, as the care for the communities founded between the 30s and the 60s became a major concern. We know only few new Christian leaders; rather, the trend was **to write to a new generation in dead apostles' behalf:** James' letter may be an example. But **this period's most important books were certainly the four Gospels.** At the same time the Church saw an internal transition from Jewish to Gentile majority and dominance. Jerusalem's fall meant that Gentile Christians no longer had to take in account the conservative Jew Church, whose role had been central. Eventually she came to an end: in 135, after another terrible war, Jerusalem became a pagan city and the Christian community there had a bishop of Gentile birth. **By the late 1st century Rome's Church was pre-eminent.** More and more clearly Christianity, begun within Judaism as a sect expecting the imminent end of the world, appeared as **a new religion, with a particular belief, a distinctive literature and a fixed organisation centred on the episcopate.** The last NT writings view faith as the acceptance of a set of statements, and do appeal to an authoritative tradition against what was considered deviation. Catholic Church's features began to emerge before the end of the Apostles' age. Israel's institutions were regarded as finished: what was permanently worthwhile in them was simply taken over as pertaining to Christians, not to "unbelieving Jews". The place of temple's sacrifices was taken by the Eucharist, a pure offering magnifying God's name among the Gentiles as foretold by Mal 1:11. Yet **vibrant elements of Jewish Christianity were preserved in Matthew's gospel and James' letter.**

❖ *What was John's special view and experience?*

In Acts, receiving the Holy Spirit is seen as part of the baptismal entry into the believers' communion. Yet it was especially John who favoured animated imagery like the vine and the branches to portray **Jesus not as a past founder, but as a living presence.** As God's Son he has God's life (6:57) and gives it to all who believe in him in a birth of water and Spirit, and he nourishes it through the food and drink of his flesh and blood. This gift of eternal life was the really important element for John. He didn't suggest any chain of teachers to preserve Jesus' message: that is the work of **the Spirit who guides the Christians in the way of truth.** Such amazing vision of the Church didn't offer a solution when John's followers disagreed among themselves, each group claiming to be guided by the Spirit. So, at the end of the 1st century, his writings acknowledged the **need for Church structures against the first evidence of broken communion.**

THE FOUR GOSPELS

"There are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (Jn 21:25).

❖ What does 'Gospel' mean?

Gospel comes from two old English words ("god-spel" meaning "**good news**") used to translate the Greek term "Εὐαγγέλιον", Euangelion. It was known to secular authors and was used above all to announce a victory or great events in the life of the king, or a message by him which obviously would change the world for the better. It is not just information, but action, efficacious power which comes to save. This word is present 72 times in the NT referring to **Jesus' person and message** as fulfilment of OT prophecies about the living God's power coming to act. Because **Mark used it at the beginning of his book**, the first of this

literary genre, any other similar to it was also called Gospel. The Church accepted **only the first four, written in apostolic time**, and refused all the others, written too late, from 150 AD on. Before the 4th century, the whole fourfold collection was usually called "the Gospel", the one and only Gospel of Christ; its four components were distinguished by adding the words "according to Matthew" and so on, though **no Gospel identifies its author by name**.



The four Evangelists' symbols.

❖ Why are the Gospels the heart of all the Scriptures?

Today we use also the plural "Gospels", meaning the four books which are **the heart of all the Scriptures because they are our main source for Jesus' life and teaching**. The fourfold Gospel holds a unique place in the Church, as is evident both in the reverence which the worship accords it and in the extraordinary attraction it has exercised on the saints at all times. "There is no doctrine which could be better, more precious and more splendid than the text of the Gospel. Behold and retain what our Lord and Master, Christ, has taught by his word and accomplished by his deeds" (St. Caesarea the Younger). "Above all it is the Gospels that occupy my mind when I am at prayer, my poor soul has so many needs, and yet this is the one thing needful. I am always

finding fresh lights there, hidden and fascinating meanings" (St. Therese of the Child Jesus).

❖ Why are the Gospels the most important source of our knowledge of Jesus?

We are so used to talk about Gospels that we don't see how new this kind of literature was when it first appeared. With it Jesus, the one who proclaimed the good news became the subject of the proclamation; the single Gospel he preached became texts reporting Jesus' history. We cannot exaggerate their importance for our knowledge of what Jesus did and said. **Apart from them we have only scattered references to him** in a few Roman (by Pliny, Tacitus, Suetonius) and Jewish (by Joseph Flavius) works. He lived, simply, to the full; he spoke too, and that's all: **he himself left no writing**. Even the other NT books, while providing priceless material for the theology of Jesus' person and saving life, death and resurrection, tell us very little about his activities and teaching. **An intelligent and faith-filled reading of the Gospels, then, is necessary for a Christian knowledge of our Saviour**. Such a reading requires some information on how they were composed. At one time or another we have all dreamed of having photographs of Jesus, recordings of his words on CD, so to be in direct touch with Jesus. In fact the Gospels give us something much better: through them, his disciples tell us who he really was, how they gradually discovered his mystery, and what changed their lives. **Their witnesses some years afterwards show Jesus at a deeper level than a newspaper account**. They introduce us to the believers' living community, and **it is within this Church that we are invited to encounter the Lord Jesus**. Our communities, today, have to continue the work of discovering Jesus through our life and questions, in order to faithfully show him to the world as the good news it needs.

❖ What is the convenience of having four Gospels?

Having four Gospels gives us a much more comprehensive picture of Jesus than if there had been only one. **Each representation of him has something special and important to bring to the whole**. In all of these four inspired versions **Jesus is clearly the same but each one's stress on different aspects of his life, message and work gives us distinct insights into the God-man's infinite mystery**. What we have are Jesus' deeds and words interpreted by authentic witnesses in the light of their lives. So, each Gospel tells us about Jesus, but it tells us as much about the communities in which it was formed. Similarly, the life of our communities today is always the starting point from which we are better able to understand him, on condition that we respect each one of these witnesses as they were inspired by the Holy Spirit.



An ancient picture of Jesus as the world's Alfa and Omega.

❖ How does Mark represent Jesus?

Mark, writing for a persecuted Church, emphasizes Jesus as the one who brings God's kingdom but who is, from beginning to end, **misunderstood, rejected, and finally put to death**. Mark presents us with the everyday Jesus, a man like ourselves, and reports certain features which stun who is accustomed to see him as God's Son. Because he followed the path of humble service and suffering the

Jews - and his disciples as well - found it hard to recognize him as the Messiah. In Mark we have sometimes the illusion of **discovering Jesus through Peter's eyes**. He emphasizes actions rather than teachings and rarely uses the past tense; this is his conviction: the Jesus whom he portrays is always present in the life of his community which believes in him, proclaims him and honours him.

❖ *How does Matthew represent Jesus?*

When we change from Mark to Matthew, we get the impression that we are moving into a different country: **here we are never quite sure whether we are beside Jesus in the year 30 or at a Church's liturgy in the 80s**. Or better, Matthew puts us in both places at the same time, revealing to us the historical Jesus' face through the glorious features of the Risen Lord celebrated by the Church. **In many occasion he presents himself and is proclaimed Son of God. Matthew's Jesus is solemn, potent, without emotions. Writing for a largely Jewish Christian community, Matthew focuses on Jesus' relationship to Jews' faith**. He stresses how **Jesus was the fulfilment of all the prophecies and divine promises of the OT**, the new Lawgiver, the Teacher of a new covenant, **the founder of a new and purified Israel**. He strongly denounces the two-faced outlook of the Pharisees and judges them for failing to believe in Christ. **He systematically presents Jesus' teaching for the Church's inner life and missionary work**.

❖ *How does Luke represent Jesus?*

Luke did not know Jesus personally: so the Jesus whom he discovered is not primarily the itinerant prophet of Galilee but **the glorified Lord showing himself to Paul** on the Damascus road. Easter's glory surrounds Jesus from his birth onwards. Luke is the only evangelist to call him "Lord" when he is talking about him. He portrays him as **the promised universal Saviour**, the Messiah son of David and the Son of God. For him Jesus is **the rejected Prophet who is the hope of the poor and outcasts**, namely the needy, sick, women and sinners to whom he promises and grants God's forgiveness and blessing. Jesus is also fully man. He lives what he proclaims so perfectly that he is the model of the perfect man, transfigured by the Spirit, living in his Father's arms. He constantly lives in the Father's presence and his prayer demonstrates it. Confronted with him, men must make their choice for him, today, simply because he is who is, so full of tenderness but also terribly demanding. This total faith which gets salvation is the source of joy which irradiates the Gospel and transforms the disciple.

❖ *How does John represent Jesus?*

John goes deepest into God's revelation showing Jesus as the eternal Word and Wisdom, the one sent by the Father into the world to give life to it through the knowledge of the truth. His Gospel is far more concerned than the other three to bring out the meaning of Jesus' life and of all he did and said in the light of the complete understanding made possible by the Spirit after the resurrection. **Jesus is his Father's perfect revelation.**

❖ *What were the three stages in forming the Gospels?*

In the formation of the Gospels we can distinguish three steps:

1. **The life and teaching of Jesus (about 6 BC-30 AD).** The Church holds firmly that the four Gospels, whose historicity she affirms without doubt, faithfully hand on **what Jesus, the Son of God, while living among men, really did and taught** for their eternal salvation, until the day when he was taken up.

2. **The oral tradition (about 30-100 AD).** After the Lord went to heaven, his apostles handed on to their hearers what he had said and done, but with that **fuller understanding** which they, instructed by the glorious events of Christ and enlightened by the Spirit of truth, now enjoyed.

3. **The written Gospels (about 65-100 AD).** Four authors **selected** several of the many elements handed on, either orally or already in written form, **synthesizing or explaining them with an eye to the situation of their Christian communities**. They maintained the form of preaching, but always telling the honest truth about Jesus. Each one's aim is well summed by Jn 20:31: to give a selection of Jesus' deeds and words in order **to induce faith in him and so to share his life**.

❖ *Why are three of the Gospels called 'synoptic'?*

The four Gospels fall naturally into two groups: on one side the first three (by Mark, Matthew and Luke) which are very similar; on the other John's by itself because it is rather different. **The first three are called "synoptic" (from Greek words meaning "at one glance")** for they follow the **same general outline** in narrating Jesus' public ministry, and report much the same incidents in his career and the same accounts of his teaching. When placed in parallel columns so to be seen together it becomes evident that **many of their narratives are**

Mt 8:2-3	Mk 1:40-42	Lk 5:12-13
<p>And behold, a leper came and worships him, saying: Lord, if you wish, I can be cleansed.</p> <p>And he stretched out his hand and touched him, saying: I wish it; be cleansed. And immediately his leprosy was cleansed.</p>	<p>And, calling out to him, there comes to him a leper and kneeling and saying to him: If you wish, I can be cleansed.</p> <p>And, moved with compassion, he stretched out his hand and touched him and says to him: I wish it; be cleansed. And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was cleansed.</p>	<p>And behold, a man full of leprosy. But, upon seeing Jesus, he fell upon his face and requested him, saying: Lord, if you wish, I can be cleansed.</p> <p>And he stretched out his hand and touched him, saying: I wish it; be cleansed. And immediately the leprosy left him.</p>

very often word for word the same. To explain why, is the so called **Synoptic Question**. A common oral tradition as their base is certain, but by itself it could never account for the many striking similarities. A written tradition would be a better explanation, but the theory that the three authors just drew independently on such source(s) could never explain passages where **their likeness and divergences show that at times they did copy or correct one another**.

❖ What do the synoptic Gospels show after detailed study?

Detailed study shows that:

- 1) almost the entire Gospel of Mark is contained in those of Matthew and Luke;
- 2) Matthew and Luke share a great deal of Jesus' teaching which is not found in Mark, but without any direct dependence in either direction between them;
- 3) both Matthew and Luke contain valuable information about Jesus that is proper to each of them. This is most evident in their accounts of Jesus' infancy.

❖ What is the most satisfying solution to the Synoptic Question?

Many solutions have been proposed to explain this body of similarities and differences among these three Gospels. It was long thought that Matthew's was the first one to be written, that Mark abbreviated it for his own purposes and that Luke borrowed heavily from it rearranging much of its material. But a major difficulty with this theory is explaining why Mark would have omitted so much valuable Matthew's material

(for example, the entire Sermon on the Mount with the Lord's Prayer). Today the vast majority of both Catholic and Protestant experts accepts a more satisfying solution to the problem, though it is still incapable of absolute proof. It was firstly proposed near the end of the 19th century, when scholars showed that:

1) **Mark was the first Gospel to be written**; he created the literary genre of Gospel, i.e. an orderly, written account of Jesus' ministry. **Both Matthew and Luke followed this model and copied it almost entirely** (80 and 65 % respectively). Mark's narrative thus became the framework for their Gospels.

2) **Matthew and Luke, independently of each other, had to use another written document** (called Q from the German word "Quelle", meaning "Source"). It no longer exists: so its contents and nature are known only from the use Matthew and Luke made of it. It was not a Gospel since it contained little or no account of Jesus' activities, death and resurrection. It was, rather, a collection of his teachings and parables, like the material of the Sermon on the Mount (which Matthew has gathered into chapters 5-7 while Luke has distributed it throughout his Gospel). Mark has not this material because he was not familiar with Q.

3) **Both Matthew and Luke used different material not known to other Gospel writers.** From these sources, for example, they derived their quite different Infancy Narratives.

❖ Were the Synoptic writers original authors?

The Synoptic writers were not mere copyist but each of them was an author in his own right. They derived their material from sources, but they used it creatively, providing us with **distinct portraits of Jesus, each produced by a writer who was both a skilled artist and an insightful theologian**.

❖ What is the style of each of the Gospels?

Mark's Greek is rough, strongly redolent of Aramaic, often faulty, but fresh, lively and attractive.

Matthew's Greek is less marked by Aramaic as well as **more correct though less picturesque**.

Luke excels when writing independently, but out of respect for his sources he incorporates their imperfections after polishing them a little. Occasionally he goes out of his way to imitate the LXX.

John's Gospel shows that he thinks in Aramaic but his Greek is good though it is not of a learned person; his vocabulary is the poorest among all the books of the NT (only 1,011 different words).

SOME MATERIAL COMMON TO ALL GOSPELS

	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
John the Baptist	3:1-6	1:2-6	3:1-6	1:19-23
John's preaching	3:1-12	1:7-8	3:15-18	1:24-28
Jesus' baptism	3:13-17	1:9-11	3:21-22	1:29-34
First disciples' call	4:18-22	1:16-20	5:1-11	1:35-51
The temple's cleansing	21:12-13	11:15-17	19:45-46	2:14-22
Five thousand fed	14:13-21	6:32-44	9:10b-17	6:1-15
Peter's confession of faith	16:13-20	8:27-30	9:18-21	6:67-71

Glorious entry in Jerusalem	21:1-9	11:1-10	19:28-40	12:12-19
Jesus' anointed by a woman	26:6-13	14:3-9	7:36-50	12:1-8
The last supper	26:26-35	14:22-31	22:15-34	13:1-17:26
Jesus arrested	26:47-56	14:53-62	22:47-53	18:2-12
Jesus before the Sanhedrin	26:57-68	14:63-65	22:54-71	18:13-24
The trial before Pilate	27:11-14	15:2-5	23:2-5	18:29-38
Jesus' crucifixion	27:33-37	15:22-26	23:33-34	19:17-27
Jesus' death	27:45-56	15:33-41	23:44-49	19:28-30
Jesus' burial	27:57-61	15:42-47	23:50-56	19:38-42
The women at Jesus' tomb	28:1-8	16:1-8	24:1-12	20:1-13

SOME MATERIAL PECULIAR TO EACH GOSPEL

Matthew: Events: Angelic dream appearance to Joseph (1:18-25); the child Jesus visited by wise men from the east (2:1-12); the flight to Egypt (2:13-25); the slaughter of Bethlehem's male children (2:16-18); Jesus' family settling in Nazareth (2:19-23); Jesus promising the primacy to Peter (16:17-19); the tax paid by Jesus and Peter (27:24-27); Judah's suicide (27:3-10); the guards at Jesus' tomb (27:62-66).

Parables: the city on a hill (5:14); the weeds among wheat (13:24-30); the hidden treasure (13:44); the pearl found by a merchant (45-46); the net full of good and bad fish (13:47-48); the forgiven nonpayer not forgiving his fellow servant (18:23-35); the workers in the vineyard (20:1-16); the willing and the unwilling sons (21:28-32); the wise and the foolish virgins (25:1-13).

Mark: Events: Jesus teaching on clean and unclean (7:14-23); healing of a deaf man (7:31-37); a boy running away naked (14:51-52).

Parables: the seed growing by itself (4:26-29).

Luke: Events: John's and Jesus' annunciation, birth and circumcision (1:5-2:21); Jesus' presentation in the temple (2:22-40); the boy Jesus' Passover in Jerusalem (2:41-52); the Samaritan rejection and non-retaliation (9:51-56); the sending of seventy (-two) disciples (10:1-2); Jesus' comments on facts of chronicle (13:1-5); a Samaritan leper's gratitude and faith (17:11-19); Zacchaeus' conversion (19:1-10); the condemned Jesus' call for repentance to Jerusalem's women (23:26-31); the crucified Jesus' prayer for his enemies (23:32-34); the good criminal's conversion (23:40-43); the risen Jesus and Emmaus' disciples (24:13-35).

Parables: the good Samaritan (10:29-37); the rich fool (12:13-21); the unfruitful fig tree (13:6-9); the builder of a tower (14:28-30); the king going to war (14:31-32); the lost sheep (15:3-7); the lost coin (15:8-10); the lost son (15:11-32); the unfair steward (16:1-8); the rich and the poor (16:19-31); the wicked judge (18:1-8); the Pharisee's and the publican's prayers (18:9-14).

John: Events: Jesus proclaimed Lamb of God (1:29-34); Philip's and Nathaniel's calls (1:43-51); the wedding in Cana (2:1-12); Nicodemus' visit to Jesus (3:1-21); the Samaritan woman (4:1-42); the cripple's healing at the pool (5:1-18); Jesus at Shelters' feast in Jerusalem (7:1-8:59); healing of a man born blind (9:1-12); Lazarus' resurrection (11:1-16); Jesus washing his disciples' feet (13:1-20); the promise of the Holy Spirit (14:15-31); Jesus' prayer for his disciples (17:1-26); the risen Jesus and Thomas (10:24-29); the risen Jesus and Peter (21:15-19).

Parables: the bridegroom and his friend (3:29); the slave and the son (8:35); the shepherd (10:1-21); the one who walks at night (11:9-10); the grain of wheat (12:24); the vine and its branches (15:1-8); the birth pangs (16:21).

THE GOSPEL OF MARK: JESUS, THE CHRIST, SON OF GOD

❖ Who was Mark?

The Gospel according to Mark is **the shortest**. Many agree it was **the first to be written**. From the beginning of the 2nd century it has been unanimously attributed to John Mark. He was **son of Mary, a leading Christian woman of Jerusalem**, in whose house the early Church used to meet (Acts 12:12). When he was a boy he himself could see Jesus. A cousin of Barnabas (Col 4:10), he went with him and Paul on their first missionary journey but left them to return home (Acts 12:25; 13:5; 15:36-39). For this reason Paul refused to take him on his second mission causing his parting from Barnabas. However they were later reconciled, since he was later **a companion and assistant to Paul** (Col 4:10) **and Peter in Rome** (1Pt 5:13).

❖ Who did Mark write his Gospel for, and when did he write it?

Mark wrote in Rome; this earliest tradition is supported by Latin loanwords present in the Greek text. Moreover he wrote **for non-Jews**, since he has little concern to show the Gospel's connection with the OT. On the contrary, he feels the need to explain Jewish customs and Aramaic expressions, to give geographical details and to highlight the message's meaning for Pagans. The same tradition says he wrote after Peter's

death during the persecution started in 64 by the emperor Nero. Yet, the prediction of Jerusalem temple's destruction in 70 appears to be written before the event, whereas its parallels in Matthew and Luke fit the known facts. Accordingly **he wrote between 65 and 70**. His aim was to deepen the faith of his suffering community: this dramatic situation colours his whole narrative and shapes his presentation of Jesus. It was not a quiet faith: it came up against opposition and was forced to take risks. **He wanted above all provide Roman Christians in order to face persecution** and resist their world's temptations. Other purposes maybe were: to preserve Peter's memories, to combat some deviations, to provide a readings book for Christian worship.

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❖ *Has Mark's Gospel any structure?*

Mark did not make it all up himself: he used **various kinds of traditions**: sayings, parables, controversies, healing stories, other miracles and probably a passion narrative. Some of them may also have been grouped. Until recently anyone thought he wrote without order, but today experts show how **he imposed a tight geographical-theological structure on his sources**, writing bridge passages between them and adding comments for his readers. He did not claim to represent events as they actually happened but as they were seen by Peter and his fellow disciples as they followed their teacher on Palestine's roads. Afterwards, Matthew and Luke (but not John) followed his framework.

❖ *What does the geographical aspect of Mark's Gospel feature?*

Mark's geographical aspect features Jesus' movement from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are in opposition: in the eyes of the religious authorities Galilee of the Gentiles had not very pure belief, but Jesus opened it up and the crowds gave him an enthusiastic welcome. By contrast, Jerusalem seemed to be a city shut in on itself, a refuge for people certain of their truth and not allowing any contradiction. From the beginning of Jesus' ministry, the fiercest attacks on him came from there.

❖ *What is Mark's outline?*

In the prologue (1:1-13), Mark lets his readers into the secret: the man Jesus is Christ and Son of God. So the reader knows what is going on. However he is invited to share with the disciples their slow discovery of Jesus' mystery. Then **the first half of the Gospel describes his activity in Galilee and beyond**. We see: a) the revelation of his disputed authority in work and word (1:14-3:6); b) the rejection of him by his own people (3:7-6:6a); c) the misunderstanding of him even by his disciples (6:6b-8:26). This part is articulated by three summaries (1:14-15; 3:7-12; 6:6b) each of which is followed by news about the disciples (1:16-20; 3:13-19; 6:7-30) and ends showing how Jesus' true identity was misunderstood (3:6; 6:1-6a; 8:17-21).

The second half also falls into three sections but it focuses on Jerusalem: a) the journey from Galilee, when Jesus clarifies the nature of his authority and its consequences for who follows him (8:27-10:52); b) the symbolic actions and teachings during the first part of Passion week in Jerusalem where he meets inflexible resistance (11:1-13-37); c) his eventual acceptance of a cruel and tragic death (at the hands of those who rejected his authority) before his resurrection (14:1-16:8). Moreover, the first of these three sections is articulated by three predictions of the Passion (8:31; 9:30-31; 10:33-34) each of which is followed by a mention of the disciples' lack of understanding (8:32-33; 9:32-34; 10:35-37) and by an admonition to them (8:34-38; 9:35-37; 10:38-45).

❖ *How is Mark's outline significant?*

Apart from individual sequence of facts, **this broad outline is artificial** since it is likely (and to judge by John's Gospel fairly certain) that Jesus visited Jerusalem several times before the last Passover of his life. All the same, **it is both factually and theologically significant**. It means that the general public at first received Jesus warmly but their enthusiasm faded as they found he will not fulfil their political hopes. As a result, he left Galilee to concentrate on the instruction of a small group of followers. **Peter's profession of faith** at Caesarea Philippi showed that he had secured their belief: this **was a key turning-point** and occasioned a change in Jesus' tactics. We feel Jesus breathed a sigh of relief; one step has

Controversy (discussion between teachers) was a genre in which they were trained. We often find the following pattern:

- An action or saying of Jesus provokes amazement, often insincere, on the part of the audience
- The debate begins
- At the end, the real point at issue emerges. It is necessary to make a choice, and often the parties differ

been taken: his disciples have seen one part of his mystery. At the same time, however, he started to lead them towards the second stage: he would be put to death!

❖ *Why is Mark intent on explaining the growing opposition against Jesus in Jerusalem?*

After that turning-point Jesus focused on Jerusalem and on the way he taught his disciples the true nature of his being Messiah, for he knew that in the holy city opposition continued mounting. The Gospel is intent on explaining this scandal, not only by contrasting the cross with the triumph of the resurrection but also by showing **the hostility itself was an integral part of God's mysterious plan**. Jesus' mission was not to be carried out by force or for political ends, but it was necessary that he would suffer to free the whole mankind (10:45; 14:24), since this had been foretold by the OT (9:12; 14:21,49). This paradox is Mark's central interest: how Jesus, while remaining misunderstood and rejected, was God's winning envoy. **Persecution and even death could not defeat him:** when unwanted by Israel he founded a New Israel (3:7-19) and when his family refused to have faith in him he formed a new family of believers (3:33-35).

❖ *What is Mark's theology?*

Many times Mark calls Jesus "teacher" and says he was teaching, but does record only few of his sayings. The large space given to exorcisms and healings proves that he revered Jesus as a wonder-worker, but for him the passion and death are the high point of his revelation. Without the cross, Jesus' portrayal as teacher and wonder-worker would lack its balance and directing principle. **Mark's real good news is the crucified Messiah's manifestation.** Because it is centred on Jesus' rejection, suffering and death, it has been said "a Passion Narrative with a long introduction": this is only a small overstatement. Fully conscious that Roman Christians were facing torture and death for their faith, Mark stressed that Jesus' life was one of humility and submission and that **true believers must walk the same path.**

Thus from Jesus' first proclamation of God's Kingdom (1:14-15), **he and his message are progressively refused** by Israel's leaders (2:1-3:6) and also by his own relatives (3:7-6:1-6a). When his disciples do recognize him as the Messiah (8:27-30) it is soon evident that **even they misunderstand what kind of Messiah he is.** So he must explain the path of suffering which his Father has willed him to walk. Eventually the disciples betray (14:10-11), desert (14:50) and deny him (14:66-72). **It is a Pagan soldier who does recognize Jesus for whom he really is, the Son of God** (15:39): he does so **not because of miracles or any display of power, but only because Jesus died in that way.** The message is clear: in this life Jesus is to be found in suffering (glory will come later). May be for this reason **the risen Christ doesn't appear in this Gospel proper** (16:9-20 is later writers' appendix which shortly sums up Lk 24 and Jn 20). Mark is satisfied with proclaiming the resurrection (16:1-8) without emphasizing it. **It is the suffering Jesus who has most meaning for Christians,** particularly for the persecuted ones.

❖ *What is the 'Messianic secret' in Mark?*

Jesus' hiding of his being the Messiah has been called "**Messianic secret**". Before his process **he never took for himself this title and also forbade others to mention it.** He even silenced the demons that did recognize him. Rather he used the modest and mysterious expression "Son of Man" (2:10). The reason was that the Jews expected an earthly Messiah who would bring political liberation and material prosperity. If Jesus had announced that he was indeed the Messiah he would have caused false hopes since that was not the kind of Messiah his Father had sent him to be. **Instead people had to believe Jesus as he was, not as they wanted him to be.** Mark stressed this secret but didn't invent it: only, it accorded perfectly with his aim to present Jesus as one who suffers and is misunderstood rather than as one who comes in glory. Only before the Sanhedrin, when he knew of being already condemned and that there was therefore no danger of being taken as a worldly King, Jesus clearly declared himself to be Christ. Mark continues to make us ask questions: are we ready to leave the ideas we have of him in order to accept him as he is: totally upsetting?

❖ *Who is the salvation age passed down from?*

The salvation age prophesied in the OT is the time of proclaiming the good news which also calls to regret. It begins with John the Baptist, is taken up by Jesus, and is continued by the disciples and eventually in the Church's universal mission. Significantly, however, **Mark reserves to Jesus the proclamation of the coming of God's kingdom.** In Judaism of his time the "kingdom" referred to the definitive display of God's lordship at the end of history and to its acknowledgment by all creation. Jesus aimed at deepening the people's understanding so to prepare them to accept the coming kingdom as a mystery. He taught about it through parables, but his life was its best parable. Whoever wishes to understand it must look at Jesus, for he is God's perfect intervention in human history. His repeated conquering Satan's kingdom proves that God's kingdom acts in him (3:23-27). His healings foresee what life in this kingdom will be like. Its nature as the revelation of God's love and mercy is verified in Jesus' concern for sinners (2:5,16-17) and for those most in need of God's nearness (1:40-45; 3:1-6; 5:21-43). The kingdom is not merely a promise for the future, but also a reality in the present: though it is now largely hidden, in Jesus it is inaugurated and anticipated. **It is a total transformation of everyday life for those who give up their self-centred concerns and submit in faith to Jesus' person and message** (1:15). Basically the kingdom is living as his disciples, i.e. "being with" Jesus and sharing his mission of preaching and healing (3:14-15). The first disciples' relationship with him and experience of his person serve as a pattern for all ages, because all peoples to the end of the earth are destined to become Jesus' disciples.

❖ *How does Mark use the Twelve to illustrate discipleship?*

Discipleship is Mark's other major theme; he uses the twelve apostles to illustrate it in parallelism with his community. The passages relating the call of the first ones (1:16-20; 2:13-14; 3:13-19; 6:6b-13) are among the most positive stories in the Gospel. As the narrative proceeds, however, **their ignorance, slowness to listen and understand, ambition, greed and fearfulness are openly displayed.** Mark doesn't hesitate to show all their human weakness. In the first half of the Gospel they are examples to be imitated, but in the second half they are examples to be avoided. The effect of this shift is to highlight **Jesus as the only one who deserves total imitation.** With the invitation "Follow me!" he presents himself as a guide who knows both the destination and the way to reach it. His path is not a norm imposed externally. He himself walks along it and asks no more of the disciples than to follow his example.

Discipleship doesn't imply one success after another, but rather repeated failures and a constant coming back to Jesus. **It is faith in spite of mistakes, frustration and suffering.** Most of all it implies determination not to be served, but to serve. Jesus' service is limitless and includes the sacrifice of his life as the highest expression of love. For this reason discipleship includes to accept persecution, even to die a violent death. Only when the disciples have learned the lesson of the cross they are fit to meet their Risen Lord in Galilee (14:27-28; 16:7) and to take up his mission. They, therefore, don't show only the discipleship's difficulties, but also that **difficulties can be overcome**, and so they encourage the reader to true discipleship despite hardships.

❖ *What relevance has Mark's Gospel in Africa?*

Mark describes single events in **a vivid way.** His narratives are always sprinkled with touches from real life and make an emotional impact. People who love storytelling do find his Gospel very interesting. Many Africans, in spite of the modern mass media, still learn by oral communication. It would be fruitful to experiment on how easy or difficult it is to narrate anew Gospel stories according to Mark.

Jesus suffered for a noble cause, to protect sinners, women, children, sick and other despised people. Africa is often described as a dark and fragmented continent: it needs heroes and heroines who will work to improve the situation of oppressed people. In doing so, they have to expect opposition and suffering like Jesus. While all must be done to reduce pain, **let's take courage from him who was willing to suffer in order to assist the neglected.**

In Mark Jesus is always with his disciples; they are appointed at a very early stage. Against this background, Jesus' solitude appears all the more dramatic. In the first half of the Gospel the disciples appear as committed followers of Jesus, but as time goes by they depart from their teacher's direction and come to abandon him. What happened to them is constantly repeated in history. **Now many Africans follow Jesus, but for how long?** Why are they following him? How deep is their faith? May the study of Mark's Gospel contribute to boost Africans' faith in Jesus, the non violent and not political Liberator.

❖ **A help to read the text:**

Mk 1:1-8: Mark has no infancy narrative but, after the title which introduces Jesus as Christ and Son of God, he relates OT promises to John the Baptist, a prophet after Elijah's pattern. His preaching and baptism set up the way for the "stronger one" who would baptise with the Holy Spirit.

Mk 1:9-13: As preparation for his ministry, Jesus undergoes baptism and is tested by Satan in the desert. After John has introduced him, God himself confirms him as his beloved Son. Both witnesses help us to understand what follows. Mark's short version of Jesus' temptations is to be seen against the background of Jewish's belief that in the last days the evil spirit would be conquered in a great contest of strength.

JESUS MISUNDERSTOOD IN GALILEE

Mk 1:14-15: John's arrest indicates Jesus' destiny. After returning to Galilee, he starts to preach the good news. His ministry's first summary set in an end-time context all he says and does in the rest of the Gospel.



Jesus healing a leper.

Mk 1:16-20: Jesus' call of his first four disciples provides a model of response. So compelling is he that no preparation is needed for these fishermen to leave behind family and financial security. He gives them a new role: to fish people. Three of them had a special place among the Twelve, he gave them a new name and used to take them alone for further, deeper revelations.

Mk 1:21-34: In an eventful day in Capernaum, Peter's hometown, Jesus reveals himself as a healer and a teacher endowed with authority.

Mk 1:35-45: Jesus in prayer decides to broaden his mission. By touching the leper Jesus risks himself by love and opens the way to take care of the stigmatized (like today HIV/AIDS victims). The healing ends with Jesus' command to follow Moses' law: so, it prepares the following five stories which introduce various opponents who move from admiration to plotting against Jesus' life.

Mk 2:1-3:6: Jesus' deeds (forgiving sins, mixing with sinners, healing on the Sabbath etc.) cause debates. During them, Jesus reveals himself as the Son of Man who can forgive sins, the Physician come to save people, the Bridegroom bringing new wine and joy, the Lord of Sabbath who deems man more important than any law.

Mk 3:7-12: This second summary tells of the general enthusiastic welcome accorded to Jesus the healer.

Mk 3:13-19: Jesus' appointment of the Twelve is the main step in his constitution of the new people of God, hinting at Israel's tribes and pointing to the end-time people of God's kingdom. Mark presents here his ideal of discipleship: being with Jesus and sharing his ministry.

Mk 3:20-35: The opposition arrives to attribute to the Evil One what is the Holy Spirit's work. A such attitude makes salvation impossible for it means to shutting oneself off from God's grace and forgiveness.

Mk 4:1-34: After saying often that Jesus taught, finally Mark reports his teaching. It consists especially of parables comparing God's kingdom with the marvellous growth of seeds and the abundant harvest coming at the end. This form of speech allowed Jesus to involve his hearers more than plain speech could do, but Mark intended it as Jesus' voluntary hiding of the mystery of the kingdom to the crowds.

Mk 4:35-5:43: Jesus' teaching is followed by three miracle stories (a fourth is inserted into the third, according to the typical Mark's sandwich device) in which he reveals his power over Satan in nature, possession, disease and death.

Mk 6:1-6a: The second section of Mark's first half ends with a story of the rejection of Jesus even by his own people, in the same way as the first one ended in Pharisees and Herodians' plot against him.

Mk 6:6b-34: The opening part of this third section uses again the sandwich device to present Jesus' disciples sent out on a mission, John the Baptist's martyrdom, and then the disciples' return. Missionary discipleship may involve suffering and death, and John's destiny foreshadows that of Jesus and his disciples. In sending them, Jesus bans to take anything for the journey because they have to trust in God totally and to show they have no economic interest. Coming back, they give Jesus report of their work, and he invites them to a lonely place for a rest.

Mk 6:35-7:37: This and the following part have a similar structure (perhaps they formed a pre-Mark "breads' book", so called for using many times the word "bread". The main episode of both parts is a wonderful feeding of thousands, which point forward to the end-time banquet at which the Messiah will preside. Both are followed by a crossing the lake, a controversy, a dialogue about bread and a healing.

Mk 8:1-26: The second part of the "breads' book" is peculiarly intended for Gentiles, according to the Syro-Phoenician woman's precedent argument which explained God's plan for them.

JESUS' ACKNOWLEDGMENT BY PETER AS HINGE OF THE GOSPEL

Mk 8:27-38: Peter's statement of faith in Jesus does climax Jesus' self revelation with the disciples' first acknowledgment of him as the Christ, and introduce his sufferings' theme which will be developed in the Gospel's second half. Peter's declaration is correct, but needs explanation in the following three predictions of Passion and relative instructions, so that Jesus' disciples and Mark's readers can learn how Jesus' death fits in with his identity as the Messiah, and what it implies for them.



Jesus talking with his friends.

JESUS' INSTRUCTIONS TO HIS DISCIPLES ON THE WAY TO JERUSALEM

Mk 9:1-29: On a high mountain Jesus' face and garments shine: this transfiguration is intended to strengthen his three favourite disciples' faith establishing his glorious identity as the beloved Son of God. The following talk balances it placing his divine Sonship in the context of Jews' faith and expectations (the whole OT, represented by Moses and Elijah, was preparatory to Jesus) and referring to his death and resurrection. The epileptic boy's healing is narrated as a symbol of Jesus' resurrection from death, which calls to believe him who alone can free from demoniac power.

Mk 9:30-50: The second part of Jesus' journey starts with a new prediction, misunderstanding and instructions. Then a few complementary episodes follow.

Mk 10:1-31: On his way to Jerusalem, Jesus' teaching about marriage, children and riches is a further challenge to those who wish to follow him and enter God's kingdom. According to him the married couple constitutes "one flesh" and therefore their relationship cannot be dissolved. Only those who recognize and receive God's kingdom as a gift (as a child with no claim to power or status) can expect to be part of it. Wealth is an obstacle, while rewards of discipleship are infinitely greater than the sacrifices needed. The episode of the rich young man explains the limitless generosity required by Jesus. From a minimal morality he passes on to a personalised programme consisting in following him in line with the dynamism of a love whose source lies in heaven.

Mk 10:32-52: This is the third and last part of Jesus' journey, starting with a new prediction, misunderstanding and instructions. The miraculous cure of Bartimaeus, which is instantaneous and without any healing gesture, is opposed to the cure of the blind man narrated in 8:22-26. They are symbolic of the difficult but successful work of self-revelation by Jesus to his disciples.

JESUS' PASSION WEEK IN JERUSALEM

Mk 11:1-11: Three chapters deal with Jesus' ministry in the holy city. Together with the following Passion narrative it has all been fitted by Mark in a week's time. In all the Gospels Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem is a point of no little interest, for it is his entry as a Messiah in David's capital city, as expressed by the association with the Mount of Olives, the sending for the colt, and the reference to the kingdom of our father David. Unable to deny that he is the promised David's son, he seeks to show the kind of Messiah he is, no man of war but lawfully and riding upon an ass. The crowd is puzzled but penetrates his meaning sufficiently



Jesus calming the lake of Galilee.



Jesus challenging a young rich to follow him in absolute poverty.

to see that he is not to be the Messiah of their hopes.

Mk 11:12-25: These two prophetic actions expressed symbolically Jesus' judgment against his people.

Mk 11:27-12:44: In Jerusalem Jesus had a new series of debates with various expressions of contemporary Judaism about the current questions. It is interrupted by an allegory of how Israel's rejection of the prophets was climaxed by its murder of Jesus, and how God consequently dispossessed the Jews of their birthright. It ends with a warning against their leaders and a word of praise for a poor widow's generosity corresponding to Jesus' readiness to give all to God in the next days.

Mk 13:1-37: The second and last extended speech in Mark concerns the end-time and explains in apocalyptic style what Jesus as the Son of Man means for Jerusalem, for his disciples and for humans in general, while urging all to awareness. Even a superficial reading reveals a double perspective: one to Jesus' own generation and another to all men. In the Synoptics, this address is Jesus' goodbye.

Mk 14:1-11: The centre of this introduction to the Passion is an unnamed woman who anoints Jesus, pointing to his dignity as Messiah, and forward to his burial. Her spiritual insight and generosity are contrasted with the spiritual blindness of the Jews' leaders and Judas.

Mk 14:12-31: This story's aim is to show that Jesus was about to celebrate his own Passover in full awareness and explained its meaning through bread and wine.

Mk 14:32-52: This story, which sums up how Jesus confronted the climax of his life, was told often in the early Church because his agreement with his Father's will contrasted with the sleeping disciples.

Mk 14:53-72: In order to encourage his persecuted readers, Mark again uses the sandwich technique to place side-by-side Jesus' faithfulness and Peter's fear and sin.

Mk 15:1-15: The Gospels present Jew authorities as the prime movers and Pilate as merely giving up to their press. Mark actually passes over the verdict. Jesus acts as Second Isaiah's silent Servant.

Mk 15:16-41: The four incidents of this peak of the whole Gospel tell of Jesus' death as king of the Jews in harmony with the OT. The full revelation of Jesus becomes manifest. The pagan centurion's confession of him as Son of God contrasts the Sanhedrin's disbelief during the precedent trial. It is juxtaposed also with the torn veil of the temple and so it has symbolic meaning for the mission to the Gentiles.

Mk 15:42-47: The account of Jesus' hasty burial by a pious Jews, in which his own apostles have no part, confirm his death; the details are recounted in view of the coming episode of the empty tomb.

JESUS' LIFE AFTER DEATH

Mk 16:1-8: The four Gospels agree in recording the discovery of the empty tomb; afterward each goes its own way. The stress is not on what happened but on the Easter message: "He is not here. Why seek the living among the dead?" The resurrection itself is not described: it never is, and never could be.

Mk 16:9-20: This is a summary of the risen Christ's appearances, with other material, whose style is different from Mark's and could be derived from various NT writings. Perhaps the original ending was lost, so early Christians saw the need to complete the book with this conclusion.

❖ Study questions:

1. Comment on each of the following statements from Mark's gospel:
 - a) "My son, your sins are forgiven". (2:5)
 - b) "Who do you say that I am?" (8:29)
 - c) "If your foot causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell". (9:45)
 - d) "I do not know this man of whom you speak". (14:71)
2. With reference to the whole gospel of Mark, interpret the statement, "A prophet is not without honour, except in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house" (6:4).
3. "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will grant it... even half of my kingdom" (Mk 6:22). Narrate what prompted this promise, and then say what we must learn from the episode.
4. "For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45). Explain the context of this quotation and then give four lessons we can get from the story.
5. Explain the context and the lesson you can obtain from this text: "Is not this why you are wrong, that you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God? For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage..." (Mk 12:24-25).
6. Analyse the following statement with reference to yourself: "If I must die with you, I will not deny you" (Mk 14:31).
7. Using Mark's Gospel, advise a new Christian whose family completely opposes his faith and has isolated him. Give him five points concerning the importance of remaining faithful to Jesus despite any challenges he has to face.
8. What do you understand by the expression "Messianic secret" as applied by Mark? Illustrate your answer by using five examples from his Gospel.
9. "Mark's Gospel is said to have been written to non-Jews". Justify this statement by giving at least five points.



Peter using his sword to defend Jesus in the garden.

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW: JESUS, NEW MOSES WHO TAUGHT HIS CHURCH THE TRUE PERFECTION

❖ Who was the author of Matthew's Gospel?

This Gospel stands **first among NT books because it acquired early distinction in Church's worship and preaching** as the most complete store of Jesus' teaching. Another reason is that its writer was considered to be Matthew, the former tax collector present in the four lists of apostles (Mk 3:8; Mt 10:3; Lk 6:15; Acts 1:13b). Modern research makes it highly unlikely. The earliest tradition about this apostle as an author says he collected Jesus' sayings in Aramaic. Maybe his compilation influenced this Gospel, but this is **a full account of Jesus' ministry**, i.e. deeds and words, not only sayings. In common with Luke (unlike Mark and John) it even includes a **highly theological account of Jesus' birth** and (like all Gospels) concludes with **a narrative of his death and resurrection**. Still, its excellent Greek shows no sign of being a translation from Aramaic. On top, it clearly **depends for much of its content on Mark**: why would an eyewitness need to copy from someone who was not?

❖ Why does Matthew's Gospel frequently quote the Old Testament?

This mature synthesis shows its author was rooted in Jewish tradition. The verse 13:52 ("Every scribe who has been made a disciple of the kingdom of the Heavens is like a householder who brings forth from his treasure new things and old") is often taken as a description of him and his working methods. From the start of his Gospel, Matthew claims the OT for Jesus, even when it comes to apparent minutiae: more than 130 passages refer to it. By frequently quoting the OT to show its fulfilment by Jesus, he develops the idea of the **continuity within the discontinuity between NT and OT**. In God's kingdom, which contains mankind's definitive salvation in time and eternity, **the old is not destroyed but fulfilled**, i.e. its hopes are not only realized but also perfected. This applies to Jesus' person, work and teaching as well: the OT is fulfilled also in his lowliness which seems to block his work. **Reading the OT one can find light about the puzzling aspects of Jesus' story**, especially his death on the cross. Though refused by his people, he is gifted with majesty even in his earthly life, for he is "**God with us**", a covenant term which frames the **whole Gospel** (1:23; 28:18-20). To show this, it is not the only one to use arguments from the OT, but it relies so heavily on them that among its chief features are the "**fulfilment quotations**" which act as meditations on the events. This is a characteristic of Matthew: for all essential events, to give a proof from OT, for it anticipated and inwardly prepared the way for them. He demonstrates that the ancient words come true in Jesus' story, and that his story proceeds from God's word.

❖ Why is this gospel the most Jewish of the four?

Matthew is **the most Jewish of the Gospels** because not only it shows great interest in details of Jews' customs, but also it frequently uses their techniques and methods or arguments. Typically Jewish too is the concern about the final judgment and retribution and its tremendous scenario. This accounts for the **interest in showing that Christ's new Law fulfils the old one**. Matthew presents **Jesus as the new Moses**, who repeats in his life Moses' story and gives the law of the NT, stressing **moral imperatives** (5-7) and **the obedience to God's will as the essence of true righteousness**. Moses' Law continues to embody that will, but free of Pharisees' legalism and imbued with the **spirit of love and mercy that Jesus both preached and exemplified**.

❖ When and for whom was Matthew's Gospel written?

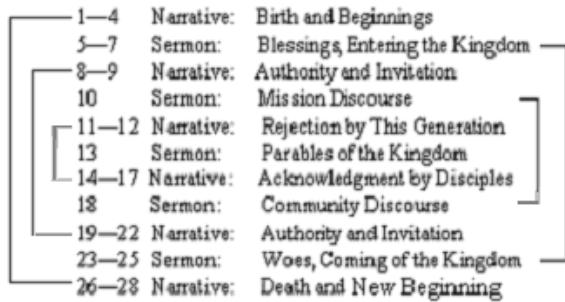
It is fair to date the Gospel **between 80 and 90 for it was written for a Christian community in or around Palestine whose many Jewish members had been recently excluded from official Judaism** by the largely Pharisaic school of Jamnia. This decision faced them with a crisis of faith as **they had now to choose** either fidelity to Jesus and his Church or devotion to Jewish law and traditions in which they had been raised. In this context of conflict, the writer made a strong call for their lifelong fidelity to Jesus, showing that he was the fulfilment of all that is worth in Judaism. It was the obvious conclusion of a long history of revelation and salvation by God which has always proceeded by leaps as well as by stages. **To be a Jew implies making the last leap to Christ**. In following him, the Jewish Christians lose nothing that they valued before. In leaving him, on the contrary, they would leave the very heart of biblical faith and stick to a religion and people that had rejected the Messiah. A text which appears only in Mt present him as the only way of arriving to know the Father. This approach explains the number and vigour of the **attacks on Pharisees** throughout the text, stressing their unfaithfulness to the OT and the **newness of Jesus' message** that his followers must hold.

❖ What were the aims of Matthew's Gospel?

The writer **faithfully conveyed traditions** he received from the early Church about Jesus and Christian life. At the same time he **creatively shaped** them into new combinations to achieve several purposes: to instruct and push members of his community; to provide liturgical reading and sermon material; to gain friendly outsiders and to offer arguments against opponents. We must marvel at the delicate balance he attained. Later Christians were quick to find **his masterpieces in the five great speeches** (confronted with Moses' five books). We should conclude that his primary aim was to write **a handbook for Church leaders** to assist them in preaching, teaching, worship, mission and discussions. But he inserted it **into the story of a living person, Jesus**, to keep it focused on him and his kingdom as the good news of salvation, far from becoming a scholarly thought.

❖ Is Matthew's outline different from that of Mark?

Mark's broad outline of Christ's life occurs in Matthew as well, but with a different stress, for he used his sources with great freedom to achieve his carefully planned work following ancient composition techniques. The most unified and detailed outline of his Gospel shows **alternate rings of narrative and speech, built up around seven parables about the kingdom of the Heavens** (ch. 13).



❖ What are Matthew's focuses?

This Gospel has two focuses not to be separated: **Jesus as the Christ and the near approach of God's kingdom** which he proclaims and starts up. The whole book could be read with either focus in view, for Jesus is the promised Messiah whose coming heralds the arrival of God's kingdom. His being the Christ, David's son, the King of the Jews, but also the Son of the Living God, is established in the Infancy Narrative and developed throughout the Gospel. In it different people prostrate themselves before him, though they should do so only before God. Rejecting or accepting him decides whether a person belongs to the true Israel. His arrival takes place every time one meets the little ones with whom he identifies himself. At the same time, God's kingdom (and the beginning of its realization) is the theme of all his five great speeches that punctuate the entire story, giving it its final horizon and goal as a dramatic account of the Kingdom's coming. It will be taken away from the Jews to be given to others: the last will be the first, and Israel's Messiah becomes the world's Messiah. Enthroned as sovereign judge and lord of the whole world, Jesus has definitively won. Now the territory has to be occupied, so he sends his disciples to establish his victory throughout the earth.

❖ Why Matthew is called the Church's gospel?

The kingdom's authentic life is the reason for Matthew's **emphasis on the Church**: she is not identical with this kingdom, but is the privileged place where it is manifested in the world. **The Church, the believers' community which replaces OT Israel** who was first invited to the Messiah's feast but refused. For him the Church, composed of those rejected from Judaism and those converted from Paganism, is the true people of God, allied to him in the person and through the sacrifice of Jesus. His Gospel is written from a Church perspective, introducing us to the heart of her adoration of the Risen Lord. The very word "Church" is used in two places in Matthew (16:18; 18:18) and not at all in any other Gospel. Matthew is concerned with the Church's organization and the brotherly life required in her. Building on Jesus' sayings, he speaks of the ideals that Christians should strive for, and of the leaders who should guide them with humble and loving care and, when needed, with the authority of Christ himself (16:13-20; 18:1-35). He stresses the **importance of Peter as the foundation stone of this new Israel and of his fellow apostles, consistently toning down or omitting Jesus' rebukes to them** reported by Mark. But no illusions about the Church: she is **a mix of saints and sinners until the final sorting out** (13:36-43; 22:11-14; 25): anyone can fall (26:69-75) and prophets can be false (7:15). She runs the risk of having only little faith. Yet, Matthew stresses **her universal mission** in order to bring the permanent presence of Christ and his word to the world (28:18-20). The life style that fits such a mission (10:1-42) and concern for the straying sheep, for the little ones, for forgiveness and humility are other central guidelines.

❖ What can this gospel teach Africans about their own culture?

This Gospel was written for Jewish Christians caught between their ancestors' religion and their own new faith in Christ. So it can be read today in the context of **traditional societies' opposition to Jesus' message** and to its acceptance by new believers. Many Africans becoming Christians find themselves in such situations. If they truly want to follow Christ, they must make difficult choices. **It is not easy to leave traditional beliefs and practices** contrary to Jesus' teaching. Here Matthew can give light and strength to African converts. If Jesus stated **he had not come to delete Jewish law but to perfect it, this applies also to any genuine values** found in African religions and cultures which agree with the Christian faith, such as the importance of family and community, the relationship with the ancestors and the reconciliation as a contribution to peace. **Jesus' message must be embodied in our cultures**, elevating them to a superior level. In this way it will be easier to understand and practice our Christian faith while remaining true to ourselves as Africans. Sometimes, however, we should **criticize negative aspects of African cultures in the light of Jesus' teaching**. This will often be painful but it is a must for following him. Moreover, anything opposing his message cannot be genuine human value and there is nothing to lose in giving it up.

❖ A help to read the text:

BIRTH AND BEGINNINGS

Mt 1:1-17: From the beginning, Matthew presents his double prospective: he introduces Jesus as King David's end-time heir restoring Israel, but also as son of Abraham, the father of all believers, including Gentiles. The family tree is a Near Eastern way of starting a book: though hard for us, it teaches an important lesson, briefly including the whole of OT history and thought into the Gospel as Jesus' nearby background, necessary to understand him. It is divided into three parts, each being supposed to have 14 generations: the symbolism involves the numerical value of David's Hebrew name ($d=4 + w=6 + d=4$). The monotony is broken up especially by the striking mention of five women (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba and Mary) whose marital union had something extraordinary and who did show initiative and play an important role in God's plan. It is a paradox to present a genealogy through Joseph only to break the pattern at the end, carefully constructed to avoid saying that he fathered Jesus. But broken patterns are a feature of the Gospel throughout.

Mt. 1:18-25: These verses teach Mary's virginity, an outward sign of the Son's inner reality. God's intervention in the birth of his chosen ones (Isaac, Jacob, Samuel) was a tradition in Israel's faith, but here he goes further, replacing the male role. The fulfilment formula (occurring 10 times in Mt) stresses God's initiative. Like Israel's patriarchs, Joseph obeys the angel's instructions. In naming the child, he acts as legal father of his wife's son.

Mt 2:1-23: Jesus' birth is related to wider political and social events. The magi, a class of wise men, represent the pagan world coming to worship the royal Messiah in a Marian context. Herod's wild behaviour is in character. The quotations refer Jesus' events to Moses and the exodus to say that he starts all Israel's restoration. So, chapters 1-2 have introduced Jesus as the all-around saviour figure: son of Abraham, Son of God and Emmanuel, son of David, new Moses, new Jeremiah and new Samson.

Mt 3:1-12: Rather suddenly Matthew moves from Jesus' infancy to the start of his public ministry, joining Mark's narrative about John the Baptist, but putting in his mouth Jesus' central message about the kingdom.

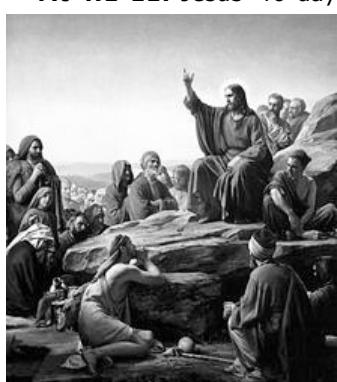
Mt 3:13-17: Mark's frank account of Jesus' baptism made uncomfortable the early Church, because it seemed strange that the sinless Jesus would receive it. So, in the dialogue between him and John, Matthew explained his gesture as acceptance of God's will without reserve, for it was the Father who asked him to associate with the sinners in order to save them. By entering the Jordan, Jesus, without sin, showed his solidarity with those who acknowledged their sins and chose to change their lives in accordance with God.

Mt 4:1-11: Jesus' 40-day fast in Matthew and Luke's source was connected with Moses and Elijah in the desert and with the great trial of God's patience by the Israelites in the exodus. All of Jesus' answers to the tempter quote Deut 6-8. So, he set an example for us, using God's word, the sword of the Spirit, to win.

Mt 4:12-22: Jesus' move to Galilee after the Baptist has been "handed over" to prison and execution may be understood both as a courageous taking up of his mission and as a prudent seeking greater safety. Matthew quotes Isaiah to defend the Messiah's activity in this surprising place rather than in Jews' capital.

THE SPEECH ON THE MOUNT

Mt 4:23-5:2: After a summary report of Jesus' ministry, Matthew introduces solemnly his first, longest and most important speech, which he constructed gathering scattered material. His editing may be seen in several places. The mountain of revelation symbolises the Sinai; likewise Jesus replaces Moses.



Jesus preaching on the mount.

sermon covers the main areas of Israel's ethical and religious life, plunging us immediately into the heart of what it means to be a faithful son of God in this world. The dominant themes are God's kingdom and its perfect morality, of which Jesus is not only the one who reveals it but also the model. After a start with 7+1 beatitudes, we read about the high standard of his new ethics. Disciples who strive to imitate Jesus are told to adopt a better way of life, anticipating the coming kingdom and reflecting God's righteousness.

Mt 5:3-16: Jesus' teaching begins with a cry of joy, based on the nearness of God's kingdom. Beatitude is an exclamation of congratulations that recognizes an existing state of happiness, for one is on the right path. The poor, the afflicted, the meek, the hungry, the persecuted, etc. are happy because God has special care for them, since king's duty is to protect the weak. Jesus himself is their best figure. Two sayings about salt and light state the missionary meaning of disciples' life according to the beatitudes. What a shame when Christians fail as individuals or as groups!

Mt 5:17-48: The first four verses give the basic legal principles of the speech reflecting Jewish Christians' outlook which through Matthew has powerfully influenced Church history, moderating any

THE EIGHT BEATITUDES

Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn,
for they shall be comforted.
Blessed are the meek,
for they shall inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they shall be satisfied.
Blessed are the merciful,
for they shall obtain mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they shall see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they shall be called sons of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

radicalisation of Paul's attitude about Moses' law. Indeed both did cherish the Decalogue and centre it on love. Jesus' fulfilment of the OT in his person, way of life and teaching is the fullest revelation of God's requests. The following six arguments go beyond OT by deepening it, returning to God's original will and correcting false interpretations. It is notable that all the given examples of the greater righteousness indicate duties towards others. The final verse proposes God's perfection as model for his children, for in Christianity every moral norm is now situated within the context of a child's relationship with him.

Mt 6:1-18: Almsgiving, prayer and fasting constituted a Jewish list of works of piety deemed necessary to be righteous. Here Jesus reforms Pharisees' attitudes stressing the interior dispositions which should motivate these duties so that they may help a living, personal relationship with the Father. In each case the disciple's efforts should issue in an intimate union with him, putting aside any calculation, quest for profit or human praise. After the introductory verse, there follow three units of very similar structure. This pattern is broken by Matthew's insertion of the Lord's Prayer (having 7 petitions, his favourite number) and other material to form a catechism on this matter.

Mt 6:19-34: A central element in the righteous living proposed by Jesus is correct stewardship of resources without anxiety for earthly needs.

Mt 7:1-29: Summing up this part of the speech, verse 12 gives us the "Golden Rule". Words and miracles are not enough to show commitment; deeds of love should authenticate them. The texts about judgment warn us about the destructive effects of evil conduct: we have to choose between two alternatives.

JESUS' AUTHORITY AND INVITATION

Mt 8:1-9:38: Having just shown Jesus as the Messiah of the Word, Matthew now presents him as the Messiah of the deed, rejoining Mark's outline. He expands it with miracles drawn from elsewhere, but he shortens the stories and drains strong emotions. Positively, he shapes them into model conversations that stress four themes: authority of Jesus, faith, discipleship and salvation. The ten miracles are as follows: cleansing of a leper, cure of a centurion's servant, healing of Peter's mother-in-law, many sick healed at evening, stilling of a storm, many demons expelled in Pagan zone, forgiveness and healing of a paralytic, healing of a woman with haemorrhage and resurrection of a little girl, healing of two blind men, healing of a dumb. Matthew breaks up the monotony of the series with buffer news. Jesus shows his power over nature, sickness, death and devils, but his miracles are not elaborated: in this they differ from the fantastic ones reported of Jewish and Pagan personalities. Most notably, they differ because of the spiritual meaning Jesus attaches to them. It is only with great consideration that he works any miracle at all.

MISSION SPEECH

Mt 10:1-42: The second great speech is about the missionary task to the twelve. Matthew compiled it from Mark and Q and reworked it for his community's apostolic work. So, as heirs to God's choice and promise, the Jews are to be the first to receive salvation's offer; but verses 17-39 suppose a wider horizon.

JESUS REJECTED BY HIS GENERATION

Mt 11:1-12:50: This narrative section is about Jesus being rejected by his generation. In contrast he exalts John the Baptist and cries of joy for God's revelation to the little ones through Jesus himself. This prayer gives us a most important clue to his self-understanding as absolute Son of the absolute Father. A mutuality of unique knowledge and love between them is asserted. Then Jesus speaks as the Wisdom in person, as the giver of rest and comfort, inviting everybody to follow his interpretation of Moses' law. In comparison with that of the Pharisees, his own is quantitatively easier because shorter and centred on the essential, though it is qualitatively more difficult, because the demands of love of God and neighbour are unlimited.

THE KINGDOM'S PARABLES SPEECH

Mt 13:1-52: This third great speech consists of seven parables and some explanations of them. It is the high point of the entire Gospel. Everything is concentrated on God's kingdom, which, however, remains mysterious. But in Matthew understanding is a characteristic of the good disciple as we read at the end. He adds to Mark four peculiar parables: the weeds among the wheat, the treasure, the pearl and the dragnet. The second and the third stress the behaviour of those who joyfully sell all to possess the kingdom. The given interpretation of the other two is that the kingdom is a mix of saints and sinners. The final sorting out must be left to God and his angelic agents. In the meantime patient tolerance must guide those in it.



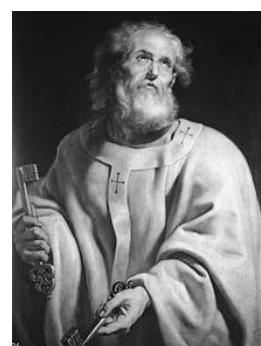
JESUS ACKNOWLEDGED BY HIS DISCIPLES

Mt 13:53-17:27: In this narrative section of his "Church book" (13:53-18:35), Matthew follows Mark very closely, but in three episodes (the walking on the water, the establishment of the Church and the paying of the temple tax) he gives prominence to Peter, associated with Jesus more than his fellow apostles. The new name he is given ("rock") symbolises his part in Jesus' new assembly. This end-time community is to have its beginning here on earth in the form of an organised society whose leader he is appointed.

Jesus saves Peter.

COMMUNITY SPEECH

Mt 18:1-35: This chapter, addressed to Peter and the other leading disciples, is about community relations. It gives rules for God's family until the kingdom comes, stressing littleness and brotherhood. Its different parts concern relations to outsiders, to those who are led, and to all within the community.



Peter in popes' dress with the kingdom's keys he was given by Jesus.

JESUS' AUTHORITY AND INVITATION

Mt 19:1-20:34: In this new narrative section Matthew again follows Mark, but inserts the parable of the workmen in the vineyard to explain that if God brings into his kingdom late-comers (sinners and pagans), those who were called first (the Jews) have no right to be offended.

Mt 21:1-22:46: Again Matthew follows Mark, but inserts two parables (the two sons and the wedding feasts) around that of the wicked tenants to stress its lesson about many Jews' refuse of God's salvation.

WOES AND END-TIME SPEECH

Mt 23:1-39: This is a new collection of harsh sayings against attitudes of Scribes and Pharisees, whose inner corruption leads to Jerusalem's destruction. It aims to warn again disciples and readers.

Mt 24:1-44: This end-time speech combines the announcement of Jerusalem's ruin with that of the end of the world. Though separated in time, the first event is the inevitable forerunner and foreshadow of the second. The kingdom's people are not spared from suffering, but will eventually win.

Mt 24:45-25:46: Matthew adds to Mark's end-time speech three parables on watchfulness (the conscientious steward, the ten wedding attendants and the talents), which prepare for Jesus' return and the great final judgment, when people will be judged by their works of mercy.

DEATH AND NEW BEGINNING

Mt 26:1-27:61: Matthew follows Mark again in narrating Jesus' passion. His several expansions generally flow from his source's narrative logic, developing three main themes: Christology (especially through prophetic knowledge and fulfilment), emphasis on Jews' responsibility, and a series of moral examples, primarily that of Jesus, but also of Peter and Judas, the women, other disciples, and the pagan soldiers.

Mt 27:62-28:15: Matthew presents Jesus' vindication by God increasing its dignity and splendour over against Mark. This event, accessible only to faith, is surrounded by peculiar passages on the guards at the tomb, in order to confirm the resurrection against Jews' lies diffused to the time of the Gospel's composition.

Mt 28:16-20: This brief ending is so rich that it would be hard to say more in the same number of words. The glorified Christ has on earth just as in heaven a limitless power received from his Father. His disciples use it in his name by baptising and forming Christians. According to Matthew's interest, they are to carry on Jesus' teaching ministry, focusing on this Gospel's great speeches. Their mission now is universal: salvation, first proclaimed to Israel as God's plan demanded, must be offered to all nations. In this so long and laborious work the Lord promises that, as Emmanuel, he will be always present and active with his own, until God's kingdom will come in fullness.

◊ Study questions:

1. The beatitudes are the core of Jesus' revelation of the Father and of the perfect morality. Report them according to Matthew and then propose ways of fulfil them in today context.
2. "You are the salt of the earth... you are the light of the world" (Mt 5:13). According to these words said by Jesus, what are the most important responsibilities we are given as his followers?
3. How would you help a Christian who doesn't go to Church basing himself on Jesus' words about praying in the secret? Use arguments from Jesus' life and teaching.
4. From Matthew 7:1-12, discuss Jesus' five important teachings on conduct leading to good relationship among his disciples (including today's Christians).
5. By giving five points, analyse Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce as presented in Matthew 19:3-12.
6. "Truly I say to you, the tax collectors and the harlots will go into the kingdom of God before you" (Mt 21:31). Explain the context of this harsh statement. What did Jesus actually mean by it? How is it applicable and fitting to Christians today?
7. "As you did this to one of the least of brothers of mine, you did it to me... As you neglected to do ... you neglected to do it to me" (cfr. Mt 25:31-46). Applying Jesus' presentation of the last judgment, give at least four points on how good works can benefit some special people in the society. Then show their religious importance according to the Gospel.

THE GOSPEL OF LUKE: JESUS, KIND BUT REJECTED PROPHET COME TO SAVE EVERYONE

◊ Who did write this Gospel and its complementary book?

This Gospel is **the first book of a two-part work** whose second one is the Acts of the Apostles. Taken together, they present **salvation history from the Baptist's and Jesus' conception to Paul's preaching in Rome**, the capital of pagan world. Their unique quality derives from the author's attractive personality, which shines throughout as of **both a most gifted writer and a man of marked sensibility**. The text doesn't yield his name nor provide enough information to deduce it. Yet the tradition has always identified him with **Luke, Paul's beloved physician from Antioch of Syria**. There is no reason why anyone would invent this datum making such minor figure the author of one quarter of the NT, nor why not to place the composition in this city, the third-largest in the Roman Empire, with a consistent Jewish presence. Indeed this Gospel addresses a mostly Greek Church with wealthy members that is painfully rethinking her mission in a hostile environment and facing internal controversies. On the last front she battles against Jewish Christians (represented in this Gospel's Pharisees) who are seeking to apply strict requirements to who wants to join the Church.

◊ When did Luke write?

It has been said that Luke wrote at the end of Paul's Roman house arrest (61-63 AD), because Acts stops then. Yet **he wrote after Mark** since, like Matthew, Luke depends on that Gospel (as well as on the source

called Q and his own particular traditions). Moreover his Gospel (21:5-38) knows of Jerusalem's destruction by the Romans in 70, but its date can be no later than the second generation of Christians, for he says (1:2) was informed by eyewitnesses. **The years 80-85 are then the probable time of composition.**

❖ *What worries did Luke answer?*

The reason he composed his books can be deduced from their main concerns. **Jerusalem's fall and its temple's destruction had raised many doubts about God's faithfulness.** If his promises to Israel had thus come to nothing, why should his promises in Christ be trusted? Luke answered showing that **God through Jesus was faithful, but in a surprising way to include pagans and mixed outcasts** as well as Israelites who regretted their initial refusal of Jesus. **Luke's main answer and attractive feature was presenting him as the kind but rejected prophet.** He, of course, made the most of the traditional portrayals of Jesus (as Messiah, Son of God, Suffering Servant, etc.), not only for their own value, but to boost the fact that **in him all of God's promises have been fulfilled.** But he depicted Jesus especially as the prophet of a new age (6:16 -21), who proclaimed God's love, mercy and forgiveness to all, and yet was rejected by his own people who thus refused what God had promised (6:22-30). So God didn't fail, the Jewish leaders did. Yet the repentance and fidelity of a chosen remnant (who Luke terms "the people", in Greek "λαός", from which we get the word laity) assures the move from the Old Israel to the New. Thus God keep on showing mercy to his people, even as he punishes them for rejecting his offer of salvation.

❖ *What is the main argument of Luke's writings?*

The main argument of Luke-Acts is the **continuity of salvation history through its central crossroads: Jesus' life and his Church's birth.** The Jews' persistent rejection of the Gospel and the mostly Gentile Christianity's ongoing alienation from the biblical people of promise caused a crisis: how could non-Jews find value in something which had its roots in Judaism but which most Jews repudiated? Facing this, to argue his thesis of the continuity between Old and New Israel, Luke had to establish the **historical link between Israel and Jesus on one hand (Gospel) and between Jesus and the Church on the other (Acts).** Thus he displayed the full span of God's plan in which the present Church proves to be the proper destination of his way with Israel. The same twelve men who witnessed the Christ event from the beginning, are there to guarantee the flawless continuity from Jesus' preaching of the kingdom in Galilee to the Church's proclamation of his resurrection in Rome. God's saving work through the Messiah Jesus, is fulfilled in the Church under the Holy Spirit's impetus and leadership.

❖ *What is God's place in Luke's Gospel?*

To say that God keeps his promises is to remind that the central character in Luke-Acts is he, who is at work through persons and nations, laws and institutions. Some Christians tend to forget what Luke highlights: **salvation history is God's story.** It is he who inspired prophets, called John the Baptist, sent Jesus, raised up him, and conveys the Holy Spirit. He is not the God only of Israel and the Church but also of Adam, of all nations, and of all creation. Since he continues with his plan, every time and place fits in it. His call of all in Christ is not limited to any culture. His word's embodiment in every one is the Holy Spirit's work which first happened to Jesus' mother. In return for his own faithfulness, **God requires obedient hearing and patient endurance.** It is not a short-lived decision, but a response which grows and matures. **Essential to it is prayer,** an important topic in Luke (3:21; 5:16; 6:12; 9:28; 11:1-8; 18:1-8).

❖ *What is Luke's position about the OT?*

Luke likes to show that God fulfilled his promises by Jesus' birth, life, death as well resurrection. He often refers to the OT, but differently from Matthew he does not try to cite precise texts. In his gospel Jesus criticises legalism and lays aside some rules of the Law, but defend its validity (16:17) and follows **Israel's tradition of prayer and worship.** So his Gospel begins and ends in the temple during prayer, the child Jesus is circumcised and is presented in the temple, and God's new people is founded on twelve apostles, a number symbolic of Israel. In Acts, the early Church continues to worship in Jewish temple and synagogues, and Paul himself, the main missionary to the pagans, strongly defends his loyalty to Judaism. Luke shows a particular understanding for the Jews; the passions stirred up by the separation between them and the nascent Church left their traces in both Matthew and John, but nowhere in Luke.

❖ *Did Luke write as historian or theologian?*

Before he wrote, **Luke investigated everything "from the beginning"** (1:3): this claim in his composition was usual in Greek historians' writings. At the same time his books form a major theological work, for the historian Luke is a believer. What he narrates is for him good news which he wants to share. His account therefore never has the cool tones of a description; it is always at the same time an exhortation to enter the marvellous life which he has discovered. **He uses history in the service of theology and with a pastoral purpose:** to confirm the ancient apostolic teaching, to clear doubts and difficulties that Greek converts would face in their new faith and to provide them with further reading for the sake of reflection and study.

❖ *What is Luke's geographical plan?*

Luke set to work with an eye to **exact information and orderly narrative**, but respect for his sources didn't lead him, any more than Mark or Matthew, to go after chronology. **He followed Mark's plan with some changes and omissions; the clearest difference is his great insertion (9:51-18:14) in which he uses the journey to Jerusalem as frame for his most particular information.** By this means he

brings out one of his chief notions: namely that **the Holy City is the chosen stage for the drama of salvation** (9:31; 13:33; 18:31; 19:11). Because it is from Jerusalem that the good news' proclamation to the whole world began (24:47; Act 1:8), **his Gospel had to start and end there** (1:5ff; 24:52ff): the risen Jesus' appearances and conversations recorded by Luke didn't take place in Galilee (24:13-51).

❖ *For Luke, who is called to salvation?*

Luke stresses more than the other Gospels that **God's visit is for salvation**: Jesus is a saviour (2:11), brings salvation (1:69; 19:9) and works saving acts (7:50; 8:36; 8:50). The salvation dominates in his typical parables, above all in those of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son (15:3-32). **The universality of the offer of salvation extends horizontally to the whole world through all of time, and vertically to all kinds of persons.** For this reason Luke cares **to situate Gospel events within world history (3:1-2) and to narrate the Church's spread to the ends of the earth** (Acts 1:8). His pagan origin and his wide travelling probably caused his **openness** to all groups of peoples, with **preference for minorities**: Samaritans, lepers, publicans, soldiers, despised public sinners, unlettered shepherds and the poor. In his view is also important the Gentiles' place among God's people.

❖ *What is Luke's most remarked feature?*

Luke's most remarked feature is his **concern for oppressed** and criticism of self-satisfied rich. His attention to the poor appears early in Mary's song (1:46-55), in the favour shown to the shepherds (2:8-14) and in the Baptist's social message (3:10-14). It is publicly announced by Jesus in his village's synagogue (4:16-21), and then becomes a refrain in his teaching (14:12,21). It is not that he turns his back on wealthy: he offers his good news to anyone (19:1-10) and rich women do follow him financing his mission (8:1-3). Even so, he states God's preference for the poor, the hungry, the mourners and the excluded (6:20-23), offering to poor, maimed, blind, and lame places at the great feast table (14:21-23). This is joined to a **challenge to human hopes and values**: God's saved people must produce "good fruits... evidence of repentance" (3:8). On this the gentle, tolerant Luke takes a firm stand, **insisting on complete detachment, especially from riches** (6:34ff; 12:33; 14:12-14,25-34; 16:9-13). Those who are powerful, who seek to justify themselves, who have no need of consolation and who despise the poor, are themselves lowered, or in the end, cut off from the people. On the contrary, those normally deemed unworthy or unimportant, **all who are rejected by human standards but accept God's presence in Jesus are raised up by him**, becoming part of the restored Israel (1:53; 4:18; 6:20-24; 7:22; 14:21; 16:19-31). Moreover, throughout his narrative Luke gives **positive attention to the women** (like Elizabeth, Anne, those who followed Jesus serving him, Martha and Mary, the first witnesses to Jesus' resurrection), and his portrayal of **the Virgin Mary as the model of faithful** symbolises the way God reverses human weakness.

Publicans
were Jews who collected taxes on behalf of Roman colonial authority. They tended to increase taxation for their own benefit. For both reasons they were regarded as public sinners.

❖ *What are some titles of Luke's Gospel?*

It is easy to see why Luke has been called **the Gospel of universal salvation, of prayer, of mercy, of the poor and of women**: these titles only hint at the richness of his version of the good news. These qualities, joint to that **joy in God and thankfulness for his gifts** which fill both Luke (2:14; 5:26; 10:17; 13:17; 18:43; 19:37; 24:51ff) and Acts, make them such a warm and human work.

❖ *Why did Luke add the Acts of the Apostles to his Gospel?*

Luke is the most modern of the Gospels. His Greek education has given him a concern for clarity. **He found it necessary to tell the story of the Church as well as that of Jesus:** the latter alone was not enough for his purpose. The salvation event includes both the ministry of Jesus and the proclamation by the Church. Luke is the only Synoptic to give the **Holy Spirit a major role** (1:15,35,41,67; 2:25-27; 4:1,14,18; 10:21; 11:13; 24:49). He shows that under Holy Spirit's leadership and impulsion **Jesus continues to live and act in human history through his Church**, so that his salvation ministry is still effective for people separated from him by place and time. Indeed, Luke is very concerned with her missionary expansion from Jerusalem to Rome.



❖ *A help to read the text:*

Lk 1:1-4: Luke alone introduces the Gospel with a finely crafted Greek sentence. This prologue contains the addressee (Theophilus might be Luke's patron, if he was a real person and not a false name for any reader, because it means "God's Friend") and the purpose of the book: to give an orderly account of Jesus' events read as having been fulfilled by God to save humans and inviting the reader to answer in faith.

DAWN OF GOD'S FULFILMENT OF PROMISE

Lk 1:5-25: The announcement of John the Baptist's birth is the first of seven stories in Luke's Infancy Gospel (1-2). Their thrust lies in the statements (by Gabriel, Mary, Elizabeth, Zechariah, the angel saying to the shepherds, Simeon and the 12-year-old Jesus) which cause in us awareness of what is happening. Luke invites to believe in Jesus as Saviour, Christ and Lord in reflecting not only upon his resurrection but also upon his life's beginning. He asks for a deeper faith in God, whose grace is sovereign and generous.

beyond measure, creating possibilities in impossible situations. Luke wants us to take in the joy, trust, endurance, expectation and exultation of Mary and all those who responded to the faithful God's actions in their lives.

Lk 1:26-38: Parallel to the first, this second story refers to the annunciation, i.e. the revelation to the Virgin Mary that she will conceive and bear a child who shall be the Son of God. Her wholehearted answer to God's plan contrasts Zechariah's, the righteous priest who failed to believe.

Lk 1:39-56: The so called "visitation" brings together the two mothers-to-be so that Elizabeth's child might be presented as the forerunner of Mary's child. Both women extol praises: after the Virgin, as model believer, is congratulated by Elizabeth for her trust in God's faithfulness, she herself exalts God as active in her life and in all humans. Her revolutionary song (whose first word in Latin is "Magnificat") is the initial one among four in this Gospel.



Lk 1:57-80: After providing sufficient narrative detail to keep his drama moving, Luke stops the action to translate it through a second marvellous song (whose first word in Latin is "Benedictus") in which Zechariah praises God for what he has done in Jesus and then foretells John's role as his forerunner.

First fruits are much sought after: what we have first seems to us to be best. So, from the beginning, humans offered to God/gods the first fruits of the harvest. It also happened in Canaan that the firstborn could be offered in sacrifice, especially in dramatic situations. God forbade this kind of sacrifice: the Israelites had to redeem their firstborns, offering an animal instead.

Lk 2:1-21: In Jesus' birth and circumcision, parallel to the story on John's, again Jesus appears in advantage. The angels' song (whose first word in Latin is "Gloria") presents him as the Davidic Messiah who will lead to the end-time gift of peace. In the powerlessness of his babyhood Jesus is the Saviour and bringer of peace to all in contrast to the mighty Roman ruler, Caesar Augustus, worshipped as Saviour and peace's source. His worldwide census causes the baby to be born in Bethlehem, the place of the promise, and in connection with the whole humankind. The angel's revelation is accepted by lowly shepherds and pondered by Mary, who models the need of reflecting on salvation events in Jesus, though she doesn't understand all at once.

Lk 2:22-40: Jesus' presentation in Jerusalem's temple as the consecrated one is the setting for the dual witness of Simeon and Anna. Its focus is Luke's fourth song (whose first words in Latin are "Nunc Dimitiss"), with his characteristic theme of universalism. The two old persons embody both Israel's waiting for the Lord and God's service as heart of temple worship. The pair expresses that man and woman stand together and side by side before God, as Jesus and Mary who is told that she will partake in her Son's sufferings.

Lk 2:41-52: This story anticipates Jesus' later journey to Jerusalem and reveals his relationship to his Father. Luke concludes his Infancy Gospel in the temple, where it started, and prepares for the whole Gospel's end, which describes Jesus' disciples in the temple, praising God. Verse 49 records Jesus' first words: no longer others, but he himself states who he is, the Son of God. His answer to Mary's anguished question is that he did only what the Son should do, that is, to be with his Father. With this term he unlocks his mystery. Afterward he willingly submits to obedience, foretelling the cross, while Mary continues her journey of faith.

PREPARATION FOR JESUS' PUBLIC MINISTRY

Lk 3:1-20: This section on John the Baptist, set in the context of world and religious history, describes his call to prepare the Lord's ways, depicts how ordinary and outcast folks got ready and highlights the difference between John and the Messiah.

Lk 3:21-4:13: Luke devotes three sections to the question of who is the Jesus near to start his ministry: God's beloved Son and Holy Spirit's agent, culmination of God's plan for creation, faithful Son who conquers evil's powers. Jesus' ministry begins at baptism with prayer (3:22) as it will end with prayer (22:46), because his power to save stems from God through the Holy Spirit, given in response to prayer. If Luke's and Matthew's genealogies have more differences than similarities, it is because both don't intend to provide family records, but to explain what Jesus means for the salvation of all. Luke places the final temptation in Jerusalem, where Jesus had to overcome all of them on the cross.



MINISTRY IN GALILEE

Lk 4:14-30: This programmatic account of Jesus' ministry is a prime example of Luke's ordering of materials according to fulfilment's principle. For the Christ's initial self-presentation, he uses a passage from Mark which doesn't concern the beginning of Jesus' ministry and a summarized text from Isaiah which explains he has the Spirit to help who is economically, physically and socially unlucky. This first of six incidents dealing with Jesus' activities on the Sabbath explains this day is inferior to him for he has to fulfil God's promises to such people.

Lk 4:31-44: This well-knit unity is based on Mark 1:21-39.

Lk 5:1-11: This passage makes four major points: these fishermen give Jesus the first truly positive response; he calls them to follow his life-style known from chapter 4; Luke starts to paint his admiring portrait of Peter; Peter's missionary success, like his catch of fish, is not his own doing, but the Lord's.

Mary embraces Elizabeth.

Lk 6:12-49: After Jesus' choice of twelve associates who symbolise the new Israel and continue his proclamation of the kingdom, the speech on the plain details what membership in it entails. Through his version, shorter than Matthew's speech on the mountain (5-7), Luke preaches to his fellow Greek Christians, some of whom are wealthy, about imitating God's generosity by lending money, forgiving debts and giving kindly, without falling back into the worldly principle of reciprocity and expect to be returned any help.

Lk 7:1-9:6: This section highlights Jesus as crossing over boundaries separating clean from unclean to restore people to life and community. It begins with stories of Jesus curing a sick man and raising to life a dead boy (a peculiarly Lucan narrative among many from Mark). It ends with stories of Jesus curing a sick woman and raising a dead girl to life. Throughout pulses the theme of who does and who doesn't respond generously to God's messengers. When we eventually read that Jesus sent forth the Twelve to heal and preach as he himself did, we know well what that activity involve and who will respond to them.

Lk 9:7-50: This section uses passages from Mark but with many omissions. It functions as a switching station between Jesus' Galilean ministry and his long journey to Jerusalem (9:51-19:27). Obedient to God's will (9:22,44), Jesus goes on his way to the city that symbolizes the continuity between old and new in God's plan. There Jesus will complete his exodus (9:31) to God and from there the Christian mission will travel to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). On his way to Jerusalem, Jesus teaches his disciples and witnesses the meaning of his way that leads to life in God. He instructs them about missionary travels, prayer and the use of possessions, and delivers challenging parables. Neither Jesus' journey nor the Christians' one will be free from trials. As we walk with him, we should be mindful of his Father's imperative, "Listen to him" (9:35), the faithful and resolute Son who teaches in words and deeds.

THE LONG WAY TO JERUSALEM

Lk 9:51-62: Jesus meets with opposition from the start of his journey to Jerusalem just as it was at the beginning of his Galilean ministry. But he is firm in fulfilling God's will without revenge against enemies. Three sayings challenge to view life from a totally new angle: that of discipleship as following him.

Lk 10:1-24: This is Luke's longest reflection on the mission's nature and on its joys and sorrows' causes.

Lk 10:25-37: A powerful lesson about mercy toward anyone in need, the Good Samaritan's parable proclaims that non-Jews can observe the law and thus enter into eternal life. Jesus' final question turns the lawyer's on its head: don't ask about who belongs to God's people and thus deserves my neighbourly attention, but rather ask about the conduct required from you as a member of God's chosen people.

Lk 10:38-42: Balancing the precedent lesson on merciful activity, this passage teaches that all following of Jesus depends on careful listening to his word, which is the best part. To the fore is Luke's universalism as he depicts Jesus acting contrary to Jews' cultural norms, especially teaching a woman in her own house.

Lk 11:1-13: Luke writes a catechism on prayer for Greek Christians, whose knowledge of God needs development and who need support to keep on praying in a hostile environment. To have its own distinctive form of prayer was and still is the mark of a religious community. Luke's form of the Our Father has only five petitions. In answer to the prayer of Jesus' disciples, who want to pray, live and act as he did, God gives them the gift of the Holy Spirit, who sums up joy, strength, courage for witness and therefore for life.

Lk 11:14-36: Luke links here disparate passages around controversies about the source of Jesus' kingdom power, alternating teachings on Christology and discipleship.

Lk 11:37-54: The amazement of Jesus' host at his failure to ritually wash before the meal provides the occasion for Jesus' speech at table against Pharisees.

Lk 12:1-59: Pharisees' opposition against Jesus will continue in that to be experienced by his disciples. It finds an ally in human greed. Besides these external problems, there are the internal ones caused by selfish Church officials. Finally we are told that both the Pharisees and the crowds are guilty of hypocrisy.

Lk 13:1-30: Though Jesus is kind, he requires anyone to repent before it is too late. Afterward he shows in action the meaning of God's kingdom, and illustrates it through two comforting parables on its growth. Then he stresses again the need for repentance through total commitment to himself.

Lk 13:31-14:35: In front of opposition, Luke highlights Jesus' obedience to God's will and his loving care for the holy city. Again at table Jesus teaches the right behaviour and presents himself as the host of God's end-time banquet, to which all are invited, though many fail to accept the offer. The last verses develop the full hearted-response needed facing God's gratuity call.

Lk 15:1-32: Joy fills these three parables about the lost and found sheep, coin and son, in which Luke backs God's mercy which breaks through all human restrictions of how he should act toward sinners. His mercy, indeed, is as foolish as a shepherd who dumps 99 sheep to save 1, as a woman who turns her house upside down to recover a little sum, and as a Jewish father who joyfully welcomes home his son become a pagan. Because disciples have such a God, they can trustingly get on Jesus' way to him. Self-righteous people are challenged to make merry with converted sinners and the God who delights in their company.

Lk 16:1-17:10: The peak of this chapter on using possession to benefit others is the two-steps story about the poor Lazarus. Will the rich man's five brothers (and we readers) follow his example or heed OT and Jesus' teaching about care of the needy?

Lk 17:11-19: The Samaritan's thanks and faith show that salvation is for all peoples.

Lk 17:20-18:8: Luke's first end-time speech stresses the speed of Jesus' coming and the people's need to be prepared for it. The final parable teaches in particular the importance of steadfast perseverance.



Peter, James and John contemplating Jesus' glory among Moses and Elijah on a mountain at night.

Lk 18:9-17: In this new parable, Luke keeps on teaching to pray, but especially to stop self-confident boasting on one's good deeds, though they are a must. In contrast with the Pharisee, disciples should approach God as little child with no medals of achievement.

Lk 18:18-43: These verses are based on Mark 10:17-52.

Lk 19:1-27: Zacchaeus' story shows how Jesus' presence and love bring about what is humanly impossible: a rich man frees himself from liking wealth and so gets through the needle's eye! The following parable pushes for courage in responding to Jesus, the king whose role in human future is decisive. His disciple has to take the risks of his decisions, without being paralysed by fear.

JESUS REJECTED BY JERUSALEM

Lk 19:28-21:38: Here Luke depends largely on Mark 11:1-13-37, though developing his own themes. Jesus, the king who brings God's peace, takes possession of the temple and there teaches the people daily. All that he teaches highlights who he is and what true worship is. This teaching amid controversy with religious leaders predicts opposition for the members of the new Israel, whose cornerstone is Jesus, the rejected one.

Lk 22:1-23:56a: While basically following Mark's account of Jesus' passion, Luke stresses both the saving power of the suffering righteous one, and God's graciousness in vindicating him. He promotes deeper faith in Jesus and a more eager commitment to follow his path to God.

JESUS' VINDICATION, PROMISE OF THE SPIRIT AND ASCENSION

Lk 23:56b-24:12: Through appearances of the risen Christ in Jerusalem the disciples journey from sorrow to joy and have their eyes opened to see in him what God has in store for all.

Lk 24:13-35: This fine, unique story shines with Luke's themes, like journey, faith as seeing, and hospitality.

Lk 24:36-53: This mainly Lucan material mixes together the themes of peace, table fellowship, God's promises fulfilled in Jesus, forgiveness of sins, Jerusalem, witness, Holy Spirit, Jesus' completion of his journey to God, and temple. The whole Gospel culminates in the disciples' posture: they worship Jesus.



Peter crying after denying
Jesus at night.

❖ Study questions:

1. Using Mary's song "Magnificat" as an example, show how Luke describes Jesus' mission as evidence of God's concern for the poor and the down-trodden.
2. "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (Lk 2:49) Briefly narrate the story and then give three lessons drawn from it.
3. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me..." (Lk 4:18). Why did Jesus use these prophetic words? How do they relate to his followers' mission?
4. "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets" (Lk 5:5). Give the context of this statement and then write down what this story teach you.
5. "Truly I tell you, not even in Israel have I seen such faith" (Lk 7:9). Explain the event which led Jesus to say these words, and then write down what does it teach us today?
6. Mention three conditions for becoming Jesus' disciple as written by Luke and then explain the way we have to fulfil them today.
7. Luke's gospel is a useful weapon to fight for and defend human rights because of its concern for underprivileged people. Discuss this statement using four such groups by citing two examples for each of them.
8. "All those in need are my neighbours". Support this statement by referring to the Good Samaritan's parable.
9. Relate the parable of the rich fool and that of the dishonest steward and explain what challenge we Christians have to get from Jesus' attitude toward assets?
10. Luke's Gospel presents the parables of the lost sheep, coin and son. What did cause Jesus to give these three parables? Summarise that of the prodigal son and then interpret it taking into consideration the father, the two sons and the feast. Suggest three solutions for restoring youths who have nothing to do and are involving themselves in crimes.
11. Relate the lost son's parable and our contemporary situation.
12. It is believed that Luke was a Gentile who wrote his Gospel mainly for Gentiles. Give eight reasons to support this statement.
13. Explain four sources of conflict Jesus had with Jewish religious leaders as reported by Luke, and then show the teachings Jesus gave them in each conflict story.
14. "Luke's Gospel advocates women's empowerment". Discuss this statement by using at least five occasion from the Gospel itself.

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN: JESUS, GOD'S WISDOM BECOME OUR WAY, TRUTH AND LIFE

❖ Who did write the fourth Gospel?

This Gospel, holding the fourth place in the lists, is the end-stage of a slow process that has brought together parts of different times, with corrections, additions and revisions. Its **lack of unity in both structure and style and of consistency in events' succession** suggests it had more than one author. But this unique presentation of Jesus has its roots in the Church's early tradition; moreover **its witness claims being apostolic** and depending on Jesus' beloved disciple, **John, at first a fisherman but may be also a Jew priest**, son of Zebedee and Salome. He must always be considered **a source in his own right**, for he was among Jesus' very first followers, lived beneath to him, was faithful until the cross and was the first apostle to reach his tomb and the faith in his resurrection. This book, however, is also the result of **many years of search for a deeper insight of Jesus' mystery**. All this was **published by the eyewitness' disciples soon after his death**. Unwilling to dump a number of fragments, they inserted them into the Gospel though uncertain of their right place (so, chapters 15-17 were placed after the farewell of 14:31). This final redaction should be dated **about 95-100 at Ephesus** in Asia Minor, the centre for John's last years, where perhaps he and his followers moved because of Jews' costly persecution against them. John presumes the readers to be already familiar with Jesus' story, its persons and places, and also with Christian beliefs such as his titles, baptism, Lord's Supper, and Spirit. Then, they must be **Greek-speaking Jews who didn't believe in Jesus** (20:30-31), but also **Christians whose faith needed being built up or corrected**.

John's position at table with Jesus during his Last Supper.

❖ *How did John develop his faith's understanding?*

John developed his understanding through **many years of meditation on his own experience with Jesus and on that of his Church's while giving witness to it in different environments** (14:26; 16:12-15). Both friendly and unfriendly encounters with groups both inside and outside her influenced John's thought and book. Because of his conviction that **what happens to the Church guided by the Holy Spirit happens to Christ**, the faith reflection on her history was incorporated into the Gospel. John broadened and deepened his theology as his Church gradually admitted **Jewish Christians** whose understanding of Jesus was close to that of the Synoptics, **Samaritans** with their own traditions, **Jewish Christians from outside the Holy Land** with their more universal outlook, and **Greeks** who caused her to look far beyond Jewish thought's borders. At the same time, the opposition by outside groups caused John's Church to think and rethink. There were, for example, **Pharisee leaders** who expelled Christians from Judaism (22-23; 16:1-4a) and whose hostility is responsible for the condemnation of the "Jews", how this Gospel call them. The **Baptist's followers** trying to exalt him more than Jesus resulted in the insistence on his subordination to Jesus (1:35-37; 3:1-3; 10:40-42). **Jews who feared to admit publicly their faith in him** were encouraged in such figures as Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea (3:1-36; 7:50-51; 19:38-42). **Jewish Christians who accepted Jesus as Messiah but not as God** and who didn't hold the Eucharist as his sacramental flesh and blood are represented by the disciples who no longer walk with him (6:60-66). Peter represents **other apostolic communities** who moderated that inclination of John's Church to reject authoritative shepherds which ragged her at the end of the 1st century, as his epistles show.

❖ *What is John's historical value?*

There is growing agreement on **John's independence and historical value**. Recent discoveries have confirmed he is more precise than the Synoptics about chronology and geography. Many truthful details display his close familiarity with Jews' mind and practices. He represents **Jesus as transcendent and yet real and entirely human**, with our body and our psychology, simple and humble even in his risen glory. Finally, no one has stressed more than him that he does testify to what actually happened, the "flesh" of history. If John had not been convinced of the historical truth of all he wrote, his work would remain an enigma. But in this context history is different from modern concept. Following Jesus' resurrection and his sending out of the Spirit, this Gospel escorts us beyond the external into the depth of words and events that come from God and lead back to him. **John's absorbing concern was the "meaning" of Jesus' both divine and human events** which flowered in time but were rooted in eternity. So he carefully selected them, choosing those which could be presented symbolically: no understanding of John is possible without appreciating symbolism. It is used not just to elucidate what is hidden, but to make it come alive giving it new overtones. **His universal symbols don't compromise history but presupposes it**, for they are inherent in the events. John saw **spiritual depths even in the most material elements of Jesus' history** and how in him were realized the "types" of the OT (1:29; 2:21; 3:14; 6:35; 10:11; 15:1). This is the cause of its being called "the spiritual Gospel". **It suggests rather than spells out**, it evokes rather than explains. The words in it are very simple, everyday words, yet specialists have still not succeeded in plumbing their depths. It is a storehouse of riches: whenever we read it, we discover new insights missed before. John deliberately begins from concrete things and situations, but he shows how they can bring us to a higher level, to create a bond with God.



❖ *Why is John's Gospel very keen on worship?*

John relates Jesus' life to Jewish liturgical year and associates his miracles with its principal celebrations: three feasts of Passover (2:13; 6:4; 11:55), one unnamed feast which happened to be the Sabbath (5:1), one feast of Shelters (7:2) and one feast of Dedication (10:22). Naming a feast creates an atmosphere for the reader and provides a religious frame to present Jesus' claims and ministry. He does step into the context of the feasts fulfil their promise

and open up the future. In so doing, he makes his own the worship symbols of sacred time, bread, water, light, sacred space, and shepherding, associated with these feast days. Moreover, the setting for both Christ's miracles and speeches is often the temple. This Gospel's plan thus implies that **Jesus fulfilled the Jewish religion's institutions**, bringing them to an end. **The Christians then don't need to miss them** after the temple was demolished and they were expelled from the synagogues: in Jesus they have God's presence and saving work. He himself is the definitive temple, altar and lamb of sacrifice, **the focus of a religion restored "in Spirit and in truth"** (4:24), **but also expressed and realized in sacraments**, which often crops up in John, especially baptism (3:1-21) and Eucharist (6). It is liturgy where Jesus' words and deeds make sense. The whole Gospel is pervaded by the concept of the Christian Passover replacing the Jewish one, like the soul's cleansing by Word (15:3) and Spirit (20:22ff) replaces Jewish purifying rites: so, **Jesus' life is directly related to a liturgical Christianity.**

❖ *What is the main perspective of John?*

From John's opening words **Jesus is presented as the revelation of the Father**, the bodily manifestation of his presence, his truth, his power and his love. Whatever people ask him, Jesus has only one answer: the Father. Jesus is always completely free, completely himself, but at the same time he is totally related to the Father, with the Father. He is **the Word made flesh, come to give life** (1:14): this **Incarnation dominates John's thought**. Jesus is sent to declare God's secrets bearing witness to all he has seen and heard from the Father. **As credentials he has been given certain works to perform which require more than human power;** through them is hinted **his glory to be revealed fully when he will be "lifted up"** (Isa 53:12) to return to the Father by way of the cross to resume the glory he had "before the world was made" (17:5ff,24). **Jesus' miracles**, then, while similar to those in the Synoptics, have a different function in John. He calls them signs, each of them **revealing some aspect of Jesus' mission** to make known the Father. So, a blind man's healing illustrates that Jesus is the light of the world, the multiplication of bread presents him as the bread of life and Lazarus' raising manifests him as the resurrection and the life. These **richly symbolic signs, seven in numbers**, make up the first part of the Gospel (1-12).

❖ *Why has John's Gospel long speeches associated with the signs?*

Associated with the signs, and often **intimately interpretative of them, are Jesus' long speeches that are, in effect, prolonged and deep meditations on his person and mission**, i.e. on his relationship to the Father and the people to whom he is God's self-revelation. Often these speeches are **spoken in dialogue** with Jesus' disciples or enemies, as John tries **to develop the Incarnation as both revelatory and redemptive**.



In this gospel a speech (for example, 8:12-20) is shaped by repetitions, antitheses, inclusions, and chiasms. It progresses in a spiral: in each construction the thought is self-contained, but when we take it with the next section, we are led to look at it on a deeper level. Another technique is the **misperception by Jesus' friends and enemies of what he says and which often turns on a double meaning** (2:19-21; 3:3-5; 4:10-15; 4:31-34; 6:32-35; 6:51-53; 7:33-36; 8:21-22; 8:31-35; 8:51-53; 8:56-58; 11:11-15; 11:23-25; 12:32-34; 13:36-38; 14:4-6; 14:7-9; 16:16-19). It is also characteristic of John to break into the narrative and **speak in his own voice as the reliable interpreter of Jesus** (2:21; 6:6,71; 7:39; 8:27; 12:33; 13:11; 18:32; 21:19,23). Sometimes he provides a looking back comment that indicates the understanding achieved after the resurrection (2:22; 12:16; 13:7; 20:9).

❖ *What is the definitive sign?*

The definitive sign of God's presence and love in Jesus is his glorification. In John it includes his death, resurrection and return to the Father. This final revelation and its implications are explained by Jesus in the Farewell Speeches to his disciples (13:31-16:33), and are portrayed by John in his highly theological narrative of Jesus' trial, crucifixion and triumph over death. **The plot of the Gospel is focused on this "hour"** through cycles of acceptance and progressive rejection. Beyond the Jews who unwanted Jesus looms something more fundamental: the world (1:9-10), i.e. **the darkness controlled by Satan who challenges God and his Anointed. Everybody is involved** in this dramatic conflict of the spirit: the world, face to face with the Word, receives its verdict (12:31-32) and admits

Roman governor Pontius Pilate judging Jesus on Good Friday.

defeat (16:7-11,33).

❖ *Why has John's Gospel been described as a Book of Witnesses and a Trial of Jesus?*

It is amazing, in so spiritual a book, to be plunged into the heart of a trial. Legal terms appear constantly. In many ways John's gospel resembles **a trial with the themes of witness and judgment running through it**. Dramatic examples are the accusation following the healing at the Pool of Bethesda, the cure of the blind man at the Pool of Siloam, the Sanhedrin's meeting following Lazarus' raising, the Roman trial of Jesus by Pilate and the story of the adulteress. The opposition suggests that Jesus cannot produce another witness to confirm his own testimony, or if he can, then he is being challenged to do so. Jesus' answer could be read as: "Of course there is a witness other than myself, in fact there are several: it is the Father who empowers my deeds, sent John the Baptist, inspired the Scriptures and appointed Moses, all of whom are my witnesses". Jesus is on trial throughout the book, but **in keeping with John's ironic attitude it is those putting him on trial who are really under examination** for they are more

interested in their own image, than in the unique opportunity of seeing God's glory revealed in Jesus. The Son of Man was expected to pass judgment at the end of time. Yet Jesus doesn't want to condemn, but to save; however he is the light that forces people to reveal themselves as they truly are: in their choice for or against him they get their own judgment. Those who refuse him are guilty and place themselves outside the order of salvation, for it is the refusal of God' loving rule revealed in his envoy's coming.

❖ *What was John's final aim in writing his Gospel?*

John proclaims that Jesus is Messiah and son of God so that **the reader may believe in him to reach life** (20:31). His favourite vocabulary consists of expressions on new life and new birth (the word ζωή, zoe, is used 36 times). It is the gospel of the great life-giving metaphors: Jesus proclaims his relationship with the community in terms of his being the bread of life, the true vine, the way, the truth and the life, the light of the world, the good shepherd, the door of the sheepfold, the resurrection, the life and the donor of life-giving water. In these sayings Jesus discloses what the Father has given humans in the Son: the fact that they are seven is hardly accidental. At the same time he shows what people should do to draw benefit from the gifts his presence brings: come to him, believe in him, follow him and remain in him. Finally, in John, Jesus uses the formula "I am" even as an absolute on four occasions: it corresponds to God's own name of old, YHWH. He is able to give life because God's life is in him in original and inexhaustible fullness. He can give God because he is one with God, for he is the Son. He himself is the gift, he is life. If all life flowed through the Word, and **he has come to give life abundantly** (10:10), he does confirm and perfect the African culture, whose fundamental principle is life. Wars, corruption, bribery and the like destroy life and must be banished. Moreover, this abundance of life is not just private happiness, not individual joy. It is the world having attained its rightful form, the unity of God and the world. It concerns not only this earth and our relatives or tribe, but is offered eternally to all humans.

THE SEVEN "I AM..." SAYINGS IN JOHN

"I am the bread of life" (6:35)
"I am the light of the world" (8:12)
"I am the gate" (10:9)
"I am the good shepherd" (10:11)
"I am the resurrection and the life" (11:25)
"I am the way, the truth and the life" (14:8)
"I am the vine" (15:1,5).

❖ *How did John use the concepts of life and death, light and darkness?*

As researchers recover the diversity of 1st century Judaism, John's background comes more sharply into focus. He was influenced by the Essenes who, in view of an imminent coming of God, **stressed the importance of knowledge, unity and mutual love, and contrasted pairs** as life/death (3:36), light/darkness (1:5; 3:19-21; 8:12; 12:35-36,46), truth/lie (8:44-45) and spirit/flesh (1:13; 3:6; 6:63), above/below (8:23), heaven/earth (3:31), God/Satan (13:27). John used **in a spiritual and ethical sense this dualism** characteristic of the original Jew-Christian setting. He did so to present the division between believers, who are righteous and have eternal life, and unbelievers, who are under God's judgment. But he didn't support the notion of good and evil as equally powerful and contending forces in the universe or the vision of spirit as good and matter as evil.

❖ *What other contributions can John give African religious culture?*

In John, Jesus is primarily the Father's revelation. Our continent's traditions are rich in concepts and descriptions of God (Creator, Potter, Father, Provider, etc.). Despite this wealth it remains true for Africans as for any other people, that **no one has ever seen God. "The only Son... has revealed him" (1:18)**. Our human knowledge of God, based on religious instinct or philosophical reasoning alone, will always remain imperfect and even faulty without Christ, the only one who can complete it. Moreover, **some African names of God are also good to say who Jesus is:** for example a name like Sun for God can help Africans to understand Jesus as the Light of the World. Likewise, in African religions God is usually approached through mediators such as ancestors who, because of their closeness to him, can facilitate our relationships with him. So, **Africans should be able to appreciate Jesus' role as the mediator and the way to the Father: he is our main ancestor.** Finally, John's Prologue speaks of the eternal Word who became flesh. In our continent the word is believed to be powerful: it can destroy or build up. **God's Word doesn't wipe out but save the world. Our words must participate in his Word in order to bring peace** and build up African society and Church. Are our words doing so or are we poisoning our communities through them?

❖ **A help to read the text:**

PROLOGUE

In 1:1-18: This prologue adapted an earlier song to the eternal Word and his activity in creation, in guiding and illuminating humans (who often reject God's wisdom), and then to his incarnation which has enabled them to partake of God's fullness. It gives an advance of what is to come in the body of the Gospel, introducing the central character (it is both Jesus and his Father, since their unity functions as a single driving force throughout), the main themes (life, truth, witness, dwelling, glory and the world) and a summary of the plot. So it provides an advantaged understanding of Jesus' origin and identity in order to help us to assess critically the other characters and to appreciate the irony and dramatic effects in the various events and conversations.

BOOK OF SIGNS

In 1:19-51: John the Baptist ties together the preceding verses and the following narrative which supports the lofty expression of faith in the prologue. He fulfills his role as witness first by denying any claim about himself, then by pointing to Jesus as the "Lamb of God", and finally by sending his own disciples to him. This section, built around a collection of messianic titles, starts the narrative of Jesus' ministry known

as "Book of Signs" (1:19-12:50) which culminates in his rejection by "his own".

In 2:1-12: The wedding at Cana is the peak of the initial series of days inaugurating Jesus' ministry. It forms also an inclusion with the crucifixion scene where the "hour" introduced at Cana is fulfilled, the "glory" first manifested there is established, and the "mother of Jesus" (called by him "woman", an allusion to her rich symbolism in the OT) figures in the final scene of the public ministry as she did at its inauguration. This first "sign" refers to a nuptial setting and imagery against which Jesus, in conformity to the Synoptics, is portrayed as Israel's bridegroom: he becomes the host and provides abundant wine for the messianic banquet.

In 2:13-25: Jesus' dramatic challenge in Jerusalem's temple is a sign, even if not a miraculous one. It is a symbolic narrative, especially in the second part, where the saying about destroying the temple fits into the unfolding revelation of Jesus' relationship to the Father, and opens onto the future presence of the Risen Lord and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the community. It prepares also for the saying on "true worshippers" in 4:21.

In 3:1-36: Jesus' two programmatic actions as bridegroom and Lamb of God are followed by a series of three representative responses, each foreshadowing a significant mission of the Church: Jews, Samaritans and Greeks. They are arranged in geographical order representing local, social, cultural and religious distance from the centre of Judaism in Jerusalem. In typical ironic style the responses are in reverse order to the distance. The first is that of Nicodemus, a teacher in Israel, who remains confused and falls silent, represents the devout Jews having problems in believing to Jesus.

In 4:1-42: In contrast to Nicodemus who came by night and faded away letting Jesus talking to himself, the nameless Samaritan woman, member of a people regarded by the Jews as half caste, heretical, inferior and unclean, engaged in lively dialogue with Jesus in the full light of day. Its main stress is on the place and nature of true worship, resulting from Samaritans' two great questions, whether they belonged to the covenant people and whether their own worship was valid. The whole scene, charged with wedding symbolism, is one of growing recognition and witness.

In 4:43-54: This short story is extremely significant, for it brings to a climax the three stories of emerging faith in Jesus. The (may be Gentile) official came to believe him without seeing any evidence: this is the authentic faith that leads to life, the stated purpose of John's gospel. But afterwards it will stress more negative reactions: lack of faith, division among the crowd, and open hostility to Jesus, especially by the authorities. The underlying pattern is of two parties in dispute on the revelation, whether it is in Jesus' truth or in Moses' law. These displays of opposition take place for the most part in the temple area during a series of Jewish feasts (ordered as they occur during the year). They reach a crossroads with Jesus' final withdrawal to the far side of Jordan where his mission began (10:40-42), and arrive to a peak after Lazarus' raising until the Jews persuade Pilate to hand Jesus over for crucifixion.

In 5:1-47: A cripple's healing on the Sabbath occasioned a speech on Jesus' relationship to the Father and his power to give life. It illustrates the point implied in 4:50: the real source of faith is Jesus' word, not the signs. His declaration that he is the Father's agent on earth, acting and speaking on God's behalf, gathers force in the following chapters as he makes deep claims about his identity (eternal existence and unity with the Father) and authority. The discussion has a nature of trial, for Jesus' utterances give rise to charges of blasphemy to which he responds in a way that cause attempts to arrest and kill him (by stoning). Several times it is said the Jews desired to do so, but God's plan was an obstacle until the time would arrive.

In 6:1-71: This new section (the scene switches from Jerusalem to Galilee) parallels the sequence of events in Mark 6:30-54 and 8:11-33: multitude's feeding in the desert, walking on the sea, request for a sign, comment on bread, Peter's confession, Passion. The three temptations presented by Matthew and Luke after Jesus' baptism (to fulfil physical need, to grasp at power and to impress with signs) are all present here as the crowds follow Jesus because of the physical food they have received, as they desire to make him king, and as they demand from him a sign. The Israelites didn't understand Moses, and now they misunderstand Jesus. In John the Eucharist's institution is not described during the Last Supper, but its teaching is contained here: Jesus' stress on eating his flesh and drinking his blood corresponds to his words in the Synoptics during that supper. He not only gives, but is the bread come down from heaven.

In 7:1-52: In this and the following chapters, Jesus sets his identity in relief against the main symbols (water and light) and historical figures (Moses and Abraham) associated with the feast of the Shelters. In the context of the water and light rituals Jesus proclaims himself the source of life-giving water and the light of the world. In discussions about Moses and Abraham he reveals his own superior origins and authority.

In 7:53-8:11: This well known story of Jesus and the woman taken in adultery presents him alike the merciful Jesus of Luke but, in John's context, it takes on and further highlights the nearby Christology. It is placed in this section where there is an ongoing stress on the Jews' judgment and condemnation of Jesus, set in ironic opposition to his own role as God-appointed judge and Son of Man with power over life and death. Left alone with the woman, Jesus acts as the serene judge balancing forgiveness and the injunction not to sin again.

In 8:12-59: In his speech at the Treasury Jesus declares himself the light of the world through the truth he brings to set free whom receives it.

In 9:1-41: The one who has declared himself light now gives sight to a man born in darkness. The account symbolically presents the way one comes to believe in Jesus and to take on the task of witnessing to him. This is the only story in Jesus' ministry where he is not the main character: the blind man takes centre stage. In opposition to the unthankful cripple of chapter 5, he argues Jesus must be "from God", not the sinner that the Jewish teachers claim he is. After the man's expulsion from the synagogue, Jesus reveals himself to be the "Son of Man", and the healed man comes to worship him with true faith. This story showed John' disciples how had to react when confronted with hostile authorities.

In 10:1-21: Jesus continues to comment on leadership and authority, their nature and how they would be acquired and exercised. He introduces an image field which can be approached from many angles and applied to many aspects. He really is who he claims to be: the model shepherd and the door of the sheepfold, in contrast to his opponents, whom he describes as thief, stranger and hireling, refusing their claim to lead Israel. At end, he spells out the price of shepherding, the commitment which knows no limits: the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. The following chapter will show how he does so for his friend Lazarus by coming to restore his life in a situation where Jesus will certainly face death.

In 10:22-42: In connection with the precedent two chapters, a new clash occurs at the Feast of Dedication three months after Shelters. Jesus sums up his relationship with the Father in the words: "The Father and I are one". Their oneness is such that one's words and works are the other's words and works. However close their unity is, it is never a fusion but a communion.

In 11:1-57: Instead of a sign followed by an explanatory speech or debate, Lazarus' raising is interpreted earlier. Distance and movement from place to place enhance the narrative as it build up the dramatic tension, forcing the reader to pause and reflect together with Martha, Mary and their friends and to face the tomb and listen as Jesus prays. Unlike the shorter accounts of two young persons' resurrection in the Synoptics, John involves us in the witnesses' doubts, faith and reactions, and supplies a privileged insight into Jesus' prayer. His greatest sign, the gift of life to his dead friend, leads to the decisive act of unbelief, the formal decision that he must "die for the people". On the High Priest's lips this meant Jews' salvation from Romans' reaction to a political threat, but in John's comment it is a prophecy about a totally different salvation for Jews and Greeks alike gathered "into one". This sign anticipates both Jesus' passion and resurrection, but also stresses the difference between the two miraculous events. Lazarus will die again, but his being raised shows that death is conquered even if it still remains a universal experience; it points to the eternal life that Jesus offers, showing himself to be truly the resurrection and the life. The titles "Lord" and "Son of God" stress the high Christology of this story, while his warm affection and tears stress his humanity.

In 12:1-36: To two episodes traditional in passion narratives (Jesus' anointing by a woman and his entry into Jerusalem) John adds the plots against Lazarus and Jesus. This final week leading to his glorification corresponds to the opening week with his peak at Cana, which introduced and prefigured Jesus' hour and glory. When Greeks wish to see him, he proclaims his hour has arrived and comments on a death that does produce fruit and a life which doesn't. His followers cannot escape death any more than their master: John speaks of "serving" Jesus, while the Synoptics speak of "coming after" him.

In 12:37-50: The public ministry's conclusion is summed up in two parts: first, the reactions to Jesus are compared to the negative reactions to Moses and Isaiah; then, he himself draws together his ministry's central themes with a ringing affirmation of being God's agent: to reject him is to reject the Father who sent him and to be condemned. This assessment gives neither time nor place: it is a timeless comment for all generations. Throughout the following chapters we will find the same distinctive use of traditional passion/resurrection material that we see in this one.

BOOK OF GLORY

In 13:1-30: From now on the narrative focuses on Jesus' last hours. The account of his passion is dwarfed by discourses stressing themes crucial to John's community. The initial reference to the approach of Passover draws our attention to the feast that provides an interpretative setting for the final drama. Jesus speaks of an imminent exodus from this world, and a return to take his followers with him. This is the new Passover, effected in the death of the true Lamb of God who takes away the world's sin. His life is summed up in terms of the love he had for his own people. At his farewell meal among friends, love is the keynote. He himself is the example to be followed in carrying out the new commandment he entrust to them as legacy. Like many farewell speeches of the past, accompanied by memorable gestures, Jesus' one is strengthened by a foot-washing which portrays his imminent death's saving, welcoming and cleansing nature. In doing so he gives his disciples an example of service to be followed, but also assumes the condition of a host who will welcome them into his Father's house.

In 13:31-16:33: There are many parallels between Jesus' last supper speeches and the literary genre of a farewell speech by a dying relevant figure. But John differs in portraying the future of the "children" whom Jesus is leaving behind that includes his renewed presence. Moreover, they don't receive wide exhortations to moral virtues or obedience to the Law: only the mutual love appears as the behaviour required. Except the clear break at 14:31, it is difficult to establish divisions within these speeches.

In 17:1-26: The speeches end with Jesus' priestly prayer, which is his report of the mission he has completed as God's agent. In it, after a request for glorification, Jesus turns first to his immediate disciples, and then includes all those who will come to believe in him. The stresses are on unity, on God sanctifying them, and on the need to keep to what Jesus has revealed. Fittingly, the prayer end on the note of Jesus indwelling in the believers.

In 18:1-19:42: John's passion narrative is cast in separate scenes, whose centre is the trial by Pilate. Jesus, acting as he has throughout the Gospel, shows that the procurator is really the one on trial, and with supreme irony, Pilate forces the Jews to show themselves unfaithful to God by declaring Caesar their only king. The confession that Jesus is indeed "king of Israel" was made at the beginning and end of his ministry narrative in the passion story; this issue is central. Unlike the



Jesus raises Lazarus: this was the greatest sign given by him. It showed the truth of his claim to be our life.

Synoptics, John gives us the majestic figure of Jesus standing out alone without crisis or need of support by Simon of Cyrene or women weeping. This is an hour of glory: far from being abandoned, the crucified is exalted, lifted up to draw all to himself. The nascent Church's nucleus, including his mother and his beloved disciple, are drawn to the foot of the cross. The dying Jesus hands over the Spirit, and from his wounded side flow blood and water, founts of the Church's sacramental life. The larger, representative crowd round about are drawn to look on the one they have pierced. What happens to him is really pointing to what is being brought about for his followers.

Jn 20:1-31: This chapter embodies three types of tradition about Jesus' resurrection: the tomb found empty, its confirmation by Peter, and Christ's appearances to his disciples in Jerusalem. Its primary aim is not to tell us what happened to Jesus after his death, but to explore what Jesus' glorification on the cross effects and means for believers. The characters (Mary Magdalene, Peter, the beloved disciples and Thomas) are well rounded, a fact brought out in their dialogues and reactions. The last two verses stood as the conclusion to the Gospel before the edition which appended chapter 21.

EPILOGUE

Jesus giving Peter the supreme leadership on his own followers.

Jn 21:1-25: This appearance in Galilee is in keeping with the gospels' broader picture. Peter is the central figure in these stories which spell his relationship to Jesus as primary witness to the resurrection, as missionary, as shepherd, as martyr in preference to the beloved disciple whose testimony is the Gospel's basis.

❖ Study questions:

1. What would you say to a drunkard who justifies himself by using Jesus' first sign in John's gospel, when he turned water into wine at Cana's wedding feast?
2. What lessons and challenges do you get from the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus about being born again?
3. What is the core of the dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well? How could you use this story to help a person without stable sexual relationships?
4. John 8:1-11 is the story of a woman caught in adultery. Based on Jesus' attitude toward the accusation, why do you think the scribes and Pharisees were wrong? Give at least five reasons.
5. How can you help a leader who doesn't warn sinners arguing that Jesus said, "Let who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her" (Jn 8:7)?
6. Using Jesus' words on the good shepherd and the bad ones, discuss the situation of today Church's leaders.
7. Account for four signs of Jesus as recorded by John's gospel and then explain the significance of each of them.
8. Jesus used Jewish feasts to present himself and his teaching. Explain how he did so and what this fact means to us?
9. The theme of the Gospel of John is the "Deity of the Saviour". In what ways did the writer prove this subject matter to his audience?
10. Explain five instances where Jesus' messianic nature is testified by John's Gospel.
11. Unity among Christians is fundamental for their missionary witness. Report Jesus' relevant words and then explain how we to follow his teaching on this matter.
12. After washing his disciples' feet, Jesus put his outer garment back on and returned to his place at table. He explained what his action meant. What is its significance? What lesson should religious leaders learn from the event?

JOHN'S GOSPEL COMPARED TO THE SYNOPTICS

❖ What are the main differences between John's Gospel and the Synoptics?

Like the Synoptic gospels, John's contains an account of some of Jesus' actions and sayings, but peculiar features mark it off sharply from the other three.

In the first place, **it is far more concerned to bring out the meaning of all that Christ did and said.** His deeds were "signs" whose significance, hidden at first, could be fully understood only after his glorification (2:22; 12:16; 13:17). His words too had a deeper meaning not perceived when they were spoken (2:20): **it was the Spirit's duty** speaking in Jesus' name to remind the disciples of what their teacher said, to deepen their understanding and **to lead them "into the whole truth"** (14:26). John looks back on Jesus' earthly life in the light of this full understanding.

Differently from the Synoptics having a low or ascending Christology, that is, a man whose divinity is discovered gradually, John presents a **high or descending Christology**, that is, a portrayal of Jesus as a person descended from above whose divinity shines through his life in the world. His humanity, however, is also in evidence, particularly in his relationships.

The portrayal of the **Holy Spirit as the personal Paraclete** is also unique to John among the gospels.

Chronologically, John presents Jesus' ministry over a period of **three years** and having his death on the day of preparation before Passover. Geographically, he presents it **alternating between Galilee and Judea**, with its major focus on the conflicts in Jerusalem. This pattern departs from the Synoptic picture of a relatively long ministry in Galilee followed by a brief phase in the holy city before Jesus' arrest.



Jesus entrusting Peter with the shepherding of his own sheep.

at Passover: the entire period could be one year. **A few events have a different chronology** (for example, the temple's cleansing comes at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, rather than towards the close, where the Synoptics put it).

John has **no mention of Jesus' infancy, baptism, temptations in the desert, transfiguration, and sending off the Twelve to preach** as narrated in two or three of the Synoptics.

Their accounts of a hurried burial are a far cry from the **kingly burial** in John's gospel.

John's feeling of a tragic death at hand, combined with reports of **some plots to kill Jesus**, parallel the more focused and stylised passion predictions in the Synoptics.

John's tale is one of **growing conflict over belief/unbelief**. Unlike the Synoptics, there is no other fight: no demons to defeat, no struggle with hostile forces of nature, no divergence with the disciples, for their misunderstandings are presented as part of a faith that must remain incomplete until the end of his mission.

It is so though **they have admitted from the start that he is the Messiah**, whereas the Synoptics make this perception the peak of his Galilean ministry.

John agrees with the Synoptics that Jesus healed persons, multiplied the loaves, and walked on the water, but he includes **no exorcism** among his healings.

In the Synoptics we meet miracles of compassion, while John's primary interest is not in the physical miracles as such: **many of the seven miracles in his Gospel are** more elaborated than the Synoptics' ones and are **reported as occasions for insight into Jesus' identity**.

John differs from them also in the **style and content of Jesus' words**, which don't longer focus on God's kingdom, use proverbs and parables, or appear in short declarations. Instead, **Jesus speaks about himself** through allegories, symbolic speeches and long conversations which often refer to **his relationship to the Father**. The hearers misunderstand him and so he has the opportunity to develop his point and explain himself further. Dialogues sometime become monologues as the partner fades out and Jesus keeps talking.

Major Synoptic speeches are absent in John, including all of the Sermon on the Mount and the end-time prophecies, though he mentions the Last Day.

John doesn't use the conclusive saying, "He who has hears, let him hear". On the contrary, when speaking, prior to his message, Jesus says "verily" twice ("Amen, amen...") 25 times rather than just 1 as in the Synoptics.

Though John **doesn't quote the OT as frequently as the Synoptics do, hints to OT texts often are woven into the speeches**, introducing the reader to rich fields of imagery, as in the case of the Lamb of God.

John **is more doctrinal** while the Synoptics are more ethical. He doesn't explain Moses' law, but gives the new commandment of loving one another.

Though in Jesus' Last Supper John doesn't report the Eucharist's institution as the Synoptics do, he is **far more interested than them in worship and sacraments**.

Jesus' **many disputes with the Jewish authorities** narrates by John could be said to anticipate his trial before the Sanhedrin, which John, unlike the Synoptics, does not mention specifically.

In the Synoptics Jesus' glory is associated primarily with his return at the end of the time (Mt 16:27ff), but in John **this end is here and now**. So, salvation and eternal life are both present and future. The coming of the Son of man is primarily his Incarnation, his "being lifted up" and his return to his disciples through the Holy Spirit. In the same way the "judgment" is already taking place in human hearts, and **eternal life (John's matching item of the Synoptic "kingdom") is already in possession of whoever has faith**. That these "last things" should be seen as present is not surprising, since salvation throughout history centres on Christ's life and death. God's victory over evil is already guaranteed by Christ's resurrection; **his return at the last day will only confirm it**.

❖ Revision questions:

1. Show four main differences and then give reasons for them between Jesus' genealogies as reported by Matthew and by Luke.
2. Narrate how Jesus underwent John's baptism of repentance. What do you learn from this?
3. Though Jesus had no sins, he underwent John's baptism of repentance. Explain the meaning of this act (give at least seven points) and then the importance of the Christian baptism in today's Church (give at least three points).
4. What does Jesus' baptism give us that John's baptism didn't give? Contrast the two baptisms.
5. In the gospels there are instances where God's voice about Jesus was heard. Report them and give its importance in your Christian life.
6. Explain the significance of Jesus' temptations to our lives today by giving at least five points.
7. Jesus' three temptations in the desert are important to us. Why? What lesson do you learn from his response to the tempter?
8. Jesus' temptations in the desert were meant to prove his loyalty to God's chosen plan. Point out the three temptations, and then use their meaning to clearly show how a Christian can fail today in his/her loyalty. What are the modern forms of mentioned idolatry?
9. Demons were very common in Jesus' time as they are today. Using the gospels, explain who they are and what power they have over Christians.
10. Miracles are very popular today as in Jesus' time and in the apostolic age. What were and are advantages and disadvantages of this popularity?
11. "The Church as an institution is sometimes corrupt". Discuss this statement with reference to Jesus'

purification of the temple.

12. Among Jesus' instructions to the twelve and to the seventy (-two) disciples there are wonderful advices for Christians' mission. Enumerate and relate them to today's situation.
13. "Who do you say I am?" Discuss this question's meaning by giving your own witness.
14. Jesus summarised the whole ethics in the commandment of love. What is the advantage of this approach in talking with your friends about responsible behaviour?
15. "Many Pharisees were a problem for Jesus' ministry". Defend this statement and then explain how you see it in today Christian communities.
16. Using Jesus' deeds and words on Sabbath, explain its meaning for Christians.
17. Jesus was misunderstood. What does this fact teach us when bearing witness to our faith?
18. Discuss the importance of Jesus' resurrection to our faith in today's environment.
19. In human life we may get friends and enemies alike. How does the Gospel teach us to behave with the later ones?
20. Relate women's position in Jesus' time and in today Tanzanian society. Which one would you favour? Why?
21. Using the Gospels, say how Jesus' followers can be faithful to God in their relationship with civic laws and governments.
22. Show the differences between the three Synoptics and the fourth gospel.
23. With reference to John's Gospel, give five points to show how you will help a person who does not believe in Jesus, yet he claims that he will not be condemned as sinner because God is love.

ACTS OF THE APOSTLES: THE CHURCH'S WITNESS FOR ALL PEOPLES TO THE END OF TIME

"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).

❖ *When was Acts written?*

Acts' dating has to be the same as that of Luke's Gospel (80-90), because originally they were a **two parts book we should call "a history of Christianity's rise"**. This is suggested by their literary affinity (vocabulary, grammar and style) and by their prologues (for both are addressed to Theophilus, and Acts 1:1, having called the Gospel an 'earlier work', goes on to say why it was written and to summarise its closing incidents). About 150 AD, when Christians wanted the four Gospels bound in one codex, these two parts were separated.

❖ *Is Acts a historical book?*

Early Christians had no interest in recording their own events, because they thought the end of the world was at hand. Luke didn't share this waiting: not only he was rather indifferent about time's end, but **he gave value to time itself**. This may be why he was the first to write a sort of account of the early Church. If, as in the case of the Gospels, earlier writings existed which Luke would have drawn upon, the harmony achieved in editing them is indeed remarkable, since it is very difficult to identify them today. **The only book of its kind in the NT**, Acts accredits itself either as an eyewitness' report for a major section of it or as based on adequate sources. Its analysis confirms Lk 1:1-14 (meant as prologue to the complete work) by suggesting that **Luke must have collected a lot of detailed evidence from several sources**, such as traditions about Jerusalem community; biographical notes about Peter, Stephen, Philip; details about Antioch community; witnesses about Paul's conversion and missionary journeys; Luke's own notes on Paul's later journeys. He **organised all this material chronologically as best he could**. Slight adjustments don't affect the basic reliability of the work.

❖ *What was Luke's view of events and persons?*

Like all historians, Luke aimed to draw **a lesson from events**. He deliberately interrupts his account with brief pauses or summaries, in which he sums up either features which he wants the reader to remember or the progress of the action. This concern influenced the way he treated his sources. Thus there is an **intentional parallelism between Peter's and Paul's miracles and between them and some Gospel passages**. In noting a contrast between Paul's portraits in Acts and in his own letters, we must consider their different interests. Luke attributed to the apostle a more conciliatory approach than is shown by the epistles for his concern was to exemplify the deep unity existing among the first Christians and their loyalty to Rome's political authorities. **He had a positive view of the world and presented his characters with psychological tact**: the apostles appear self-controlled, courageous, just, and law-abiding, far from fanatic; the outsiders too are generally reasonable and open-minded.

❖ *Is the book's traditional title right?*

The title "Acts of the Apostles" may mislead, for Luke's purpose was another. **This book doesn't record their life, not even of Peter and Paul, the two prominent** in the narrative. It doesn't even suggest that Peter had an apostolate outside Palestine, because the attention shifts to Paul in chapter 13 as the faith is carried by Hellenist Christians to Gentiles. In many vivid scenes it portrays how God's salvation in Jesus spread according to the Church's universal destiny. This assertion is based on the book's structure as summarised in 1:8. So, **after Jerusalem, other cities become missionary stations: Antioch, Corinth, Ephesus and finally Rome**, the centre of the known world. To the theological wealth of this book, we must add the **factual information which we should otherwise lack**: the centrality of faith in the risen Christ evident in the 24 different speeches: 8 by Peter, 9 by Paul and 7 by various other people; the main OT texts used by the first Christians as arguments with the Jews; important details about Church life, such as the way of prayer and sharing of goods, baptism and Eucharist, early attempts at organisation, etc.

❖ *In these speeches, whose voice do we hear: it is that of Peter and Paul, or it is Luke's?*

The speeches cover 1/3 of the book. They are not just notes taken by a listener. It's clear that Luke has rewritten them. Like other historians of his time, he composed real miniature speeches, with a beginning, a development and an appeal. However, all scholars recognize that **he did not invent them: he took up earlier material**. For example, certain titles given to Jesus in these speeches were no longer in use in Luke's time. So through them we can see how the first Christians proclaimed their faith to persuade Jews and Gentiles to convert. There are always three elements: **Jesus' event** (the speaker recalls facts from his life) **interpreted by the Scriptures** (many Biblical quotations' aim is to place Jesus' life in the context of God's plan, in order to make sense of it) **challenges us** (the preacher is not only a teacher imparting new knowledge to his pupils, but is aware that what he is saying forces the audience to make a choice).

❖ *How does this book explain the Church's marvellous spread?*

Acts' interest lies in the spiritual energy inside Christianity that causes its expansion and in the spiritual doctrine Luke can deduce from the facts. In various ways he shows that **the story he tells is not a success of some talented preachers, but the doings of God and of his heavenly agents**. First, Acts

offers a view of history in which God's Spirit promised by Jesus guides compellingly the Church every step of her way to the end of the earth. There are a great many characters in this lively book, but human actors are only instruments of the Spirit. It is he who directs the mission as Samaritans and Gentiles are converted. When Jerusalem council takes the great decision about the Gentiles' freedom from Moses' law, it is phrased thus: "It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (15:28). The Spirit prevents Paul from taking a diversion that would have delayed his planting Christianity in Europe. Paul's decision to go to Rome is a resolve in the Spirit, and when he bids farewell to Asia, the Spirit has provided priests to oversee the flock. We could say that these records have been written so that we may believe that he is at work in the Church of Jesus Christ. This is why the book, ever since the first centuries, has been called "**the Holy Spirit's Gospel**", and why it is so **full of joy and of wonder at God's work**. Moreover, the glorified Christ and the Angel of the Lord intervene, preachers work miracles in Jesus' name, and God's word seems self-propagating: this is his work indeed.



Jerusalem at the Church's beginning. On top left is the Temple.

❖ What Acts' issues are more important for African Church?

Acts is **one of the key books for faith's inculturation** in Africa, because it stresses the Gospel's universality and suggests that different customs are no obstacle when they don't oppose Christ's basic aim. **A main theme is conversion:** its most impressive example, Paul's turning from persecutor to apostle, is repeated three times. It demands change of behaviour: **who accepts Jesus has to share his possession with the needy tending to a community of goods.** This attitude is extremely meaningful for today's Africans, many of whom still lack the very means of survival.

❖ A help to read the text:

INTRODUCTION TO THE CHURCH TIME

Acts 1:1-14: The witnesses' preparation and mission by the leaving Christ is the first step in integrating the Church's time into the greater arc of salvation history.

Acts 1:15-26: Its second step is the institution of a qualified holy community around the reconstituted circle of twelve men.

THE MISSION IN JERUSALEM

Acts 2:1-13: What happened at Pentecost was as unique as what was accomplished by Jesus' resurrection. Luke vividly presents the Spirit's sending upon the first community as baptism of fire.

Acts 2:14-41: This first "missionary speech" to Jews has the typical outline of such speeches: an introduction relating it to the narrative framework, Jesus' proclamation full of Bible arguments, a call for conversion based on this proclamation.

Acts 2:42-47: This first and most complete of Acts' three major summaries occupies the keynote position in its history. It is an ideal picture of the first community as steadfast in all of these principal norms of Church life incumbent upon the baptised.

Acts 3:1-11: The first miracle story of Acts is similar to those in the Synoptics, with exposition, healer's word and gesture, demonstration of the cure and effect upon the bystanders.

Acts 3:12-26: This second speech (in the temple) completes the first in showing that the apostles' proclamation is the end-time renewal of prophecy, and that in it the risen Christ's voice is heard as the awaited one of Moses' successor. This explanation includes the usual schema contrasting God's and his people's actions toward his servant (Jesus). Once again the goal is the call to repentance.

Acts 4:1-22: The apostles' arrest at the time of their appeal for Israel's conversion begins the tide of opposition that will culminate in the community's dispersal and, at last, in the proclamation to the Gentiles.

Acts 4:23-31: This unique prayer did remind God of Jesus' passion and ask him to strengthen the Church multiplying wonders through her. It got instant answer, for the Holy Spirit filled all and they spoke boldly.

Acts 4:32-37: Single cases of freewill offerings are generalised by Luke into a community-wide Gospel ideal of renunciation to possessions. So, he fostered the impression of the apostolic Church as a "golden age". Barnabas' deed would not have been memorable if everyone did the same!

Acts 5:1-11: The terrifying tale of Ananias and Sapphira is the only NT example of miracles of punishment, ordered to reinforce God's rules as a matter of life and death.

Acts 5:12-16: The theme of this second major summary is the apostles' wonders.

Acts 5:17-42: The Sanhedrin's second indictment parallels the first, but the returning elements are dramatically intensified. The Gospel's preaching, under God's direct control, grew ever stronger and with it, by corresponding necessity, the tide of its opposition.

THE MISSION'S OUTWARD PATH FROM JERUSALEM

Acts 6:1-7: Luke's idealised picture of the community has not prepared us to this conflict.

Acts 6:8-7:1: Luke configures the first Christian martyrdom to Jesus' death. It is the peak of the earlier persecutions, the first having ended in mere threats, the second with scourging and a resolve to kill, which now is fulfilled.

Acts 7:2-53: The narrative about Stephen has in its midst his speech, the longest of Acts and the first of two which sum up OT history. The survey moves from Abraham's call over Joseph's and Moses' careers, which saw constant Israelite resistance to God's design, finally to the temple's building, treated as the peak of the former generations' infidelities. The final attack is an address to the present audience, illustrating the nation's perennial disobedience in its violence against all the prophets and showing its logical conclusion in

the murder of the Christ by the listeners.

Acts 7:54-8:3: The conclusion resumes the narrative recounting Stephen's killing.

Acts 8:4-40: One of the Hellenist Seven, Philip from Caesarea Maritima, is the champion of the Word's advance in Samaria, though he is inferior to the apostles, in whose communion only the Holy Spirit operates. The eunuch's conversion, causing readers to think of African crowds beyond civilisation's boundaries, proofs that the Gospel, after Samaria, was truly in its way to the end of the earth.

Acts 9:1-19a: After the Ethiopian's baptism has restated the mission's goal, Luke narrates one of its larger milestones, the conversion of that fearsome enemy who was to become the greatest missionary: Paul, the hero of Acts' second half. His change and that of Cornelius' family stand at the centre of this book: the extraordinary importance of both events is established through a twofold later retelling. A feature of both is the cross-referential visions which draw together the convert and his unwilling trainer, with the baptism as final result. But Luke's interest was to stress Paul's vocation more than his conversion, like many progressive variations of detail among the three versions show.



Peter's vision which helped him accept the uncircumcised in the Church.

meaning, which makes it a classic precedent for the whole Church and prepares for his version of Jerusalem's Council in chapter 15.

Acts 11:19-12:25: Luke interrupted the fleeing Hellenists' story in order to insert Paul's and Cornelius' conversions as base for the worldwide mission. He can now continue it, since the opening they are about to make has been safely inserted into the apostolic tradition by the diversion in 9:1-11:18. The firm bond between the first Gentile Church (Antioch) and the mother Church is the stress of this section, which recounts the inspection by Jerusalem's delegate, Barnabas, his call of Paul to Antioch, and their joint mission to bear the new community's aid to Jerusalem. In the midst there is the account of Apostles' persecution by Herod Agrippa I and Peter's rescue by God.

Acts 13:1-14:28: This "first missionary journey of Paul" according to Luke is a fragmentary record of the 13-year interval mentioned in Gal. It introduces the method and schedule of Paul's activity (Jews first, and then Greeks) and it thus sharpens the crucial issue of Apostles' Council.

Acts 15:1-35: This is a very relevant record of community discernment about a new problem. It has three key components: a shared process, the search for a solution and a decision. Hellenist Church's representatives had returned to Jerusalem to seal the legitimacy of the mission to the uncircumcised. In the meeting Peter spoke fittingly first, giving the orientation: don't impose useless burdens. Barnabas and Paul followed calling as witness their own experience. Luke includes the meeting told in Gal 2:1-10, but he adds a speech by James, the sage, that settles beforehand the meal-sharing divergence (emerged later at Antioch according to Gal 2:11-14). He proposed a temporary compromise by laying on four clauses of minimal adherence by Gentile Christians to avoid scandal and keep Jew believers in mind. The following decree, destined beyond the inquiring Church to its expanding mission territories, stresses God's initiative in the question's resolution ("the Holy Spirit and us") against divisive effects of decisions made outside communion.

PAUL'S PATH TO ROME

Acts 15:36-16:10: Paul's sharp disagreement with Barnabas was followed by his major missions. The Holy Spirit's guidance of the journey in haste to Europe expresses Luke's theology, which leaves no room for the founding of communities in Galatia. The sudden first appearance of the "we" narrator joins the report of Paul's dream and confirms it was a revelation.

Acts 16:11-40: Upon the account of the journey to Philippi follow four ministry events there: Lydia's conversion, the divining spirit's expulsion, the missionaries' miraculous release from prison and their vindication by the town's authorities.

Acts 17:1-15: Two brief scenes, at Thessalonica and Beroea, have parallel structure: usual beginning in a synagogue, discussion of the Scriptures, success especially with high rank women, and outbreak of non-acceptation under Jewish instigation.



Ananias heals Paul in Damascus.



The angel rescues Peter from prison at night.

Acts 17:16-34: In this story about Paul's activity in Athens, his speech is central. The cityscape is carefully adjusted to the speech's content which, in proclaiming the true God hitherto "unknown", makes three critics of pagan religiosity from a viewpoint shared with open-minded Greek philosophers: temples, sacrifices and idols. Like other ones in Acts, this interrupted speech results in a divided audience.

Acts 18:1-17: This account on Paul's one and a half year in Corinth offers detailed and reliable information on one of his most important missions, though it is silent about any developments that would later cause his critical letters to them. Moreover Luke doesn't tell us that from there he wrote 1Ts, the first NT book; it will be the same about the following epistles.

Acts 18:18-23: After fast verses on Paul's travel back to Syria via Ephesus, suddenly he is presented again in Asia province. The account of each stop is very brief, and the traditional marking out of a third missionary journey in v. 23 is disputable.

Acts 18:24-19:7: These episodes light up each other. Luke uses them to show how movements on the margin of his linear history were integrated into the mission charted by the apostles.

Acts 19:8-40: For a mission such important as the three years of Paul in Ephesus, Luke doesn't give us a quality of information comparable to chapter 18 about Corinth. In verse 21 we read the first announcement of Paul's destined itinerary to Jerusalem and Rome. At this time he wrote at least Gal and 1Cor.

Acts 20:1-16: Departure from Ephesus came according to plan, not under pressure. A highly simplified travel report is interrupted by Eutychus' resurrection. It is silent about the setbacks and conflicts known through the letters to the Corinthians. At this time he wrote Rom.

Acts 20:17-38: Among Acts' speeches, that at Miletus represents a new genre: the farewell discourse, to which analogies abound in the Bible. This testament by Paul for all the Churches he leaves behind is the only speech to Christians in Acts. It announces both the end of his missions and the start of his trials and detention, serving thus as a hinge between the two segments, mission and passion, in which his career parallels the Lord's. Luke uses it to mark the end of the Church's first generation and to record the orderly transition from the Apostles' ministry to the later life of the Church.



Paul saved by Roman soldiers while assailed by Jews in Jerusalem.

Acts 21:1-14: The travel report is resumed.

Acts 21:15-36: Luke omits crucial circumstances of Paul's last visit to Jerusalem, especially the collection's delivery and why he feared it might be rejected. At the time the local Church was leaded by James, the voice of moderation amid rising fundamentalism. During the mid 50s Jews' nationalism put pressure on the helpless Jewish Christians, whose relations with fellow citizens could not be improved by Paul's arrival with gifts from Gentiles. In this frame the accusation of v. 21 and the gesture of Paul's faithfulness to Moses' law gain their meaning.

Acts 21:37-22:29: This first of three self-defences by Paul in the trial chapters, together with its narrative frame, argue his equal footing with his accusers: he claims full membership in the community of Israel, right here in its historic centre. The Damascus event would have brought anyone of them to his same conclusion: Christian conversion and mission.

Acts 22:30-23:11: The process against the earthly Jesus has been continued in Acts through four trials where the accused is he as proclaimed by his Church (Peter and John, the Apostles, Stephen and now Paul).

Acts 23:12-35: Jews' plot against Paul and his hasty transport to Caesarea get a broad description.

Acts 24:1-27: This account is dominated by two speeches: a statement of accusation and Paul's second self-defence. Felix deferred a verdict of discharge as a strategic concession to the Jews.

Acts 25:1-26:32: After Paul's initiative of appealing to Caesar and its acceptance by Festus, it remained only to put him on board for his Roman journey. But two scenes involving King Agrippa II delay that turn of our story: both are united by the motif of Paul's innocence, progressively articulated by governor and king. Paul's speech before the latter completes his realization of the missionary duty charted by Jesus (Lk 21:13), having run the range of synagogue, governor and now king.

Acts 27:1-28:16: The risky sea voyage confirms that, according to God's sure plan, Paul must reach his (and the book's) destination in the world capital. There he was under house arrest in rented quarters.

Acts 28:17-31: The book's ending is a two-part dramatic episode: Jews' rejection and Paul's turning to the Gentiles. It condenses his two-year first Roman sojourn in a reprise of the stages his mission has followed at all of its principal stations. The risen Lord's plan for his witnesses (1:8) is fulfilled when the last of those directly commissioned by him completes his missionary adventure from Jerusalem, city of the true Israel's first assembly, to Rome, centre of the Gentiles' vast and fertile world. Luke leaves unsatisfied our thirst for an ending to Paul's biography, quite as he did in the case of Peter and the apostles, abruptly removed from his story. Jesus, the true prophet of salvation to all the nations, is the one whose path has been plotted in Acts; his witnesses have come and gone in its pages only as needed. Paul's personal destiny is outshone by the open-ended triumph of the Gospel over its powerful opposition.



The Appia Way, through which Paul reached Rome, as it is still today.

♦ Study questions:

1. "I have no silver and gold, but I give you what I have" (Acts 3:6). What was the story about this statement and what does it touch the Church today?

2. Briefly describe who Gamaliel was and two advices he gave the Sanhedrin. Afterward relate his words to present day life, answering those who would like to forbid religious gatherings.
3. According to Acts 5, Ananias and his wife were greedy; in three paragraphs, describe their story and then show their greed's outcome to them and the Church; moreover, explain how today Christians demonstrate their greed and what the Church should do if one misappropriates community properties (give seven points).
4. Ananias and his wife tried to lie to the Holy Spirit and died. How did they lie and what do we need learn from their story?
5. Briefly narrate two incidents where the Apostles came up against magicians and then say how these stories relate to us.
6. Give an account of Cornelius' conversion and then explain how God until today prepares pagan people to accept Jesus as saviour.
7. Faced by criticism from circumcision's party at Jerusalem, how did Peter justify his conduct on Cornelius' event (Act 11:1-18)? Giving at least four points, moreover, explain that event's significance to the Church.
8. While Peter was in prison, the whole Church prayed for him and so got his miraculous liberation. Narrate the episode relating it to today's Church.
9. "The voice of a god, and not of man" (Acts 12:22). After exposing the context of these words, say if they could be heard in today's political situation.
10. "The gods have become like men and have come down to us" (Acts 14:11). Narrate the event which led to these words and then relate them to Church's ministers in today's context.
11. Describe circumstances and resolutions of Jerusalem Council and then explain what we have to learn in our care for Church's unity today.
12. James proved to be a model of good leader in the way he resolved the conflict at Jerusalem Council. Give an outline of how he worked on the matter and how we have to imitate him.
13. When Paul went back to Jerusalem after his third missionary journey, he met suspects against him. On what ground did Church elders fear for him? What did they counsel him to perform against Jews' suspects? Give three reasons which made Paul obey them and then narrate the end of Paul's mission.
14. Whenever there were crises in Apostles' ministry, they turned to God in prayer. Narrate three examples from Acts and then say why you think it is important to pray in times of crisis.
15. Explain five characteristics of the early Christian community as presented in the book of Acts of the Apostles. Then, in connection with these characteristics, show at least three changes needed to be made in the Church today.
16. "Magicians have caused serious troubles in our societies, opposing even the Church's mission to the world". a) Justify this statement with reference to three encounters with evil powers in the Act of the Apostles. b) Explain how you would help a person who fears magic powers by giving him two points.
17. The book of "The Acts of the Apostles" can also be called "The Acts of the Holy Spirit". Evaluate this assertion by giving five points.
18. The book of "The Acts of the Apostles" records the principles of social and moral life in the early Church. Identify five such principles and then show their usefulness to the Christians of today.

SOME EPISTLES BY PAUL

"Count the forbearance of our Lord as salvation. So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given to him, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures" (2Pt 3:15-16).

❖ What epistles are?

Letter writing is attested for millennia. Four modes are used: to write oneself, to dictate word for word, to state the sense leaving the expression to a secretary, to have someone write in one's name without indication of contents. Many do distinguish a letter from an epistle, which resembles an essay on some theme for a wide audience. It is difficult, however, to classify some writings as letters or as epistles. **21 out of 27 NT books are called επιστολαι, epistolai, whereas no OT book is so designated.**

❖ Who was the main author of NT epistles?

There are letters in the OT, especially in the latter period, but **the use of this form of writing for religious purposes became prominent with Paul**, imitated by later Christian writers. Part of his genius was to adopt this handy form to evangelise. His letters were sent to communities and individuals to express his apostolic presence and authority in building up Churches, to spread his understanding of Christ's message and especially to apply it to concrete problems arisen in places that he could not then visit personally. They shared features of contemporary letters, which had at least three parts: opening formula (with the name of the sender and of the addressee and a short greeting), message itself, final greetings; many times a thanksgiving introduced the body of the letter. Into it Paul often introduced other material which in many cases derived from the Church's blooming tradition. **13 NT epistles are attributed by name to Paul** and in them we read he wrote also other letters now lost. They reflect his ardent spirit with his boundless confidence in Christian truth's compelling power. The communities treasured these letters highly, read them during worship and passed them on to others. By the end of the 1st century they were circulating throughout the Church and were already being gathered and accepted as written Word of God. In our Bible they are **not ordered following the time of composition**: those to seven Churches precede those to three individuals; within these groups, the likely reason for their order is the length, decreasing from Romans to 2Thessalonians and from 1 Timothy to Philemon.

❖ Who did write the other epistles?

Except for 2 John and 3 John, **epistle is a title better suited to Hebrews and the seven so called "Catholic Epistles"**. This collective title, whose original meaning was "addressed to all", seems to have spread from 1 John to the whole group, though it is now hard to justify for three of them; so Western Christians may grasp it as "recognised in all Churches". **They are distinguished by the name of the one they are ascribed to**, rather than by that of the addresses. But the attribution to John, Peter, James and Judah must in each case be evaluated taking into account the convention of that time by which literary works could be attributed to great past figures not directly concerned with their composition.

PAUL

❖ How do we know Paul?

What we know of him comes from **two main sources of different value: his own letters**, in which he talks about himself all the time, **and the Acts of the Apostles**. Paul's letters are so engaging! They reveal what God's grace can achieve in a man's heart, and what he truly was, a saint with countless failings. He was emotional and needed faithful friends by him. When a Jew he was a fundamentalist; after becoming a Christian he remained in character: his colleagues and followers learnt this to their cost! At the same time he was utterly caught up in his mission; all that counted for him was love for his Lord and the service of his communities, his dear children for whom he felt as physically as a mother. In his letters there is a series of movements from his conversion to the arrival in Rome which parallels the more detailed movements in Acts. In reconstructing his life, **we must prefer what he himself has written, but also admit details of Acts** if they don't conflict with Paul's letters. A few divergences are only to be expected because Luke wrote many years after the events. Even so, his account is generally reliable and accords with the information we have from Paul himself.

THE 21 EPISTLES AS FOUND IN THE NT

13 (+ 1) BY PAUL

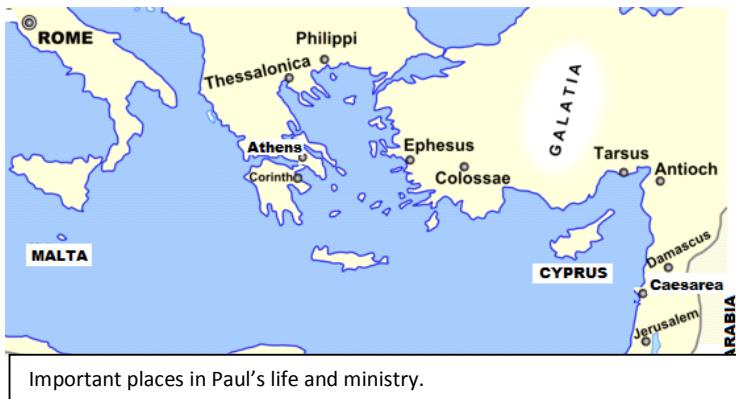
Romans
1 Corinthians
2 Corinthians
Galatians
Ephesians
Philippians
Colossians
1 Thessalonians
2 Thessalonians
1 Timothy
2 Timothy
Titus
Philemon
Hebrews

7 CATHOLIC

James
1 Peter
2 Peter
1 John
2 John
3 John
Judas



Paul's look.



their similar sounds, one Semitic and the other Greek or Roman. So he was called "Saul, also known as Paul" (Acts 13:9). He boasted of his Jewish background and traced his lineage to the **tribe of Benjamin**. He was an extremely zealous Pharisee, **educated as scribe in Jerusalem by Gamaliel**, the leading Jewish teacher of his time. Afterward, as a Christian he looked back on his Jewish career with a quiet conscience: "As for righteousness under the law, I was blameless". **Moreover he didn't marry**. Paul never saw or heard Jesus while on earth: during his ministry, he had probably returned to Tarsus. He was again in Jerusalem shortly after the resurrection and was appalled at the Christians' preaching. As a theologian, he saw better than Peter and others that their message ran the risk of overturning Judaism. **His zeal for Jews' traditions made him a hater of the early Church**. While persecuting her adherents, after joining Stephen's murder, he **received God's revelation near Damascus** (ca. 36). All his knowledge was uniquely transformed by the insight into Christ's mystery accorded to him there: to fully explore it took him the following thirty years through the experience of everyday contact with different communities, whose life and problems forced him to deepen his knowledge of Christ.

◊ *How did Paul convert to Christ?*

In Luke's three accounts of Paul's fundamental experience, the essential is the following dialogue: "**Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?**" – "**Who are you, Sir?**" – "**I am Jesus whom you are persecuting**". This identification with his own persecuted disciples may well have been the source of Paul's teaching on Christians' unity in and with the one Body of Christ. In any case, **this meeting with the risen Lord was decisive in Paul's life**: God had glorified that accursed man! So, the Law which had condemned him was itself condemned by God. Paul's very life was falling apart: we understand how he remained for three days, blind, prostrate, trying to make sense of things. Then he became "Christ's servant", compelled to witness his resurrection and to preach his Gospel; for it he turned into "apostle to the Gentiles", ready to become "all things to all human beings". The finest expertise he acquired in Jewish thought and practice from his home life and from his education in the OT scriptures, united with his knowledge of Greek life and culture, made him **the ideal bridge between the early Jewish Christianity and the Gentile world**. Other NT writers could claim a Jewish background and Hellenistic contacts, but no one had Paul's depth in understanding Christ's event, except possibly John. The Church's tremendous transformation which took place during the 30 years of his ministry is essentially his work. This is why **his conversion is her most important event** after Pentecost. Viewed in the light of the resources and powers of any one man, it is in every way a gigantic achievement, but it looms still greater in the light of the fact that **his mighty work was carried out and made permanent from a weak body and facing the opposition of false brothers** who everywhere placed the greatest obstacles to it. Against them he was constantly obliged to defend - often with sharp words - his mission's validity. With God's help, his larger vision of Christianity finally prevailed.

◊ *Did Paul depend on early Church's tradition?*

Paul had a supreme consciousness of a divinely imposed task for the good of others, and of God's power working in him. His call, however, exceptional though it may have been, brought him, humbly, into the Church's tradition through his baptism at Ananias' hands. His own letters clearly show he inherited early Church's message, worship, songs, faith's formulas, theological terms and moral advices. At times **he explicitly calls attention to the fact that he is "handing on" what he has received, he appeals to Church's customs and urges fidelity to her tradition**. Another aspect of this dependence is his little knowledge of what Jesus did and taught: his letters say only that Jesus was born of a woman under the law, instituted the Eucharist, was betrayed and crucified, died, was buried, was raised from the dead and taken up to heaven. A main reason is that he wrote before the Gospels' authors. **Not having been an eyewitness, he stresses the saving effects of Christ's death and resurrection, rising above the data of Jesus' historical ministry**. When he alludes to or quotes a saying of Jesus, he refers it to "the Lord", a title revealing the imposing aspect under which he regards him.

◊ *What did Paul do after his conversion?*

According to Paul's letters, after his conversion he visited Jerusalem twice and planned another visit before going to Rome and Spain. He went to where Jesus' name was not known, proclaiming him always a ~~star further always going forth always farther away~~ ~~he never stopped to have the advantage of a position~~

◊ *Where did Paul live before his conversion?*

Paul's life (about sixty years) was divided by his conversion into two almost equal parts. He was **born in the first decade AD in Tarsus**, capital of Cilicia province. **This Hellenistic town's people had Roman citizenship**: Paul willingly used this status' privileges to facilitate his ministry. Though **he had a Greek education, he was a Jew who could also speak Aramaic and read the Hebrew OT**. Many Jews of that period had **two names** often chosen for

of authority, of being served. The Acts confirm and complete such and other information. After spending some time in Arabia Paul returned to Damascus until he had to escape (39). Then he went to Jerusalem for the first time "to get information from Cephas" (how he calls Peter) and met James, "the Lord's brother". After fifteen days he retired to Syria and Cilicia (40-44), where he had a vision. Then he was called by Barnabas to help him in leading the important community of Antioch. **The years 46-58 were the most active of his life, as he evangelised Asia Minor and South East Europe.** During this time he went again to Jerusalem (49) where Peter, James, and John realised the grace given to him and extended to him the right hand of fellowship, without requiring the circumcision of Gentile converts. The decision of this Apostles' Council was unanimous, but the right practice was not yet carried out. Jewish Christians would not sit at the table with Gentile Christians: in the same year Paul had to criticise Peter in Antioch for separating himself from them after the arriving of Jerusalem Christians with a marked OT inclination. So the question of Jewish food regulations was now posed. James convened apostles and elders again, and their decision was sent as a letter to the Churches of Syria and Cilicia urging Gentile Christians in such mixed community to abstain from four things most sensitive for Jews.



Paul preaching in Athens.

❖ *What were Paul's following journeys?*

Between 50 and 52 Paul was again on his way and reached Europe. He stayed 18 months in Corinth, from where he wrote his first letters (to the Thessalonians). After a visit to Jerusalem, he stayed again at Antioch well over a year. During his third missionary journey (54-58) for three years Ephesus was the centre of his activity; from there he wrote to the Galatians, to the Philippians, to Philemon and a few times to the Corinthians. During other three months in Corinth he wrote to the Romans. In the course of a new visit to Jerusalem (58) Jews tried to kill him; the Roman militia saved him, but this was **the beginning of a long detention**. After two years of prison in Caesarea he appealed to the emperor (Caesar Nero, 54-68), so he

was sent to Rome escorted by a soldier. After a long and troubled voyage, for two years (61-63) he was kept in house arrest, with the possibility of evangelising there and of writing to Colossians and Ephesians. This is the peak of Acts' account of the spread of God's word from Jerusalem to the capital of the civilised world of the time, but **it was not the end of Paul's life**. His letters to Titus and Timothy suggest that he visited the East again, was arrested there and brought to Rome. Pope Clement I wrote (ca. 95) that he visited Spain before **another trial and killing**, which according to 2nd century traditions happened **in Rome by beheading at the height of Nero's persecution of the Church (64-68)**.

Paul beheaded in Rome.

❖ *What was Paul's genius?*

Paul's genius can be better appreciated recalling that he wrote his letters before any other NT books. He was able to take the earliest oral tradition about Jesus and to develop a **deep knowledge of salvation that embraced just about every aspect of Christian life** in the light of OT scriptures and of his own experience of Christ and missionary work. His inspired writings helped other disciples to reinterpret their memories of Jesus. The Church has been living by them for 2,000 years and they have not lost their richness and brightness. Though filled with difficulties which might mislead the unwary, as Peter's second letter cautions, they are an endless mine of wonderful thought.



Paul writing a letter.

❖ *Can we summarise Paul's theology?*

It is impossible to summarise Paul's theology in a brief space. The varied richness of his thought must be experienced meditating the letters themselves. **Two major themes are salvation and Christ's body.** Paul considers **of top importance Jesus' death and resurrection**, whose motive was the love God has for us despite our sins. Jesus made his own death a sacrificial offering of love and obedience to the Father. Through his resurrection Jesus became the Spirit-sender who makes all believers one with himself. **By means of baptism they are united with Jesus' death and resurrection as his body and receive his unifying and life-giving Spirit who inspires them to live with love as Christ lived.** The Holy Spirit gives them the power to share in all that Jesus is, has and does, thus overcoming the "flesh", i.e. the innate selfishness which constantly tries to draw them away from God. The more believers are guided by the Spirit, the less they need to be given rules of conduct. Living Christ's new life, they are God's children with full right to inherit all that the Father has given to his Son, including the present life of grace and the future glorification of both soul and body. But if they are to be co-glorified with Christ, they must co-suffer with him in different forms. **They need everyday struggle against the flesh:** each overcoming of it by the Spirit's power is a sharing in Jesus' death and resurrection. Christian life is thus a constant worship of the Father in union with his Son's sacrifice. **All of this is the free gift of God in Christ, unearned and undeserved.**

FIRST LETTER TO THE THESSALONIANS: WAITING FOR THE LORD

❖ When and why did Paul write to Thessalonica's Christians?

Paul's policy was to establish the Christian faith in a town so that it could spread into the whole region. Such it was Thessalonica, a city important for economic and political reasons. At his time it was the capital of Macedonia province (north of Greece) and attracted an international population (perhaps 300,000 inhabitants). Besides the temples to Greek, Roman and Egyptians gods, the many Jews had at least one synagogue. Paul arrived there around 50 after been expelled from Philippi. After three weeks of successful preaching, Jews' opposition caused him to go south: to Berea, Athens and Corinth. Timothy, sent back to Thessalonica, brought to Paul in Corinth good news about the Thessalonians' faith and passionate love under persecution, but a somewhat disordered hope with some misunderstanding of his teaching about Jesus' second coming troubled them, who were converts from paganism. Resurrection and afterlife did not readily enter into Greek perspectives. They were worried about what happens to the dead. How and when will the Lord return? Some answered: "He is coming now, and since he is coming now, let us not work!" This report caused Paul's first letter, being the **earliest written book in the NT**, most probably in that very year.



Thessalonica's today port.

❖ What are the main themes of this letter?

Since this letter uses earlier material from tradition, it is an important witness to what Christians believed in the 20 years between Jesus' resurrection and the writing of the NT. At this early stage, God the Father was more prominent in their ideas, as they were **closer to Jewish Christians' than later**. Like other Christians, Paul had only one desire: that the Lord's day should come quickly and put an end to history. He began his ministry living, and making his followers live, in imminent expectation of the Lord who was to come. He took time to accept that the delay before Jesus' return would be a long one. He had to reflect about how Christ's resurrection could save his followers whether alive or dead. As popular in the 1st century, he used a strong imagery to stress God's majesty and power, but it is not the accurate description of what will actually happen. Paul's message is like this: "No grieve as others who have no hope, because the Lord will come and our dead are with him. We too shall always be with him". Particularly important about **end-time teaching**, the letter also introduced many points elaborated in the following ones, for example about the ministry of the apostle, consisting essentially in preaching the Word and asking authenticity and disinterestedness. From its beginnings, the Church is invited to live in constant prayer and to give priority to the care of her weakest members.

❖ What is the relevance of this letter in Africa?

Today some Africans, confused by new evangelists, do expect Christ's second coming to be soon: they imagine he will descend dramatically to take his faithful up to paradise. Such expectation is nothing new: in front of it, **Paul demanded calm and taught the value of hard work** as a participation in the creating act of God. Among many African tribes through work everyone strengthens the life-force of the whole community. But it should not become a preoccupation geared only to get money. It has first to humanise. In this sense we must also consider ecology: in order to reach wealth, we are destroying our environment and harming human life itself. Politicians have to create jobs so that everybody can dedicate oneself to serve others.

❖ A help to read the text:

THANKSGIVINGS

1Thes 1:1-2:12: After a typical start, the first thanksgiving is for the Thessalonians' reception of the Gospel. Their faith was expressed in their having become imitators of the Apostles and of the Lord; by doing so they in turn became examples for other believers. In such way the Gospel's spread itself is now part of the good news. Then a confession follows, similar to Jeremiah's ones, which underlines missionaries' blameless behaviour as decisive factor in their witness to Jesus. We have to learn very much from Paul.

1Thes 2:13-3:13: A second thanksgiving includes a series of complaints against Jews and an expression of Paul's desire to be present to the letter's addressee. He lessens this desire by suggesting that he wants to be present in his apostolic function and by saying it is surpassed by Christ's presence.

EXORTATIONS AND END-TIME REVELATIONS

1Thes 4:1-12: The letter's second part starts with exhortations to chastity and charity. Both are badly needed today also, in the Church too. Facing what many see as demands of nature (occasional sex), are other demands due to the fact that God has called us to become holy. If we have given ourselves to Christ, that should surely make our life different from what we lived before.

1Thes 4:13-5:11: In the first revelation about end-time, Paul explains the lot of the dead: they are asleep, waiting for the time of rising as new persons transformed by the Risen One. In the second one he reflects on the implications of the end-time for those who are alive: among them, the duty of work.

1Thes 5:12-28: The first two verses relate to the building up of the community, calling for order. Then a series of brief instructions is given. At the end, we read closing wishes and greetings.

❖ **Study questions:**

1. Discuss the relevance of 1Thes to today's Church in reference to end-time's hopes.
2. In 1 Thes 4-5 we read that the believers were anxiously waiting for the Lord's second coming. Briefly explain the six precautions given to them and then expose their relevance to contemporary Christians.
3. Evaluate five themes that Paul emphasises in 1 Thes 5.

LETTER TO THE GALATIANS: FROM SLAVERY TO FREEDOM

❖ *When and why did Paul write to the Galatian Christians?*

Paul wrote to the Churches of Galatia province (whose capital was Ancyra, the present-day Ankara in Turkey) **during his major struggle with Judaist Christians**. A reasonable date is about 54, not long after his arrival in Ephesus at the start of his third mission. There he learned that in Galatia some strict Jewish Christians were scorning his authority as an apostle. They further claimed that, for the sake of Gentile converts, he was diluting the Gospel's requirements because he didn't insist on OT rules (circumcision, food laws and special days). They maintained that such acts were needed for salvation: moreover, by adopting Moses' laws, the Galatians would link themselves with values that had inspired and united God's people for more than a thousand years. But not every pleasing cause is correct. Those who were requiring religious practices of old did so after failing to understand that **being Christian was primarily living one's faith** rather than following any customs. They did not accept to follow Paul when he declared that **Christ was able to fill their lives and that the Holy Spirit is a much better guide than any moral obligations**. The Galatians found it difficult to maintain themselves along such a new line and felt a need for rules and practices through which they could expect a reward for their good deeds. On the contrary, faith means surrendering to God and his mystery which is as awesome as its symbol, the cross. Having heard the confusion that his opponents were creating, Paul was enraged and **wrote this strong letter to defend his position as an apostle and to warn his simple followers** against this "different gospel". In his view it was equal to saying that Jesus was not enough. Any compromise would mean that Christ died and was resurrected for nothing. Paul's passion gave this letter an extraordinary feel. We have to read it without worrying too much about hard phrases.

❖ *What are the main themes of this letter?*

Paul wanted to bring Galatians back to **Jesus as only means of salvation, God's free and freeing gift available through a faith working by love**. This letter was his first presentation of salvation by grace through faith apart from deeds set by Moses' law, above all circumcision, the commandments concerning food, the prescriptions relating to purity, and how to keep the Sabbath. Paul sees in these observances a return to the situation before Jesus' revolution, through which Israel's God has truly become the God of all nations in accordance to OT promises. This letter allows us to understand an essential feature of Paul's method: using theology to solve practical problems. It also introduces us to a deep spirituality: though OT truly flowed in Paul's blood and he often appealed to it, what he preached was no religion of a book, but a relationship with Jesus who, named in the first and last verses of the letter, truly dominates it. A popular slogan today is, "Are you saved?" This letter reminds us that **salvation is not assured once for all**. The initial grace which saves in principle must be ratified by expressing faith in love. To test how far this is happening we have to use the lists of the "works of the flesh" and the "fruit of the Spirit" in 5:19-22: which of them describes our personal and social behaviour? It is only by letting ourselves be led by God's Spirit that we become free from Moses' law, for Christian freedom is not the freedom of people with no obligations, but that of people totally united with the Father's will: it is freedom in the service of good.

❖ *What is the relevance of this letter in Africa?*

As stated by Paul, **Christ accepts all humans with their distinctive traditions**. Nobody should be forced to adopt Jewish customs to become a Christian. Likewise western Christianity should not be imposed on Africans who have to read the Gospel in line with their own culture. On the other hand, Paul challenges us not to cling to traditions which violate human dignity and don't match with the Gospel. Abraham's role in relation to Jesus can help understand the ancestors' one in African culture. Just as God's promises to him were fulfilled in Christ, so every religion is faulty without Jesus. In our time when so many people reduce religion to practices, Christians who move between traditional and Church procedures are deeply challenged by Paul's **insights on Christ as the centre of a new life**. Moreover, it is a fact that to the extent that the mother Church has to sustain many Christians who have a very limited experience of life in the freedom of the Spirit, she tends to bring herself to their level and to become a system of doctrines and precepts similar to the Jews' one. This is why she has to continually rediscover the meaning of living by faith. Paul's manifesto about Christian freedom won by Jesus for mankind can also help Africa understand what its hard-won freedom from such burdens as slavery and colonialism should mean, and what that freedom is for.

❖ **A help to read the text:**

INTRODUCTION

Gal 1:1-11: Paul expands the typical start, by adding motifs of the letter itself: the defence of his apostolate (its independence and divine origin) and the explanation of God's plan for humans' justification through Christ. Instead of the usual thanksgiving Paul voices his shock at Galatians' inconsistency and affirms that his own Gospel alone is the real one. Today too many different teachings in Jesus' name are

coming into the Church: we absolutely need to know how discern them in order to cling to the truth.

PAUL'S CALL AND GOSPEL

Gal 1:12-2:14: Against Judaist Christians' accusation, Paul narrates a few historic events to reaffirm his apostolic commission and explain his relation with Jerusalem's mother Church. Not only did her pillars

WORKS OF THE FLESH

- Fornication
- Impurity
- Licentiousness
- Idolatry
- Sorcery
- Enmity
- Strife
- Jealousy
- Anger
- Selfishness
- Dissension
- Party spirit
- Envy
- Drunkenness
- Carousing and the like

approve his position, but at Antioch it proved to be the only answer in a community of both Gentile and Jewish background. The Church has to be open to different people, so that everyone feels at home.

Gal 2:15-21: Paul now proposes a brief summary of his teaching on faith and Jewish customs; it may be a new formulation of his address to Peter at Antioch. It will be developed in Rom 2-8.

GOD'S PLAN FOR HUMANS' SALVATION THROUGH FAITH

Gal 3:1-4:31: Paul gives six proofs of the previous thesis, appealing to Galatians' experience and using arguments from Scripture, especially Abraham's faith which made him righteous long before Moses' law.

EXHORTATIONS

Gal 5:1-6:10: Paul draws three practical conclusions about preserving the freedom got in Christ, walking as per the Spirit against the flesh and using Christian freedom in the right way. We have to struggle for true maturity (fruit of the Spirit) and not being resigned to do the works of the flesh as worldly persons. Among these works, Paul places side by side idolatry and the ambitions or divisions so common in religious groups. It is clear that for him flesh and spirit are not the same as body and soul: the pettiness and attachment to our privileges are also sins of the flesh, that is of people alien to the Spirit.

Gal 6:11-18: Thus far the letter has been dictated to a scribe; now Paul himself adds the conclusion as his signature. It contains a summary and farewell blessings, but also presents his way of life so opposed to that of the world: persecuted by some, despised by others, feared by those who cannot stand his example of complete self-denial, he truly follows Christ to the cross.

❖ Study questions:

1. Why did Paul rebuke the Galatians for turning too quickly to another presentation of the gospel? What have we to learn in today's situation of contrasts between Christian denominations?
2. Account for the questions in Galatians' church and explain who did raise up the crisis. Then in at least five points present how Paul did defend his apostleship.
3. Analyse Paul's arguments in defending his apostolic authority in Gal 1:6-24. Use at least six points.
4. Point out at least five reasons for Paul rebuking Peter at Antioch. Then give at least five examples of how Church leaders today manifest contradictory behaviours.
5. "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me..." (Gal 2:20). Why did Paul speak this way? How does this inspire and challenge you as a Christian?
6. "In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail but faith working through love" (Gal 5:6). Explain what prompted Paul to write these words and give concrete examples of today's related problems which you have experienced.
7. Write a short article on a Christian magazine explaining the importance of the Spirit's fruit exposed by Paul in Gal 5:22 against the works of the flesh.
8. The Galatians turned to false teaching which obliged them to keep Moses' law in order to be saved. Present five false teaching that are affecting Christian in today's globalised world.
9. "Paul's letter to the Galatians is a summary of the Christian way of living". Justify this statement by giving five points.

FIRST LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS: CHRISTIAN LIFE IN A MULTINATIONAL CITY

❖ When and why did Paul write to the Corinthian Christians?

The great and rich Greek town of Corinth, capital of Achaia province (southern Greece), had social, ethnic and religious complexity and very loose ethics. We notice in Paul's letters very clear allusions to different aspects of local life: slavery, prostitution, sports. After arriving there in about 51, **Paul made it one of the main centres of early Church**, dynamic though not well ordered, with a solid nucleus of Jews but many more Gentiles, mostly poor. After believing, they gave him **more problems than any other community**. In particular they didn't cease to question, did welcome other versions of Christianity and compete with one another for spiritual reputation. Many of them were in danger of returning to the vices of their former lives, once the enthusiasm of their first years as Christians had worn off. Paul himself says that he wrote



Corinth's isthmus as seen from a satellite.

1Cor from Ephesus in the spring, but the suggested years range from 52 to 57. It is a complex reaction to two sets of data about Corinthians. In an official letter they had asked Paul's advice on a series of problems. It was supplemented by Chloe's people on return from Corinth, who had been surprised by some aspects of Church life there which revealed Corinthians' basic errors about Christian community and the danger of divisions. Paul integrated his replies into an effort to bring them to appreciate the authentic life in Christ. **Putting Jesus at the centre, they could find unity, solid teaching and moral standards.** After this letter he needed to write to them time and again: many see 2Cor as a compilation of these other letters. In all we notice the authority with which he, from afar, leads the Church in Jesus' name.

❖ *What are this letter's main themes?*

1Cor contains **a lot of information** about urgent problems facing the Church and the decisions made to meet them. There were internal questions of moral behaviour, of marriage and celibacy, of worship and Eucharist, of charisms. There were also external matters of appeals to civil courts, and eating foods sacrificed to gods. **Paul's genius turned his practical answers into means to teach deeply about Christian freedom, body's holiness, love's primacy and union with Christ in his body, i.e. the Church.** The end-time basis of his thought is present in his **explanations of the resurrection**, a teaching so hard for Greeks. This confront of the gospel with the new world it was entering is seen above all in the contrast between cross' folly and Greek wisdom. To his converts, split into factions, each proud of its own leader, Paul reminded **there are only one master, Christ, and only one true wisdom, the cross.** Its power is manifested through the Holy Spirit's many gifts working together with mutual concern.

❖ *What is the relevance of this letter in Africa?*

In today's Africa the theme of divisions is more important than in other continents. Those who do struggle for Church leadership, seek support to struggle against the existent authorities, start new Christian denominations, or put their tribe at the centre have to learn from this letter that **it is the crucified Jesus alone who saves and that he unites all.** Sometimes Church problems are reported to State's tribunal or in magazines, against the family spirit required by Paul. If we would follow his admonitions to the Corinthians, our communities would have no disunity, quarrelling, jealousy, greed, selfishness or disorder; our harmony would be the needed foundation of our witness to the new life in the Spirit. Some persons praise the first Christians as if they had been models of all virtues. However, the vivid picture of Corinth's early Church cancels the idea that an apostolic community has to be exceptionally holy or that its members' teachings are always sound. We have to learn time and again about practical love, starting with the poor. Also Paul's answers about ethics are relevant to today's African Church, because ministers' and common Christians' sexual immorality kills her.

❖ **A help to read the text:**

GREETING AND THANKSGIVING

1Cor 1:1-9: The opening formula and thanksgiving follow a standard pattern. In it, Paul shows his certitude of spiritual riches present in a community where all is far from perfect. This is how we have to do: instead of being discouraged by the problems we face and accusing each other when something fails, let us first to appreciate the positive aspects and remember what unite us all.

DIVISIONS IN THE COMMUNITY

1Cor 1:10-17: Since Christian life's basis and only true expression is communion, Paul is particularly sensitive to any lack of unity. So he deals first with this aspect of Corinth Church's situation. After him, other leaders went there, especially Apollos and Cephas (the Aramaic name of rock, i.e. Peter). Certain faithful profited by this to affirm their own identity by allegiance to one of them rather than the others on the base of how well they preached. Really, this was only a way of satisfying vanity and the need of self-assertion as cultured persons who could enjoy fine speeches. Paul exhorts all to be a united family.

1Cor 1:18-2:5: Believers must detach themselves from the fallen mankind's standards – the cause of any divisions – if they are to understand the way God relates to them. Paul is faithful to the above principle by accepting the mystery of the cross and finding in it the strength of the Spirit.

1Cor 2:6-3:4: Paul turns against his opponents their own ideas and words, influenced by Philo's Hellenistic-Jewish wisdom, may be introduced into Corinth by Apollos. Following them, some Christians believed they were mature or perfect spirit-people having the right to look down on others as children. Paul is not jealous, for he never intended to be seen by his audience as a wise or eminent speaker, but he saw that some of them were seeking their own prestige, forgetting that the Church belongs only to God.

1Cor 3:5-4:5: The main theme of this section is the right attitude toward Church's pastors: they are only Christ's servants and stewards of his mysteries. In the Church there is no place for the cult of personalities, for we are face to face with God himself.

1Cor 4:6-21: Paul applies the earlier images to himself and Apollos in order to clarify their role. In contrast with both, who knew only suffering and struggle, the Corinthians imagined themselves to be in possession of the end-time God's kingdom. Some of them saw Paul as a fool, and in a way he was so for Christ. However, even if taken for a fool because of his efforts, he brought them to Jesus.

IMPORTANCE OF THE BODY

1Cor 5:1-6:20: The three problems of these two chapters show Corinthians' belief that physical actions have no moral importance. On the contrary, for Paul the body is where commitment to Jesus becomes real: there is no purely spiritual Christianity. How far is our daily life from what we pretend it is: God's children born again in the Spirit? What do our neighbours think of us?

MARRIAGE AND CELIBACY

1Cor 7:1-40: Chapters 7-14 face a wide variety of questions by Corinthians: this one begins and ends with sexually related problems, though the central part regards the irrelevance of legal situations (e.g. circumcised/uncircumcised or slave/freeman), for God calls individuals in any of them. To reach practical discernment, Paul distinguishes four types of rules whose force can be placed in descending rank: first of all, an order of the Lord himself, hence unchangeable, against divorce; then a decision grounded upon his own apostolic authority about mixed marriages; then again a counsel by him as a person having God's Spirit in favour of celibacy; finally a concession on conditions about sexual abstinence for spiritual reasons by married couples. He takes this occasion to affirm the perfect reciprocity and equality of husband and wife, whose bodies are at the disposal of each other: such vision was revolutionary!

PROBLEMS ARISING FROM PAGAN ENVIRONMENT

1Cor 8:1-11:1: Usually, in the ancient world meat was available only after great festivals, when the priests sold their share in sacrificed animals. Corinthian Christians were divided on eating such meat first offered to gods. Paul gives here another example of discernment on such problem which, in his time, was difficult, as many others are which we face in our pluralist society. He confronts two series of arguments. In favour of a positive answer he appeals to theology: an idol is nothing, hence, eating the meat in question has in itself no moral quality. Moreover he affirms an inalienable right: the believer's freedom. These arguments, however, are opposed by a decisive principle that stems from practical prudence: the delicacy of love. He highlights other areas in which he has accepted limitations on his freedom for others' good, mirroring Jesus' life.

PROBLEMS IN WORSHIP ASSEMBLIES

1Cor 11:2-34: Before answering Corinthians about spiritual gifts, Paul deals with two issues related to Christian worship: clothes and love. According to other Churches' practice, he requires men to look like men and women like women: if God had intended them to be identical, he would have created them in the same way. More importantly, there can be no Eucharist in a community whose members don't love one another. Faced by Corinthians' misbehaviour even at that celebration, Paul reflects on Eucharist's nature and meaning; in so doing he writes down the earliest account of the Lord's Supper. It is not an eyewitness' report but a quotation from liturgy. He himself is a link which passes it on as a tradition, whose chain reaches back to Jesus. Paul recalls two aspects of the Lord's Supper: it is the communion of his body and blood; it affirms a union of love among all us who form one body. Paul denounces the Corinthians for their sin with regard to both points: not discerning Eucharist from ordinary food and ignoring brothers and sisters while celebrating it. Fulfilling the requirements for a worthy celebration would renew the Church overcoming her members' weakness.

1Cor 12:1-14:40: Paul's reply about the order of the Holy Spirit's gifts shows that he discerned selfish competitions harmful to Church unity. In particular, the Corinthians gave undue importance to meaningless sounds seeing them as the clearest sign of being possessed by the Spirit. Three arguments prove that such sounds help nothing: his own ministry, musical instruments and foreign languages. Paul rejects the view that a gift's possession enables one to impose oneself on a meeting. In contrast, he stresses the primacy of the three ministries of the Word by which the Church is founded and built up, not of what appears more miraculous. Prophecy itself is a spiritual gift different from wild ecstasy: in Christian worship the Spirit makes everyone more responsible. So, a message from God would be offered in an orderly way, at a time provided for it. Moreover, hinting to what is central in following Christ, Paul inserts a marvellous hymn to the love as the greatest gift: the ability to love is the truly important thing, and only by loving in daily life we do exist authentically.

RESURRECTION

1Cor 15:1-58: This long chapter answers those who deny resurrection, for they give no importance to the body. Basing his reply on Church's belief in Jesus' resurrection, Paul shows the consequences of their denial and the benefits of his affirmation. He presents the close connection between the resurrection of Jesus, the resurrection of Christians and the assessment and consequent evaluation of our present life. Human logic gives way to Paul's prophetic passion in proclaiming a conviction that surpasses reason and experience.

CONCLUSION

1Cor 16:1-24: This conclusion relates to every Sunday's collection for Jerusalem Christians, Paul's travel plans, some recommendations and final greetings. In it he asserts that Jesus must be loved.

❖ Study questions:

1. Corinthians gave the most spectacular charisms a place of pride. Discuss how this put in danger Church's unity and what we have to do following Paul's message to them on love and charisms.
2. "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1Cor 1:18). By giving five points, discuss this quotation in the light of the cross as the means of salvation to all believers.
3. Corinthians' love for freedom was a danger. Describe Paul's reaction and what it teaches us in front of the multiplication of Christian denominations.
4. Discuss the relationships between Paul, Apollo and Cephas in Gospel's ministry at Corinth as a lesson about Church leaders' roles. Explain what today's leaders and we as believers have to do.
5. Account for the divisions in the Corinthians' church. Give at least five points.
6. How did Paul react or respond to the splintering groups in the Church of Corinth? Give at least five points on this and then propose five reasons of the divisions among today Christians.
7. Briefly narrate how Paul challenged many of his followers as not spiritual people. Do you think that today Christians may face the same reproaches? How do we quench the Spirit?

8. In 1Cor, Paul refers to the Lord's Supper as criterion for Christian behaviour. What does he say and how is it important for our community life?
9. Paul warned Corinthians not to take their fellow Christians to courts. Why did he do so? How can you apply this today?
10. How did Paul condemn the rampant sexual immorality among the Corinthians? If he lived today, what do you think would be his reaction to the present day state of moral corruption about sex?
11. Using 1Cor, write down what do you think about the special attention given to sexual sins throughout Church's history?
12. Basing you on Paul's methods in solving problems about sex and marriage, suggest how to face AIDS disease which threats our society.
13. Appealing to the Lord's authority, Paul in 1Cor 7 refuses the divorce. Report his statement and then explain its importance in the context of today widespread immorality.
14. Suppose you have been appointed a lecturer on Christian celibacy. What will you produce on the basis of Paul's attitude?
15. Paul was gifted with speaking in tongues, but he saw the need to regulate the use of this charisma. What were his rules and what is your experience about their application in today's communities?
16. "All things are lawful, but not all things are helpful" (1Cor 10:23). Explain Paul's teaching in connection to this statement and then show how relevant it is today (give at least three points).
17. 1 Cor 12 presents various charisms. Use eight of them to explain Paul's teaching concerning spiritual gifts.
18. Why is Christ's resurrection very important in our faith? Relate Paul's teaching about it in 1Cor 15 to your own life.
19. Discuss five major doctrinal issues in the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians.

**LETTER TO THE ROMANS:
SALVATION THROUGH FAITH IN CHRIST**



Two most known monuments of the Ancient Rome which evoke its past glory.

❖ *When and why did Paul write to Rome's Christians?*

Paul wrote Rom shortly before his last trip to Jerusalem, in the first months of 58, probably in Corinth or in its port of Cenchrae. Conscious that his apostolate in the north-eastern Mediterranean area was over, having he preached "all the way from Jerusalem to Illyricum", he looked westward to Spain. He planned to visit Rome on the journey, to fulfil the desire of years. But first he wanted to carry personally to Jerusalem the collection taken up in his Gentile Churches so as to show solidarity with the poor Jewish Christians of the mother Church. Before departing, he wrote to the Romans **to announce his visit to a famous Church that didn't know him personally but could not ignore the problems caused by his attitude**. So, he doesn't go to any great lengths to introduce himself as "the apostle of the Gentiles", but his teaching.

❖ *What was the situation in Rome?*

Rome's Church was founded in the 30 AD by Jews converted to Christianity while in Jerusalem as pilgrims. These believers already had their own ways and customs. Paul's call for mutual understanding among them, both the "weak" and the "strong", echoes the local situation: reasonably, these **two Roman groups were the Jewish Christians and the majority composed by Gentile Christians**. The latter developed on its own after all Jews had to leave Rome following riots among them about the Christ (49). When they returned (shortly after 54) they found a novelty: Gentile Christians by now felt no worries about Jewish rules on diet and calendar. So there was a danger of these two parties looking down on one another. We ourselves sometimes fail to accept each other with our differences. More than ever it was not easy to gather Jews and converted Pagans in the same community. In view of this, Paul **explained the relationship between Judaism and Christianity**. This letter may also (indirectly) be a formulation of his Gospel such as he would present to Jewish Christians in Jerusalem still suspicious of him. It discusses **some of the same topics as Gal but in a conciliatory mood**, both calmer and fuller. While Gal is like a cry from the heart, Rom is a carefully planned whole.

❖ *What are the main themes of this letter?*

Rom, **the longest and nicest of Paul's letters**, has affected theology more than any other NT book and has contributed a lot to Western thinking, but **it must be integrated with Bible's other books**. It is a treatise more than a letter, but not a full summary of Paul's doctrine, because it misses some of his significant teachings (e.g. on Church, Eucharist, resurrection and end-time). Rather, it presents his **missionary reflections on the historical chance of salvation: that it doesn't depend on deeds**

faith and baptism in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son whom the Father's love didn't spare. This faith must result in good works, but these will not be at all equal to those commanded by the Law, on which Jews were so proud to rely. They will be works prompted by the Spirit already present as first-fruits in God's children so that they can live in Christ. The Mosaic stage of religion is over, and those who claim they are continuing to fulfil the Law are in fact putting themselves outside the light of salvation. God allows their blindness only to save more easily the Gentiles. Before all Jews have become believers, Christians of any backgrounds must love and help one another as a single family.

❖ *What is the relevance of this letter in Africa?*

Rom states that **God revealed himself not only to the Israelites through Moses, but also to the other peoples through creation and natural law**. Many Africans knew God even before joining world religion. They focused on the ancestors, but knowing that they too could do nothing without God's support. **Those who served him following their conscience have been saved**. Moreover, Paul's concept of the body with different members characterising the Christian community furthers the idea of Church as God's family in Africa. The family that Africans speak of is extended, involving the living, the dead and the not-yet-born. In this concept there is room for all the members united by a blood pact, and some kind of alliance. **In Jesus we are all relatives and family in an Africans sense**, for we all are united through Christ's blood. This covenant and family bond is a reality renewed especially in the Eucharist.

❖ **A help to read the text:**

INTRODUCTION

Rom 1:1-15: Differently from many other letters, Paul alone writes this one. Its opening formula is the most solemn in all of them. The first sentence is expanded to include: a triple self-description, echoes of the original Christian message, and motifs to be treated in the letter. In thanksgiving, Paul's prayer for the Romans is addressed to God through Christ. His coming visit to them is seen as a source of mutual benefit, but also as a chance to preach the Gospel in the capital of the civilised world.

THROUGH THE GOSPEL GOD'S UPRIGHTNESS IS REVEALED

Rom 1:16-17: The theme of the next ten chapters is announced: the Gospel is the powerful source of salvation for all, which discloses God's uprightness. Faith in it is the only chance for Jews and Gentiles alike. Both could think that people become righteous by their own efforts. Paul retorts that the righteousness God wants is something much greater and beyond what human effort can achieve. This is because all need the Gospel to be saved. Faith is neither an option nor a luxury, as if we could well do without it.

Rom 1:18-3:20: The above statement is explained first by a contrary consideration on what happens to humans without the Gospel. Certainly a majority on our planet do without faith comfortably. Yet, if we were to withdraw all that comes from faith in our life, the world would die for want of hope, as is already the case with nations and ideologies that ignores God. Paul accuses both Paganism and Judaism for failing to enable people to achieve uprightness. The Greeks didn't come to acknowledge God and so did fall into immorality. The Jews too didn't succeed to be upright, in spite of possessing Moses' law. For both, the result is separation from God. This is why, in announcing the Gospel we free people in need, even though they may feel satisfied with themselves.

Rom 3:21-31: The whole world lives in sin, but a new period began with Jesus' coming, which displayed God's uprightness. It is seized by faith in his Gospel. These key verses express the essence of Paul's teaching about salvation through faith.

Rom 4:1-25: Paul uses the first book of the OT to prove that all are made upright by God's grace through faith. For example, long before the law was given to Moses, there was Abraham's faith. He was considered upright not because of his circumcision, nor in dependence on the law, but in virtue of a promise. Thus, he is our father; his faith is the model of Christian faith which saves us. It is both more fundamental and more universal than Moses' law. We become God's friend by believing in his promises.

GOD'S LOVE ASSURES SALVATION TO THOSE JUSTIFIED BY FAITH

Rom 5:1-11: Sharing his own experience, Paul begins here to discuss the Christian way and to explain how salvation is assured through a threefold liberation: from death and sin, from self through union with Christ and from Moses' law. These opening verses announce the theme: the Christian is reconciled to God and experiences a peace which no trouble can upset, a hope without disappointment, and a confidence of salvation. We are accustomed to hear about Christ's dying for our sins, so that often we are not touched, for his sacrifice seems to be far away and quite unreal. When by grace we understand it, love suddenly pours from our hearts. Return love for love: this is the beginning of true conversion, beyond observance of Moses' law and any other religious precepts.

Rom 5:12-21: To express the Christians' new condition, Paul contrasts it with humans' status before Jesus. He does compare Adam, the first parent, with Christ, the head of the new mankind, clarifying their difference and the superabundance of Christ's grace which now overcomes sin and death. The new Adam was very more helpful toward all humans than Adam was troublemaker. Human nature was created good, but we are born alienated. Sin refers to the totality of forces that have imprisoned humankind and which bring it to evil. At times we feel crushed and powerless by the evil forces present everywhere. Humanity is not at peace with God and cannot reach his goal without being saved by Christ. Starting with Adam all humans are sinners, but in Christ all are reconciled with God and among themselves. The affirmation of original sin is simply the consequence of a much more important fact: we all are saved in Jesus Christ. We are all saved because we all need to be. We are not gracious by ourselves, but given grace by God!

Rom 6:1-23: The description of Christians' experience goes a step further. The new life they received through baptism reshapes their self so that they could no longer ever think of sinning. Identified with

Christ's death and resurrection, they are dead to sin and alive to God. Dead is the right word since it has been a definitive step, one that is intimately linked to Jesus' death. It is most important for us to believe that sin has not more power over us. We belong to him and he transforms us: by grace we achieve true freedom day by day by trying to be better.

Rom 7:1-25: Jesus' death marks the death of ancient history, of which Moses' law was part. Following the Christians' freedom from sin, what role has this law still in human life? After asserting their freedom from the law, Paul plays the role of the one who still does not know Christ in order to explain that the law is good, but has been used by sin to dominate the weak man. The problem is not the law itself, many of whose commandments are not to be neglected because they deal with justice and mercy, but humans' inborn inability to cope with its demands. The law with his commandments has no power to renew a person. If he know the law only, he is divided among two opposing forces within him: he is not really free of doing what he knows is his duty.

Rom 8:1-39: This chapter explains how Christian's life is dominated by the Holy Spirit, not the flesh, and is destined for glory. Paul stated that the believers have been empowered to a new life as result of God's love manifested in Christ's liberating acts. Now that liberation from sin, death and the law has started, they can live for God, whose love is granted through the dynamic principle of such life, God's Spirit himself. Because of this gift the Christian is a child of God, destined for his intimate presence. This experience of the Spirit working in us, especially while praying, is the most characteristic in Christian life. Contemplating this plan of salvation, Paul praises God's love.

GOD'S PROMISE TO ISRAEL OF OLD ARE NOT CONTRADICTED

Rom 9:1-11:36: Paul now turns to a problem raised by his Gospel of the new uprightness through faith in Jesus: it is Judaism's relationship to this mode of salvation. His discussion is heavily biblical, as he tries to relate OT teaching to his Gospel. He begins expressing his anguish at the plight of his many fellow Jews who have refused their Messiah. Then he shows that this plight is not contrary to God's direction of history. The cause of Jews' failure is to be found in them, not with God, but it is only partial and temporary. In God's plan mercy is to be shown to all, the Jews included. So Paul bursts in a hymn to God's merciful wisdom that knows how to lead and save humans.



Tiber river in the centre of Rome. On the background, the dome of St. Peter's church, built on the place of his death and tomb.

THE DEMANDS OF UPRIGHT LIFE IN CHRIST

Rom 12:1-13:14: As in his other letters, from now on Paul try to be more practical. This unit reflects the early Church's tendency to join morals to faith exposition. It is not systematic, but concerns in general Christians' relation to the larger society. Moses' precepts may no longer be the norm for their conduct, but there are demands on believers, and the principle at work in all of them is love. Church's unity demands individuals

to overcome evil with good. The common pursuit of the good is expected of the members of Christ's body: their whole lives must be a sacrifice to God, not only the weekly worship. A Christian will always challenge the world which wants to enclose him in its logic and its would-be needs through fashions, propaganda, songs and slogans. It is so easy to become accustomed to what everyone does, but we should be free for our heart to be only for God! Christian renewal springs from new criteria, from a new vision of existence. Rather than commandments concerning external acts, Paul stresses internal attitudes and dispositions.

Rom 14:1-15:13: This second part of the exhortatory section is immediately concerned with minor questions as eating meat and observing holy days. More basically it deals with the age-old problem of rigorous versus liberal conscience, or conservative versus progressive. Paul deals with it only in generic terms, probably because he is not well aware of Rome's situation, but formulates prudent principles based on conviction, love, Christ's example and loyalty to him, ending with a plea for unity. No food or drink was forbidden by Jesus, but Paul rejects the disputes about these thing. No letter of him misses warnings against divisions.

CONCLUSION

Rom 15:14-16:23: Paul sends news about himself, his apostolate and his plans. This give us an idea of how zealous he was in creating new communities in all parts of the world, without waiting for the newly founded ones to attain perfection. Moreover he compliments the Romans on the good things he has heard about them. After the usual ending of the letter, praise is paid once again to God the Father, through his Son, Jesus Christ.

❖ Study questions:

1. Illustrate Paul's teachings on how a person attains righteousness according to his letter to the Romans. Give at least eight points.
2. Using the epistle to the Romans, argue with people who say they have no sin (give eight points).
3. "Paul's letter to the Romans is a guide on how the Church should treat and welcome all people, regardless of their differences". Justify this statement by providing five points to show how Christians should relate to each other.

❖ Revision questions:

1. Early Christian communities experienced that people's cultural background could hinder the Gospel's progress. Discuss one example from the NT and one from your own experience in the Church.
2. The Gospel "is the power of God for salvation" (Rm 1:16). Discuss this statement giving relevant examples from Acts and from your own experience.

3. Examining NT criteria regarding leadership, what do you expect from your Church leaders and what is your responsibility towards them?
4. Briefly describe Paul's life before and after his conversion, and then say what can today Christians learn from his experience.
5. How would you explain to your fellow students the function of Moses' law to us believers according to Paul?
6. Clarify to your friends the importance of righteousness and the way to reach it according to Paul.
7. "Idols' worship is a danger". What was Paul's interpretation of this warning and what is its relevance to you?
8. Paul needed to defend his apostolic authority. Explain how and why he did so and then comment on its relevance to Church leaders today.
9. Paul speaks of the Law of Christ. Explain what is it and how can it help today Christians live together.
10. What can today Church learn from the strengths and weaknesses of one community of your choice among those to whom Paul addressed a letter?
11. After reading Paul's letters, how do you understand the relationship between faith and good deeds?

AT THE END OF OUR COURSE

We have just entered Bible's world, coming to know something of Israel's history. We have read or glanced through pages on which we would have to spend more time. We have met many ancient persons. We may have forgotten some facts and dates, but that doesn't matter too much, because we have learned to use our Bible, to go back and find texts, and to refer to these notes and other books for more information. We have now enough background to no longer be confused, because we can see where a book or a person fits into a whole, and finally understand them in the context of the life of God's people.

He wants us to use our minds when reading the Bible. We are men and women of the twenty-first century, moulded by arts and applied sciences, and it is as such people that we should believe, without giving up either our faith or intelligence. We can belong completely to our age and still believe because **there is no clash between science or history and faith.**

The Bible is Christians' holy book for it is God's own word. We, however, have studied it with analytical methods used also for secular texts, with the risk that it may seem above all to be men's words. **Our amazement at how the Bible is so strangely human, however is like that of Jesus' contemporaries who had to perceive God in his human form.** Only after his resurrection, his disciples became aware that they had lived in close association with God's Son, though they had only seen and heard a man. This leads us to recognise the Holy Spirit's importance in guiding us into all the truth. God's word humbly made itself similar to our words, and we have to discern it by faith. **We have to decode God's word through human words, attitudes and events.** If the Bible is the humble interpretation of human events by generations of believers, reading it invites us less to repeat what they discovered than to do what they did: to read God's word in our own lives and in the events of today world.

We have seen that the Bible is not eye-witnesses' account, but believers' interpretation. Now, when reading it, don't first ask, "What happened?", but rather, "What did these believers wrote about what happened? What word of God have they perceived and told us?" **Getting this new way of approaching the Bible,** probably we have now lost the aptitude to deal with it naively, but we have gained in truth. We could list other discoveries: texts become familiar, figures turned into friends, a new gaze on God, a way to relating ourselves to his written Word, the need to live according to it, following Jesus in his Church for the life of this world, so that **all may believe and to be saved.**

Spending time to get used to Bible's vocabulary, imagery and historical situation, we have seen our own life's elements evoked here or there. For example, the prophets' cries demanding justice and respect for the poor match our social concerns. **The Bible is a mirror of our existence offered to us so that we can reflect on how to live today.** Anybody can feel that it is one of the great works of humanity, which express the essential qualities of being human; this is still more true for a believer. Because biblical events have a value in themselves; for we believers, however, they anticipate also our own life. **God was thinking of us when he was guiding Israel through great experiences and hopes.**

One conviction stands out from the whole Bible: **God wants all men and women to be free and responsible.** This is indeed his godly way: not to overwhelm with external power, but to give freedom, to offer and yield love. It is part of his mystery that he only gradually builds up salvation history within the history of mankind, becoming man, being overcome on the cross by evil forces, and also after his resurrection coming and acting through his disciples' weak faith. He is the transcendent Lord, universe's Creator, but above that **he likes to be the God who is near, who by infinite respect goes with his people step by step.** He wants us to stand on our own feet, leaving everything depend on us. We do have to shape ourselves, the world and history; at the same time we ourselves are the finest gift by God.

Here is our ultimate security, which frees us: **whether we are saints or sinners, we do know that we are unfailingly loved by God.** Humanly speaking, it is so important to be loved if we are to act: we need someone to count on us, to trust in us. Believers' huge confidence is that God loves us, trusts in us, despite everything. History, both of the world and of the Church, can have its setbacks and failings, but that should not lead us to despair because **invisibly, God goes with us and trust in us.** Once for all, he has cast the weight of his faithfulness into the balance of history.

Christianity is all about love. And love opposes self-seeking, it is an exodus out of oneself: yet this is precisely the way in which man fulfils himself. **Only on love's way, the richness of life and the greatness of our call are opened up.** According to the Bible, God is love, so he descends, to the point of death on the Cross. Precisely by doing so, he reveals himself in his true greatness. Surprisingly, **we are called to climb to God by following him on this descending path, by loving and serving our least fellow humans!**

**PRAISE THE LORD, ALL NATIONS!
EXTOL HIM, ALL PEOPLES!**

**FOR GREAT IS HIS STEADFAST LOVE TOWARD US;
AND THE FAITHFULNESS OF THE LORD ENDURES FOR EVER.**

(PSALM 117)