

**Introduction to the New Testament**  
**- with African perspectives**



Eero Junkkaala

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With articles by George Fihavango,  
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## **Preface**

This introduction to the New Testament has been written especially with Tanzanian pastors and theological students in mind. It deals briefly with all New Testament books and some special biblical issues. It is a continuation to the author's *Introduction to the Old Testament – with African perspectives*, published in 2010.

Like all such introductions, this book deals briefly and compactly with such questions as authorship, date, main content and special problems of each New Testament book. The following topics are covered separately: canon of the New Testament, the Synoptic problem, history of the text, archaeology of the New Testament time, issues regarding Jesus and Paul, and the central doctrine of the Law and the Gospel. In other words, this book is not just an introduction in the conventional sense, because it also contains some theological discussions about the content of the New Testament. The author's aim has been to write a book that could be a real help for those who teach and preach the Bible in the African context. For more detailed information, please consult the books listed in the Bibliography, especially *An Introduction to the New Testament* by D.A. Carson, D.J. Moo and L. Morris.

The African perspective is derived from two sources. Several articles and ideas of the Africa Bible Commentary (ed. by Tokunboh Ad-eyemo) have been used to cover questions that are familiar to Africans. In addition, six Tanzanian New Testament scholars have written articles on their special areas of expertise. All of them take a look at the issues both from the biblical point of view and from the African perspective. Each writer is exclusively responsible for his own text. There are differences between their views, and no effort has been made to harmonize these views. Together, the articles give the reader an idea of what Tanzanian theologians think about a number of New Testament themes.

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# PART I

## THE NEW TESTAMENT AS A HISTORICAL BOOK

### 1. Canon of the New Testament

The Old Testament was the Bible of Jesus and the apostles. At the end of the first or in the beginning of the second century AD the books of the New Testament were already in use, but it took a long time before these books were accepted as part of the Holy Scriptures. This process is called formation of the canon of the New Testament. The word “canon” is borrowed from Greek, in which it means ‘rule’ or ‘yardstick’.

The Bible is not only a collection of ancient religious writings; it is also an inspired text with divine authority. We believe that it is a revelation of God himself, even though it was written by ordinary human beings. In this respect it differs from all other books. According to our Christian belief, the texts of the individual books of the Bible were written under the influence and guidance of the Holy Spirit. We also believe that later on he guided the process of deciding which books should be accepted into the biblical canon. Bearing that in mind, we examine the process of how the books of our Bible were accepted as Holy Scriptures.

The first Bible of the Christians was the Old Testament. It did not take long before the words of Jesus and the story of his life were being considered as authoritative as the Old Testament. A bit later the words of the apostles gained the same status. In other words, the Old Testament and the teachings of Jesus and the apostles formed the basis for Christian faith and doctrine. The Old Testament was in written form, whereas the speeches of Jesus and the apostles were at first passed on orally, but they were probably also written down nearly simultaneously.

In all likelihood the sayings of Jesus were collected into a single document. This first collection has disappeared, but the scholarly world calls it the *Logia*-source or uses the German word *Quelle* (‘source’, abbreviated “Q”; see **The Synoptic problem**). The Apostle

Paul wrote his epistles before the words and deeds of Jesus were collected into the four Gospels, very probably between the years 48 and 64. Soon they were being widely read in the congregations, distributed from one congregation to another, and given the status of Holy Scriptures. This can be seen in 2 Pet 3:15-16, where Peter equates them with the Old Testament texts. Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch, who died during the executions by Emperor Trajan (98-117 AD), knew several Pauline Epistles.

The first gospel was probably the Gospel of Mark, written at the end of the 50's or at the beginning of the 60's. The Gospels of Luke and Matthew were doubtless written between the 60's and 80's and the Gospel of John in the 90's. The other letters in the New Testament were written between the 60's and 90's, although some scholars think that the latest of them were written in the second century.

We can say that approximately in the year 100 all the books we have in our New Testament were ready. But there was no special need to collect them in one volume at the time. For the Christian church it was enough that she had the Old Testament and the apostolic teaching including the stories of Jesus' speeches, life, death and resurrection. All of these formed the basis of the correct Christian doctrine and teaching in the congregations. If somebody taught something else, he was a heretic. Sound doctrine was very important in the Christian church, because it kept the young religion and the preaching of the gospel pure.

Interestingly, the first person to make some attempts to influence the canon of the New Testament was a heretical teacher by the name of Marcion. He lived in the middle of the second century and preached a doctrine of two Gods: the Old Testament God was righteous and angry, whereas Jesus proclaimed a good God. Marcion rejected the Old Testament, and according to him the divine compilation of the Holy Scriptures consisted of only one Gospel, that of Luke, Acts, and ten Epistles of Paul. Other compilations were introduced by heretical Gnostic groups, who accepted not only several books we have in the New Testament but also many Gnostic books such as the Gospel of Thomas. These attempts challenged the church to start formulating her own collection of books belonging to the Bible.

The first evidences of the concept of a canon are to be found among the so-called Church Fathers during the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. Irenaeus of Lyons quotes from the four Gospels, Acts, the Pauline Epistles, Revelation and some Catholic Epistles. Hippolytus of Rome referred to several New Testament books as well. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> century Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria and Origen all made wide use of the New Testament Scriptures. But it was not before the 4<sup>th</sup> century that the canon of the New Testament was established.

In addition to the books we have now in the Bible there were some others that were used in different parts of Christendom: e.g. the Acts of Paul, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Apocalypse of Peter, the Epistle of Barnabas, the Didache, the Gospel according to the Hebrews, and the Epistles of Clement. A few later canonical books (Revelation, James, Jude, 2 and 3 John and 2 Peter) were not accepted in some churches.

The confines of the New Testament Canon as we know it today were set in the eastern parts of Christendom in 367. In the western parts the Councils at Hippo in 393 and at Carthage in 397 arrived at the same decision. The Church made a clear distinction between three groups of religious books: (1) the books that belong to the New Testament and are Word of God; (2) good and useful books, such as the Didache and the Shepherd of Hermas, which do not belong to the New Testament canon; (3) heretical books, including those that represent Gnosticism.

The main criteria for any book's acceptance into the Holy Scriptures were the following: apostolic authorship, the text was written for a wider audience, general distribution in the Church, and sound doctrine. The first two criteria were not applied strictly. Not all books which were accepted were written by the apostles. Luke was not an apostle, but his close companionship with Paul probably gave him authority. Mark was not an apostle either. He was a co-worker of Peter and could be accepted for that reason. James and Jude were brothers of Jesus, and this gave them sufficient authority. The Epistle to Philemon was a private letter, but it was accepted, because it was written by Paul. Hebrews was thought to be a Pauline letter, although the author was unknown.

The question of correct doctrine is interesting, because doctrine is assessed in the light of the content of the biblical books. According to our thinking this is circular reasoning: the books are accepted or rejected on the basis of what is sound doctrine, but at the same time it is those same books that tell you what that sound doctrine is. However, the Church arrived at a common understanding of sound Christian doctrine early on. Everything that was in line with the teachings of Jesus and the apostles was within the limits of sound doctrine, and everything that disagreed with them was heresy. The Apostles' Creed was the first short summary of the most important aspects of the Christian faith. Later on the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed expressed the same faith in a somewhat longer form.

To sum up, we can say that although the process of determining which books should be in the Canon was sometimes difficult and the Church found it difficult to arrive at a consensus, the result must be the one God wanted. We believe that the Holy Spirit has watched over not only the birth of each book of the Bible but also the formation of the biblical canon. It is an impossible thought that the early Christians made some mistakes in this respect and that therefore the Christian church has not had the right texts in her Bible. Both the Old and the New Testament contain precisely the books which God intended for the preservation of his Church in this world.

## 2. The Synoptic problem

We have four Gospels in the New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. There are a lot of similarities between them but also quite a few differences. What is the history behind them? Have the authors borrowed material from one another? Which Gospel was written first? Questions such as these have been asked by exegetes throughout the centuries. In spite of centuries of research no final consensus has been reached. The most likely and most commonly accepted theory is described below.

Initially, everything was transmitted orally. In all likelihood Jesus spoke Aramaic. Very few scholars think that he used Hebrew, which was the language of the Old Testament but not the spoken language of that period. The other common languages in the Mediterranean world were Greek and Latin. Greek was the main spoken language among the Romans and Latin the official language of bureaucracy.

In other words, the teachings of Jesus must have been passed on at first in Aramaic. Jesus used a lot of stories, proverbs, examples from everyday life, and short, impressive sayings that were easy to remember and pass on. Elementary school teaching used the method of learning by rote, thus committing everything to memory. The Jewish rabbis used this method as well, as did Jesus. Those who had heard the stories remembered them in detail and passed them on faithfully.

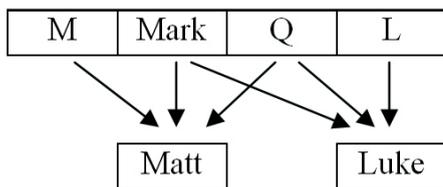
Probably very soon – how soon, nobody knows – Jesus' speeches were written down as well. Some scholars think that the disciples wrote down his teachings soon after listening to them. However, they felt that there was no need to document Jesus' words for a larger audience immediately after his death. They waited for Jesus to come back soon and proclaimed the good news of the Kingdom of God. Aramaic was not understood by everybody, and therefore some sayings and teachings of Jesus were translated into Greek. The Gospel was preached first exclusively to Jews, but there were Jews living in all corners of the extensive Roman Empire. The farther the new message spread, the clearer it was that its language should be Greek. Later on also non-Jews, in other words Greek-speaking people, began joining the ranks of believers. For this reason Greek became the language of the gospels and the entire New Testament.

When we study the four Gospels, we soon realize that the first three – Matthew, Mark and Luke – have a lot in common but that John differs greatly from them. That is why these three have been called *synoptic* gospels. Synoptic means that they look at things in a similar way. But what is the relationship between these three? All kinds of solutions have been suggested, for example that they did not know each other, that Matthew wrote first, and Mark and Luke took advantage of his text, or that Mark was the first to write, and Matthew and Luke borrowed from him.

Nowadays most scholars think that the Gospel of Mark was written first. It is the shortest, and most of its material can also be found in Matthew and Luke. It is more probable that Matthew and Luke expanded on the text of Mark than vice versa. The next observation is that in the passages where Matthew and Luke differ from Mark, they have a lot in common, even in some Greek nuances. This has given birth to the theory that they used a common Greek source. The source itself has not been found; instead, it has been reconstructed by studying these two gospels. This hypothetical source is called the *logia*-source (the Greek word *logia* means ‘speeches’) or *Quelle* (German for ‘source’, abbreviated with the letter Q). In other words, the Q-source is a possible collection of the sayings of Jesus which Matthew and Luke used when they wrote their gospels. New Testament scholars have written a lot of studies on the Q-source. However, this may lead the gospel studies in a wrong direction, because even the starting point is very hypothetical. For example, to speak about the “Q-congregation” is not very relevant.

We accept the hypothesis that Mark was the first gospel and that Matthew and Luke were familiar with it. When they refer to Mark, they are also close to each other. In addition, they may have known some other common source that could perhaps be called Q-source. The material they have in common may be a proof of this. However, there are several small differences even between these passages. In those texts we see their individual emphases. Furthermore, both Matthew and Luke have some relatively long passages that are not found in the other gospels. For example, Matthew has the Sermon of the Mount and Luke the story of Jesus’ childhood. In summary, we can make the following chart, which illustrates the relationship of the first

three gospels. (M refers to the special material in Matthew and L to that in Luke.)





### 3. The history of the text

No original New Testament scriptures have been preserved. The Greek texts that are available are copies of copies of the original ones. The study of the history of the text is called textual criticism. Specialists in this field seek to determine the original form of the text by comparing all available manuscripts and translations.

Although manuscripts were copied very carefully, it was a human process and thus subject to mistakes. Sometimes a word or even one line has been omitted, sometimes the copyist has not understood a word and has changed it into one which is easier to understand, or sometimes he has substituted from memory a similar text from another part of the New Testament.

Because of these differences, textual criticism has developed certain rules on how to define which text form is the earliest. The earlier the text, the closer it is to the original text form. For example, normally the more difficult word is earlier than the easier word. Also the variant that fits in better with the context may be earlier.

The age of the manuscript is very important as well. As a rule, they are divided into three groups: *papyri*, *uncials* and *minuscules*. Some of the oldest extant manuscripts were written on papyrus, which is a very fragile material. Therefore just a few papyri have survived. The other two groups were written on *parchment*, sheep- or goatskin dried and polished with pumice. This very durable material was used from antiquity till the late Middle Ages when paper began to replace it. The earliest manuscripts were rolled into scrolls. Later on the scrolls were replaced by *codices* (plural for *codex*), which resemble the books we have today. The text in the older parchments, known as uncials, was written in majuscules, i.e. in capital letters. In the later group, known as minuscules, the text was written in stylized lower case letters.

The oldest papyrus text is the Rylands Library Papyrus P 52, from c. 125 AD. It contains only verses 18:31-33, and 37-38 from the Gospel of John. Other important old papyri from c. 200 AD are found in the Chester Beatty Collection (P 45, 46 and 47). The most important uncials are the Codex Sinaiticus (Ⲙ) from c. 350 AD, the Codex Alexandrinus (A) from the 5<sup>th</sup> century and the Codex Vaticanus (B)

from the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Other noteworthy old uncials are the Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus (C) and the Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis (D<sup>ea</sup>) from the 5<sup>th</sup> century.

There are a number of differences between the old manuscripts, but very few of them have any special significance. They are mostly such insignificant variants (e.g. “Lord Jesus Christ” instead of “Lord Christ Jesus”) that they have no relevance for the understanding of the text. For the scholarly textual study they are naturally interesting and important. In summary, we can say that we have very reliable texts in our Greek New Testament versions.

The Bible reader may feel perplexed by the differences, especially in the case of some missing texts in the modern New Testament translations. The two most important passages in this respect are Mark 16:9-20 and John 7:53-8:11. In most Bible translations they have been put in parentheses. The parentheses have been added as textual criticism has developed and scholars have realized that these two passages are not found in the most original texts. However, it is very probable that both of these texts tell about real, original words and deeds of Jesus, and that they were incorporated into the text corpus at a later date.

## 4. Historical background of the New Testament

### From Alexander the Great to Rome

The era of the New Testament belongs to the Roman period. Before that, Greek culture was dominant in the Middle East. Hellenistic influences spread during the reign of Alexander the Great (356-323 BC) to a very wide area. Greek became the most commonly used language in his empire. The provinces of Samaria and Judah were administrated by Graeco-Macedonian governors.

After the death of Alexander the Great the Empire was divided into two parts. The Seleucids in the north and the Ptolemies in the south ruled the Middle East from 323 to 164 BC. In Palestine, Ptolemaic rulers held power until 198 BC, when the Seleucid king Antiochus III won a battle at Paneas, near the sources of the Jordan, and took control over the area. He was quite sympathetic of Jewish habits and religion. His successor, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, instead, tried to hellenize the Jews and their culture. The climax of his policy was the installation of a pagan cult, the worship of Zeus Olympios, in the temple of Jerusalem. Dan 11:31 foretells this event as follows, "His armed forces will rise up to desecrate the temple fortress and will abolish the daily sacrifice. Then they will set up the abomination that causes desolation."

This act of Antiochus IV Epiphanes stirred up a revolt among the Jewish people. Rather than renounce their religion, many pious Jews were willing to undergo martyrdom. Others took arms against their overlord. Among the latter were members of the priestly family of the Hasmoneans, headed by Mattathias of Modin and his five sons. One of them, Judas Maccabeus, became the leader of the people. The Maccabean Revolt led to the rededication of Jerusalem's temple in 164 BC. Jewish people have celebrated the Hanukkah festival in memory of that event ever since. However, all fighting did not end. Judas was killed in battle in 160 BC, and his brother Jonathan took over leadership. Jonathan died in 143 and was succeeded by his brother Simon, who was able to achieve complete independence from the Seleucids in 140 BC as a result of diplomatic negotiations. Simon

himself was appointed governor of the nation as well as commander-in-chief of the army and hereditary high priest.

The Hasmonean Kingdom lasted from 140 to 63 BC. The last ruler was Aristobulus II. During his reign a civil war among the Hasmoneans ended in Roman intervention. Jerusalem opened its gates to Pompey in the spring of 63 BC, and Judea was subjugated by Rome. Syria and Judea were the easternmost provinces of the Roman Empire. Several cities in Palestine and Syria were gradually hellenized. Ten cities formed a group called Decapolis that is mentioned several times in the gospels (Matt 4:25, Mark 5:20, 7:31).

The Anchor Bible Dictionary describes the period of Roman Empire and Hellenistic culture as follows, “By the time when Christ was born, soon after the middle of Augustus’ reign, a traveler could go from Jerusalem to Lisbon on the Atlantic, or from the upper Nile to the English Channel, without leaving the empire. Travel was slow, but he needed no passport—a purseful of Roman coins was acceptable anywhere. There was one system of law (different, however, for Roman citizens and noncitizens), and in the towns, at least, and in his dealings with the Roman administration, the traveler needed only two languages: Latin in the West and Greek in the East, where it had been the *lingua franca* since the conquests of Alexander the Great three centuries before. Local languages of course survived, like Aramaic and other Semitic tongues in the East.”

“Not only local languages, however, but many local customs persisted, especially in religion, where local deities continued to be worshipped, often superficially Hellenized or Romanized. The towns and cities, however, and the propertied classes in general for the most part embraced Roman rule, Roman law, Roman nomenclature, Roman architecture and a Roman style of life. The great line of social cleavage was between rich and poor, not on nationalistic lines. We hear virtually nothing of nationalistic protests against the occupying, colonialist power, such as we are familiar with in the 20th century. The main exception was the Jews, whose fiercely monotheistic religion could not accommodate pagan worship, including the worship of the emperor, which rapidly became almost universal, and whose sense of nation-

al and cultural identity made Judea notoriously difficult for the Romans to understand or to govern effectively.”

In the New Testament we meet Emperor Augustus in Luke 2:1. According to the gospel he issued a decree according to which a census should be conducted in the entire Roman Empire. This special census is not mentioned in other historical sources, but it is known that several similar decrees were issued around that time.

Luke adds that “this was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.” Publius Sulpicius Quirinius was consul in Rome in 12 BC, and in 3 BC he became proconsul of Asia. In 3-4 AD he taught Augustus’ grandson Gaius Caesar, and from 6 to 9 AD he worked as imperial legate of Syria-Cilicia. According to Josephus, he conducted a census in Judea during this period. This does not fit in exactly with the Bible narrative. There are many possible solutions to this discrepancy. Quirinius may have had similar responsibilities earlier, including conducting a census.

Pontius Pilate was the governor of Judea at the time of Jesus’ crucifixion according to the gospels (e.g. Matt 27:2). Emperor Tiberius had appointed him *praefectus* of Judea. Josephus and Tacitus use the title *procurator*. The name Pilate was found in a stone inscription in Caesarea in 1961.

#### Hasmonean kings and high priests

Re-dedication of the Temple	164 BC
Judas Maccabeus	164 – 160
Jonathan	160 – 143
Simon	143 – 135
John Hyrcanus I	135 – 104
Aristobulus I	104 – 103
Alexander Jannaeus	103 – 76
Salome Alexandra	76 – 67
Aristobulus II	67 – 63
John Hyrcanus II	63 – 40
Antigonus	40 – 37

### The main Roman emperors during the New Testament times

Octavian (Augustus)	27 BC – 14 AD
Tiberius	14 – 37
Caligula	37 – 41
Claudius	41 – 54
Nero	54 – 68

### The Herodian dynasty

Herod the Great	37 – 4 BC
Herod Archelaus	4 BC – 6 AD
Herod Antipas	4 BC – 39 AD
Herod Philip II	4 BC – 34 AD
Herod Agrippa I	37 – 44
Herod Agrippa II	50 – 100

### **Judaism at the time of Jesus**

Judaism in the Graeco-Roman period was very diverse, but it had also many common features. The Jews believed that they belonged to a chosen nation and they had been elected by God. They had an everlasting covenant with God, and this separated them from the Gentiles. The Torah, i.e. the five books of Moses, formed the basis of Judaism. The Torah expressed the message of the covenant and governed everyday life. The temple in Jerusalem was the geographical centre of Judaism. During the three big annual festivals huge numbers of people gathered in the temple. The temple priests were figures of authority in the Jewish society. The historical covenant had to do not only with the temple but also with the Land of Israel.

A religious aspect, which is not found in the New Testament, is the ritual bath called *miqveh*. We know from other sources and archaeological discoveries that *miqveh* was a basin in which ritual ablutions were performed for purposes of purification. There were several different things which made people unclean. Rich people had these ritual baths in their houses. Most people were able to use public baths. There were large *miqveh* basins in the temple of Jerusalem as well.

According to the New Testament and Josephus' writings there were several different religious groups or parties at the time. The main groups were Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes and Zealots. The New Testament gives a very negative picture of the Pharisees and Sadducees. The reality is not that one-sided.

The movement of the Pharisees is thought to have begun in the second century BC. The Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the dead. They emphasized ritual purity, Sabbath regulations and food taboos. The Pharisees had a strong influence on the ordinary Jewish people. In Jesus' time they were divided into two parties, the schools of Hillel and Shammai.

The name "Sadducees" comes from Zadok, a high priest at the time of David and Solomon. The Sadducees were a priestly group, and they were at the top of society at the time of Jesus. They did not believe in the resurrection of the body or life after death.

The Zealots were not a unified group, but they had one thing in common: a passionate hatred of the Romans. Part of them, the Sicarii ('daggermen'), believed in using violent tactics against the occupiers. Other Zealots acted more peacefully, but their attitude was just as strongly anti-Roman. One of Jesus' disciples, Simon "who was called the Zealot" (Luke 6:15, Acts 1:13), belonged to this group. Interestingly, there was another disciple who held a diametrically opposite view. Matthew was a tax collector (Matt 9:9; 10:3), which means that he was in the service of the Romans.

The Essenes is a group that is not mentioned in the New Testament. The Jewish historian Josephus tells about them. The Dead Sea Scrolls, which were found in and around Qumran, contain plenty of texts about a sectarian group that lived in a community close to the Dead Sea. It is a common view that these people were Essenes, although the Qumran texts do not mention that name. Nowadays this connection is also disputed. Anyway, both groups, the Essenes and the Qumran community, were strictly religious people who opposed the temple, because it had become too secular.

## **Qumran**

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls at the end of the 1940's revolutionized the study of the Hebrew Bible, ancient Judaism, and emerging Christianity. It was by accident that a young Bedouin found some scrolls in a cave at the north-western corner of the Dead Sea. Later he and his cousin found more fragments and sold them to a dealer for 30 U.S. dollars. When the scrolls were bought by the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem a decade later, the price had risen to 250,000 dollars.

The first discovery was made in 1947. During the next decade a vast quantity of ancient manuscripts was discovered in eleven caves. The total is now close to one thousand. The manuscripts and fragments can be divided into three groups: (1) texts from all Old Testament books with the exception of Esther; (2) fragments from apocryphal and other non-biblical books; (3) writings of the Qumran community. All of these are very important for biblical studies and for the understanding of Judaism at the time of Jesus.

The biblical manuscripts are extremely valuable for textual criticism. Before this discovery the oldest known Old Testament texts were from the 10<sup>th</sup> century AD. The Dead Sea Scrolls can be dated to between 200 BC and 70 AD. In other words, scholars now had access to texts one thousand years older. They were able to compare the manuscripts and look for differences between them. They found that copying had been done extremely carefully and that the manuscripts had remained almost exactly the same. In other words, we have a Bible that is reliable in the light of the earliest known manuscripts.

The second group is made up of such books as Ben Sira, Tobit, the Epistle of Jeremiah, Apocryphal Psalms, Jubilees, 1 Enoch, the Book of Giants, the Testament of Levi, and the Testament of Naphtali. This proves that the Qumran community read not only the Bible but also other religious books.

The third group is very useful as we seek to understand early Judaism. It is made up of such books as the Temple Scroll, the Community Rule, the Damascus Document, and the War Rule. These texts have been found in several copies, which is an indication of their popularity at

Qumran. They shed light on an eschatological group, its habits, liturgy and religious ideas. This group was connected with the Essenes mentioned by Josephus. There are many similarities between them and the Qumran community. In all likelihood the community of the Dead Sea Scrolls community lived at a settlement known as Khirbet Qumran. The ruins are still visible. The scholarly study of the Dead Sea Scrolls was initiated by the French archaeologist Roland de Vaux in the early 1950's.

### **Ancient synagogues**

The synagogue institution was established during the Babylonian Exile. Because the Jewish people had no temple any more, they began to gather in houses which they called *synagogues*. The word means 'coming together'. Archaeologically the oldest found remains of synagogues in Israel date back to the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC – 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. In Egypt some remains are even older. These ruins have no religious symbols, and therefore it is not very easy to identify them as synagogues. However, the form of the buildings tells that they were public buildings in which people gathered together.

The oldest ruins of synagogues found in Israel are at Gamla, Masada, Magdala, Capernaum, Jericho, Modiin and Herodion. In Jerusalem no ancient synagogues have been discovered, but there is one inscription which is a proof of their existence. This inscription, the oldest written document relating to a synagogue, was found in Jerusalem in 1913. The Greek text, known as the Theodotus Inscription, reads as follows:

Theodotus, son of Vettanos, a priest and an archisynagogos, son of an archisynagogos grandson of an archisynagogos, built the synagogue for the reading of Torah and for teaching the commandments; furthermore, the hostel, and the rooms, and the water installation for lodging needy strangers. Its foundation stone was laid by his ancestors, the elders, and Simonides.

The style of the text points to the time before the destruction of the temple in 70 AD. It seems that the synagogue mentioned in the text was built by Jews from the Diaspora. The New Testament also mentions a

synagogue which had been established by people from the Diaspora (Acts 6:9).

Later on, synagogues were decorated with different kinds of religious symbols, sometimes even with astronomical signs. The synagogue in Beit Alpha is an example of this. Other well-preserved later synagogues in Israel have been found in Bar'am, Capernaum, Chorazin and Sepphoris.

### **Herod the Great and his building projects**

Herod the Great (37-4 BC) was one of the most famous rulers in Early Roman Palestine. His father Antipater, who was an Idumaeen, was appointed procurator of Judaea by Julius Caesar in 47 BC. Later on, the Roman senate, on the advice of Mark Antony and Octavian, gave his son Herod the title 'king of the Jews'. Herod was a loyal friend and ally of Rome. The Jews never accepted him as one of them because of his Edomite background, in spite of his greatest achievement, the building of the temple in Jerusalem.

Herod the Great was a good administrator, but he did not tolerate any threats to his position. That is why he had several people killed, even members of his own family. His suspicious nature is well illustrated by the story of the visit of the Magi and the slaughter of the infants in Bethlehem (Matt 2).

On the other hand, Herod was a great builder, one of the greatest in the history of Israel. His most famous building project was the renovation of the temple in Jerusalem. It was one of the most remarkable religious buildings in the world. This temple is called 'The second temple', because it was an extension of the temple built by Zerubbabel in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. Herod's temple is the one mentioned in the New Testament, the one which Jesus and the apostles visited. In addition, Herod built several cities, including Sebaste in Samaria and Caesarea Maritima. Caesarea was the harbor where ships left for Rome. The harbor of Caesarea was a great building achievement, because it was the first artificial deep-water harbor in the world.

Knowing what Herod was like makes it easier to understand why he needed to build big fortresses on top of the highest mountains. Remains of these fortifications are found all over Judea. The most famous is Masada by the Dead Sea. It became well-known in the Jewish war (66-70 AD), when Zealots defended it heroically and finally committed suicide when it became clear that the Roman troops would soon conquer it. Another famous fortress of Herod's is Herodion some kilometers east of Bethlehem. Herod ordered that he must be buried in Herodion. Herod's burial place was found there by the Israeli archaeologist Ehud Netzer in 2007.

Herod the Great built also a fortress on Machaerus east of the Dead Sea. That is probably where John the Baptist was killed by Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great. Hyrcania, Cypros and Alexandrium were fortresses located in Judean desert. Herod's winter palace at Jericho was one of his most magnificent buildings.

### **Jerusalem and Galilee**

Jerusalem was the religious and political center of Palestine, and the center of Jerusalem was the temple. The temple was not only a building; it was also the seat of religious leadership in the country. The high priest was the leader of Judaism and the temple. Everything that happened in the country was more or less under the control of the temple and its personnel, especially the high priest. When the ministry of Jesus caused unrest in Galilee, the temple sent officials to find out what was happening (e.g. Matt 15:1).

Galilee, instead, was located far from Jerusalem. It was a rural area, but not at all backward. A significant international highway, the Way of the Sea (*Via Maris* in Latin), traversed it, and some large Roman cities were located there. Nazareth, the hometown of Jesus, was a relatively small village. Capernaum, where Jesus lived during his public ministry, was not very big either, but it was located on the main highway and therefore quite important. Capernaum had a Roman garrison and a customs station (see Matt 8:5 and 9:9). Bethsaida was also an important town by the Jordan River (see John 1:44 and 12:21).

The largest city in Galilee was Sepphoris (Zippori). It is not mentioned in the New Testament, but we know it from other historical sources and archaeological excavations. An important Roman city with its big theater and other public buildings, Sepphoris was built by Herod Antipas. It was the capital of Galilee during Jesus' life time. However, the discovery of ritual basins proves that Sepphoris had Jewish inhabitants as well. The capital of Galilee was moved c. 20 AD from Sepphoris to Tiberias by the Sea of Galilee. Herod Antipas built a stadium and probably also a bath in Tiberias.

The area where Jesus walked and worked was not large; it was mostly made up of the northern shores of the Sea of Galilee. Capernaum, Chorazin and Bethsaida formed a triangle within which most of the stories that are told in the gospels took place. Jesus rarely visited the eastern side of the lake. He did go once to Caesarea Philippi in the northernmost part of the country, and once to the Mediterranean coast. This is what we know about his journeys from the gospels.

Although Jesus did not visit the largest cities of Galilee during his public ministry (at least we are not told that he did), he was not only a man of the outlying villages. He was familiar with the life situation of the Galilean poor people, but he met Greek-speaking and wealthy people as well. Galilee was an area where all possible kinds of people traveled and lived.

## **5. An overview of New Testament research history and methodology**

During the Middle Ages the study of the Bible was subordinate to ecclesiastical dogma. The Bible as interpreted by church tradition was the source of dogmatic theology. The reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century constituted a revolution in biblical exegesis. The reformers reacted against dogmatic theology and insisted that theology must be based exclusively on the Bible. This new emphasis led to a study of the original languages of Scripture and to a consciousness of the role of history in biblical theology. The reformers insisted that the Bible should be interpreted literally, not allegorically. Martin Luther's influence as a biblical scholar was immense. His extensive studies on books of the Bible and his lectures, which were both scientific and popular, opened a new page in biblical studies and understanding. He also emphasized that Jesus Christ is the center of the Bible.

The period of Christian orthodoxy in the 17<sup>th</sup> century also emphasized the importance of dogmatic Bible studies. The period of Enlightenment in the 18<sup>th</sup> century caused a counter reaction to that trend. The rise of rationalism included the denial of everything supernatural and the development of so-called historical criticism. The Bible became a source of the history of religion instead of a source of theology. The next century saw a breakthrough of rationalistic theology with idealistic philosophic influences represented by Hegel. The most famous biblical scholar in this "liberal" movement was the German exegete F. C. Baur. There was also a conservative reaction to this movement, represented by e.g. A. Schlatter.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century biblical research was developed further by "liberal" scholars. Their most renowned representative was Rudolph Bultmann, who became famous for his "kerygmatic" approach to the Bible text. According to their opinion we cannot know much about the historical Jesus, because he is obscured by layers of believing tradition, which reinterpreted the significance of the historical Jesus in terms of mythology. Most of the words of Jesus are in reality words of the church. This exegetical view became dominant in western university teaching. Not all exegetes, however, accepted these liberal theological trends.

There are many German- and English-speaking theologians who emphasize the reliability of the Bible and do not belong to the so-called liberal school of interpretation. Names that can be mentioned are e.g. Peter Stuhlmacher, George E. Ladd, I. Howard Marshall and Donald Carson.

**The Historical-Critical Method** is a tool which has been the dominant theological method of New Testament studies since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It can be divided into textual criticism, literary or source criticism, form criticism and redaction criticism. Textual criticism concentrates on the study of the original text forms of the Bible. Literary criticism looks for the various sources behind the biblical text. Form criticism analyzes the various literary forms of the text, and redaction history is interested in the influence of the editor(s) on the text.

The historical-critical method has dominated Bible exegesis up to the present time. However, several new methodological tools have been developed. In most cases, they have not replaced the historical-critical method; instead, they have been used alongside it. They are not as concerned about discovering the various stages of development behind the text as they are about understanding the available text form as such. Narrative criticism, rhetorical criticism, structuralism, and the empirical model approach are some of these new methodological tools.

Here are some examples of the historical-critical method. Textual criticism looks for the original text form (see **The history of the text**). The scholars study old manuscripts and compare text variants trying to determine which are the oldest and most reliable text forms. The results of these studies can be read in the apparatus of the Greek New Testament versions (e.g. Nestle).

Literary criticism looks for sources behind the text. The Synoptic problem (see **The synoptic problem**) belongs to this category. A synopsis of the Gospels, in which the texts of the three synoptic gospels have been placed side by side, is a valuable tool. It makes it easier to find similarities and differences between the texts. As a result, it has been concluded that in all likelihood Mark is the oldest gospel, that the writers of Matthew and Luke have used Mark, and that they have another common source, which is called Q.

Form criticism pays attention to different forms of the text. A parable differs from a narrative passage. Proverbs and poetry have a special style of their own and need to be interpreted accordingly. For example, in the Gospel of John we can study the “I am” sayings of Jesus. A study of such forms may reveal something about the history of the text.

Redaction history concentrates on the role of the editor(s) of the text. By means of synoptic comparisons it is possible to find out how Matthew has changed Mark’s text or how Luke has used the Q-material. “Fingerprints” of editors reveal their special emphases.

All of these methods can be helpful in understanding the early stages of the biblical texts. Nowadays the emphasis is more and more on the text as such. This is a healthy trend, because reconstructions of the history of the text are always very hypothetical. These tools can be useful to a certain degree, but other tools are needed as well on the way toward the correct interpretation of the text.



## 6. Archaeology and the New Testament

In my *Introduction to the Old Testament* we studied briefly the methods used in biblical archaeology and presented the most important discoveries. New Testament archaeology is very different. The time span of the Old Testament is thousands of years, but the ministry of Jesus spanned only some three years. Jesus did nothing that archaeologists have been able to find after two thousand years. The ministries of Paul and the apostles did not leave any such remains either. Archaeology has to do with long periods, signs of wars, remains of cities and buildings and also smaller objects. Emerging Christianity did not leave traces of this kind and is therefore not easy to study by archaeological means.

In spite of these difficulties, the study of the archaeology of the New Testament is relevant. We can ask what we know about the towns and villages in which Jesus lived and whether we know anything of Jesus' birthplace and burial place. We can try to understand better what everyday life in Jesus' time was like. We can also track the spread of Christianity in the world during the first centuries. The periods we are dealing with are called Roman and Byzantine. In this chapter we take a look at some of the most important sites in Israel mentioned in the New Testament.

As our sources we have first of all remains of buildings, mostly churches from the Byzantine period. In addition, we need literary information on the sites we are interested in. The most important literary source is the writings of Josephus who lived in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD (about 30-100 AD). A very useful document is also the Madaba Map located in Jordan, in the Greek Orthodox Basilical of Saint George in Madaba city. The oldest known map of the Holy Land, this mosaic map dates to the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD. Several place names mentioned in the New Testament are found in that map.

Jesus was born in **Bethlehem**. Bethlehem is a sizable Palestinian town 8 kilometers south of Jerusalem. A very large church called The Church of the Nativity is located at the center of the town. According to tradition, it is the birthplace of Jesus. Traditions such as this may well

be based on factual knowledge, but this is not always the case. As for Bethlehem, it is highly probable that the identification is correct.

The Church of the Nativity is the oldest church still in use in the world. One of the earliest churches in the Holy Land, it was built in the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. Part of that first building can still be seen, but the present church dates back to the 6<sup>th</sup> century. We cannot reach any farther into the past by archaeological means, but we do have some literary documents which tell something about even earlier history. The Church Father Origen wrote in the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century that *“in Bethlehem the cave is pointed out where he was born, and the manger in the cave where he was wrapped in swaddling clothes and the rumor is in those places and among foreigners of the faith that indeed Jesus was born in this cave”*. One hundred years earlier, about 150, Justin Martyr wrote, *“when the child was born in Bethlehem, since Joseph could not find a lodging in that village, he took up his quarters in a certain cave near the village; and while they were there Mary brought forth the Christ and placed Him in a manger.”*

These two literary sources mention that Jesus was born in a cave. It was not uncommon that houses were built on top of caves in a mountainous area such as Bethlehem. The cave was the first floor of the house, and that was often where the domestic animals spent the night. According to Origen even foreigners to the faith, i.e. Gentiles, knew the place where Jesus was born. In other words, it must have been a well-known place. We may assume that the vicinity of Jerusalem made it easy for Christians to visit the place. Mary, the mother of Jesus, who lived in Jerusalem, could have been the one who showed the cave to people interested in seeing it.

**Nazareth** was the hometown of Jesus during his childhood and youth. Nazareth is today also a sizable town, and it is inhabited mostly by Arabs. A Jewish town called Nazareth Illit is situated close to it. In biblical times Nazareth was a very small village. It is not mentioned in the Old Testament. There is a large modern Roman Catholic church in the center of the old town. It was built at the traditional site of the home of Mary and Joseph. Jesus' mother, Mary, may well have fetched water from a nearby ancient well, which is still in use.

**Sepphoris** was a city 8 kilometers north of Nazareth. Its name is not mentioned in the New Testament, but in all probability Sepphoris was where Joseph and Jesus walked every day to work. There was very little work available in Nazareth for builders, but Sepphoris was growing during those days. It was built by Herod Antipas, and it became the capital of Galilee. It had for example a Roman theatre with 5,000 seats. Sepphoris has been excavated thoroughly, and today there is a lot to see for the tourist. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> century it was the center of Galilean mosaic art, and much of that period has been restored. The Roman stone-paved streets in the city are the same on which Jesus and Joseph walked two thousand years ago.

**Capernaum** was the hometown of Jesus during his public ministry. It was located on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Today we can see its ruins and a small Roman Catholic church built on top of them. Ruins from the 1<sup>st</sup> century can be seen at the site, the most important being those of a synagogue and St. Peter's house. The synagogue is from the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD, but underneath there is a foundation of an older synagogue from the 1<sup>st</sup> century. That older synagogue is very probably the very one in which Jesus worshiped.

The history of St. Peter's house is interesting. Underneath the small Roman Catholic church there are ruins of a 5<sup>th</sup> century church which in turn was built on top of a public building from the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> century. That house, which has several Christian graffiti on its walls, has sometimes been called "the first congregation house". Underneath that building there was a private house from the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. Texts written by early pilgrims tell that in Capernaum the church had been built on top of St. Peter's house. Therefore it is very probable that tradition and archaeology together give us reliable information about that place. Interestingly, if the house belonged to Peter, then it is possible that Jesus lived in that very house. Jesus did not have a house of his own, and he may have lived together with Peter and Peter's extended family.

**Jerusalem** is naturally one of the most interesting places for archaeological research. It is also very difficult to study, because it is densely inhabited, and archaeologists cannot perform excavations under houses

that are lived in. This difficulty notwithstanding we do know something about its holy places. The Mount of Olives is situated east of Jerusalem. On its slope there stands a church that is called The Church of All Nations, which is surrounded by a garden full of ancient olive trees. The garden itself is called **Gethsemane**. Several older churches have stood at the site, and the Christian tradition locates the New Testament Gethsemane here.

We also know the place where Jesus was crucified. Today there is a church called **The Church of the Holy Sepulchre** at that site. This huge church complex contains several churches which belong to a number of denominations. Inside the church we are shown the place where Jesus was crucified and another place where the tomb of Jesus was located. The history of the churches goes back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, to the time when some of the first churches in the world were built. This particular church was commissioned by Emperor Constantine the Great's mother Helena. Earlier, a pagan temple had stood at the site, built by the Roman Emperor Hadrian to show his supremacy over Christianity.

Some archaeological finds can be linked with Jesus' life. Interestingly, two of them contain the names of his adversaries, Pilate and Caiaphas. In June 1961 Italian archaeologists were excavating a Roman theatre in Caesarea. They uncovered a limestone block with the text *Pontius Pilate Prefect of Judea*. That was the first archaeological document testifying of this ruler. His name appears also in Josephus' writings. In December 1990 several ossuaries (bone boxes) were found in a first-century tomb in the Peace Forest in Jerusalem. The name *Josephus Caiaphas* occurs in one of them.

## 7. What we know about Jesus

The most important source about Jesus is the stories of **the four gospels**. Sometimes their historical value has been questioned by insisting that because they are religious stories they cannot be historically reliable. But “religious” and “historical” are not necessarily mutually exclusive. It is true that the gospels are not interested in the whole story of Jesus’ life. They just tell us something about his public ministry and concentrate on describing his last days, crucifixion and resurrection.

According to the gospels, Jesus was born in Bethlehem during the time of the Roman Emperor Augustus. He grew up in a small Galilean village called Nazareth and lived in Capernaum during his public ministry. The area in which he worked was quite small, consisting mostly of some towns and villages around the Sea of Galilee. He preached the Kingdom of God, healed the sick, and drove out demons. For some reason the Jewish religious leaders wanted to kill him. He died on the cross at the age of about thirty. His death took place in Jerusalem during Easter. The Roman procurator at the time was Pontius Pilate. This is, briefly, what the gospels tell about the life of Jesus.

Do we have any information about Jesus outside the gospels? Yes, but not very much. Some Jewish and Roman sources mention him. The most important is *Antiquities of the Jews* (History of the Jews) by **Flavius Josephus**. Josephus was a Jew who defected to the Roman side during the Jewish revolt against Roman occupation and was commissioned to write a history of Jewish people. Josephus lived c. 30-100 AD. He mentions Jesus twice in his book.

Josephus mentions Jesus very briefly in Antiquities 20:200, “*Festus was now dead, and Albinus was but upon the road; so he assembled the sanhedrin of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others...*”

The second mention in Antiquities 18:63-64 is much longer, “*Now, there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man; for he was a doer of wonderful works – a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles. He was [the] Christ. And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him*

*to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; for he appeared to them alive again the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him. And the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day.”*

The first text has not been disputed, but scholars have debated the originality of the second passage. It seems too Christian to have been written by a non-Christian. It has been suggested that Christians added something to Josephus' text later on in an attempt to defend their religion. Another possibility is that Josephus merely wrote down what he had heard from Christians without personally believing in Jesus. In any case, the main thing is to notice that there is some historical evidence about Jesus in Josephus' writings and that some of these words could not have been written by Christians.

In addition to Josephus, who was a Jew, some Roman authors wrote about Jesus. The most important among them are Tacitus, Pliny the Younger and Suetonius.

The most prominent Roman author who wrote about Jesus was **Tacitus** (c. 56 – c. 117). He writes in his *Annals* c. 116, “*Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular. Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired.”*

**Pliny the Younger** (Plinius) (61 – c. 112), was Governor of Bithynia. Pliny persecuted Christians. He is known for his letters, hundreds of

which have survived. Pliny explains that he forced Christians to curse Christ, which a genuine Christian cannot be induced to do. He describes their actions and practices as follows, “...they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and bound themselves to a solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft, adultery, never to falsify their word, not to deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up. When this was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of a mea – -but ordinary and innocent food.”

The Roman historian **Suetonius** (c. 70 – c. 130) writes, “*Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Christ, he expelled them from Rome.*” It seems that Christianity was still viewed as a Jewish sect at that point.

Why didn’t Jesus’ contemporaries write more about him? Jesus died as a young man, he did not write any books, nor did he travel abroad. He did not do things for which great politicians, emperors, historians or other prominent people were famous for. He was just a wandering preacher in a remote corner of the Roman Empire. The lack of mentions by his contemporaries is more than understandable. However, quite a few texts outside the New Testament support the testimony of the gospels.

The birth of Jesus did not take place in the year 0, although we calculate our calendar from that point. In general terms we can say that this is the year 2011 after the birth of Christ (in Latin Anno Domini (AD) which means ‘year of the Lord’). In reality Jesus was born a few years earlier. The exact year is not known, but his birth must have occurred between 7 and 5 BC. One chronologically fixed date is the death of King Herod the Great in 4 BC. Jesus must have been born before that.

In all likelihood, Jesus was crucified in 30 AD. As we study the question of the historical Jesus, we can ask what is known about his resurrection. It was a miracle, and it is impossible to prove miracles scientifically. Miracles cannot be proved by means of conventional historical tools. However, in this case a lot of things speak for the historicity of the events. The empty tomb is one. Nobody found the body of Jesus. If the tomb had not been empty, the adversaries of Jesus could have proved it very easily. Because they did not find the body, they started to spread

the rumor that Jesus' disciples had stolen the body. Is this possible? Psychologically, it is out of the question that the disciples, who had a moment ago cowered behind locked doors afraid for their very lives, could suddenly have changed completely and started boldly proclaiming to everybody that Jesus had risen from the dead. We can also ask how the idea of the risen Jesus could have been born, if Jesus had not risen. In addition, moving the Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday could not have been possible without that miracle. The keeping of the Sabbath was based on a commandment of God and it could not be altered – not without something that changed the world: the resurrection of Jesus.

## 8. Paul as a missionary

The name of Paul was originally Saul. He was a devoted Jew, who knew the Holy Scriptures and practiced his faith. He was born in Tarsus, a major city in Cilicia, which is a region in the extreme southeastern part of Asia Minor. Paul had inherited his Roman citizenship from his family. He became a zealous member of the party of the Pharisees and was convinced that those who believed in Jesus were heretical and enemies of the pure Jewish faith. At one point he was given authority to hunt them down and have them executed. But when he was on his way to Damascus with this purpose in mind, the resurrected Jesus appeared to him.

The conversation Paul had with Jesus had such revolutionary consequences that it is recorded three times in Acts (chs. 9, 22 and 26), and Paul himself writes several times about it (e.g. Gal 1:13-16, 1 Cor 15:8-9, 1 Tim 1:13). This encounter took place some years after 30 AD. Paul was not able to directly join the apostles; instead, he stayed somewhere in “Arabia” for three years (Gal 1:17-19). It is not clear what he means by Arabia, but the name must refer to somewhere south or south-east of Jerusalem, to a place where he could be alone, without any contact with other Christians. It is not known what Paul did during that time, but we can assume that he spent a lot of time reading the Bible – with a totally new perspective. He had met Jesus, the Messiah prophesied in the Scriptures. Now the Bible was opened to him in a fundamentally new way. During the three-year “Bible school” in Arabia it became clear to him which direction his life would take.

After the three years in Arabia Paul went up to Jerusalem in order to get acquainted with Peter. He stayed there for fifteen days. Those two weeks must have been very important for both men. They must have had a lot to discuss. Paul must have wanted to find out what Peter knew about Jesus. How had he met Jesus? What had Jesus looked like? What had Jesus done? What was the central message of Jesus? Why did the Jews hate him so? Why did the Romans crucify him? What was he like after his resurrection? Wasn't it wonderful to see Jesus ascend into heaven? And what did really happen on the day of Pentecost? Paul must have asked innumerable questions about Jesus' earthly life. It is also quite likely that Peter asked Paul what he had learned from the Bible.

As an educated Pharisee, Paul had studied Scriptures much more thoroughly than Peter. Was everything that had happened to Jesus in keeping with the Old Testament? Those two weeks must have been a real in-depth Bible course for Paul and Peter.

Paul then joined the other apostles. But he did not become a missionary at once, for he had to return to his home in Tarsus, where he took up his old profession as tentmaker (Acts 18:3). He was not the man who had left Tarsus some years earlier, for he had been converted. He lived a normal life among his family, relatives and neighbors, but there was a distinct difference: he lived with the testimony of Jesus Christ. He was to be a missionary in and around his own home.

More than ten years passed before Paul was called from his home to Antioch. Barnabas remembered him and asked him to come and help the other apostles in preaching and teaching in the church (Acts 11:25-26). Much later Paul was called to be a missionary to both Jews and Gentiles. He was appointed to this task in Antioch together with Barnabas (Acts 13:2-3). Initially they preached the gospel only to the Jews, but it soon became clear to them that the Jews did not accept their message. Therefore they decided to turn to the Gentiles (Acts 13:46). Paul became an apostle to the Gentiles.

Paul's heart was burning to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ everywhere, especially in the areas where nobody had proclaimed it before. As a rule, his ministry in Asia and Europe are divided into three mission journeys. He began by ministering in the cities of Asia Minor, in other words present-day Turkey. The biggest city in that region was Ephesus. There he stayed for quite a while. Then he crossed over to Greece and went to Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth and Athens. His journeys were unbelievably long. Walking by foot thousands of kilometers over high mountains and large areas must have been very strenuous. But he was not satisfied with what he had accomplished. His dream had been to reach the capital of the Roman Empire, Rome. But because there was already a Christian church there, he felt that he could not stay there. That is why he sent a letter to the Christians in Rome asking if they could help him to travel to the end of the world, to Hispania, modern Spain, and Portugal.

Paul was told that he was going to go to Rome as a prisoner. Before that he was in prison in Caesarea for two years (Acts 24-26). From there Paul appealed to the emperor. Being a Roman citizen, he had to be sent to Rome. During the voyage there was a huge storm, and Paul's ship was wrecked at Malta.

The Book of Acts ends with Paul in prison in Rome. We don't know for sure what happened after that. In all likelihood he was released after two years and was free to travel some more. It is possible that he visited even Hispania, but there is no reliable information about that. We do know that he died in Rome during Emperor Nero's reign c. 67 AD.

Paul's strategy was to preach the gospel especially in areas where it had not been preached before. He also chose the biggest cities for his main targets, because new Christians would then spread the gospel to the surrounding towns and villages. When he arrived in a city, he talked with the citizens and told them about Jesus Christ. After becoming Christians some of them joined him in his ministry. After some time Paul entrusted the new church to some of them and continued on. He trusted the new Christians to serve and lead the congregation. His call was to go on and plant new churches. Later on he returned to the same areas and encouraged the Christians. He did much of this work also by writing letters to the churches.

An approximate chronology of Paul's life:

Conversion	34-35 AD (or even earlier)
Ministry in Damascus and Arabia	35-37
First visit to Jerusalem	37
Ministry in Tarsus and Cilicia	37-45
Famine-relief visit	45/46
First missionary journey	47-48
Apostolic council	49
Second missionary journey	49-51
Third missionary journey	52-57
Caesarean imprisonment	57-57
Voyage to Rome	59-60
Roman imprisonment	60-62
Ministry in the West	62-64
Death	64-67



## 9. The question of Pauline authorship

Paul's epistles (letters) were written over a period of about fifteen years. They belong to three groups: the Principal Epistles (Rom, 1-2 Cor, Gal and 1-2 Thess), the Prison Epistles (Eph, Phil, Col and Phlm) and the Pastoral Epistles (1-2 Tim and Tit). According to the traditional view, all of them were written by Paul.

During the last few centuries many scholars have argued against the Pauline authorship of some these epistles. Therefore it is appropriate to include a brief discussion on the subject. The most heavily disputed epistles are 2 Tim, 2 Thess and Eph, but also Col and some others have been under fire.

Those who deny Paul's authorship of one or several letters argue that it was a common phenomenon during the Graeco-Roman period for somebody to write a letter in the name of another, more famous author. *The Epistle of Jeremiah* and *The Letter of Aristeas* have been mentioned as examples of such pseudonymous texts. Another factor to be taken into account is that scribes were frequently used. They wrote to the dictation of the actual writer. It is an open question how frequently scribes were used. The Apostle Paul, in any case, is known to have used scribes. One of them was Tertius (Rom 16:22). Paul also signed some of his letters personally (Gal 6:11, 2 Thess 3:17).

Ephesians is rather different from the other Pauline epistles. With the exception of this one letter all of his letters address specific situations in the churches. They contain specific information, personal greetings and other things that give local color. This is not true of Ephesians. Its style is also different, because the sentences are much longer than in other Pauline epistles. On the other hand, it follows the text of Colossians almost too closely. In addition, the words *in Ephesus* (Eph 1:1) are not found in some early manuscripts. For these reasons many scholars think that Ephesians was written by a student or admirer of Paul's at a later date. These arguments are not, however, very convincing because an author may use different styles in different situations. Paul may well have had in mind from the very beginning that this was to be a circular letter, which was first sent to Ephesus and then forwarded to other churches.

Arguments of this kind have been presented by those who have disputed the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians. On the one hand, it is similar to 1 Thessalonians; on the other hand it presents a different view on eschatological issues. We can say that these arguments cancel each other and therefore do not inspire confidence.

As for 2 Timothy (and partly the other Pastoral Epistles), the arguments are somewhat different. It has been argued that the historical situation described in Acts and other Pauline epistles cannot be reconciled with that of the Pastoral Epistles. Pastoral epistles contain references to “overseers” and “elders”, and this is said to reflect a situation that is very different from that of the other Pauline epistles. The Pastoral Epistles contain references to false teachings and such doctrinal positions which differ distinctly from other Pauline texts. Furthermore, there are differences in language and style. In spite of these suspicions, several arguments favor Pauline authorship. The Book of Acts ends with Paul still imprisoned in Rome. If his letters were written after his release, this would explain the differences in style and content. If, on the other hand, the author was somebody else and the text was written after Paul’s death, the personal remark about the cloak which the author had left at Troas (2 Tim 4:13) would be impossible to explain.

The question of pseudonymity is not so clear as the supporters of the pseudonymous letter theory argue. It has not been proved that this custom was accepted in the Christian circles. Also the role of the scribe makes it difficult to draw accurate conclusions about the writers.

On the one hand it can be said that the value of the Pauline epistles is not dependent on the question of authorship. We believe that all of them were inspired by the Holy Spirit and that all of them are part of God’s Word. On the other hand, it seems appropriate to believe that the traditional view of their authenticity is correct. Each epistle begins with the mention of Paul as the author. The arguments which have been raised against this view are not convincing.

## 10. How to interpret the Bible?

This chapter is almost the same as in my book *Introduction to the Old Testament – with African perspectives*. (Tumaini University, Iringa College 2010). Accordingly, the examples have been taken both from the Old and the New Testament.

A good starting point is to recall how the early church interpreted the Old Testament. It regarded it as God's word and tried to find Jesus Christ in it. This was also the model of the Reformation. The main principles can be summarized as follows: the Bible must be taken literally as the word of God. Its main message is the account of Jesus Christ and salvation through him. The special emphasis of the Lutheran reformation was that the doctrine of righteousness is the most central issue in the Bible. In other words, we are saved by faith and by grace alone, not by deeds.

The traditional Lutheran emphasis is that the Bible is clear and easy to understand. This is a very important principle, although we know at the same time that there are many very difficult passages in the Bible. This principle of easiness and simplicity means that everybody can understand the word of God in the right way. Anyone can find the way to salvation and understand the most important points of Christianity without any theological education. The Holy Spirit opens the Word, and accepting this does not require any special knowledge or intelligence.

The Bible is both easy to understand and extremely deep and inexhaustible. It can be understood correctly by using common sense, but even the most learned theologian may feel that he has merely wet his feet in the ocean of the biblical message. The most central message is clear and understandable for everybody, but the Holy Book is so rich that there is enough material for study for ordinary Bible readers and theologians alike for the rest of their lives. Everybody must accept the fact that there are a lot of passages in the Bible that are difficult or impossible to understand well enough.

The following principles may help the reader and student of the Bible to understand it better. The examples, which illuminate ten good rules of Bible study, are taken both from the Old and the New Testament.

### **Read the context of the verse or passage**

Each separate word in the Bible is God's word, and in many cases the Bible gives the correct and exact answer to our questions. Taking the verse out of its context (the verses surrounding it) may sometimes lead us astray. Therefore, in order to understand the text as correctly as possible, it is wise to read the context and try to understand how it illuminates that particular passage.

The story of Jacob in Genesis 32 is a good example. If you read only verse 24, you may wonder about the identity of the "man" who is wrestling with Jacob. But when you read on, you realize that the "man" was God. You will understand the significance of this event, when you read what happened before and what took place afterwards. Jacob's problem was his broken relationship with his brother Esau. He had to wrestle with God before he was able to face Esau.

In Exodus 20:5 we find a one-sided picture of God, "I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation." The continuation reveals the other side of God, "...but showing love to thousands who love me and keep my commandments."

Ecclesiastes 3:20-21 seems to be in conflict with other Bible passages, "All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return. Who knows if the spirit of man rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?" When we remember that the book was probably written by King Solomon after he had become estranged from God, it is easier to understand these words. However, at the end of the book he speaks with a different tone, "Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil" (Eccl 12:13-14).

Finally, an example from the New Testament. Romans 11:29 reads, "...for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable." This passage has often been understood to refer to the spiritual gifts which God gives to the believer. This is not a very serious misunderstanding, but if we read the context we can see that the goal of the verse is elsewhere. It teaches

about Israel's destiny. God will never reverse the call he has given to his chosen people. This verse says nothing about spiritual gifts. It speaks about the call of Israel and – interpreted typologically - about the call of a believer.

### **Take the Bible literally unless the style or the text itself tells you otherwise**

Normally we follow the rule “read it as it has been written and believe that it has been written, and you will be given as it has been written”. Mostly the literal meaning is the correct meaning. Avoid trying to find first a deeper meaning.

However, sometimes the text requires some other explanation. If the style is poetic, it must be understood as a poetic text, and the rules of poetry differ from those of narrative text. If there is a saying or a proverb in the text, it must be understood as a saying, not literally. Sometimes the context gives a hint of an interpretation other than a literal one.

Here are some examples of poetic expression. In Judges 5:20 we read, “From the heavens the stars fought, from their courses they fought against Sisera.” This is a poetic account of the battle which the previous chapter describes in the narrative style. The message is that God helped his people in the battle against Sisera's troops. But everybody understands that the planets had nothing to do with this. The description is symbolical, not realistic.

The second example is from Job 38:4-6, “Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone – while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?” Here God speaks to Job beautifully, poetically about the creation of the world. We know that the world has neither footings nor a cornerstone. “The morning stars sang together” is a poetic description as well. But the message is clear: God is the creator and Job a human being.

The Book of Psalms is full of poetic expressions. Proverbs is a book that consists, naturally, of proverbs, and the reader is reminded about

the special nature of proverbs. In Proverbs 30 expressions like this are repeated, “There are three things that are too amazing for me, four that I do not understand.” The reader may ask which is right, three or four – but in vain. This is a typical construction that is called parallelism. The same thing is said twice in two different ways. All poetic Bible texts use this construction, and it must not be interpreted too literally.

1 Kgs 7:23 is a description of the metal water basin which King Solomon put in his temple. The text says, “Measuring ten cubits from rim to rim... it took a line of thirty cubits to measure around it.” Nowadays we know that if the diameter is 10, the circle is 31,415926, etc. Is the Bible wrong? No, it tells the truth with sufficient accuracy, not with mathematical exactness. It uses everyday language, not scientific terminology.

Then two examples of sayings from the New Testament. According to Mark 13:2 Jesus prophesied about Jerusalem’s destiny, “Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.” When we go to Jerusalem, we can look at the foundation of the temple Jesus spoke about and see that there are still some stones on top of each other. Was Jesus wrong in his prediction? No, he used a common saying, in the same way we might if we wanted to say that something has been destroyed totally.

Sometimes we read in the Gospels that “the whole city came to see Jesus”. Is that right? Is it true that every person living in Capernaum was present? I doubt it. The meaning is simply that a large number of people wanted to see Jesus and that the streets were full of citizens. We might use the same type of expression. If a very important person came to our town and a lot of people went to see him, we could say that the whole town was there.

In Matt 12:40 Jesus speaks about his death and resurrection comparing it with the story of the Prophet Jonah. Jesus says, “The Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” But if we count from Good Friday to Easter Sunday morning, there are only two nights, not three. The meaning is that Jesus will be in the tomb during three days, Friday, Saturday and Sunday.

## **Pay attention to the salvation-historical line of the Bible**

If you understand the salvation-historical line of the Bible, you may avoid some misunderstandings. From this perspective we know that the first chapters of Genesis (so-called Primeval history, Gen 1-11) form a basis for the biblical message. The creation, the fall and the first promises of the coming Messiah are foundational to the correct understanding of the world and of God. Abraham and the promises given to him (Gen 12:1-3) are the following important phase in God's plan to save mankind. God has chosen a certain land and a certain nation as he prepares the coming of the Messiah. Through him the world will be blessed. Genesis as a whole is essential for the proper understanding of the salvation-historical message of the Bible.

The next stage is the slavery of God's people in Egypt. The nation is formed there, and the promise given to Abraham keeps the faith of Israel alive. The Exodus, the escape from Egypt and the conquest of the Promised Land, is a central theme in salvation history. It is a cornerstone in the Old Testament, because it tells about God's saving work on behalf of his people. The Exodus in the Old Testament can be compared with what happened at Golgotha in the New Testament: God's sovereign act to save his people.

In the Book of Exodus we read about the giving of the Ten Commandments and the instructions for building the tabernacle and the ark of the covenant. The Book of Leviticus contains instructions on how to approach God through the sacrifices. These guidelines reveal the way to salvation and give advice on how to live. The commandments show the way to a good life but not to salvation. Salvation comes through the sacrifices and by grace. Numbers and Deuteronomy describe the years of wandering through the wilderness towards the Promised Land.

The Book of Joshua is the story of the settlement of the Promised Land. God has fulfilled his promises. The Book of Judges is a tragic description of the events which led Israel to forsake the Lord, its God. After this period all the books in the Old Testament tell about Israel worshipping false gods instead of the true God. Time and again God sent prophets to warn his chosen people and to call it back to its Lord. The Books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles tell about the period of the monarchy and the divided kingdom. Finally God had to punish his

people and send it into exile to Babylon. This could have meant the end for the nation, but it didn't, because God still had plans for his people. The end of the Old Testament speaks about the return from Babylon and the rebuilding of the temple and the land.

Some differences between the Old Testament and the New Testament can be understood from the salvation-historical perspective. One example is the question of the wars in the Old Testament. God allowed and even ordered his people to fight against its enemies. This was important, because it was the only way in which his nation could live in a world where other nations worshiped idols. This was true particularly when the chosen people were settling the Promised Land. Wars were part of God's secret plan for this world. But in the New Testament we don't find orders to fight for the same reason. A new era has begun. Wars are part of our world, but they do not have the same meaning as in the Old Testament. In our day and age it cannot be argued any more that God has commanded us to wage wars.

We find the message of God's good plan for his people in all the books of the Old Testament. Already in the dawn of mankind he promised to send the one who would "crush the head of the serpent". Later on the promise of this coming Messiah became increasingly clear. He will be a descendant of Abraham. He will come from the tribe of Judah. He will be a King from David's royal line. And last but not least: he will be the suffering servant of the Lord.

The central message of the Bible is the message of salvation. In the Old Testament the focus is on the people of Israel and promises of the coming Messiah. Israel is the chosen people, not because of its obedience but because of God's choosing. This is clearly expressed in Deut 9:4-6, "Understand, then, that it is not because of your righteousness that the Lord your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people."

From the very beginning the Bible teaches that salvation comes through grace, not through deeds. Abel was not better than Cain, but he was chosen by God. Noah was not better than his contemporaries, but he "found favour in the eyes of the Lord" (Gen 6:8). Abraham was just one of the people living in Ur of the Chaldeans (Isa 51:2), but God chose him to be the ancestor of his chosen people. At first Abraham did

not believe that God could give him a child, but God gave him the faith that was needed. He was standing outside his tent and counting the stars in the sky when faith was given to him. Then “Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness” (Gen 15:6). This is one of the key verses in the Bible. Paul cites it when he is teaching about justification by faith, the central message of his letters (Rom. 4:3-5). And 1,500 years later these Bible verses became a turning point in world history. The Reformation changed the world, and the doctrine of justification by faith became again the focal point in the message of the Christian church, thanks to Martin Luther’s teaching.

Everything in the Bible must be understood in this light. God is holy and righteous. He demands righteousness from us. Only absolute obedience is enough for him. But – nobody is obedient enough. Everybody is a sinner. Therefore we need a sacrifice; we need to be reconciled with God. He saves us for his own sake (Isa 43:25). His grace is our only possibility to be saved.

### **Understand the difference between the law and the gospel**

If you don’t understand the difference between the law and the gospel, you cannot interpret the Bible correctly. This issue has caused a lot of confusion and misunderstanding.

In the Bible “law” is everything that commands, advises, forbids, exhorts, binds, challenges or warns. The Ten Commandments form the core of the law. All calls to repentance by the prophets are law. Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount is law. The innumerable exhortations of the Apostle Paul in his letters are law.

“Gospel” in the Bible is everything that promises, presents, gives or proclaims God’s grace. It is something that has been given to us unconditionally. We cannot do anything to get it. It comes from outside of us and can only be accepted or rejected. Its main content is the forgiveness of sins. It proclaims the fulfilled work of Jesus.

The law has two purposes. Firstly, it shows the way to a good life. If you keep the law, your life will be good, and if everybody keeps it, life in the society at large will be good. It is the law of life itself. It is written in our hearts, and everybody is able to understand it. Even non-Chris-

tians can understand it in some respect (see Rom 1:19-20). It is not only a suggestion on how to live; it is God's holy will. However, it is not the way to salvation.

Secondly, the law shows us that we are lawbreakers. This is the second purpose of the law. The law shows us that we are sinners. Nobody can keep the law, if it is understood in its real meaning. We may not be murderers, and we may not have committed adultery, but there is a lot of sin in our thoughts, motives and attitudes. Nobody can control his words in such a way that he never says anything bad (see Matt 12:36-37). If we understand the law in this way, it condemns us. The Apostle Paul writes, "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin" (Rom 3:20). The law pursues us to a dead end where we have only one possibility to be saved: the gospel.

The gospel has only one purpose: to proclaim that we are free from the judgment of the law. The essence of the gospel is Jesus Christ and the forgiveness of sins. Already in the Old Testament we see the message of the gospel. It is everywhere. God reveals himself as a merciful God, who accepts man unconditionally, by faith. Sacrifices are the instruments through which man can have a share in forgiveness. Several texts, e.g. in the prophetic books and the Psalms, tell us about God who is merciful and forgiving.

If we confuse the law and the gospel, our understanding of the Bible is led astray. On the one hand, the danger is to think that we are able to fulfill the law. Trying to do that is an endless job, and you can never be sure if you have done enough. On this road you cannot have security of your salvation, because you cannot be sure that you are good enough. On the other hand, if you think that as a Christian you don't need the law any more, you may end up committing sins without any hesitation. Then you are in danger of becoming totally estranged from the real life in Jesus Christ.

Taking both the law and the gospel seriously is not easy, but it is the only way for the Christian. As a result, there is a certain tension in his life, but it is a healthy, useful tension. Both the law and the gospel tell the truth about me. I am a sinner who cannot save himself, but my sins

are forgiven because Jesus has reconciled me with God. This is a balanced view and the way to a sound understanding of the Bible.

### **Remember that the New Testament interprets the Old Testament correctly**

As a matter of fact, the Old Testament contains the entire message of the Bible. But some parts of the message are still “in bud”, and the fulfillment, the “flower” is seen in the New Testament. The Old Testament teaches about salvation by grace, but in the New Testament we see the final formulation of the actual doctrine. The Old Testament predicts the coming of the Messiah, and the New Testament tells about his actual coming.

Many things that were predicted in the Old Testament were fulfilled by and in Jesus Christ. We don't need sacrifices any more. Jesus declared all the foods clean. Nor do we need a visible temple with all its regulations, because Jesus is our temple. The salvation-historical meaning of the Old Testament ark of the covenant no longer applies, because Jesus is now our “ark of the covenant” (see Rom 3:25).

The Ten Commandments (Ex 20) are the central ethical rule in the Old Testament. The value of the Decalogue is undiminished in the New Testament. It is the universal law for mankind and forms the basis for all ethical thinking.

The command to observe the Sabbath day is an exception. In the Old Testament the significance of the commandment is clear. The chosen people were told to keep the Sabbath day, and it was and would be a sign between God and his people (Ex 32:13). However, in the New Testament its importance seems to diminish. Jesus heals on a Sabbath, and he opposes the Pharisees who demanded that it be observed very strictly. Jesus proclaims, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). Paul must have got his teaching principles directly from the Lord as he writes, “One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind” (Rom 14:5). The New Testament seems to make it clear that the first Christians moved the Sabbath day to Sunday

because of the resurrection of Jesus. Nothing less could have made them do that.

We would not be able to understand the Messianic message in some Old Testament passages without the clear evidence of the New Testament. Ps 16:8-11 is a good illustration of this. We would not know that it speaks about the Messiah without Acts 2:25-28, where Peter explains that David is prophesying about Jesus Christ in this psalm.

Matt 2:15 claims that the prophet predicted about the Messiah, when he wrote, “Out of Egypt I called my son.” This is a quotation of Hos 11:1. However, Hosea talks about Israel, not the Messiah. How should this be understood? The answer is that Jesus fulfilled in himself what Israel was unable to fulfill. Jesus is the New Israel.

### **The difficult passages should be interpreted in the light of the clear passages**

There are a lot of difficult passages in the Bible. Sometimes the best advice is – according to Martin Luther – to raise one’s hat and go on. Maybe you will understand it the next time. But you may also find other Bible texts that tell about the same things, and they may shed light on the difficult one.

It is hard to understand why God punished the early mankind by sending a worldwide flood and destroying almost everybody. How can God, who is merciful and forgiving, be so cruel? 2 Pet 3:6-7 gives us the answer, “By water also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.” The flood was a type of the last judgment. Through it God demonstrated to the world that sin is a very serious thing. But he also promised not to destroy this world again before the day of the last judgment.

Another example could be the prophecy in Joel 2:28-32. It is not immediately clear which period it refers to. But when we read Peter’s explanation in Acts 2, we realize that its fulfillment took place on the day of Pentecost.

When we read Psalms, we find expressions such as “Whatever he does prospers” (Ps 1:3). Is it true that whatever the righteous man does will prosper? Reading on we find the wicked man, and we are told that “His ways are always prosperous” (Ps 10:5). This looks like a contradiction. To understand what is behind these opposite statements we need to study the Bible in its entirety. Then we will find out that prosperity comes from God but that the life of God’s people may also include difficulties and misfortunes, even poverty.

Gen. 49:10 is quite difficult to understand, if we are not familiar with the overall message of the Bible. The Messiah will come from the tribe of Judah and he will be King. In Matt 1:3, 6, 16 we see that Jesus was descended from Judah and King David. In Phil 2:9-11 and many other passages we are told that the Jesus will be the Highest Ruler and that everybody must obey him.

Many Old Testament characters had several wives, for example David and Solomon. The Bible does not say in the actual stories whether this was right or wrong. The reader may wonder about the Bible’s attitude to polygamy. But if we read what the Bible, both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament, teaches about marriage and family, we know how such passages should be interpreted. The creation story, Jesus himself and the Apostle Paul tell us that marriage is the union of one man and one woman and that all other combinations are sin.

One more example from the New Testament. In 1 John 3:8 we read, “He who does what is sinful is of the devil.” This seems to be in contradiction with Bible passages which teach that Christians are still sinners. However, 1 John 1:8 reads, “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” Therefore the words of 1 John 3 must be interpreted so that if somebody sins continuously, openly, without any thought of repenting, then this shows that he is living without God.

### **Study the historical background of the text**

Knowing the historical background of a given text is not necessary in order to understand the passage correctly, but in most cases it deepens our knowledge. Sometimes it also helps us to avoid misunderstandings.

If you read in Exod 1:8 that “Then a new king, who did not know about Joseph, came to power in Egypt”, you may think that this happened soon after the Israelites had come to Egypt. But if you know that they were in Egypt probably about 400 years, you understand the verse better. In addition, if you know that the king mentioned here is very likely Ramses II, you have established a real connection to world history.

If you understand the role of the Assyrian empire in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, you may understand Isaiah 36-37 better. Assyria was the undisputed superpower of the world, and all other nations had to bow down to it. Therefore tiny Jerusalem had no chance of resisting Assyria’s attack – except by God’s supernatural help. We have a lot of archaeological evidence about the event.

The third example comes from Daniel 11. It is full of historical information which becomes much clearer to the reader, if he knows who were the kings that are mentioned in that chapter. The kings of the South refer to Ptolemaic rulers and the kings of the North to Seleucid rulers. Interestingly, the mighty king in Dan 11:3 is Alexander the Great. He is present also in Dan 8:5, 21.

### **Ask simple questions about the text**

Good questions are often very simple ones. What, where, who and why are the most useful questions. Ask them about every text you read. Consider what has happened before the passage and what happens after it. What happens in the text you are reading? What is the main message of the text? Where did it take place? What do you know about the geographical circumstances? Who are the persons in the text? Why are they there instead of somebody else? What else do you know about them? Why are they doing what they are doing?

Try to read the text with your heart and soul. What would you like to do, if you were one of the persons mentioned in the text? Who would you like to be? What can you learn about God in this text? What does it teach about man in general? Should we take it as moral advice? Asking this kind of questions about the text you are studying makes it possible to go much deeper in your understanding of it.

### **Accept the fact that you don't understand everything**

Deut 29:29 is a good rule to follow, "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law."

God is both a hidden and a revealed God. There are things that we don't know. God is greater than we and he has not revealed everything about his purposes towards us. There are secrets which we cannot open.

But all things that are revealed are for us that we should believe them. Accepting this helps us to have a humble attitude before God's word. We must remain true to the Christian faith which we have adopted, but we should also accept the fact that we don't have the final truth. There may be misunderstandings and errors in our knowledge. The final truth is in God's word, and we personally are in possession of only a part of that truth.

### **Accept the Bible as God's word and live accordingly**

Understanding the Bible is not a scholarly question; it is an existential question. It is not a philosophical issue; it is an issue of life and death. You must read the Bible critically, but more importantly, you must let the Bible criticize you. You cannot say about the Bible what is right and wrong in it, but the Bible can say this about you.

A scholar once said that his problem is not so much with the Bible texts that he does not understand as with the texts he does understand. If you know the right way and don't take it, you commit a sin. The Bible shows the right way, but it also shows the way to forgiveness of sins. If you accept the Bible as God's word for you, you will follow Jesus with all of your heart. And you will live in his grace every day.



## **11. The Law and the Gospel**

One of the central biblical doctrines has to do with the relationship between the Law and the Gospel. Understanding the distinction between the Law (commandments, regulations) and the Gospel (grace, promises) opens the door to sound interpretation of the message of the Bible.

Martin Luther said, “Whoever knows well this art of distinguishing between Law and Gospel, place him at the head and call him a doctor of Holy Scripture.”

According to Apology of the Augsburg Confession (1531), “All Scripture ought to be distributed into these two principal topics, the Law and the promises. For in some places it presents the Law, and in others the promise concerning Christ, namely, either when [in the Old Testament] it promises that Christ will come, and offers, for his sake, the remission of sins, justification, and life eternal, or when, in the Gospel [in the New Testament] Christ Himself, since he has appeared, promises the remission of sins, justification, and life eternal.”

The Formula of Concord (in Article V) states, “We believe, teach, and confess that the distinction between the Law and the Gospel is to be maintained in the Church with great diligence...”

C. F. W. Walther (1811-1887) was a great teacher of this issue. He writes, “The Word of God is not rightly divided when the Law is not preached in its full sternness and the Gospel not in its full sweetness, when, on the contrary, Gospel elements are mingled with the Law and Law elements with the Gospel.”

### **The meaning of the law**

The law in the New Testament

All commandments, prohibitions, rules, advice and the like in the Bible belong to the category of law. The Ten Commandments is the basic example of this. In the New Testament Jesus even sharpens the message of the Ten Commandments as he says, “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will

be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment.’” And again, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (Matt 5:21-48).

Here are some other New Testament examples about the law: “In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you.” (Matt 7:12); “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind... Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt 22:37-40); “But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken” (Matt 12:36); “Go now and leave your life of sin” (John 8:11b), “Therefore I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – which is your spiritual worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom 12:1-2); “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children, and live a life of love... But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or any kind of impurity, or of greed... Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking...” (Eph 5:1-4); “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” (Phil 4:4).

From these passages we see that both Jesus and Paul preached the law and that there are a lot of sayings of this kind in the New Testament. Accordingly, it is a misunderstanding to think that the Old Testament contains nothing but law and the New Testament nothing but gospel. Both parts of the Bible contain both law and gospel.

### **The law as a rule of life**

The law has two main uses. Firstly, it shows us the way to a good life (rule), and secondly it makes us conscious of our sins (mirror). The law is God’s holy will, and therefore we must keep it. We have no excuse not to keep it. Breaking the law is sin, always and in every case. Keeping God’s law makes life better for everybody. That is true of every country and every nation.

Let us think about the Ten Commandments. If there were no stealing, we could live safely and we would not have to lock our doors. If there were no killing, we would not have to be afraid of anybody. If everybody were faithful in marriage, families would be much happier, and there would be a lot less problems in our everyday lives. Deaths from HIV/AIDS deaths would decrease dramatically. If nobody said anything bad about their neighbors, and if everybody always spoke the truth and only kind words, we could trust everybody and our lives would be much better. In other words, God's law is the law of life itself. What follows is that our lives will be better, but if we reject the law, we miss out on the good life.

The law is the way to a good life, not the way to salvation. This is a basic Christian truth. Paul writes about this in Gal 3:11, "Clearly no one is justified before God by the law." In many other religions keeping different kinds of regulations is thought to be the way to salvation. If you follow the rules, you are a good "believer", if you don't, you "perish". The heart of most religions is keeping the rules and commandments of that particular religion. The Christian religion is different. Even if you could keep all the commandments, you would not be saved, because salvation is by grace, not by deeds. That is why we need to understand the second meaning or use of the law.

### **The law as a mirror**

Secondly, the law is a mirror. It reveals our sins. It shows us that we are lawbreakers and therefore under God's judgment. This second use of the law is sometimes difficult to understand, because it seems to be in conflict with the first one. We are required to keep the law, but are not able to do it. How can this be explained?

We may not be murderers or adulterers, but all of us have said bad words to others, and our motives, attitudes and thoughts are not always pure and good. We are sinful by nature, and therefore we do not love God with all our hearts, nor do we love our neighbors as ourselves. It is absolutely necessary to understand that we are sinners, because if we don't, we don't need salvation.

The main New Testament texts that refer to this are the following: “Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin” (Rom 3:20), and “Is the law sin? Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law” (Rom 7:7).

In the liturgy of some churches the pastor invites the congregation to confess their sins by reading the Ten Commandments. This is a good idea. Before we confess our sins we must understand that we are sinners. God’s commandments make us realize that we are lawbreakers and that we cannot save ourselves. Then we are ready to accept the forgiveness of sins.

The purpose of this second use of the law is that we acknowledge that we are sinners and that we therefore need Jesus Christ to save us. The law is a mirror that reveals our true nature, but it also forces us to search Jesus and ask for his forgiveness. The law is “holy, righteous and good” (Rom 7:12), but it cannot save us. Therefore we need the message of the gospel.

Sometimes we are taught about the third use of the law, which is showing believers how they should live. But this use can also be understood to be included in the above-mentioned two uses of the law.

### **The meaning of the gospel**

The gospel is the message about Jesus, God’s promises, his grace and the forgiveness of sins. The law demands, but the gospel gives. The law says that we must fulfill the law, the gospel says that Jesus has fulfilled everything. The law shows us that we are sinners, the gospel proclaims that all our sins can be forgiven.

Examples of the gospel are found in the following New Testament texts: “When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic: ‘Son, your sins are forgiven.’” (Mark 2:5); “The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said: ‘Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.’” (John 1:29); “‘Then neither do I condemn you’ Jesus declared.” (John 8:11a); “When he had received the drink, Jesus said: ‘It is finished.’” (John 19:30); “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified freely by his grace through the redemp-

tion that came by Christ Jesus.” (Rom 3:23-24); “Now when a man works, his wages are not credited him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.” (Rom 4:4-5); and “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.” (Gal 3:13).

The gospel is something that we cannot do or earn. It is given to us as a free gift. The only precondition is that we acknowledge our sinfulness. Only lost sinners need the gospel. If we could earn it, it would not be a free gift any more. If we explain to God how much we have prayed, how blamelessly we have walked before him or how much faith we have, it does not help us at all – in terms of salvation. We need to pray, and we need to fight the good fight of the faith, but these cannot save us. Only Jesus saves.

Some people think that salvation by grace is too easy. They think that we should do at least something to please God. But we cannot. Grace is God’s work, not ours. We can only accept it by faith, that is all.

### **Tension in a Christian’s life**

A certain tension is present in the life of each Christian. He is required to keep the law, but he is not able to do it. He cannot say that it does not matter whether he breaks the law or not. It does. The law is God’s holy will, and the Christian must keep it. At the same time he understands that it is impossible for him to keep all of it. That is why he needs Jesus all the time. Jesus and the forgiveness of sins is his only hope. This tension is part of each Christian’s life. In the New Testament the best illustration of this is what Paul writes in Rom 7:7-25. Here is a part of it, “I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing... What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ my Lord!”

One way to illustrate the distinction between the law and the gospel is to say that the life of Jesus is law for us but that the death of Jesus is

gospel for us. The life of Jesus is an example. We must live like Jesus. We must follow the principles which he followed and taught. This imitation of Christ has been the way many Christians have tried to go. The ideal is very high. It is a good goal, but nobody can reach it. It is too high. We must follow Jesus, but we are not able to live like Jesus. Therefore his life is law for us. It shows us the right way (rule), but it also shows us that we are not good enough (mirror).

Therefore we need the death of Jesus in order to be saved. The death of Jesus means forgiveness of our sins. It is our reconciliation and our redemption. It proclaims that we are free and opens the way to heaven.

It is good to remember that although the law demands us to fulfill it, it does not give the power to do that. The gospel gives the power to do what God wants us to do. Those, who have received grace and have been forgiven, want and are able to love their fellow men, because God has first loved them.

It is very easy to confuse the law and the gospel in our daily lives, also in our preaching and teaching. If I am tempted to commit a particular sin, a voice in my heart says, "Just do it. Everybody does it. You know that you will be forgiven." This is the voice of Satan. Jesus says always, "Don't do it. Never commit the sin. Just follow me." If I have fallen to a temptation and done something that I know is sin, the voice in my heart says, "You have committed a sin that will never be forgiven. You are lost." This is the voice of Satan. Jesus says, "I will forgive all your sins." It is important to keep this order in mind.

Sometimes it is claimed that those who emphasize God's grace as the only way to salvation offer a way to heaven that is too easy. Our answer is that it is the only way. It is not an easy way, because Jesus had to die because of it. And we Christians know that all our sins are as serious as death. We hate sin, because Jesus hates it. But we cannot get rid of sin, and therefore our only hope is what Jesus did on the cross.

How, then, should we preach the law and the gospel? It is not a simple task. It is quite easy to be a moralist, in other words to preach the law and nothing else. There are many such preachers, but a sermon containing only law is not a Christian sermon. If we preach only the gospel, then the listeners will not understand why they need the gospel. They

may also have a wrong attitude toward sin if they do not listen to the sermon of the law, because the law shows them to be sinners. The preacher has to proclaim both law and gospel. Sermons and Bible texts differ from each other, and not all speeches can be the same. When the preacher is preparing a sermon, he should ask if his text contains law or gospel and seek to explain it in the right way.

The law should be preached in such a way that people will know the right way to live. It must also be preached in such a way that people will understand that they cannot fulfill it. If they then start asking how they can be saved because they are sinners, it is a good sign. The law should make us despair and ask if there is any way out. That is when the time has come to preach the gospel. And it must be preached unconditionally. The preacher must proclaim Jesus Christ in such a way that the gospel can be accepted. God's grace must be made so accessible that nobody feels he is too evil to accept it. It can even be said that the prime challenge for the preacher is to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, not only to introduce the way to salvation but to give it to his audience. It is only through the gospel that people can come to Christ and faith can increase in their lives.

Finally we ask what we mean by faith. We have said that faith alone is enough, that salvation cannot be attained through good works. Is the way too easy? If you believe that Jesus lived and died, are you then allowed to live exactly the way you wish? Christian faith is divided into two parts: knowledge and confidence. Firstly, knowledge or intellectual content means that the object of our faith is Jesus, nobody else. If you don't believe in the Jesus who was born of the Virgin Mary, died on the cross and rose from the dead, you are not a Christian. This is the first precondition of the Christian faith, but it is not enough. Non-Christians may believe that this is true as well. Secondly, confidence means that I put my trust in Jesus and him alone. I believe that he forgives my sins every day. I pray to him and expect only good things from him. He is not only the Savior of the whole world; he is my personal Savior.



## 12. A brief overview of the New Testament books

In this chapter the main themes of each New Testament book are presented in one or two sentences. Some information about the dating of the book is also given, if such information is available.

**Matthew** was the principal gospel in the early church. It contains e.g. the Sermon on the Mount, parables of the Kingdom of God and the Great Commission. It was probably written in the 60's. **Mark** is the shortest and in all likelihood the earliest of the four gospels. It may have been written at the end of the 50's or in the beginning of the 60's. It was written specially with the Gentile Christians in mind.

**Luke** is the first volume of a two-piece work, and it was probably written in the 60's. The author was a physician. Luke contains the narratives of Jesus' birth and several passages, such as the story of the Prodigal Son, that are missing from the other three gospels.

**John** is very different from the three other gospels. It begins by telling about Jesus' pre-existence. It contains several "I am" –sayings of Jesus, many discussions between Jesus and the Pharisees, and Jesus' farewell speech. Written in the 90's (or much earlier), John is the youngest of the gospels.

**Acts** is the second part of Luke's two-piece volume. It tells how the gospel began to spread out into the world. At first the main character is Peter, and later on Paul. The description of Paul's missionary journeys concludes with his imprisonment in Rome. Acts may have been written at the end of the 60's.

**Romans** is Paul's chief epistle. It contains his teaching of righteousness through faith and the central message of the Christian doctrine.

**1 Corinthians** deals with several problematic issues which had arisen in the church, such as divisions, the nature of marriage, food sacrificed to idols, spiritual gifts, the Lord's Supper, and the resurrection of the dead.

**2 Corinthians** deals with such topics as comfort and reconciliation. Paul reveals his big difficulty, which he calls "a thorn in my flesh".

**Galatians** is shorter than Romans, but it also deals with the doctrine of Law and Gospel. It also teaches about freedom in Christ.

**Ephesians** is one of Paul's letters written in prison. Its central theme is the universal church, which is composed of both Jews and Gentiles. It also contains an important passage about family life in the light of life in the church of God.

**Philippians** is also one of the prison letters. It emphasizes joy in Christ and contains a profound message of Christ's humility and glory.

**Colossians** resembles Ephesians in many respects. The description of Christ's pre-existence in chapter 1 gives a unique picture of him and his supremacy.

**1 Thessalonians** may be the earliest of Paul's epistles. Its central topic is the second coming of the Lord.

**2 Thessalonians** continues the theme of 1 Thess, but the tone is somewhat different. The Lord is coming back, but Christians ought not to wait for him without doing anything. The letter also contains the message of "the man of lawlessness", who must come first.

**1 Timothy** is a so-called Pastoral Epistle, which were addressed to a single person. It encourages a leader of the church to serve faithfully. It also gives instructions regarding the role of overseers, deacons, widows and elders in the church.

**2 Timothy** is the last of Paul's epistles. The writer knows that he is approaching the end of his life. He emphasizes the importance of the Scriptures and gives personal instructions.

**Titus** is a short letter to Titus, a church leader, whom Paul had left on Crete. Paul gives him advice on how to lead the church.

**Philemon** is a short personal letter. Paul is sending Onesimus, a slave, back to his master Philemon together with an accompanying letter.

**Hebrews** is like a sermon emphasizing the person and work of Christ in the light of the Old Testament. It uses typology in interpreting the Bible as it tells about Melchizedek and Moses as shadows or foreshadows of Jesus.

**James** was written by a brother of the Lord. The letter contains many similarities with Jesus' teaching. It emphasizes the importance of good works in the Christian's life.

**1 Peter** encourages Christians who are suffering for the name of the Lord. It also says that the Christian church is a chosen people, a royal priesthood and a holy nation, which is composed not only of Jews.

**2 Peter** warns Christians about false teachers and proclaims the coming of the Day of the Lord. The letter also points out that the Scriptures have been written under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

**1 John** is a sermon-like letter. It emphasizes walking in the light and warns against Antichrist. Christians ought to love one another, and their walk ought to be characterized by faith in the Son of God.

**2 and 3 John** are the shortest letters in the New Testament. They warn against false teachers and encourage Christians to keep the faith.

**Jude** was written by a brother of the Lord. This short letter is a call to persevere in the faith which is both unique and revealed.

**Revelation** is an apocalyptic and prophetic book which describes both the Roman world at the end of the first century and the future end times of the world. It contains several symbolic numbers and images. Its central message is that God rules even when darkness seems to prevail.



## **PART II**

# **THE NEW TESTAMENT IN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT**

### **13. Biblical understanding of spiritual gifts (Gerson Mgaya)**

#### **Introduction**

Any study of Scripture is deficient, if it does not address the practical life of the readers. This article maintains that, although the Bible was mainly written nearly two thousand years ago, and most of its books were addressed to specific people with particular problems, it is just as relevant to the modern readers as it was to the first readers. Most of what happened to the biblical people has counterparts in people's lives today. While the western world may differ from the biblical world in many ways, it has been proved that African cultures, as diverse as they may be, resemble the cultures of the people about whom we read in the Bible. Although not always, most often people with the same type of culture face the same type of challenges, and therefore the methods of countering problems may also be similar. This then justifies the relevance of applying Scripture to solving most of the problems that Africans face today.

Out of the many issues which could be discussed, this article devotes space and time to the various practices and opinions concerning spiritual gifts in the Christian communities. Numerous academic studies on spiritual gifts present differing – and sometimes directly opposite – opinions that leave the readers with more questions than answers. Some studies focus only on a few spiritual gifts, mostly prophecy and speaking in tongues, and as a result many Christians are not aware of the other spiritual gifts. Consequently, they think that the spiritual gifts which are the most conspicuous are also the most important. An example of this is that there is a special emphasis on tongues and prophecy in many Christian communities. Such an emphasis gives rise to a multitude of problems. Many pastors, irrespective of their theological

views, wrestle with questions raised by believers regarding spiritual gifts frequently, and in some instances quite painfully.

In the mainstream churches, questions regarding spiritual gifts are mainly raised by the charismatics who, as it has been observed, have almost the same practices as those in traditional 'Pentecostal' denominations. This has not been an easy thing for many pastors to cope with. Often they have reacted by urging the charismatics to remain silent and follow the traditional liturgy of their denominations. As the charismatics do not agree to be silent, because they claim that they are under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they are seen as threats to authorities. They cause confusion and therefore cannot be accommodated in the church.

Beginning with the 1980's, many mainstream churches in Tanzania have faced this challenge, and many dioceses have been forced to redefine their practices and their understanding of the spiritual gifts. Since the movement has mainly been engineered by lay persons, the process has been rather slow. But when the church leaders were personally challenged, meetings were held in an attempt to find a solution. For example, the pastors in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania, Southern Diocese, held meetings in 1992, 2004 and 2005. While the meetings also addressed other matters, the hottest topic under discussion was the charismatic movement. There have been two attempts of kicking charismatics out of the Lutheran Church, but both attempts have failed. Some pastors voiced the opinion in the general meeting of all pastors of the diocese that unless the ELCT-SD decides to stop the movement, there will be no order in the Church, and the worship services will no longer be Lutheran. They suggested that charismatic members should be subjected to church discipline and kicked out completely, unless they agree to give up charismatic practices. The meeting was divided on the matter, but the majority supported the proposal of banning the charismatics. The few who supported the charismatics urged that they are an asset to churches, because thanks to them church members use the spiritual gifts they have been endowed with. The meeting's resolution recommended that pastors be understanding and willing to learn of the situation.

In 2005 the matter was brought again before the pastors' general meeting, but this time the movement had grown and many different

revival groups had been formed. The pastors' complaints were even more serious than before. They reported that they were confronted by the charismatics and accused of being spiritually dry leaders. They were told that they were preaching and teaching believers a message that does not quench their hunger for the Lord, that they were better at defending traditions than the truth of Scripture, and that under their leadership the worship services were dull. The pastors, however, considered the charismatics profoundly unbiblical and a threat to both the authority and unity of the church. Hence their wish was that the diocese should do something against the charismatics. But this time also, it was decided not to kick them out of the church; instead a committee of a few pastors was formed to think over the matter.

Having been present in those meetings (2004 & 2005) and having seen how confused many pastors were regarding spiritual gifts, I decided to conduct a study on the subject, which I expect to be ready, under God's guidance, by 2012. Although the study is purely exegetical, the first stage was to collect data from interviews in order to establish which texts people rely on for their understanding and practice of spiritual gifts. The interviews showed that people rely on what Paul wrote. This made me ask, "Does the confusion regarding spiritual gifts mean that Paul expressed two conflicting opinions simultaneously?" Definitely not! This then suggests that there has to be a different problem, which causes the existing perplexity. Hence, the big question is: How can we read the text in the way Paul meant it to be read? How would the original audience have understood the text, when modern readers come up with so diverse, and sometimes opposing, interpretations? Is the diversity in understanding what Paul intended to communicate about spiritual gifts caused by the readers, by Paul himself, or by both Paul and his readers?

*This article deals with the questions that were raised above. It is a discussion of the spiritual gifts which the Lord gives to His church. Although the aim is to help the readers understand, appreciate and bring into use the spiritual gifts in their daily lives, the focus remains on what Scripture actually says about of them. As was pointed out earlier, what the first readers faced relates to what many churches face today, especially in Africa. Before going into what Paul actually says, the article presents the basic available facts about spiritual gifts.*

Considering the fact that the practices and opinions in our communities are many and varied, *it is expected that the article will be of great help to both casual readers and those in academic fields.*

### **The Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts**

Our understanding of spiritual gifts begins with what we know about the work of the Holy Spirit. One of His principal roles is to bring believers together into a community, which we call the community of believers or the Church. Although this role is not seen very clearly in the Old Testament, it is seen all the more clearly after Pentecost. Many people from different backgrounds formed the community of the believers, having placed their faith in Jesus. Difficult as it can be for people from different backgrounds to live together harmoniously, the Holy Spirit helped Christians not to look on their differences, but rather on what united them. In addition to bringing the believers together, the Holy Spirit gave them spiritual gifts which were meant to *build, edify* and *help* the body of Christ (the Church) to grow. It is the Holy Spirit who inaugurated the Church and continued to be actively involved in what the Church was doing. I could even say that the correct expression is that *it was the Holy Spirit that was doing things*, not the Church. This active role was carried out by him by means of the spiritual gifts which can be looked at in two ways: (i) by studying the life records of those who were given spiritual gifts, and (ii) by going through the passages which discuss spiritual gifts.

The study of biographies of individuals reveals only a few gifts. Of the gifted biblical figures we can mention Daniel, Joseph, David, Samson, Elijah, Elisha, Paul, Peter, John and a few others. *Joseph* is known as a dreamer and dream interpreter. Because of the gift he had, the country of Egypt was saved, as was his people (Israel). *Daniel* was also a dream interpreter. Interpreting dreams is a gift from God. *David* was a king. He organized his kingdom very well. Although he fought tens of battles, he knew nothing but victory. In addition, David was a gifted singer. His singing drove bad spirits out of Saul. You may wonder what the power in his music was, but I don't think it was the music that had power. It was God who chose to work through David as he played the musical instrument. *Elijah* was a great healer, powerful in prayer, and per-

formed many miracles in the power of God's Spirit. *Elisha*, in addition to many other things, raised the dead. The Holy Spirit was at work through him. *Prophets* could see things of the future through the power of the Holy Spirit. *Solomon* had an extraordinary wisdom in giving advice and making decisions. His wisdom made Israel prosperous, and it is said that during Solomon's reign, Israel knew no war. Through the Holy Spirit, Peter, John and Paul preached, spoke in tongues, healed, taught the Scriptures in truth, prophesied, advised people, etc. Since there are no systematical biographies of these individuals, it may be difficult for most readers to notice their gifts.. Luckily there is another way in which we can complement this.

There are passages that help us deepen our understanding of spiritual gifts. The most frequently cited passages regarding spiritual gifts are Romans 12:6-8 and 1 Corinthians 12-14. In these passages, Paul mentions some spiritual gifts: teaching, wisdom, word of knowledge, discerning the spirits, healing, speaking in tongues, interpreting tongues, counseling, prophesying, leadership, faith (believing), exhorting, showing mercy, and helping. These passages however, were written in response to certain situations in the Roman and Corinthian congregations. Therefore, the list of spiritual gifts is by no means exhaustive. In fact, not even the whole Bible mentions all the spiritual gifts that God gives. The ones that are mentioned are related to certain situations, and to get the most out of the texts requires that we first understand the situations which necessitated the letters.

Of the two passages, the discussion in 1 Corinthians 12-14 is much longer than the one in Romans 12. The reason for this is that the believers at Corinth had been abundantly blessed with spiritual gifts, but as they had no guiding rules on how to handle the situation, instead of experiencing blessing, they found themselves in confusion and disorder. Although part of the factionalism was caused by different parties that followed different teachers such as Paul, Cephas and Apollos, the findings of recent studies, with which I side, show that conflicts were primarily caused by the naïve opinion of the Corinthian Christians on the church and on the spiritual gifts. Though I urge that one should read the whole epistle of 1 Corinthians for a better understanding of spiritual gifts and also to get a clear picture of what was going on in Corinth, in this article I will only focus on matters raised in 1 Cor 12-14.

### **Confusion about spiritual gifts in the Corinthian church**

The Corinthians had written to Paul asking for help in many issues, spiritual gifts being one of them. We do not know for sure the exact problem regarding spiritual gifts, but going through Paul's response we can infer that Corinthians had the following problems: (i) There was an overemphasis on tongues in comparison with the other spiritual gifts, (ii) spiritual gifts were applied without love, and (iii) there was no line of separation between pagan cultic practices and Christian spirituality. In these three chapters, step by step, Paul corrects them by drawing the line between paganism and Christianity, and then moves on to tell them about the nature, purpose and proper application of spiritual gifts as they come together.

The reason he draws a line of separation between pagan religious practices and Christianity is easier to understand if we know something about daily life in Corinth. Life was very busy and competitive. Philosophers kept flowing to the city in search of pupils. Those, who succeeded in finding some, would build a fence around themselves by speaking against other teachers, a custom which their pupils imitated. The pupils were required to be loyal to their teachers at all times, and this made them continue speaking against other teachers and their pupils even in the absence their own teachers. It was customary to resort to insults, character assassination and invoking gods to curse the rivals. It seems that after Paul left Corinth, Apollos came, and the Corinthian Christians applied the same criteria to Paul and Apollos as the secular pupils would apply to their teachers. Thus, when coming together in worship, they would begin invoking Jesus to curse one another.

Paul also seems to tell them that they should not be taking their cases before secular judges. The corruption rate in Corinth was more or less the same as in many African countries today, Tanzania being no exception. Money was the means of setting the accused free in court. As many early Christian converts were poor, they would lose their cases. Religion became their only hope and weapon as they fought against their opponents. They reverted to their old pagan way of cursing enemies, but now they would invoke Jesus to curse those who opposed or oppressed them. The words of 1 Cor 12:3, which have traditionally been translated "Jesus be cursed", is a misinterpretation and should be

translated “Jesus curse (you)...” In other words, having understood correctly the divinity of Jesus, the Corinthian believers now thought that He played the same role as the pagan gods. Because they invoked Jesus to curse those they did not like, their worship services lacked the basic mark of identification which was to distinguish Christians from others. There was no love for one another in the Corinthian church. Therefore Paul stresses that in Christianity we invoke Jesus when we praise Him as our Lord and also when we ask Him to bless others, be they friends or opponents.

Regarding the emphasis on tongues over other gifts, Paul tells the Corinthians that the body is not one organ. There are many organs in the body, and they are meant to be as different as they are. With this metaphor, he tells Corinthians that, just as there are many organs in one body each with a different task, so is the body of Christ, the Church. The same Spirit gives different spiritual gifts to the church members, but for the purpose of building up of the body of Christ. Each spiritual gift is equally important, because the one who gives it has seen that it is good and important. Believers are not to rank spiritual gifts on the basis of what is accomplished through them. They should be seen in relation to the giver. The Corinthians thought that speaking in tongues was an expression of deeper spirituality, but Paul told them that the fact that they had certain spiritual gifts was not because they were more deserving than others. It all depended on God’s gracious giving and on the task He wanted to be accomplished through that gift. This is the reason he opts charisma for pneumatics. Consequently, those who spoke in tongues and considered themselves spiritually stronger than those who did not, were required to reconsider their opinions and attitudes and to conform to what Paul was teaching.

Using spiritual gifts without love was something that Paul did not understand. According to him, when a person was converted, he was in Christ and Christ in him. In other words, a mystical union had taken place, and as a result one cannot tell who is in the other. This mystical union of the believer with Christ leads the believer to a life whose principal characteristic is the radiation of love, which according to Christ is love that knows no limits. In John 13:34 Jesus had told the disciples that the love they have towards one another will identify them as His followers. Although Corinthians had been baptized and given

spiritual gifts, this principal identifying mark was missing. Spiritual gifts, important and useful as they can be, can all be imitated by pagans. But this quality of love which is the mark of true believers cannot be imitated. That is why Paul shows in 1 Corinthians 13 that in the absence of this love, not only the gifts but also the person himself becomes useless. In plain language, those who considered themselves spiritually mature in the Corinthian Church were thoroughly wrong. In Paul's language, they were nothing.

Paul went on to show them how they could use spiritual gifts with love. First of all, he urged them to acknowledge the worth of all gifts. The aim was to elevate all believers to the same level of respect. Those who did not speak in tongues were brought to the same level as those who did. Then he told them how tongues should be used as they came together for worship. It sounds as if Paul wanted to ask these questions of the Corinthians, "How is the gift of tongues used when you are together? Do tongues help build the community or its individual members?" As the community did not get anything out of it, Paul's advice was that the community should concentrate more on what would promote fellowship and harmony. And here he brings up prophecy. Prophecy is the gift through which messages from God are transmitted in the language people can understand. Paul wanted this gift to be exercised more than tongues, and when it was necessary to speak in tongues, there had to be order and then there had to be interpretation. Although Paul appears to focus only on tongues and prophecy, his aim was not to show that the two are the only spiritual gifts. Rather, he wanted to show how love can be seen through these two gifts which were common among the Corinthian believers. When we are together, it is always the words we speak that can separate or bring us together. This is the reason Paul focuses more on the speaking gifts.

As for order, it is to be clear that without proper leadership any community will slide into anarchy. This is true also when the leaders are irresponsible. Paul offers a sound teaching on how to maintain order. His teaching is: spiritual gifts should be manifested in an orderly way. God himself is a God of order, and there is no chaos in and with Him. When churches experience disorderly behaviour, it is important to reflect on what the Scriptures teach. Although most of what we read in the New Testament today describes or was addressed to communities less organized than those we have today, there are some flashes of

information on which we can build the foundation of our understanding and practice of spiritual gifts. There are ministries or offices which are responsible for maintaining order in the church. In Eph 4:11-13 and 1 Cor 12:27-28 they are listed as (i) apostles, (ii) prophets, (iii) evangelists, (iv) pastors, and (v) teachers. While apostles may not be seen today, the other four ministries are familiar to us, and when they are given full recognition, the church will manifest what the Lord has ordained. It is mainly these offices that are responsible for authority and leadership, and when the ones holding such offices are not sensitive, they may be stifling the other ministries. The Lord has meant these ministries to work cooperatively. The apostles propagated the Church. Now the Church has spread to most parts of the world. The remaining ministries should cooperate in maintaining it and making sure that it continues what the apostles began. God offers spiritual gifts as a means of continuing these ministries.

### **Modern churches and spiritual gifts**

In the beginning of this article it was pointed out that modern Christian communities are confused about spiritual gifts. In many African countries, where corruption is tolerated even in the churches, Paul's teaching to the Corinthian Christians on the nature, purpose and use of spiritual gifts offers a potential help when reflected on and put into practice. To begin with, the image of the Church as the Body of Christ tells those in leadership that each church member has a role to play. Therefore, each member should be helped to recognize the gifts which the Lord has given him or her and given guidance on how to use them. This includes being given opportunities to practice those gifts. Each believer has a specific function and has been gifted by the Spirit of God in various areas for the benefit of the entire Body. It is time for the Church to begin functioning as a collective Body under the lordship of the Holy Spirit. When the gifts are not recognised and used, church leaders are overloaded, because they try to do everything alone. But the Lord wants each believer to do something, to have a role in building up the Church. The leadership's role is to make sure that each gift is brought into use in the right place. If this is not done correctly, the work of the Lord suffers, as some ministries that are necessary in furthering the work are not given a chance. I do not believe that the church leaders are equipped with all

the spiritual gifts that the church needs. Some lay Christians are more gifted than the ordained ministers, and they can be used in teaching, singing or preaching with great impact. They should be given opportunities to serve the Lord through the gifts they have been endowed with. When people are placed in the right positions, which correlate with the gifts they have, the results are always excellent.

There is a big problem, however, that is connected with leaders giving an opportunity to others to do something. When somebody then does something successfully and is praised by others, most leaders cannot stand it. The Bible has examples of people of this type. King Saul did not tolerate anyone who was gifted. He got angry with his son Jonathan and later on with David. He worked against those who were more successful than him. The result is that, in addition to ruining the work of God, the person himself is ruined. When a person harbours jealous thoughts, it is for his own destruction. This is what happened to Saul. On the other hand, when a leader recognizes the many gifts that his subjects are endowed with and facilitates their use, then God does a lot through them. David's reign is a good example of this. That is why he was never defeated in all the wars he fought. While in the church at Corinth the problems were between the believers, many churches today face problems that are caused by the failure of leaders either to treat the members fairly or handle property in the proper fashion, and mostly the question is about money. Injustice and corruption are signs of lack of love. If Paul were to write to communities such as many of our churches in Africa today, his message would be more or less the same as to the Corinthians. The different types of service in the Christian Church are divinely instituted, and the varieties of gifts which the church receives manifest God's richness. When God's richness is acknowledged, the communities always grow in grace. The African cultural setting, which claims to support all people, enhance unity and facilitate cooperation, would be a great help when combined with the teaching of spiritual gifts, but in many communities it is the problems which dominate daily life. The love, which would guide our way of life, seems to be lacking among us just as it was lacking among the Corinthian Christians. This is the reason why I said above that although what we read are ancient texts, God is speaking through them and addressing problems in modern communities. We can state boldly that the word of God is relevant throughout all generations.

## **14. Conflict Reconciliation in Acts 15: A Reading from the African Perspective (Gerson Mgaya)**

### **Introduction**

Although it is held that the gospel, the good news to humankind, liberates the hearers from problems they encounter, social, political, economic, and religious unfairness are common phenomena in African societies. Civil wars, HIV/AIDS, corruption, and poverty are issues that colour African communities today. If Africans have the gospel and yet these problems abound, one must question why Africans fail to counter their enemies, although they have the weapons. Indeed, one comes to realize that these problems, which are encountered in the African context, cannot be solved using means influenced by foreign perspectives. African theologians should apply methodologies that are culturally informed and relevant to the context and yet faithful to the Christian faith in order to address the issues that inflict the African societies.

This article demonstrates that reading Scripture in Africa from an African perspective leads to a better understanding, which in turn liberates the readers and the communities at large. By using Acts 15:1-35, this article shows how Scripture can be applied to practical problems which people face in their daily lives. To this end, the article follows this structure: (i) the text's social background is presented in order to provide modern readers with an overview of the author's and readers' environment; (ii) the text of Acts 15: 1-35 is analysed in order to find out what actually is said; (iii) the findings are applied to the African communities that are facing similar situations; (iv) the Africans' response to what the text addresses; and (v) the African way of handling conflicts.

### **Understanding Conflicts in the Greco-Roman World**

In reading the New Testament and contemporaneous works, it is fundamental to understand both the values and social institutions of ancient Palestine. While the Bible is familiar to Christians today, a number of things would be better understood if we knew more about the Greco-Roman world. The influence of the Greco-Roman world on

the Palestinians of the first century AD is significant. Therefore, studying the Greco-Roman period provides the modern reader with a better understanding of the biblical texts.

The Greco-Roman period in Palestine, especially in the biblical time, was characterized by tensions in almost every aspect of life. Politically, the inhabitants had been under foreign rule since the Babylonian captivity. They reacted to the oppression with a series of revolts, many of which were engineered by the Zealots. The uprisings were crushed and the rebels massacred.

Economically the Palestinian Jews depended on agriculture. Most of them were peasants or subsistence farmers. Increasing taxes forced some of them to become labourers on the estates owned by the rulers and the elite. It is likely that in many cases those who could not comply with the new taxes became bandits. The government's response to banditry was often crucifixion. Although bandits and rebels were being crucified, daily life was anything but peaceful. Both peasants and rulers were insecure.

Culturally the Greco-Roman world was multi-faceted. The people came from many different origins, and as they interacted, the culture became diffused. Allowing cultural diffusion could lead to loss of identity, and in that case punishment would befall the Jews, because their cultural values were religiously oriented. Some Gentiles, who were attracted by Jewish customs, converted to Judaism by being circumcised, and later on kept the entire law. Another group, which could not keep the Mosaic law and which was known as godfearers, was charged to adhere to a minimum of Jewish rules. These converts, who were commonly known as proselytes, and the Jews themselves saw that they must protect these Jewish customs. This, however, was not always done by peaceful means. Sometimes they were regarded as rebels and persecuted to death.

With the birth of Christianity, Judaism experienced another phase of conflicts. The Judaizers could not tolerate Christians, who preached free salvation apart from the Law. Their reaction against the missionaries and the Christian converts led to the emergence of conflicts. As was mentioned above, both Jews and their rulers responded violently to conflicts. This type of response, instead of bringing harmony as was

assumed, worsened the situations. What would be the response of Gentile Christians to Jewish Christians who caused problems to them? Acts 15:1-35 tells about the conflicts which Jewish Christians caused in Antioch. The text also relates how the Christians reacted. An analysis of Acts 15:1-35 helps us find out how the conflict was solved.

### **Analysis of Acts 15:1-35.**

It appears that Luke's theological concern was to show how the gospel of Jesus Christ was preached from Jerusalem to the ends of the world (Acts 1:8). The gospel that was a part of the Jewish culture now proceeds outside Palestine where it encounters different cultures and peoples. Even the structure of the Book of Acts fits this focus. For detailed analysis of Acts 15:1-35, I suggest a division into five sections. The first section (vv. 1-2) introduces the contentious issue: *Should circumcision be a necessary demand for salvation?* Verses 3-5 form the second section. This section shifts the scene from Antioch to Jerusalem, where essentially the same problem continues to trouble those who belong to the party of the Pharisees. The third section comprises vv. 6-21. This section tells about the conference that was necessitated by the situations described in the first two sections. The conference involves the apostles, elders, and the entire church. The fourth section (vv. 23-29) records the resolution that was reached by the council. It contains a letter that was written to the Gentiles. The fifth and last section (vv. 30-35) tells about the reaction of the Antiochian church as Paul, Barnabas, and the council's delegates bring the message from the council. Having seen the structure of the text, let us now look more closely at the text. Due to limitations of space, the analysis here concerns only the resolution which the council reached.

The resolution of the council can be approached from two different angles. Firstly, these prohibitions relate to *the grave crimes with which, according to the rabbinic tradition, compromise was impossible even under the pain of death, namely idolatry, bloodshed and incest.* Was James a radical Jew who did not find a compromise with the Gentile believers? This is open for debate. Secondly, the four prohibitions which James proposed are found in the Noachic rules. According to Scripture, Noah was a godfearer. He lived before the Torah was given

to the Israelites through Moses. Writings outside Christian literature show that Noah had rules which he observed and used in instructing his sons. Although the rules were later applied by the Jewish rabbis as they admitted Gentiles to Judaism, they remain Noachic. In other words, Noah, who was not a Jew, by observing such rules, had righteousness which was acknowledged by God. It is possible that James had this view of the Noachic rules in mind, something which was also entertained by the rabbinic tradition.

In the rabbinic *Midrash*, it was assumed that the Noachic rules contained several revealed commandments which define just and humane behaviour. If it is accepted that James proposed these prohibitions with the view that they are Noachic rules, then his attempt was to associate Gentiles not with Abraham nor with Moses, but with Noah. The Gentiles' relationship with God was to be expressed in terms of the covenant made by God with Noah, who represented the entire human race, and not in terms of the covenant made with Abraham, renewed in the time of Moses, which was only for the Jews. Thus, the proselytization process, which Jews used in admitting Gentiles into Judaism and which certain men from Judea were imposing on the Antiochenes, was rejected.

What is striking here is the fact that the council writes a letter without mentioning circumcision, the issue that caused the council to be convened in the first place. It only speaks of troubles and states, *since we have heard that some of us troubled you with words upsetting your souls whom we did not command* (v. 24). In the letter, the council acknowledges the risk that Paul and Barnabas undertook due to the clash that had taken place. As a solution, the council sends delegates in addition to the letter. Again it was common in the Greco-Roman world to send a person who could tell more about the written message.

It is noteworthy here that the Holy Spirit is included in the decision that is sent to the Gentiles. Luke has shown from the beginning of Acts how active the Holy Spirit is. This letter makes it clear that it is the purpose of God that Gentiles should turn to God. The phrase *it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us* shows that the Holy Spirit was present in their discussion. The Gentiles are required to obey the prohibitions

which James has proposed in Acts 15:20, not the circumcision rite as demanded by the Pharisaic party.

The closing narrative summarizes the travel of the delegates, and the reception of the message by Gentile believers at Antioch. Luke writes that the Gentiles were glad for the encouragement brought by both the letter and the delegates. The encouraging message here is that *circumcision has not been counted as a prerequisite for Gentile converts*. They do not have to abandon their culture to follow Jesus; instead their culture will enrich their understanding of the message of the gospel. This encouraging message can be applied into other areas of the Gentiles' lives as the gospel is spread. The next section postulates the encouraging message can get upon reading Acts 15:1-35.

### **Conflicts and reconciliation in the Book of Acts from the African perspective**

In the gospels, we read about the procedures that Jesus taught His disciples to follow when one of them would offend the other. In all the passages which relate to this subject, the procedures concern personal conflicts, in other words the question is about two individuals in conflict. It does not seem that Jesus had in mind the kind of group conflicts which we read about in the Book of Acts. What the council did in Acts 15:1-35, attempting to solve the conflict that had erupted in Antioch, was peculiar to them, and it had to determine the way in which other similar cases would be handled within Christian communities. Jesus had not told them how to proceed in such cases. Before turning to see how the council handled the conflict, let me explain the nature of the conflict itself.

Paul and Barnabas had been in Antioch preaching the good news of Jesus Christ to Gentiles. They had preached that faith in Jesus would save them. Since Antioch was the third most important city in the Roman Empire where many nationalities went for different purposes, there came *certain men from Judea*, who upon hearing what Paul and Barnabas had preached to the Gentiles began teaching against that, emphasizing that unless the Gentiles were circumcised, they would not be saved. The outcome was a fierce argument between Paul and Barna-

bas against these *certain men from Judea*. When it became clear that they could not reach an agreement, they decided that the matter should be handed over to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. Both parties were then given an opportunity to explain their standpoint, and the Pharisaic party reiterated that in order to be saved, Gentiles must be circumcised and charged to keep the Law of Moses in its entirety.

Three parties were involved in the conflict. The first party was made up of Gentile converts, who seemed to be passive. They waited to see what would be concluded about their admission. The second party consisted of Paul and Barnabas who, in this case, were guilty of preaching the gospel which was free of the Mosaic Law. The third party comprised *certain men from Judea*, who are later identified as *some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees*. Apart from these three groups which were involved in the conflict, the issue concerned the apostles, the elders (v. 6), and the whole church (v. 22). They were not involved in the first scene when the fierce argument arose, but here they are present as people who listen and should say something about the issue at hand. *Must Gentiles circumcise and keep the law of Moses to be saved?*

It is not clear from Luke's account in Acts 15:1-35 whether all who attended the conference got an opportunity to speak. We can only assume that the expression *after a long debate* in v. 7 contains the speeches of all those who were present although not accounted for by Luke. When an agreement could not be reached, experience and scriptural authority were resorted to. Peter shared his experience about what he had done, and James affirmed the experience shared by Peter by citing scriptural authority. Experience and Scripture helped them come to a conclusion.

Luke does not tell us explicitly that the parties involved in the conflict decided to settle it peacefully. However, the narrative about the council of Jerusalem shows that the resolution was reached through discussion. Unlike other conflicts that erupted in the Greco-Roman world and ended disappointingly, in Acts 15 the defeated party was happy with the outcome. The Antiochene church decided to settle the dispute by discussion, unlike the Jews who revolted against the Roman rulers and unlike the Romans who resorted to violence in suppressing the upris-

ings of the Jews. The Antiochene church saw that the conflict had to be settled by peaceful means. That is why they referred the case to Jerusalem.

While we recognize that the outcome was peaceful, it is important to point out that there was a shift from the principal subject which was originally under discussion. The question was: *Must Gentiles be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses to be saved?* In other words, the question was about the criteria by which Gentiles were admitted into the community of believers. The resolution reads as if the issue at hand was whether Gentile believers could stay in the community of believers. In the letter to the Gentiles there is no mention of circumcision, the subject that occasioned the council. Can we say then that the matter of circumcision was left unsolved?

The shift from “getting in” to “staying in” and the fact that circumcision was not mentioned in the letter to the Gentiles tells me that the conflict was only partially solved and that the parties involved in the conflict were not reconciled. The *certain men from Judea* did not go to Antioch and apologize to both the Gentile converts and Paul and Barnabas for the troubles they had caused. It is the messengers carrying the letter from the council who go to the church in Antioch. Nothing is told of the *certain men from Judea*.

Looking at what was done in Acts 15:1-35, it appears as if the offended parties were only Paul and Barnabas and “some other believers” of v. 2 from Antioch. But the reality is that all Gentile converts in Antioch had been offended. The *certain men from Judea* were the ones who should have been reconciled with them, because they had caused trouble to the Antiochenes and had also unsettled their minds, which the council acknowledged (v. 24).

Though the Antiochenes could not see the offenders coming to apologize, Luke tells that upon reading the letter from the council they rejoiced about its comforting message. It may be that the requirements, which the letter contained, were already known to them and that they had already been observing them. Most of the first converts were godfearers, who attended the synagogue services regularly. Nothing, however, is said about the troublemakers, the *certain men from Judea*. Whether they seconded the decision of the council or not, Luke does not

say. Could the way in which the conflict was handled be applicable to the African environment?

### **The applicability of the model to the African environment**

The implementation of the method and the solution reached in the conflict described in Acts 15:1-35 would meet with some difficulties among Africans. First of all, Africans would not use the large-group method in facilitating reconciliation. A few wise elders would labour for the solution. The trust which the African community has traditionally placed on the elders has been so high that all matters of decision have been left in their hands. What happened in Jerusalem and is recorded in Acts 15:1-35 would not happen among Africans. Apart from the elders, other people would be present only for three purposes. Firstly, to bear witness for the parties involved. Secondly, to merely observe, not to give opinions. Thirdly, especially those who are closely related to the parties in conflict, would be required to appear on the day when the reconciliation was to take place, because reconciliation involved everybody.

The second difficulty for Africans would be the kind of resolution which the council reached. The two parties which were present when the *fierce argument* erupted were divided on the issue of circumcision: *Must Gentiles be circumcised to be saved?* The argument had to do with getting in. However, the resolution gave them something else: *How Gentiles can stay in.* The Africans would still ask, "How about circumcision?" Some scholars say that the question of circumcision was left pending so that the Gentiles who wanted to be circumcised could undergo the ritual. Leaving the matter unsolved gave the later Judaizers an opportunity to continue troubling the Gentiles. Galatians may have been victims of this very thing.

In the African environment, after the discussion and negotiations led to an agreement, the two conflicting parties had to sit together and perform some reconciliatory signs. The two parties in Luke's account did not meet at the end to confirm the reconciliation. From the African perspective, the two parties were not reconciled. The process of reconciliation was very important among Africans, and it was accomplished by means

of signs or acts. Therefore, it can be concluded that, though the problem raised in Antioch was resolved, from the African perspective those who were involved in that conflict were not reconciled.

Since the findings show that both the method and the solution would not work among Africans, it is therefore necessary that Africans apply their own cultural background to reconciling conflicts. However, I want to emphasise that the cultural ways I am speaking about here have nothing to do with ways which threaten African Christians with syncretism. The African cultural methods which can be used by African Christians in conflict reconciliation are discussed in the following section.

### **Methods of handling conflicts among Africans**

The relevance of African cultural approaches towards a systematic articulation of human response to conflict situations and contexts cannot be underestimated. The role of traditional families, clan heads and elders, and reconciliatory signs help us understand its value. Its value is seen as one explores the methods they used, their concern, and their ultimate goal. Although the degree of crimes varied from one category to another, the ultimate goal was to reconcile all. Before coming to the actual reconciliation, there were some steps that were taken, as we can see in the following paragraphs.

The steps can be grouped into two types on the basis of the degree of their effect on society. The practice of witchcraft is a type of its own, because it was considered to be a grave crime that threatened the stability of the whole society. Though Africans often reacted sluggishly to situations that irritated them, their reaction to this crime was rather quick.

The bewitched person would secretly go to a diviner and after being told who bewitched him/her, he/she would reveal it to the clan head, who would then call both the accused and the accuser and, using his wisdom, talk to them. Each of them would tell his or her story. Conflicts of this type often involved the use of diviners, who had to prove whether the accused was a witch or not. If it was proved that the person was a witch, he/she was shaved and the diviner would warn him/her not

to repeat what he/she had done. Death was the consequence of ignoring the warning of the diviner. When the diviner had finished his or her part, the clan head would continue with the process of helping the two conflicting parties towards reconciliation. At this stage, the steps that were taken were the same as with other crimes. To avoid repetition, I will discuss them in the following paragraphs in connection with the steps that were taken when handling conflicts caused by doing damage, theft, quarrelling and adultery.

In this second category, when the offence was discovered, the victim would seek an apology. The offended person would forgive the offender out of concern for the other's dignity. If one was so forgiving, no reparation was demanded, but if the offended person demanded a reparation, then compensation would have to be paid for damages caused.

When the two parties in conflict had difficulties in reaching reconciliation, they would seek help from a close friend of the one who had difficulties in the reconciliation process. If the counsel of this friend helped, then the two would be reconciled. However, if the two were not able to reach an agreement even after this, the case would be forwarded to the clan head and clan elders, who would make sure that the two became reconciled. Together with the elders, the clan head would call the two parties and would listen to their case. Both parties would present their cases, the elders would weigh the matter and, with their wisdom, decide which party was the offender. The elders would work until they had made sure that the conflict was resolved. After that followed the last step in the process of reconciliation. The Bena call it *whitēpula*.

The elders in the panel would ask the offender to bring enough alcohol for everyone to drink. Normally the offender was told the amount of alcohol to bring, most commonly a measure equivalent to twenty litres. In addition to alcohol, the offender was told to bring meat. In most cases it was a cock. On the appointed day, the offender would bring what he had been told to bring and would wait for directives from the elders. On this last day, the relatives of those who had been in conflict were to appear in the gathering. The two parties were then to perform three reconciliatory signs: shaking of hands, working together and eating or

drinking from the same vessel. All of these had cultural significance, as we can read from the explanations below.

One of the concerns of African philosophy is to bring people as close to each other as possible. Whenever close people meet (this is still practiced), they greet one another by shaking hands. Not shaking hands was a sign of not knowing one another. If one knew a person, and yet did not greet him or her by shaking hands, it was understood that something was wrong between them. Reconciliation was needed to remove whatever caused the enmity between them. In the process of reconciliation, shaking hands between the two individuals in conflict was imperative (nowadays a hug is added). This shaking of hands on the day of reconciliation meant practically the same as saying *we are now friends*.

In addition to greeting one another, friends often worked together. On the day of their reconciliation, as a demonstration of what they would be doing later, they would be asked to go and slaughter the cock together, if both parties were men. If one or both were women, they would share different responsibilities.

Working together would be followed by another sign, which involved eating or drinking from the same vessel. Among the Africans, eating or drinking from the same vessel was a common practice. Many people would surround the vessel with food and share it. On the day of reconciliation they would be asked to take pieces of meat from the same vessel and eat, and then they would be asked to drink alcohol from the same calabash.

In case one party was not ready to share the food with the other or shake hands, then it was understood that he/she was not content with the decision which had been made. The panel would then seek an explanation from him/her. We can see how meaningful the signs of shaking hands, working together, and eating or drinking from the same vessel were among the Africans. They were a reflection of a state of harmony in the community.

In consideration of the value of cultural methods in reconciling people in conflicts, the government of the United Republic of Tanzania issued the act in 1985 that allowed the establishment of Ward Tribunals. The

members of a ward tribunal are mainly elders with a good reputation in their villages. The ward tribunals have the mandate to operate on the basis of the customary laws of the tribe in question. Instead of passing judgment, the task of the ward tribunals is to help people find reconciliation in accordance to the customs in the society.

In Tanzania, the government has no official religion. It is the citizens who have religion. However, the people are to abide by the laws of the government. If the ward tribunal decides a case in accordance with the customary laws, the parties concerned have to submit to the decision. At this juncture, if one party is a Christian, he/she will be in trouble. On the one hand, the Church has the attitude inherited from the missionaries that African customs are pagan practices, and to follow them would necessitate measures of church discipline. On the other hand, the government has established the system of ward tribunals and expects people to be subject to it. What should this Christian do?

It is high time for the church to re-examine the cultural values of the places in which Christians are living. No human being exists without cultural values. It is the culture that nurtures a person. Divorcing a person from his/her culture and imposing cultural values from the outside is going against the apostolic council, which decided that there is no culture that can be sandwiched between the gospel. The gospel, the message which centres on the person and work of Christ, demands a constant effort to translate its central claims into cultural categories in order to obey Christ in a practical way.

The approach of the 19<sup>th</sup> century missionaries in Africa was in line with the interests of the colonialists, who wanted to make the Africans dependent on them economically, politically and culturally. The repercussion was that the African believers were led away from their own traditions and left lost somewhere between the missionary culture and their own culture. The resolution of the Jerusalem council, which gave the Gentiles the freedom to follow Christ in their own cultural context, was not implemented among the Africans. Whereas the Judaizers failed in forcing the Gentiles to be circumcised according to the Mosaic Law, the missionaries in Africa were successful in “circumcising” the Africans into the missionaries’ traditions.

Nowadays many African Christians are merely wandering, not knowing what they should do when they face troubles. Because the African cultural values give answers to their daily life questions, some African Christians embrace them secretly for fear of being subjected to church discipline. Most of those, who have embraced these cultural values, come to the church elders after solving their problems saying that they need the grace of the Lord, because their consciences are troubling them and they find no peace. Listening to what they have actually done, one finds that they have performed reconciliatory rituals in the traditional way, in other words done something that is not sin.

Just as the Antiochene converts were allowed to follow Jesus as Gentiles, the Africans also should use their cultural methods in conflict reconciliation. Their cultural values are not sinful. They were only erroneously perceived to be sinful by some missionaries, and that wrong mentality was implanted among the indigenous Christians. The result is that many Christians have secretly adopted their cultural values. Since the churches in Africa, especially in Tanzania, have not said anything about the relationship of the culture and the gospel, Christians who are found applying cultural values in some matters, particularly employing cultural methods in reconciliation, are looked down upon by those who do not use these cultural methods, and in some cases they are subjected to church discipline. In other things they often succeed in hiding themselves from other Christians, but not with employing cultural methods of reconciliation, because the process often involves many people and takes place in public. What often happens is that the majority refuse to use these methods, claiming that these cultural methods are against their Christian faith. The repercussion is that the conflicts they face may either take a long time to solve, or tend to reoccur a short while after the reconciliation.

Since the *whitēpula* and its signs are not against Christian faith, I see no reason why they should not be used by Christians. I have served as a pastor in the ELCT-SD since 2003. During my service in the congregation, I have encountered two chronic conflicts. One conflict had continued for seven years without reaching a resolution, and the other was recurring now and then. I was the congregation's pastor by then, and I decided to use the African cultural methods of reconciliation for both conflicts. The parties in conflict were asked each to bring a cock

on the day of reconciliation. I gave a speech linking the way conflicts were traditionally settled in Africa and the way African Christians have been distanced from their culture. Towards the end, I prayed and asked the two men to go slaughter the two cocks while their wives made a fire for cooking the meat. When the meal was ready I asked the two parties to shake hands as usual, and then I administered the Eucharist, which was followed by the meal they had prepared. It was a joyous moment for them. From that time on, nothing has destroyed the harmony that was born on that day.

Since this worked, it is my opinion that Acts 15:1-35 is a helpful text in reconstructing the African cultural values and applying them in a Christian way. This is how Africans can respond to the gospel as Africans. This is how they can read the Bible from their own perspective. And this is what I advocate. Before closing, let me say something else about the Africans. The Jewish society was male-dominated, and this is also true of most African societies. All the roles in resolving conflicts and reconciling those in conflicts belong to men. Women have no place in the entire process, only if they are victims, or if they have to bear witness. I do not agree with the odd mentality that women have no contribution to give to conflict reconciliation. Likewise I do not agree that women should be silent in the presence of men. Since we believe that the same Spirit that men get from God is given to women as well, women are also endowed with wisdom that would bring constructive ideas to the conflict reconciliation process.

Including women and children in important decisions is not a typical African practice. While we say the missionaries brought a bad mentality to the African culture, in this respect I must praise them for bringing something good, something which challenges the African culture in a positive way. While the process of reconstructing what can be useful for African Christians in responding to the Gospel as Africans is advocated, African Christians, especially men, should understand that the Spirit that was given to the Jews and to the Gentiles, is that same Spirit that is given not just to African men but also to African women and children. Women and children should be involved in decision-making, and in this context, they should be allowed a role in conflict reconciliation processes as well.

## **15. Exorcism in the New Testament and Tanzania (Cornelius Simba)**

### **Conceptual understanding of demons and exorcism**

The New Testament clearly indicates that exorcism was part of Jesus' earthly ministry. In order to understand the ministry of Jesus in relation to exorcism, it is, therefore, critical to gain insight of what demons are, the activities that call for exorcism, and the conceptual understanding of exorcism.

The English word *demon*, which is widely used in the New Testament, originates from the ancient Greek word *daimōn*. This word refers to beings with special powers, which places them between people and the gods. The New Testament uses several other names about the demons: evil spirits (Luke 7:21), unclean spirits (Matt 10:1), wicked spirits (Luke 11:26), deceiving spirits (1 Tim 4:1), and spirits of demons (Rev 16:14). Another name for demons in the New Testament is "angel". This name has the connotation of a messenger, and demons are referred to as angels because they are messengers of Satan (Matt 25:41). The book of Revelation mentions "the angel of the Abyss, whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek, Apollyon" (Rev 9:11).

The Scriptures describe Lucifer (Satan) as a fallen angel. The New Testament refers twice to the fall of the devil (2 Pet 2:4 and Rev 12:7-9). According to Revelation 12:7, demons are fallen angels. Lucifer was one of the talented angels in heaven before he disobeyed God. When he (Satan) rebelled against God, a group of angels joined him in his rebellion (Matt 25:41). God threw the whole gang of disobedient angels out of heaven. Those fallen angels are now demons. They have chosen evil as their element. It should be understood that the devil is highly intelligent and the best informed of all creatures. His thoughts are not altogether known to us (Matt 13:28ff; 2 Cor 2:11). We discern through the Scriptures that Satan and his demonic hordes are engaged in an intense struggle with Jesus and his followers.

Together with Satan, demons use cunning and deception and do their utmost to blind the minds of unbelievers and hinder the outreach of the

Gospel in the world. The New Testament understands the essence of the kingdom of evil spirits (Matt 12:26; Mark 3:24). This kingdom is the antithesis of Christ and His Kingdom. A head of the kingdom of darkness, Satan has many ranks and classes of demons under him (1 Cor 15:24).

The New Testament describes exorcism as a response to the activity of the demons on human beings. Exorcism is derived from the Greek word *exorkidzō*, which means 'to bind by oath'. Evil spirits (demons) which possess a person are exorcised (compelled to leave) by a higher authority, such as God or Christ. Exorcism was the practice of the Lord Jesus in his earthly ministry and of the early church in opposing the demonic forces. Jesus Christ freed people from the control and affliction caused by demons by expelling them by the word of power. The apostles also expelled demons in the name of the Lord Jesus. They appealed to a higher authority (the name of Jesus) to put a stop to the work of demons in individuals. Exorcism from the Christian perspective denotes the invocation of Jesus Christ to bind the demonic spirits in order to control them and make them act contrary to their own nature and intent. Christians believe and trust that because Jesus Christ is the highest authority in heaven and on earth (Matt 28:18) He is able to control the spiritual forces and cosmic powers of darkness against which Christians are ever at war (Eph. 6:12) and to change the course of events in the Christians' favour.

### **Evidence of demons in the New Testament and in Tanzania**

There is a great deal of evidence in the New Testament and Tanzania of the existence of demons and their activities. The New Testament, the synoptic gospels in particular, attests that Jesus lived in a context where demonic influence was potent and real. The healing and exorcism ministry of Jesus is a vivid illustration of the existence and activity of demons. Quite a few passages in the New Testament, particularly in the synoptic gospels, deal with exorcism and demonic activity (Satan, the devil, Beelzebub, or demons). These passages include: Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:33-37; Matt 9:32-34, 12:22-30; Mark 5:1-20; Matt 15:21-28; Luke 9:37-43a; Mark 9:38-41.

The world of the New Testament, where the belief in demons and a host of unseen supernatural powers was potent and real, is relatively similar to the situation of the majority of African, and even more so Tanzanian, Christians. Most African scholars, theologians and Christians in general believe in the existence of a spirit world, including demons. The Tanzanian universe is populated by ancestors, spirits, demons and angels. These supernatural beings are present and active. Traditional religions, Charismatic movements, Pentecostal churches, revival groups, some pastors and leaders of the Protestant and Catholic churches and some Western missionaries believe in the existence of the demons in Tanzania and have engaged themselves in the ministry of exorcism to liberate people from the bondage of demons. This shows vividly that Tanzania – in fact Africa in general – has possibly more in common with the New Testament than the countries of the West. In Tanzania, in most open-air Christian meetings and seminars, casting out demons is a common practice. This is evidence of the existence of evil powers which afflict humanity and, consequently, a call for a special ministry of liberation from evil powers.

It should also be pointed out that not all Christians and theologians in Tanzania believe in the existence of demons. Some theologians and modern New Testament critics regard demonic possession as a form of insanity or epilepsy. Secularization has led many to believe in a universe where the unseen is no longer real. Some people think that to believe in the kingdom of Satan and his angels would destroy the joy of living, and threaten the feeling of security. Little consideration has been given to demonology in modern theology. The subject of Satan and his angels is being neglected to a large extent in theological thinking, although the Scriptures have a lot to say about it. However, this trend cannot abolish the fact that the devil is alive and active. Denying his existence does not prevent the devil from attacking people and causing havoc in their lives.

Some Protestant churches in Tanzania believe in the existence of demons and their activities. However, there is no established mechanism of dealing with demons. The theological training of many pastors in Tanzania offers no help in dealing with demonic influences. Demonology is not taught or even discussed. In some cases the tradition of the churches does not offer room for exorcism. This makes it difficult for

many pastors to deal with demons, although they believe in their existence and activities. This is a great impediment to the spiritual development of Christians and church ministries in general. In some churches the work of exorcism has been left to lay Christians in revival groups.

This is a great challenge to the church, a call to seriously re-examine the Scriptures on the subject of demonology and the healing ministry which Christ has entrusted to her.

### **Activities of demons**

The Greek word *daimonidzomai*, which means 'to be demonized', is used in the New Testament to signify being controlled by a demon from within. This word is found in Matt 4:24; 8:16, 28, 33; 9:32; 12: 22; 15:22; Mark 1:32; 5:15-16, 18; Luke 8:36; John 10:21. It emphasizes residency of the demon, the fact that the demon has taken control of an individual. In other words, demonic control means that a demon is residing in a person and exercising direct control over that person. That control is combined with a certain degree of mental derangement or physical upset (Matt 12: 43-45).

The New Testament depicts the demons as being hostile to human beings. At times, they were able to cause diseases (Matt 4:24; 12:22; Luke 4:40-41) and mental illness (Mark 5:2-20; Luke 8:27-39). The New Testament understanding of the activities of demons is to a large extent similar to what is happening today in Tanzania. It is a fact that the devil and his messengers are at war with the people of God. Using the demons he attacks God's people and their property. Some forms of discouragement, depression, or unusual temptation are caused by such demonic activity. Some extremists believe that every evil, disease and misfortune is the result of demonic activity. However, I do not accept this view, for in my opinion we are, in most cases, responsible for what we do, and some diseases and infirmities are the result of the environment in which we live, not the work of the devil.

## **Exorcism in the New Testament and Tanzania**

The New Testament shows that Jesus expelled demons during his ministry. According to the three synoptic gospels, Jesus performed many exorcisms of demoniacs. The seven major, detailed exorcism accounts in the synoptic gospels are:

- i. Exorcism at the synagogue in Capernaum, where Jesus exorcised an evil spirit who cried out, “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!” (Mark 1:21-28).
- ii. Exorcism of the demoniac in the region of the Gerasenes. People had chained him, but he had escaped, lived in caves, and roamed the hills, screaming and hurting himself. Jesus inquired the man's name, but was told by the man/demons that his name was Legion, “...for we are many”. The demons asked to be expelled into a herd of pigs, which Jesus did. Immediately after that the pigs rushed into a lake and drowned (Matt 8:28-34; Luke 8:26-39; Mark 5:1-20).
- iii. Exorcism of the Canaanite woman’s daughter. The woman asked Jesus to heal her daughter, but Jesus said, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” The woman replied, “Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table” (Matt 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30).
- iv. Exorcism of the blind and mute man appears in Matt 12:22-32, Luke 11:14-26 and Mark 3:20-30. Jesus healed a demon-controlled man who had been blind and mute. People were astonished and said, “Could this be the Son of David?” The Pharisees said that it was only by Beelzebub that he drove out demons, but Jesus rebuked them.
- v. Exorcism of a boy controlled by a demon in Matt 17:14-21, Mark 9:14-29 and Luke 9:37-43. A boy possessed by a demon was brought forward to Jesus straight after Jesus’ transfiguration. The boy foamed at the mouth, gnashed his teeth, became rigid and involuntarily fell into both water and fire. Jesus’ followers were not able to expel the demon, and Jesus condemned them for their unbelief. But when the boy’s

father asked Jesus to heal his son, Jesus said that everything is possible for those who believe. The father said he believed that the boy could be healed, and Jesus healed him.

- vi. The miracle of Jesus exorcising at sunset appears in the synoptic gospels immediately after he had healed Peter's mother-in-law (Matt 8:16-17, Mark 1:32-34 and Luke 4:40-41). That same evening Jesus healed people and drove out many demons who knew he was Christ.
- vii. The miracle of Jesus' exorcism of a mute appears in Matt 9:32-34 immediately after He had healed two blind men. A man who was demon-possessed and could not talk was brought to Jesus. And when the demon was driven out, the man was able to speak again.

The Scriptures report that Jesus cast out demons by the finger or spirit of God (Matt 12:24-28; Luke 11:15-20), and that He exercised no mere delegated power but a personal authority that was His own. This is clear from the direct and authoritative way in which He commands the demon to depart (Mark 9:25; cf. 1:25). It is recorded that "He drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick" (Matt 8:16). Sometimes, as with the daughter of the Canaanite woman, the exorcism took place from a distance (Matt 15:22-28; Mark 7:24-30). Sometimes the spirits that were expelled were allowed to express their recognition of Jesus as "the Holy One of God" (Mark 1:24) and to complain that He had come to torment them "before the appointed time", i.e. the time of their punishment (Matt 8:29; Luke 8:28). If demoniac control was accompanied by some disease, yet the two did not confound Christ, or the evangelists. In Luke 13:32, for example, Jesus Himself expressly distinguishes between the expulsion of evil spirits and the curing of disease.

We learn from these passages that Jesus had authority and power to cast out demons. This of course implies that demons are powerful and that they are capable of harming people. However, their power is nothing in comparison to that of our Lord Jesus. A mere person cannot simply cast out demons. We also learn that demons have the ability to recognize people and their capabilities. They also understand their limitations and their fate before Jesus Christ.

Christ also empowered the apostles and disciples to cast out demons in His name while He Himself was still on earth (Matt 10:1, 8; Mark 6:7; Luke 9:1; 10:17), and He promised the same power to believers in general (Mark 16:17). But the efficacy of this delegated power was conditional, as we see from the fact that the apostles themselves were not always successful in their exorcisms: certain kinds of spirits, as Jesus Christ explained, could only be cast out by prayer and fasting (Matt 17:16, 21; Mark 9:28-29; Luke 9:40). In other words, the success of exorcism by Christians, in Jesus Christ's name, is subject to the same general conditions on which both the efficacy of prayer and the use of charismatic power depend. Yet conspicuous success was promised (Mark 16:17). St. Paul (Acts 16:18; 19:11-16), and, no doubt, the other apostles and disciples, made use of their exorcising power regularly, and the Church has continued to do so uninterruptedly up to the present day.

The New Testament explicitly underlines the means of casting out demons. Some of these means are still used by the Church today. The first means is to use the name of Jesus to expel demons (Luke 10:17). The name of Jesus has the power and authority to put to an end to demonic control in an individual. This power is capable of expelling the demons. The exorcist should have a clear understanding of who Jesus is, believe in Him, and have a personal and intimate relationship with his Lord and Master Jesus Christ. The second means of driving out demons is by the power of the Holy Spirit. Human power is not enough when confronting demons. Demons are cast out by the power of the Holy Spirit. The third means is the use of a specific command, "a word" (cf. Matt 8:16; Mark 5:8), and that word is none other than "Get out in the name of Jesus Christ". This command seems simple, but it has the power to drive out demons. The fourth means is by faith. The exorcist should believe that he has the power and authority to exorcise demons through Jesus Christ (Matt 17:18-20). Last but not least, demons can be driven out by means of prayer and fasting.

While the reality of demons or evil is all too evident in human affairs, few people in Tanzania would ascribe certain illnesses to unclean spirits or demons in the same way as the synoptic evangelists and their contemporaries. However, the majority of Tanzanian Christians still live in a New Testament world in which belief in demons and supernat-

ural powers is potent and real. For many Tanzanians, ordinary church members and theologians alike, there is no conflict between the New Testament and traditional African religious beliefs, particularly as far as the existence of a spirit world, including evil spirits and their influence, is concerned.

The Church in Tanzania is the product of Jesus' ministry and lives to witness the truth of the gospel in the church and outside of it. As such the church, as an institution, has followers who, like in the New Testament, are burdened with various spiritual and physical impairments as a result of the environment in which we live. The Church, in response to the commission of Jesus, ministers to the whole person spiritually, mentally and physically.

Exorcism has not been fully practiced in the mainline churches of Tanzania. This means that there is no established modality of dealing with the problem. It is not very clear as to whether the church understands the fundamental nature of demons and their activities within the church, among Christians in particular. The practice of exorcism has been limited to revival groups, charismatic movements, and individuals within the mainline churches. However, the Church in its ministry has emphasized the healing ministry of prayer and provision of health services to its members and the community as a whole. The establishment of hospitals, dispensaries, health centres, prayer groups and counselling services is a response to the healing ministry, which is crucial to the church in Tanzania today. Such an effort should be commended, for it is directly linked to the ministry of Jesus Christ. However, such an initiative is not capable of helping people who are controlled and/or afflicted by demons or evil spirits.

In some Pentecostal churches or revival ministries in Tanzania, exorcism plays a major role in their mission activities. It is one of the methods of recruiting new members. Exorcism has a liberating value which meets the existential needs and fear of people in a ritually understandable and therefore psychologically and religiously satisfying manner.

Exorcism in Tanzania should be understood as the work of God, which has been entrusted to the Church. It is a sign of God's presence and active involvement in the church's ministry and the provision of a better

life. Like the New Testament, exorcism points to the dawning of the kingdom of God, the doing of God's will and deliverance from evil. Thus, exorcism in Tanzania should be understood and practiced as a positive means of extending the frontiers of Jesus Christ's Kingdom and demonstrating the power of Christ's resurrection in overcoming evil and replacing evil by good. The focus should be on Christ's authority in helping the afflicted and in building and expanding his Kingdom. Jesus Christ should be the ideal in expelling demons in the present-day Church in Tanzania. In other words, the Church should have and use His authority and attitude, in other words love, humility, compassion, selflessness and an attitude of seeking to magnify God and of giving peace and happiness to the persons who are afflicted by demons.

### **The purpose of exorcism**

According to the four evangelists, the exorcisms of Jesus were an essential part of his proclamation of God's kingly rule. There is no doubt that Jesus clearly understood the reality of demons and their activities in the context to which he had been sent. Accordingly, he used his authority and power over the demons as a sign of His Messiahship (Matt 12:23-28; Luke 11:20). His power over the demons or unclean spirits was a sure sign to those with the requisite spiritual insight. They saw that God had given him the power to deliver all mankind from the captivity and oppression of sin and evil.

Jesus' ministry of exorcism demonstrates the presence and nature of God's Kingdom and salvation itself. The healings and exorcisms are a visible form of the salvation which He proclaims. Exorcism today should be seen in the context of the proclamation of the works of Jesus Christ by his church. Exorcism is part of the good tidings; it is God's redemptive action, which is heralded by preaching.

Like the other miracles of Jesus, exorcism attracted men and women not only to hear his message but also to witness His mighty acts. The exorcisms were a call to people to either accept or reject Jesus Christ. It is clear from the synoptic gospels that some who witnessed the exorcisms believed in Jesus but that others rejected him. Thus, although

exorcisms were a critical tool in setting people free from suffering and the control of demons, it was also a tool in calling people to make a decision of either accepting or rejecting Jesus.

Exorcisms helped people realize who Jesus was and give Him credit for what He had done. Because of what they saw some believed that Jesus Christ was the son of David, Christ, or a prophet. In some cases even demons identified Him as the Son of the most high God.

Exorcisms played a central role of revealing God. The exorcisms of Jesus Christ were not merely deeds to authenticate His message, but a vital part of that message. The exorcisms not only revealed the power of God, but His person. In the exorcisms of Jesus we see the sympathy and compassion of God. Jesus was deeply moved by human suffering and needs. These needs prompted Him to action. As was said earlier, the exorcisms reveal Jesus as the Redeemer and Restorer of a fallen universe. He came to save.

### **Concluding remarks**

Exorcism is one of the healing methods that Jesus used with success and which he commanded his disciples to employ in their ministry (Matt 17:18-21, 10:1, Luke 10:17). Exorcism is part of Jesus' commission to his disciples (Luke 9:1, 2) and should be practised by his Church today.

The absence of an official practice of exorcism in the mainline churches in Tanzania has resulted in many Christians moving from one denomination to another in order to find freedom from physical and/or spiritual impairments which they believe to be caused by demons. Some Christians, who find solutions to their problems, join the churches or ministries which helped them, believing that they are the true churches or ministries, because they practise what Jesus did or, rather, have the power of the Spirit to cast out demons. This has caused some Christians to backslide when they have seen that even in the new church or ministry the leaders or Christians do not live up to their expectations.

It is very unfortunate that some Christians merely go after miracles and are not grounded in faith and the word of God. As a result, most Christians move from one denomination to another looking for miracles,

not Jesus Christ. The Church is challenged to teach the Christians the fundamentals of our faith, including the proper role of exorcism.

Since the role of the Church is to minister to the whole person, it should do so by imitating Christ. The fact that demons exist and their activity has a direct impact on Christians and non-Christians alike makes it imperative that the church teach its members to deal with demons. Christians ought to have a clear understanding of the fact that the Lord Jesus has given them the authority to defeat demons. Exorcism should always be practised with the aim of glorifying God, not the exorcist. The Church's ministry of exorcism should be centred on Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Church and the one who gave the Church its mission.



## 16. Leadership in the New Testament and in the African context (George Fihavango)

### Introduction

The challenges that leadership faces in modern societies, especially in Africa, are numerous. While in other parts of the world leaders resign because of the heavy burden of leadership responsibilities, in many African societies, be they secular communities or churches, the situation is different. Leaders like to stay in leadership positions even when the situation is dangerous for them and for the people they lead.

My observations and experience have shown that at present people have lost their confidence in leaders from family level to the national and international level. People feel that their leaders are not willing or able to solve their problems. The outcome is that people use force to make sure that they are listened to. Even when they have good leaders, people still want to use the same approach, because they believe that all leaders behave alike. As for the leaders, they resort to the use of force, sometimes unnecessarily. Demonstrations in opposition to bad leadership have become common in many African countries. In schools, teachers use the maximum punishment of expelling students from schools in order to solve the problem of indiscipline. Surprisingly, even in the Church the issue of the use of power and threat is rampant!

People with power are a threat to those under their domain. A sense of mistrust in leaders is increasing. When a new leader comes, people stay away and watch whether they should give their trust to the new leader or not. This makes it necessary for the leader to work hard in order to win the trust of the people. Something that is wrong has entered our societies.

A closer look at the leadership as demonstrated in the Bible shows that our societies have good lessons to learn. Thus, the main question in this article is: *What can African leaders learn from the New Testament concept of leadership?* My presupposition is that the New Testament has much to offer to the leadership in our modern communities. To demonstrate this, we (a) go through some passages in which Jesus or

the apostles teach about leadership, (b) examine the secular and the African traditional concepts of leadership, and (c) take a look at the present-day leadership practices in African churches and then compare them with the concepts discussed in (a) and (b). Finally, a conclusion will be drawn on the basis of the comparisons.

### **Leadership in the Light of the New Testament**

We shall look at the gospels, the book of Acts and the epistles. The gospels have many passages in which Jesus teaches about leadership. In this article, I will pick a few of them to demonstrate what Jesus teaches on this subject and how many leaders today, especially in Africa, fail to follow his teachings. These texts include Matt 20:20-28, Mark 10:35-45, Luke 22:24-27, and Luke 12:35-48. These texts will be discussed here briefly. For a more detailed discussion, please see my *Jesus and Leadership* (pp. 117-224).

In the first three texts (Matt 20:20-28, Mark 10:35-45 and Luke 22:24-27), one finds that Jesus is correcting the wrong notion of his followers who wanted to live and behave like the leaders of nations in the issue of power and leadership. James and John aspired to have the best seats in the kingdom of Jesus, and when the other ten disciples learned that the two had secretly sought positions of power from Jesus, they became angry. Jesus learned of the situation and called them to himself and gave a lecture on leadership. “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so among you” (Mark 10:42-45). The key words in this passage are “slave” (*doulos*) and “servant” (*diakonos*). Jesus calls his followers to an entirely new model, one with which they were equally familiar, but one that is less known to us. He tells His followers that leadership in the new community which He will establish looks like slavery; like the work of the most humble servant. Jesus modelled this himself, and without that experience it is doubtful whether anyone would have understood what He meant. Jesus, who identifies Himself with the prophetic title of Son of Man, and therefore the long-awaited Messiah, is a servant. His model of leadership is not that of the world, because the world regards leaders as lords who have to be served, but Jesus wants his followers to learn leadership by serving.

Chapter 13 of the Gospel of John shows Jesus serving the disciples by washing their feet. Washing somebody's feet involved bending down below his knees, and that was counted as one of the duties of the slaves. If slaves were not available, then servants would do it instead. Jesus was Master of the disciples, and He was their teacher. They were to serve Him, and He even had the right to demand it from them. But instead, it is He who serves. What he says in Mark 10:45, he demonstrates by doing in John 13. Leaders ought to serve. Writing some years later to the Philippians, Paul says that in our relationships with others we ought to have the same attitude which Christ had, "who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness" (Phil 2:5-11). The idea here is to completely remove or eliminate elements of high status or rank by eliminating all privileges associated with such status or rank. Peter also emphasizes that the leaders must be servants (1 Pet 5:2-5). Therefore, when leaders demand service, they deviate from the biblical teaching on leadership, which demonstrates *Leadership as servanthood*, and as a result they go against the Lord's wish of what Christian leaders ought to be like.

Luke 12:35-48 tells about the manager who is placed in charge of other servants, not to order them around, but to give them their daily allowance. He holds an absolute responsibility for being aware of his master's will and carries out his tasks in the light of the master's return. The parable evokes nothing but stewardship. A leader is called to be a steward, who serves others faithfully and regularly. The passage awakens in leaders a sense of the importance of faithfulness, because in the end they will be held accountable for the way in which they have performed their duties. There is a warning that leaders may abuse their position of power and authority and end up striking their fellow servants. Leadership is like a ladder. When you climb the ladder, the higher you climb, the more slippery the ladder becomes, so watch your step. Power is very tempting; instead of merely using it, one is likely to end up abusing it. But if a leader remembers that *Leadership is stewardship* for which he will be accountable, he will be careful and faithful. Years later, Paul repeated this when he wrote to the Corinthians (1 Cor 4:1-2).

*Leadership requires meekness, patience and love.* This can be seen from the teachings of Jesus and his interaction with people. In Matt 18:1-20 Jesus teaches how to restore a person who has gone astray. There are several reasons as to why one strays from the group. It may be due to his/her will or personal problems, or the cause may be other members of the group, but sometimes the cause is the leader himself/herself. The text stipulates three steps in dealing with the cases of conflict or the one who has gone astray. The person must be first approached individually. If this fails, two or more witnesses have to be involved. The last step is to involve the whole Church. To follow all these steps, the leader has to have spirit of love and care. Otherwise, pastors or bishops can end up deciding the fate of a church member alone, without giving heed to the steps which Jesus has set before them.

From Jesus' interaction with people, especially with those who had special needs or questions, we see how important it is for the leader to be approachable and ready to listen and respond with love. This is possible when the leader recognizes the dignity of each person. For example, in the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus corrects the wrong understanding of the lawyer in a very polite way. Instead of telling him that he has a wrong notion of who a neighbour is, Jesus uses the parable to make him understand. At the end of the story, he understands, without feeling humiliated. Many leaders in Africa today, even in churches, rebuke their people even when it is not needed. Jesus shows that leaders have to value peoples' dignity.

*Leadership is plural.* The book of Acts shows that Paul ordained *elders* in every city, never just one elder (Acts 14:23). In other words, leadership, especially in a church, is to be done in a team, where diversity and the wisdom of a multitude is the norm. However, even in a leadership team, one needs to be the primary leader, the *first among equals*. For example, Peter was the leader of the other apostles (Acts 2:14), then James and the elders (Acts 21:18). What does this imply? The main point is that, even though there is a person who is the first among equals, *leadership is shared power*. And it can be deduced from shared power that decision-making depends on the voice of the whole community, not on just one individual controlling everything and making decisions alone. This is demonstrated by John 6:1-15, in the well-known miracle of feeding 5000 men. Jesus knew what to do, but

he wanted to involve his disciples, and therefore asked for their opinions. What the text wants us to know is that a leader should understand that he is not the only one who thinks correctly. Even when he has a definite goal, he should also let others be heard. As a result, a leader will have the cooperation of the people all the time. And there is no greater joy for the leader than to have the people he is leading working together with him. The text here challenges the leaders to involve their people in decision-making. The benefit of this is that when something goes wrong by accident, there will be nobody to blame.

In Acts we also see that leaders should be appointed on the basis of their evident gifting and ability to perform the task before them. One sign that shows whether the giftedness is of God or not, is the person's manner of living. God has designed the Church so that those with the spiritual gift of leadership should lead, those with the gift of teaching should teach, those with the gift of mercy should show mercy, etc. Actions should precede any title or office. Unfortunately many societies start with a title expecting the person to function well as a leader. The New Testament shows clearly that before any election, there are qualities that must be considered before a person is elected leader. In Acts 1, we see the apostles setting qualifications for one to fill the place left by Judas, and in Acts 6:1-7 we see the qualifications of deacons. In the Pastoral Epistles, (1 Tim 3:1-13 and Titus 1:5-9) we find Paul insisting that a leader be of godly character. These passages list many qualifications that must be considered when electing a leader.

*Leadership is modelling.* This is seen clearly in the relationship between Paul and Timothy (1 Tim 4:11-16 and 2 Tim 3:10-15). The spiritual leader who is a servant does not demand, but serves. He sets an example for others to follow. In John 13, after Jesus had washed the feet of his disciples he urged them to do to one another just as he had shown them. He was setting an example which the disciples were to follow. A leader who knows that he has set an example, even when he is leaving a place or office, is ready to say what Paul said in Acts 20:33-35. This goes hand in hand with a leader's self-evaluation, even by asking from his people as Jesus did (Mark 8:27-30).

## Secular and African Traditional Concept of Leadership

The word “secular” is generally used to refer to any non-religious organization or institution. In secular leadership, the focus is on position and control. The higher the position of a person, the greater the control and authority. In many secular institutions or organizations we can observe that leadership is characterized by amassing of wealth, lack of reverence for God and a sense of superiority. Such leadership results in hatred of the people towards their leaders and often leads to demonstrations and fighting and sometimes division. Also, secular leaders, especially the autocratic ones, make decisions alone. They decide how things should be done and spell out who will do them. Such a leader relies on his position of authority and considers himself indispensable.

What is described above as secular leadership does not correspond to the African traditional concept of leadership. In African countries, the social and ethnic background of individuals has an influence on the entire perspective of life, which includes both the religious and the secular. Thus, when discussing matters that concern leadership in African traditional societies, we cannot leave out any one aspect of life, because the traditional societies viewed life as a whole. In the traditional African context, power belonged to a select few: the *initiated* and those who have been favored by the *gods*. Leaders were recognized on the basis of age and the fact that leadership can be passed down from one family member to another. The responsibility of ensuring the transfer of power was the duty of *king makers*. The core philosophy behind the concept of power in traditional Africa was that it did not tolerate any form of challenge or opposition because it was *divine*. What the leader said, the subject had to obey. Many African leaders embraced this perception of power and the followers usually respected the leaders’ position and decisions.

Now Africa has received the gospel, whose view of leadership is quite different. Which form of leadership do African churches observe? A discussion of leadership in present-day African churches informs us about this, and this topic is dealt with in the next section.

## **Leadership in African Churches Today**

Leadership in African churches can be easily understood by looking at the leaders and the functions or tasks they perform. These two angles help us understand what kind of leadership the churches have. Is it secular, biblical, traditional, or a blend of these?

Many African churches have a constitution which states how leaders are chosen or acknowledged. In most churches this happens by election. Such elections are usually preceded by nomination of candidates. The individuals do not name themselves, it is others who do that, and this is usually done shortly before or during the election to avoid campaigns. When the process of choosing or acknowledging leaders takes place by election, the obvious question that arises is: Who is qualified for the position? In many churches leaders are required to have a formal education. In fact, it is often considered the most important criterion. For example, many mainline churches in Tanzania are seeking persons with formal educational qualifications who can then enter the theological field and be qualified to enter the pastorate. Many also are going through formal education by extension. In evangelical churches there are certain positions that one cannot hold without a university degree.

On the other hand, many independent churches consider spirituality or charismatic gifting the most important criterion for leadership. Many charismatic leaders, by virtue of the fact that they have planted the church, have assumed the position of leader and acknowledge other leaders by their gifts. These leaders, however, do not subject themselves to election. If they do, it is certain that they will have ensured the safety of their position by some clause in the church's constitution. However, in both mainline and evangelical churches, individuals aspire to leadership because they are convinced that God has called them. Charismatic and evangelical churches can be very willing to acknowledge these leaders, if their leadership abilities are obvious. It should be pointed out that this way of acknowledging leaders has exposed the church to dangers, because in many cultures today, where Christian leadership carries prestige and privilege, people aspire to leadership for reasons quite unworthy and self-seeking. Although some who had said they have been called to leadership have been proved to be wrong, it is

still worth noting that many churches acknowledge leaders in response to their conviction of a personal call.

Looking at what has been discussed above we find that leaders who have been acknowledged in an election have a secular concept of leadership. Secular leadership does not consider the person's call into that position. It focuses more on eligibility and qualification principles that are spelled out in constitutions. There is less emphasis, and sometimes no practical consideration, for the qualifications found in 1 Tim 3:1-13. Secondly, recognizing leaders because of their charismatic gifts or leadership abilities follows the traditional concept of leadership. Traditional leaders were recognized because of the special abilities or qualities. As a result of this, some church leaders may continue in leadership positions until their death or retirement. But some churches, such as the Roman Catholic Church and a few other churches, still consider a calling to be the main criterion for leadership. This shows that in some African churches, there is an aspect of the biblical concept as far as choosing or recognizing their leaders is concerned.

As for the tasks or functions of leaders, one finds that many church leaders in Africa pay more attention to their position than to their tasks or functions. Many of them end up doing more in administration than in spiritual ministry. They are more involved in business meetings and projects, such as building and fund-raising. For some, the ministry has been basically church activities or special programs. Some evangelical and charismatic churches leaders, however, seem to give more time to the needs of their members. They do this through Bible studies, preaching, teaching and special services, healing, breakthrough and deliverance, etc. But at times the leaders seem to burden the people with financial demands. Church members generally believe that their leaders must be involved in almost everything as long as it has something to do with the church. They keep inviting their leaders to attend whatever happens, and when the leaders do not show up, some are disappointed with not being included in the leaders' list of priorities. Many leaders feel that everything has to be under their personal control. This has resulted in power struggles in many churches, because leaders do not want any competition. As a result, many leaders, because of their desire to do everything, end up stressed, and this is becoming increasingly common in Africa. They have forgotten that leadership in the church is

plural, and that not everything has to be done by them singlehandedly. God has placed many people in the church. The leaders' role is to organize the members and help them get involved in what the church does.

However, a study should be conducted to find out what motivates many leaders to stay in leadership positions even when they have failed to function as leaders. In addition to social recognition that is always associated with such positions, one finds that some church leaders use their positions for their own benefit and that leaving the office would mean losing the benefits. Many church leaders are involved in misusing church funds or take advantage of other opportunities offered by their position. For example, some leaders keep travelling abroad even when such trips could be taken by others. The misuse of student scholarships is common in some cases. Thus, there is no single reason as to why many leaders use questionable means to make sure that they stay in leadership for a long time.

Looking at such examples of leadership, one is quickly led to ask: Is the present church leadership in Africa biblical? One cannot avoid realizing that they function more like traditional leaders, who have absolute power and control and tolerate no competition or opposition. Many African church leaders want their followers to recognize their position and be subjected to them at all times. Also, they function as secular leaders who are task-oriented and not people-oriented. They are more concerned with the work to be done and goals to be achieved than with the needs of the people. Only a few of them function as servants to the people and demonstrated the kind of leadership which Jesus wanted his followers to embrace. It is clear that traditional and secular concepts of leadership are gaining ground in the church in Africa. Sometimes one cannot tell the difference between a church leader and a secular leader. The church leader functions like a secular leader with the difference that sometimes a secular leader may do with some limitations, because when he does wrong, the steps taken against him are very strict. Thus, church leadership in Africa is facing the challenge to learn what the New Testament teaches about leadership.

## Conclusion

The aim of this article was to show what the New Testament offers to modern society concerning leadership. To reach that goal these steps were followed: First, the New Testament concept of leadership was presented; secondly, the secular concept, and thirdly, the African traditional concept. Fourthly, the leadership practices in the present-day church were discussed and comparisons made with three basic concepts to determine which concept is prevalent in present-day African churches. It was noted that the secular and traditional concepts are dominant. The New Testament concept of leadership, which should be the norm for the African church, has little or no recognition in practice.

In the modern African churches, formal education and spirituality have been seen as two different entities. The leadership concept of some churches has been influenced by formal education, which has been considered as a requirement for positions within the church. The leadership concept of some churches has been influenced by spirituality or charismatic gifts, and the leaders function more like traditional leaders who do not tolerate competition.

However, both formal education and charismatic gifts are needed in leadership positions, but the Church in Africa must return to the New Testament concept of leadership. Making such a return, the church will find that leadership as demonstrated in the New Testament is characterized by *servanthood* and *stewardship*. It is also plural in nature in the sense that no single person controls everything alone. A leader also sets a model for his people to follow. Such a leadership was not only taught by Jesus and His disciples; it was also realized in their lives. Thus, church leaders must follow Jesus' example by serving others. The African church can make use of the good aspects of secular and traditional concepts of leadership, but the New Testament concept of leadership as defined by Jesus must always be the norm for the Church. This, in my opinion, will reduce many problems that our church in Africa is facing.

## **17. The understanding of salvation in African traditional religions (Gabriel E. Mgeyekwa)**

### **The African world view**

African traditional religions teach that human beings are created by God and that life is a gift of God to the individual. Life is meant to be lived in its fullness without disturbance. However, life is communal. It is not lived in isolation from one's fellowmen, both the living and the dead. This is possible only in a network of mutual interdependence between the individual and the community. An African therefore strives to maintain a dynamic relationship with his/her extended family, clan or tribe, ancestors, God and nature.

When the African God withdrew from the world he had created, he entrusted it to the power known as "world power". This power serves as an immanent reflection of the divinity. It creates the underlying unity of all things. It is the all-pervasive potency in every element and every creature.

As a matter of fact, all Africans possess this power and strive to maintain it in order to live in harmony and to be successful in all life ventures. If they lose power, they fall victim to dynamic influences, including evil spirits, which may take the form of supernatural beings as well as humans, particularly sorcerers and witches.

When a person experiences disappointments or frustrations, for example loses a job, these experiences are interpreted as instances of the domination of a power as a result of self-defilement, sorcery or the influence of evil spirits.

There are socially instituted codes of conduct. The failure to observe them may release evil forces, which will bring illness and misfortune to the individual in question.

Witches and sorcerers violate the natural law by manipulating the power or vital force for evil purposes. This is both irresponsible and evil. It violates the purpose of God for human life and destabilizes the

cohesion of the community. Witchcraft is evil in the highest degree among Africans, for it breaks the harmony among men.

With this African world view in mind we can now take a look at some factors of life which Africans find oppressive and from which they seek relief. These are discussed under the subheading “The African concept of evil”.

### **The African concept of evil (sin)**

There are four basic factors of life which Africans find oppressive and from which they seek relief. These factors relate to the emotional needs of Africans. They are experienced as threatening to life. It is from such factors that the African traditional religions offer redemption to their adherents.

#### **a) Anxiety caused by day-to-day problems of life**

Since Africans believe in the possession of a vital force, they also believe that the loss of that vital force causes problems. They fear inconsistencies of the weather, natural disasters such as droughts and floods, hazards caused by encounters with wild beasts, hunger and poverty which result in a high infant mortality rate (Africans have a great desire for children, especially sons), lack of employment, bad luck or failure in life’s ventures, unforeseen conditions which give rise to practical problems, other types of evils and misfortunes, conditions which experience has taught them to find oppressive and from which they seek relief or salvation. All of these are blamed on demonic influences, including men (particularly sorcerers and witches) and evil supernatural spirits as well as angry ancestral spirits. These demonic influences are believed to diminish vital force and make people vulnerable to attacks of all sorts in the form of misfortunes and dangers.

#### **b) Anxiety caused by fear of evil spirits and malicious person, witches and sorcerers**

The fear of evil spirits and evil persons such as witches and sorcerers may be removed by specially designed religious rites. These rites are recommended by religious leaders such as diviners and traditional doctors. The evil spirits may be the spirits of the dead who were not

raised to the status of ancestors by their next of kin and are just wandering causing misfortune to all people. Unless they are given the veneration that is due to them with the support of sorcerers and witches, ancestral spirits violate natural law by exploiting the vital force for the purpose of causing harm to people. Therefore, the practice of witchcraft is particularly detestable among Africans, because it poisons human relationships and threatens the corporate nature of society. It is in this context that any premeditated enmity, hatred, gossiping, or any act aimed at the destruction of the lives of others is considered witchcraft and as such evil and sinful in God's sight.

Calling upon evil spirits and practicing witchcraft constitute sins against which traditional Africans spend their energies trying to procure relief or salvation. Witchcraft is an injustice, since it violates the commandment to love our neighbours as ourselves. Witches and evil spirits undermine that which makes human life possible and fulfilling for everyone in society.

From the traditional African point of view, any attempt against human life is evil and, consequently, sinful, because the attack is directed against the creator who created every person and upon whom all things depend.

In other words, sin and evil in African traditional religious thinking is measured in terms of how they affect the life of people who suffer from injustice inflicted by wrongful acts of evil agents. Sin is understood to be a breach of fellowship with our neighbours. It is manifested in the absence of brotherhood or sisterhood. It is lack of love in communal interrelationships.

### **c) The concern for a good relationship with the ancestral spirits**

Here also, appropriate rites have been developed both to keep ancestors happy and well-disposed towards their descendants. Africans are aware of the need to give ancestors the respect that is due to them. The failure to honour or venerate the ancestors is tantamount to undermining their position and may release evil spirits. The ancestors may also withdraw their protection and support from the living.

It is believed to be injustice and an act of evil, if a youngster makes an important decision, for example to buy a car, without taking into account the interest of the ancestors in the matter.

A certain elder of the Ng'anda Parish once refused to brew Bena beer for his daughter's wedding feast because of his Christian convictions. The extended family members deplored his decision in the strongest possible terms and said it was serious violation of the traditions of the founders of the extended family. In other words, it was an injustice which was directed against their ancestors. Several days later the elder began losing his sons one after the other. Some of them died of natural causes and others were stabbed to death. People blamed the misfortune on the father's strange behaviour in connection to his daughter's wedding.

Misfortunes or deaths in the family are believed to prove that the ancestors have been neglected. They must be appeased by sacrifices in order to restore health and happiness.

Experiences of being under the wrath or curse of the ancestors, believing that they have withdrawn their blessing and support, have caused the traditional Africans to venerate the ancestors and promote good relationships with them. High on the priority list of their religious activities are various cultic rites which aim at keeping the forebears happy and well-disposed towards their descendants. This leads us to the last problematic area in which relief is needed.

#### **d) Possible loss of vital force**

To the traditional Africans, the possession of vital force guarantees harmonious fellowship with their next of kin, the community, the clan, the tribe, God, and nature. It guarantees enjoyment of life and success in life's ventures. However, the diminution of that power may result in misfortune, lack of love and lack of fellowship with God, men, supernatural beings, and nature. Africans strive to maintain vital force in order to be able to live in harmony and to be successful in life's ventures.

Disappointments in the form of frustrations and loss of job, etc., are interpreted as instances of diminution of power. The loss of vital force is attributed to evil spirits, who must be appeased, to the activities of sorcerers and witches, and to self-defilement.

## **The origin of evil from the point of view of the African traditional religions**

From the point of view of the African traditional religions evil does not originate from the creator. God is considered to be absolutely good. African traditional religions regard evil as mainly human in origin. It manifests itself particularly in wizardry. The biblical concept of Satan as absolute evil was alien to the traditional philosophical thinking. Satan was misinterpreted as a manifestation of God, the manifestation of the dark side of God. It is because of this misconception that many African Christians, even third and fourth generation Christians, tend to interpret Satan as a son of God. And because of this misconception Satan is not experienced existentially as the enemy of the human race. Instead, he is considered harmless.

Evil, then, springs from God's creatures, the living and the dead. It emanates from human immorality. Evil is not incidental; it has always a personal, creaturely origin.

Africans are puzzled by the Christian notion of Satan as a created but non-human being who is fully committed to evil of his own free choice. It is the very fact that Satan is subject to divine power that makes it difficult for Africans to understand why God at all permits the satanic power to operate among human beings.

In view of the fact that evil has a human, creaturely origin, the solution to the problem of evil cannot be traced from God since he is in no way involved with evil. Evil in Africa, whether cosmic or on a more limited scale, is one-dimensionally moral in character owing to its personal human origin, and it is dealt with within this framework. As a matter of fact, every person is potentially a witch, that is to say he/she is capable of immorality. African morality therefore is grounded in relationships within the human community and in the way it emphasizes the moral responsibility of each and every individual. Nobody blames the devil for his/her own actions. There is no "The devil made me do it" excuse in the African world. Thus the witch in the African context is a true symbol of the evil one, the father of lies, the hater of God, the enemy of God, the community, and nature.

In the following section we consider how African traditional religions offer relief or redemption to Africans.

### **Signs of salvific activity in African traditional religions**

Traditionally, Africans have designed various types of rites and rituals and ways of relief from anything they find oppressive. Some of them are described below.

#### **a) Protective rites**

Protective rites and rituals serve to immunize potential victims against the dangers of witchcraft, evil spirits, thieves, barrenness, dangerous animals, impotency, bad luck. etc. Originally these rites were performed by the heads of families on the family level. On the tribal level, it was the chief who officiated, and on the national level the king. Traditional doctors practise these rites as well. I know of a certain traditional healer, Nxamalala, who was very popular in our area for his ability to protect houses against lightning. Others immunize people against poisonous snakes.

#### **b) Religious rites**

These rites have been established to keep angry ancestors happy in order to maintain their support and protection. Among traditional Africans, ignoring the ancestors is considered to be a serious offence. In such cases, advice of a diviner or traditional doctor is sought. He is asked to prescribe a remedy for normalisation of the situation.

#### **c) Purificatory rites and rituals**

Purificatory rites are for people who have been defiled. They are intended to avert the impending destruction of individuals or threats to the well-being of the community. Normally purificatory rites are the prerogative of heads of families, tribes and nations. Traditional healers and diviners also purify people or can prescribe remedies for defilement after diagnosing the problems affecting the individual or community.

#### **d) Sacrificial offerings**

Traditional Africans perform various types of sacrificial offerings for different purposes. The majority of them are meant for the atonement

of sins or evils committed by the individual, the community, the tribe or the entire nation. Some sacrifices are offered to appease ancestors and to maintain the fellowship that exists between fellow human beings, both living and dead. Other sacrifices are offered for the healing of those who are sick. Some rituals are performed to help people succeed in life's ventures.

#### **e) Rituals of avoidance**

Certain codes of conduct help traditional Africans avoid self-defilement. These codes apply to such areas as premarital sex, black magic, calling elderly people by their first names, extramarital affairs, and sex with one's relatives. When such a code is violated, a diviner will prescribe relevant rites to cleanse the defiled persons.

#### **Life after death**

To traditional Africans time is a two-dimensional phenomenon consisting of a long past and a dynamic present. The future as we know it is non-existent in traditional African thinking. The future does not constitute time, since events which lie in the future have not yet been experienced. In other words, what has taken place or will shortly occur matters more than what is yet to be.

What has taken place in the past is an elongation of the present and adds to the events that constitute time. Time therefore is oriented towards the past rather than the remote future. People look more to the past as they make adjustments in their lives.

Because of their orientation towards the past, traditional Africans have no conception that the universe will ever change radically or come to an end. Instead, they are looking back to where they came from. The universe is endless. Nothing will bring history to an end. People have nothing to fear and nothing to fix their minds on as far as the future is concerned. History moves from the present to the past (tense).

Death is just a process of removing a person from the present into the remote past (tense). He/she goes to the land of the dead, which is not different from this one. It is a duplication of this one, and it is on earth and not in heaven. He/she will join the deceased family members. Life will continue just as it has been. The land of the dead is beautiful, since no one has come back from there. Instead of being feared, death is

accepted as something natural and inevitable. After all, it is through death that one joins one's departed fellowmen.

### **Judgment**

Life in the hereafter is a carbon copy of this life. There is no need for anyone to fear a future judgment. In any way, people are judged during this earthly existence and such a judgment is carried out not by God but one's ancestors.

People are rewarded for their good deeds in this existence, and are also punished for the evil they commit in this existence.

### **Ancestral spirits**

Ancestors protect and support their living descendants. The living in turn have to perform the necessary rites to maintain the fellowship between them and their ancestors. They have to perform the necessary rites to elevate their dead to the status of ancestorship so that the ancestors in turn will protect and support them. The leaders in the African traditional religions claim to derive their power to heal and their exceptional perception skills from the ancestral spirits. The ancestral spirits inspire the diviner to perform his diagnostic activities and to prescribe the remedies.

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## 18. The Sermon on the Mount – an African perspective (Peter Fue)

### Introduction

Chapters 5-7 of the Gospel of Matthew have been traditionally known as “the sermon” or “teachings” on the mountain. On the one hand this passage can be called “teachings”, because Jesus sat down to teach just like the Jewish rabbis. Also, the layout of the entire speech is in the form of a teaching, because it differs from an ordinary modern sermon in that it addresses many topics one after the other. But on the other hand it is also a sermon, because the audience raised no questions, in contrast to modern communication methods, which would require a question-answer format for good understanding. Jesus nevertheless used different techniques of communication. On several occasions he taught (Matt 5:13-7:27), also by using parables. At other times he preached (Matt 4:17; 5:1-12; 19:13-15), but sometimes he used both techniques at the same time, as in the question-answer session concerning the difficulty of rich people entering the kingdom of heaven (Matt 19:16-30).

Out of the Bible passages that are memorised by African Christians, Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount is probably the most popular, right next to the Ten Commandments and the Lord’s Prayer. It consists of short, easily memorized teachings which one can recite even at night. In general, the teachings of Jesus are not in the imperative mood; instead he uses strong negation (the word *mee*, just like in Kiswahili).

Africans still place a very high value on community life. And since communities are held together by codes of conduct, the African Church feels blessed to have such a ready-made code of conduct as that of Matthew 5-7.

This text is a paraphrase and revision of an original version printed in the Kiswahili journal ‘*Jarida la Kichungaji* (Volume 1, Number 1-2 of 2004, pp. 56 ff.). The text discusses three sub-sections. The first one seeks to show the relationship of the Sermon on the Mount and Christian morality. The second one explains the relationship of the sermon

and African morality. The third one describes the three dimensions of Sermon: personal integrity, responsibility to others and responsibility to God.

### **The Sermon on the Mount and the Christian morality**

The Sermon on the Mount has two ethical dimensions both of which aim at a peaceful and harmonious community. The first dimension is that of an earthly community – the present one in which loving one’s neighbours is essential. As far as earthly life is concerned, the demands of this community are perennial and independent of the spiritual after-life community. In other words, peace and harmony in this life would be necessary goals even without God or promises of heaven.

The second dimension is the afterlife community, usually referred to as the spiritual life with God. The two communities are alike in that they share characteristics of unity and do the will of God (worship). But they differ in two respects: the former is physical, tangible and temporary, while the latter is metaphysical, beyond human reach or interference. Members of the temporal community access the spiritual community through Jesus Christ, who is the door. The other main difference is that the physical community has many different manifestations depending on the culture and environment of the people. This, in turn, has given rise to many different denominations and many different interpretations of the Sermon on the Mount.

The earthly community can exist independently from the spiritual community. But the spiritual community is entirely dependent on the earthly one. This is because membership of the spiritual community is judged by those who kept the rules and demands of the earthly community, that is by doing good to others as well as loving God. Apparently the teachings of Jesus aimed at improving the potential of fulfilling the demands of the earthly community, which form the basis of membership in the spiritual community. Jesus did this by reinterpreting the law of Moses (e.g. 5:22, 28, 34) and by giving the Holy Spirit to the earthly community to enable it to abide by his teaching even in his absence (John 14:26). This may sound somehow ridiculous to Protestants, because it reinforces the traditional tension between faith and works.

The African Church life quite happily resonates with this legalistic antagonism.

The teaching of the Sermon on the Mount is called Christian, because only those who follow the edited version of the Law of Moses according to Jesus are members of the spiritual community. A person who follows these teachings must first of all become a follower of Jesus, one who commits his life to the worship of God through Jesus, and to the service of God and Christ for the remainder of his life. Anyone can be an ardent follower of the Law of Moses, but this does not make him a Christian. A Christian must follow the law of Christ:

*Mosaic morality.....Ten Commandments*

*Christian morality.....Ten Commandments + the Sermon  
(teachings) on the Mount*

The Sermon on the Mount differs from the Mosaic Law in two ways:

- It is an analysis and interpretation of the Law of Moses beyond what the Pharisees understood it to be (e.g. Matt 5:21-22, 27-28, 33-39; 43-44).
- Jesus makes it more difficult to fulfill the Law of Moses. His teaching elevates and complicates the morality of those who were to be his disciples by showing that they need God's grace. *The Golden Rule* (doing to others what you would like them do to you) is hard to fulfill unless carried on into the hands of God. Jesus separates man's moral responsibility from man's capability and places the responsibility with God (cf. Matt 19:26).

### **The Sermon on the Mount and African morality**

Is there such a thing as African morality? No community will hold together without a moral code and principles, whether documented or oral. African morality is community-oriented, and each person is

known and recognized according to his/her physical contribution in society.

The Sermon on the Mount is very close to African conceptions of morality. One is tempted to say that Jesus taught like an African elder who talks sitting down. Or he is like one who is addressing African followers by touching on every bit of the detailed code of conduct: exemplary living (being the light and the salt of the world), individual and collective responsibility, marital and sexual responsibility, justice and forgiveness, and man's personal relationship with God.

Like an African leader, Jesus takes his followers apart, to the top of a mountain in order to hold a seminar for them. Africans used to practice ritual separation under renowned professionals. A young person did not become a full member of the community unless he had undergone the ritual training, called *jando* and *unyago*, which prepared him for guardianship of society, parenthood and leadership. The *jando* and *unyago* was a seminar that prepared young people for married life and service to society. Similarly, the Sermon on the Mount teaches responsibility to the members of the Christian community. To an African, the earthly community is very important, because everything in it reflects on the future afterlife. The same is true of the blessings of this life. If one is cursed now, it reflects on the life to come as continued curses. On the other hand, if one is blessed for doing good in this life, the ancestors and God will doubtless do the same. The present life is a portal to the next. That is why every person wants to take part and be seen taking part in the activities and welfare of the community: in joy and sorrow; in working and eating, and in producing offspring. In a way, the Sermon on the Mount complements African social morality.

### **Three features of the Sermon on the Mount**

The Sermon on the Mount can be divided into three sections:

*a)Improvement of the personal integrity of the disciples (Matt 5:3-6).* Here Jesus addresses the inward spiritual nature of a person, wanting it to be poor, to mourn, to be meek, to be just. First of all, a person with integrity acknowledges that he/she is nothing without the community, ancestors and eventually God. Personal integrity makes us respect and

serve the community and God. We need to know our limitations and capabilities, and so to be humble and seek justice for ourselves and for others. Being there for others, both physically and in thought and prayer is a prerequisite of all cycles of life in the community as well as of personal integrity. Absence of a person raises questions. Where is he/she? Why is he/she absent? What will happen to him/her? How shall the community attend to him/her if he/she is not present? Absence leads to distortion of personality. Presence in the community promotes and integrates personality. The same is true of discipleship. The disciples are there not as an end in themselves; they are there to serve the community, the Church of God which has been called through Jesus. And it is by teaching what Jesus taught that one becomes a messenger of good news, an apostle.

*b) Responsibility to others:* (showing mercy, Matt 5:7; peacemaking, 5:9; patience, 5:10-11; living as salt and light, 5:13-14; protection of the life of others, 5:21; sexual purity, 5:27-28; refraining from retaliation, 5:38-48; forgiving, 5:40, 6:14; swearing of oaths, 5:33-37; perfect love, 5:43-48; hypocrisy, 6:1,16; judging, 7:1-5; false prophets, 7:15-23.)

What Jesus is communicating is that recognition of the community and having good relationships entails all of the above: loving, serving and honoring others. The world is overburdened by the needs of people – needs above our own. We need those who can recognize the existing, abundant resources and transform them in such a way that the needs of people can be met. Jesus came for that very purpose. He wants his disciples to know it and serve with merciful hearts, bringing reconciliation to people and communities. He wants them to be the light and salt of the earth, to be leaders toward a better life in their communities.

The African Church exists on the needy side of the earth, which calls for mercy, material assistance, reconciliation, improved sexual relationships as it faces killer diseases, social and economic transformation. The African Church is in dire need for people of this kind, for friends and colleagues from other parts of the world. But the other side of the coin of responsibility is that the African Church also needs to recognize the fact that it has not taken seriously the teaching of being merciful to itself and to others. Instead, it has expected to be served by others; rather than giving, it has expected to receive. The Sermon on the Mount

speaks to the African Church here and now: it needs to hearken, to wake up and to act. Ministers are called to care for the flock instead of caring for themselves. The laity are also called to care for their leaders and the Church, to love, to honour and to serve.

Responsibility to others calls for reconciliation whenever strife and conflict arises. Several times African church leaders have become sources of disharmony because of a power struggle. Likewise, church members have rejected their leaders because of false allegations. Also, at certain instances the African Church has failed to seek, advocate and promote justice where it was needed (cf. the Rwandan genocide two decades ago, and several present unconstitutional governments in African countries). Instead of looking for reconciliation and justice, churches have remained silent when big governments have carried on wars and massive killings. The strong countries of the West have imposed heavy discriminatory economic measures against African countries, and the Church has remained silent instead of speaking out.

Truthfulness and transparency are needed in society and the Church instead of flattery and lies, especially among church leaders. The spirit of secular politics has invaded the African Church to the extent that Christians tend to applaud even unworthy leaders who are leading them astray. Lies and untruthfulness has also broken marriages and governments. James 3:3-12 warns of the dangers of the tongue and calls for uprightness.

Sexual immorality is among the worst vices besetting humanity. This is true of nearly all ethnic groups and nations worldwide. Yet the importance of sexuality is apparent in the fact that so far it is the only method for reproduction of humans and animals. Sexuality is regarded as the highest form of pleasure among human beings and animals. Through it human beings experience pleasure, love, honor and intimacy.

On the other hand, the moral requirements that accompany various expressions of sexuality are very intricate. They include matters of pleasure and pain, lust and jealousy, culture and religion, love and hate, marriage and divorce, anger and joy, health and sickness, intimacy and intimidation, celibacy and the sex business, and so forth, all for humanity to observe. As we consider the teachings of Jesus on adultery and divorce (5:27-32) we see their universal implications. With the

rampant pandemic of HIV/AIDS in Africa south of the Sahara Desert their impact is seen vividly. Adultery is a form of sexual immorality which plagues most married people. Through it HIV/AIDS has attacked many marriages and families, leaving indelible marks. The infection trend of the pandemic makes it clear that there is an urgent need for caution against sexual promiscuity along the lines of Jesus' teaching. However, this attitude should not be an end in itself. But it is a reminder for the Church to re-emphasize teaching on the subject, as far as married couples are concerned. It has been supposed that only young people need it, and as a result married couples have been neglected in the campaign against the pandemic. The contrary is also true. Change of habit requires education and training. Some evils cannot be stopped or even reduced by enacting and enforcing laws; the provision of correct information and better skills is a more effective alternative. But sexual controls are also needed.

The same is true of divorce. Generally speaking, divorces are more common elsewhere in the world than in Africa. This is not to say that divorces are an unknown phenomenon in Africa. In Africa there are nearly as many divorces as there are separations. It is therefore proper to deal with separation hand in hand with divorce. Many couples live together and have children without marrying. Frequently, conflicts in the relationship cause men to run away with other women and abandon their families. Separations cause a lot of harm in Africa, like divorce elsewhere in the world: abuse of women and children, intimidation, economic hardships, multiplication of diseases, and break-ups of family units and personal relationships.

The Church in Africa needs to see adultery and divorce/separation in its multifaceted dimensions, and to establish programs to address them. It is not enough to just say that sinners will not inherit the kingdom of heaven. The promise of citizenship of the kingdom of God concerns the future. The Church must take steps to salvage the present community by placing in its annual calendar as many seminars as possible for married couples (women/men separately and jointly) and for youth (girls/boys separately and jointly). Hopefully the community will hear the teachings of Jesus and respond to them.

c)Service (worship) to God is the third aspect.

This covers such issues as false prophets (7:15), praying (6:7-13), swearing oaths (5:33), fasting (7:8), spiritual base (6:19, 24), the impossibility of serving two masters (6:24-25), and listening to the word of God.

The caution against false prophets (7:15) is a genuine call for the African Church today. A true prophet is one who has been sent by God and who acts on God's authority. A false prophet is one who teaches and performs under the disguise of a true prophet but actually acts on the hidden authority of evil. Both of them perform extraordinarily, but only the true prophet's ministry bears good and lasting fruit.

In recent years we have seen a massive increase of so-called prophets in the Church in the form of self-imposed ministries and self-appointed episcopacy. They begin by creating ministries which they claim not to be churches. The ministries are managed by individual persons without any formal leadership structure. They emphasize healing of diseases and alleviation of poverty, all by faith in Jesus. They have an outward image of an economic enterprise, but they lack the classical social services in the fields of education and health. These ministries also lack specific doctrinal bases which would distinguish them from one another. Most of the adherents come from the traditional main line church bodies and the older Pentecostal Churches, rotating from one ministry to another, this week to one and next week to another, and still trying to maintain their allegiance to mother denominations. The sustainability of these ministries is doubtless in the balance, given that their present leaders are aging and retiring. If there is no prepared leadership for the proper handing over of the ministries, they will come up against a dead end.

After that the followers will realize that such a terminating ministry is a false prophetic ministry. Healing and prosperity were used by Jesus and his disciples as tools for creating faith. The miracles were not an end in themselves, because they were nevertheless bound by time and space. Eventually the persons involved had to suffer and die anyway. The biggest miracle that surrounds humanity is life itself and salvation: "*For in Him we live and move and have our being*" (Acts 17:28). There is no point in passing over and neglecting these divine and lasting gifts and place the emphasis on temporal gifts. The promises that are given

by ministries such as these are temporary. The emphasis should be on salvation. If this is missing, the emphasis is on false and fake prophecy.

The warning against serving two masters is another issue which should be addressed in the African Church. In practical terms it is clear that a person cannot serve two masters equally well; one has to come before the other. What Jesus wanted to teach is that we must have priorities in life, and in this case we should give the priority to God, whom we serve through other people and the community (Jas 2:14-17; 1 John 4:20). God needs to come first.

There has been a growing phenomenon in African Christianity especially when problems such as diseases arise. Christians go to God in prayer and take advantage of hospital care, but they also seek traditional prayers and divination. The argument behind this is that the Christian God is the same as the African God. So God is worshiped and sacrificed to, at first in the Christian framework, and later in the framework of traditional worship and eating together.

There is an aspect of dilemma in interpreting the caution against serving two masters. Some Christians tend to think that Christians, ministers in particular, should avoid indulging in multiple economic enterprises. I specifically remember the liturgy used by the bishop during my ordination into ministry. I was strongly advised against indulging in business, because doing so would endanger my ministry. However, since the African Church is poor, its ministers are also poor, and the same is true of its adherents. There is a need for the Church to encourage some kind of multiple economic enterprises to subsidize the income of its members, in other words to adopt a tent-making approach.

The Sermon on the Mount also aims at reconciling man/community with God through prayer, fasting and abiding by God's Word.

The African Christians still value community worship and prayer by attending worship services. This is based on the conviction that it is God who attends to all spheres of their life, from procreation to protection from catastrophes, food, health, and provision of rain, and many others. This conviction is expressed by joyous hymns and dancing.

Fasting is understood to be a tool for strengthening personal spirituality in that prolonged hunger disciplines the body against physical lusts, and

at the same time whets the appetite for God. Fasting, however, has not been a common phenomenon in African worship. The contrary is true: access to God is sought by offering and sacrificing, and then expressed by eating together and dancing. This has been a wise thing to do, because in their poverty, often suffering from extreme malnutrition, Africans do not need to fast. What is needed is positivism: approaching life in a holistic and joyous manner.

Reconciliation with God takes place as we hear and do the Word of God. There is no logic in claiming to be a disciple, unless we abide by the instructions of the Master. Knowing the weakness of the disciples, Jesus promised to give them a “Counselor” who would continue to remind and teach them God’s will (John 14:26). In addition to the Christian’s personal commitment to Christ, the Holy Spirit would be there to nourish him. It is like the parable of a farmer who sowed the seed, returned home, and later, to his wonder, saw that the seeds had germinated (Mark 4:26-29). Who did it? It was God’s power. Christians are to give themselves to the WORD through faith, and the Spirit will do the rest. They will germinate, grow and produce a hundredfold. Sometimes the Church forgets the promise of Jesus and looks at itself thinking that its growth in Africa is due to abundant faith or wonderful abilities. No! It is due to God’s presence and God’s work. “If God is for us,

### **Conclusion and recommendation**

Thus far I have attempted to show how the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount relate to African Christianity. The African concept of togetherness is seen to be in harmony with Christianity: the African values of community and the Christian values of fellowship are in agreement in several instances.

The Sermon on the Mount demands personal integrity, responsibility of the individual to others and hence to the community, and last of all it demands service to God. As for the demands of the Sermon on the Mount, they are closely related to the moral demands of the life of the Church in Africa. This is an encouragement to the Church in Africa to keep on practicing African moral philosophy in its life.

The quality of life that people have depends on the kind of community that they have. It is a known fact that the community shapes personality. But the attitude to individual personal responsibility determines what the community will be like. The time will not come when communal demands will be relegated to a lesser role and surpassed by individualism. Therefore, it is the responsibility of any communal institution, the Church being one, to keep on checking and improving its moral demands in order to maintain continuity and existence on the earth. Life on earth entails ongoing challenges: secularization, globalization, the environment, economy, population growth, and development needs in general. Yet these shall not diminish man's hunger for God and a good spiritual life both in this life and the hereafter. Whatever the challenges we may have to face, it is important to remember the promise of Christ: *the world is full of trouble, but let us keep heart, for Christ our Lord has overcome the world*. The Sermon on the Mount will be there for future generations to learn from it. The Sermon will stand for eternity. Let us abide by it.

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## 19. Eschatological expectation in the New Testament –an African perspective (Falres Ilomo)

### Introduction

The term “eschatology” comes from the Greek *eschatos*, ‘last’, and *logos*, ‘word, knowledge’. The plural *eschata* means ‘the last things’, and the neuter singular *eschaton* ‘absolute future’. The Latin term, *de novissimis*, means ‘of the last things’.

In human history, eschatological expectation is a significant social and religious factor among the members of a community. It shapes the lifestyle, ethics and beliefs of the members. In this paper I have decided to deal with this topic, because not many scholars have viewed eschatological expectation from the African perspective. This need arises from the fact that some western scholars believe that Africa has no religion and no concept of a supreme God. According to these scholars, the existing practices cannot be regarded as religion, because any belief system that can be called religion must have at least the following qualities: a founder, a holy book, if possible the universal idea of a supreme God, and a doctrine. African practices do not have all these qualities. Therefore, these scholars conclude that these practices do not qualify as religion.

### Why do we need an African perspective?

A thorough study of Bible reveals that eschatological expectation was part of both the Jewish and the Hellenistic culture. Therefore, the predominant eschatological expectation in the Bible is based on the Jewish and western world view, rather than the African world view. From the biblical perspective one can conclude that eschatological expectation is more social than religious. Therefore, one cannot speak of a heavenly message concerning eschatology without including a sociological aspect. If, then, it is true that the New Testament eschatological expectation is full of images from Jewish and western cultures, it can also be viewed from an African perspective to help Africans

understand New Testament eschatology from their cultural and religious viewpoint.

In Africa, where the gospel was introduced by western missionaries in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, teaching and preaching went hand in hand with eschatological expectation. Unfortunately, during the missionary era, the emphasis was normally on apocalyptic eschatology. The proponents of this view underline such biblical metaphors as, “There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. Men will faint from terror... for the heavenly bodies will be shaken...” (Luke 21:25-26; Mark 13:3-37; Luke 13:22-29), and “When the Son of Man comes in his glory... he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats” (Matt 25:31-46).

When we speak of eschatological expectation, such terms as “the last judgment” and “the day of judgment” are unavoidable. In the Swahili Bible the term “judgment day” is translated *siku ya hukumu*. The Swahili word *hukumu* originates from the Arabic word *hokum*, which means ‘court prosecution’. A prosecuted person may be found innocent or guilty. From this translation one can conclude that when Africans are taught that eschatology refers to a day of prosecution they are right to worry about it, because they are not sure how they will be judged on that day. Despite the terrifying term, *hokum*, there is a different meaning for the word “eschatology”. The Arabic term, which is used by Arab Christians for eschatology, is *umur al-akhira*, literally ‘the last things.’ This contradiction in translating the term “eschatology” shows that the translators, who translated the Martin Luther Bible into Swahili, chose the wrong equivalent for “eschatology”.

Eschatological expectation in the New Testament is individualistic in the sense that the individual is responsible for his/her destiny. Moreover, the image of heaven above the sky shows that this individualistic image is predominant in a heaven where we see no picture of earthly family ties. We will be in heaven with God, Jesus, saints and angels. To Africans, this heavenly community seems strange because of its non-community nature. Also, life in heaven is spiritual, unlike the physical life in this world. It is also strange that in heaven the majority (sinners) will be burnt in eternal fire while the minority of holy people are

enjoying eternal life. This kind of punishment – God burning people whom He has created – seems strange. For Africans it is comparable to a parent, who decides to punish her/his own children by killing them. Under normal circumstances, a person, who kills her/his children simply because they have committed an offense, is considered mad.

The kind of eschatological expectation, which was discussed above, is one-sided because it overlooks God's salvific plan for mankind. This type of eschatology can be called vertically oriented, because in it people view a heavenly God with angels. This God has nothing to do with his creatures except to punish and terrify them. However, the kind of eschatological expectation that is relevant for Africa is horizontally oriented. According to this eschatological view God deals with mankind in a variety of situations, in relation with joy, peace, hunger, suffering, despair, etc. This type of eschatological expectation is not only biblical, but the correct approach in the mission field in Africa today.

From the African perspective, eschatological expectation was supposed to be an obvious thing. Experience shows that in Africa, New Testament eschatological expectation exists as a secondary religious experience. Among Africans, this does not give hope, instead it poses a threat. In the Bible it is clearly stated that salvation is offered to all mankind as a free gift. But many Bible texts, for example Luke 14: 24, Matt 22:13; 24:1-2, 15-25, 29-31; 25:31-46, insist that judgment is there for those who refuse the offer.

There are two allegories in the above texts, where the emphasis is that those who refuse the invitation shall not take part in the banquet and those who are not dressed in a wedding garment will be excluded from the wedding party. Moreover, the Bible shows that the Day of Judgment is terrifying. If an African does not believe in the Word of God, the reason may be the eschatological message, which contains this terrifying image but omits the other part, which shows God's grace for sinners who repent. Therefore, the gospel sounds like Bad News instead of Good News. In such cases, Africans whose primary religious experience is related to their traditional religion, normally tend to continue practicing it, although they are church members. Therefore, the task of the Church is to provide thorough biblical teaching and to enable them

to see that Christianity can offer them a true salvation that is superior to what they have believed in relation to their traditional religious experience.

### **The African understanding of eschatology**

The African world view is that there is this world and another world near the community where Africans live. Africans do not believe in the last day or the Day of Judgment as it is taught in the New Testament. For Africans, members of the community multiply in this world through birth. At the same time, people multiply in the other world through the deaths of community members. These deaths are the ones that are known as timely deaths, the deaths of adult persons. In this respect, the death of a child or young person is a violent blow or causes fear among family and community members.

From the African perspective, the death of an old community member has a positive aspect. It differs from the western understanding in which death means the end of life. In the African understanding, death means departure. Therefore, death is a transition to a permanent destination. When someone dies, the Africans say, “he has accepted the call,” or “he has been called.” The Kinga say, *ilangilwe*, “he has gone back home,” Kibena and Kikinga, *agodwike*.

Since death is one of many rites of passage, it is normally followed by burial and mourning rites. The burial rites include burying a dead person with articles such as foodstuffs, weapons, tools such as hoes, merchandise, firewood or charcoal, etc. Burying a body with such articles reflects the African belief that life in this world is a photocopy of the other world. Therefore, when a member of the community dies, or departs from this world to the other, he must take with him all the tools he has used in this world. A departing member cannot go into the other world empty-handed as this will imply that he did not have a good farewell from his fellow community members.

### **The position of sinners in the afterlife**

The belief about the position of sinners after this life has a distinct place in the African cosmological view. Africans believe that in the coming world, where the forebears and God live, there are no separate places for sinners and righteous people. Instead, people live there as one community. The only difference is a temporary separation of newly arriving members, which is carried out by the forebears for two reasons: first, if the newcomer did not settle his/her disputes before death; secondly, if the burial or mourning ceremonies were improperly performed by the living members. In such a case, the newly departed member cannot be accepted by the community of forebears until the living members perform some reconciliatory rituals. To show that he/she is not accepted, the rejected member will cause some problems to the living members until they celebrate rituals which will secure his/her acceptance.

Africans believe that unsettled matters in human relationships (with one's children, wife, husband, neighbours and relatives, or thievery, etc.) hinder a departed member from joining the community of the departed. However, matters such as murder and witchcraft that were not settled during the person's lifetime, cannot be forgiven by means of reconciliatory rituals. Instead, the departed member who has committed such crimes is believed to be "forgotten", and he will have no relationship with the living members or forebears. However, some African communities believe that a forgotten member can be malicious towards the living community members.

Some other African communities believe that unaccepted forebears remain in this world as spirits, causing harm to the living members. In this case, if a person did not lead a good life, broke clan taboos, did not respect his seniors or lived a cruel life, he will get a poor welcome by the forebears when he dies. Sometimes such persons are expelled from the land of the forebears and compelled to wander restlessly upon the earth where they cause much mischief.

The African concept of the position of sinners seems to be about the same in many communities. John Mbiti asserts that African peoples do not expect any form of judgment in the hereafter. Instead, if judgment has to come, it comes in the course of one's earthly life. Mbiti mentions

African communities which believe that offenders are punished in this world. For example, the Bachwa people believe that God punishes only in this life through illness, death or lightning. The Abaluya also believe that God punishes in this life those who break the established order of marriage or taboos or contravene tribal law. In the latter case, the forebears, who are the guardians of tribal law, may also join in punishing the offenders.

The few cases where punishment of offenders is believed to take place in the hereafter are found among the Yoruba people in Nigeria. E. Bolaji Idowu reports that there is a strong conviction among the Yoruba that sinners will not go unpunished and that the judgment applies to every form of sin. The Yoruba imagine the other world to be divided into two parts: a paradise where the forebears and the supreme God live, and a bad place with a celestial rubbish-heap and broken pots. These broken pots are hot, and the place is dry. The Yoruba not only believe in the punishment of sinners after this life, they also interpret the adversities that befall a person shortly before his death as the beginning of his punishment. These adversities include wretched blindness, losing beloved children, a miserable death and an unceremonial burial.

Some of the sufferers had involuntarily made detailed confessions of their past wickedness. Idowu emphasizes that because of the suffering that befalls an offender during his last days, the Yoruba normally think twice before they act, and they have developed a system whereby the community members are reminded to be aware of their future. The following are two wise sayings in relation to possible future suffering. "Lying does not debar one from becoming rich, covenant breaking does not debar one from reaching old age; but the day of sleeping, there awaits trouble!" "Let us behave gently, that we may die peacefully that our children may stretch out their hands upon us in burial."

A survey of many African communities reveals various perspectives with regard to the position of a sinner in the afterlife. The study shows that some communities believe in the existence of a separate place for sinners after judgment. However, some other African communities believe that there is no suffering in the coming world; instead, all people will live happily. This is not, however, a reward for individual merit, but simply the nature of life in the next world.

Although African communities differ with regard to beliefs about the hereafter, they agree that the evils in the living communities should be dealt with as soon as possible. This shows that for Africans life in the here and now is equal to or even higher than the life to come. The fact that most African communities fear the punishment that may befall a person in this life and cause him to be forgotten in the life to come, is the reason why a reconciliation process should take place during this life.

### **Reconciliation**

The term “reconciliation” comes from the verb “to reconcile”, which means ‘to restore friendship’ or ‘to bring back to harmony’, ‘to reconcile persons who have quarreled’, ‘to restore to communion’, ‘to purify or restore to sacred use after pollution has taken place’.

There is a widespread understanding among many African communities regarding sin and reconciliation. John B. Ambe (in *Meaningful Celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation in Africa*) describes the African understanding of reconciliation and gives credit to the African practice. He states reasons for finding this practice worthwhile. According to him, the involvement of the whole community in correcting or punishing its offending members helps to keep alive the sense of sin in the society. The notions of sin and reconciliation have a very strong social dimension in Africa.

According to African custom, whenever any misunderstanding or quarrel among the members occurs, it must be resolved. Otherwise there will be no harmony in the community or family. Africans are afraid to talk with an enemy, to eat together, to work together or to pass by the enemy’s home. If anything happens to an individual or family that has a broken relationship with a neighbour or relative, the adversary will be the first suspect in the problem. Since no one can bear to live in such constant fear, reconciliation is sought by Africans.

Among Africans, reconciliation processes are different at the individual level and at the clan level. When the conflict involves two individuals, the two may meet and resolve their differences without the need of a reconciler, if the conflict is not severe. However, when the conflict is

acute, for example, when it may cause the two individuals to fight, a third person is vital to play the role of reconciler. At this stage, a meeting of relatives and both parties is held and the case is heard from both sides. When the breach involves the entire clan and the ancestors, the clan works out a reconciliation with the ancestors by means of sacrifices that are performed by a clan priest. On this level, the entire clan, ancestors and God are involved in the conflict. The harmony of a community is disrupted until reconciliation is reached.

The motives of Africans for seeking reconciliation are social as well as religious. From the social aspect, Africans believe that unresolved conflicts may cause infertility, an issue that is very sensitive among Africans. Another problem caused by unresolved conflicts is the broken relationship with other community members, the ancestors and God. A person may live his whole life without having peace. From the religious aspect, Africans fear very much losing the potential of becoming forebears, which can cause one's name to be forgotten for ever. Another problem connected with unsettled conflicts is that they can cause the departed members to be temporarily separated from the forebears upon their arrival in the other world. Due to such pressures, both within their communities and from the departed members, Africans prefer to reconcile conflicts rather than tolerate them until after death.

### **Summary**

Our observations about the pre-Christian African community show that their understanding of the hereafter is collective. However, this does not mean that Africans perceive communal life from a universal perspective. According to them, in the other world there will be a community which is exclusively made up of Africans. They also think that the earlier Africans will be part of this community. That is why the dead are buried with their heads towards the place of origin.

This conviction has also developed the practice of grave transferring ritual from a foreign land (in case a member was buried away from his homestead) to the homeland. Moreover, Africans expect their neighbouring tribes, with whom they share some ancestor cult practices and

eschatological mythology, to be among the community members in the hereafter.

Despite the fact that the concept of the hereafter is collective, it is hierarchical in form and interrelated through rituals and rites. The order in the hierarchy is: children, parents, ancestors and God. Through the hierarchy system and the descriptive names of God that are known by the community (creator, provider, almighty, lord and king, holy, and all-knowing) Africans manifest the supremacy of God and that beside him there is no other opposing power (dualism).

Africans believe that the other world to which one must go after death is not far from the living community. It is somewhere in this world or underground. God is also believed to be omnipresent: he lives near the departed members as well as everywhere in this world, where he is in contact with Africans in all forms of social activities.

Although Africans have no concept of a universal homecoming, they still believe that their community will live together in the other world. They believe that even those who commit sins will be accepted after the reconciliatory process has been performed by the living members. Moreover, they believe that the departed members receive supernatural power, which makes them superior to the living, although they remain inferior to God. However, Africans do not believe in the transformation of the physical body into a spiritual body.

Since Africans understand the system of the living community and the departed community to be hierarchical and that the ancestors have been empowered, they normally direct their petitions to God through ancestors. In connection to this, Africans consider also that the first encounter after a member dies is with ancestors, not God. Moreover, in that other world, human activities dominate instead of God's glory. The apparent conclusion is, from the fact that the interaction of ancestors with the living members dominates the scene, rather than interaction between God and people, that the African understanding of the hereafter is anthropocentric rather than theocentric.

The African understanding of a community is broader than the Christian understanding. The African community consists of both the living

and the departed members. This community is maintained through an ancestor cult. In an article entitled *Communio Sanctorum in Africa*, Ephraim K. Mosothoane stresses that this cult has been maintained by Africans despite the joint efforts by church leaders in some parts of Africa to exterminate it. In the Church's view, ancestor cult is incompatible with Christian belief and is not to be tolerated. This tendency has compelled church members to practise ancestor veneration in secret.

Despite the Church's fight against ancestor veneration, Mosothoane hopes that this cult will enrich Christian theology especially since the concept *communio sanctorum* has been rediscovered by Protestant and Roman Catholic theologians. He believes that this enrichment will be a step forward and that it can help preaching and pastoral counselling in Africa. He combines the two concepts, ancestor cult and the teaching about *communio sanctorum* by saying that theologically both concepts have something to say about death.

Mosothoane is reluctant to interpret the concept of *communio sanctorum* in accordance with the Bible and the Apostles Creed. Instead, he prefers his own personal interpretation. First of all, he gives credit to Protestant theology, which has given a good contribution to the understanding of the concept. But he also criticizes this theology, stating that since the Reformation it has denied a very important dimension, the social aspect of this solidarity. By "social aspect" he means the solidarity of members of the body of Christ. He emphasizes that this unity should be taken into consideration in a special way.

Mosothoane is skeptical about the idea that the communion of saints consists of the living and those who have died as Christians. He argues that the idea has not caused a great deal of joy among Africans. He further emphasizes that the expression *communio sanctorum* in the Apostles Creed, which is also evident in the New Testament, is still meaningful to the Church. In the New Testament, the term *hagios* (saint) does not mean that a person who is called a saint is perfect. In essence, the Church consists of women and men who are called to be holy (*kletoi hagioi*, see Rom 1:7, 1 Cor 1:2, 2 Cor 1:1, Col 3:12, 1 Pet 1:16). Mosothoane underlines that the only source of holiness is God, His Son Jesus Christ and His Holy Spirit. Therefore, only those who are in Christ (incarnated in Christ and Holy Spirit, Rom 15.16) are holy.

Furthermore, Mosothoane writes according to the New Testament, as underlined by A. Richardson, that a holy person is not a perfect person. Instead, he is a sinner who has been forgiven. Here the determining factor is God's act of salvation in and through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. It should be considered that in the New Testament the term "church" does not imply an individualistic concept. For example, such metaphors of the church as the body of Christ, temple, vineyard, etc. have a corporate meaning. Therefore, the Church in the New Testament is understood as *koinonia*, a community.

Suggesting a meeting point between African and Christian concepts of *communio sanctorum*, Mosothoane stresses that the Christian faith understands the communion of saints as a faith in communion with Christ which is bridged through his death. At the same time Africans see in ancestor belief a bridge, which is created through the deaths of community members. In Holy Communion, there is a communion not only between the believers and the resurrected Lord, but also between the living and the departed members of the Christian community.

### **Reconciliation as an alternative of the "Day of Judgment"**

As we have seen above, the main concern of the concept "hereafter" is the continuation of life in another world which is made possible by means of a reconciliation process. In this section, my goal is to rediscover the proper terminology for the Day of Judgment and the eschatology that is relevant for Africans. The term "reconciliation" will be discussed after presenting some Bible verses that support the view that eschatology has to do with a reconciliation process between man and God.

From the biblical point of view, in regard to salvation, we see that initially God's plan was to save people, not to destroy them. That is why besides giving the Ten Commandments he also gives texts that show his mercy towards human beings. For example, he says, "I am making everything new" (Rev. 21:5). In the new creation of heaven and earth there will be no more death, either natural death, death caused by sin, or everlasting death. God's grace is more powerful than human sin, "But where sin increased, grace increased all the more" (Romans 5:20). God is angered by human sin, and he judges the sins of the world in

order to save the world (1 Sam 2:6). “For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime” (Psalm 30:5). God’s judgment separates the sin from the person, condemns the sin and gives the person a free pardon. God’s last judgment has no double outcome; it serves the universal establishment of divine righteousness and justice for the new creation of all things. On the other hand, I can see the greater importance of God’s grace over his anger, which is experienced in faith.

We can conclude that the great turning point from disaster to salvation took place on Golgotha; it does not happen for the first time at the hour when we decide for faith or are converted. Faith means experiencing and receiving this turning point personally, but faith is not the turning point itself. It is not my faith that creates salvation for me; salvation creates faith for me.

### **Conclusion**

Whenever we discuss the issue of the Day of Judgment in the African context, the term “reconciliation” can give a positive image of New Testament eschatology. In the African context, “reconciliation” signifies that we bless each other or pray for each other after a broken relationship has been healed. A community member who enables two parties to resume their broken relationship is known as a reconciler. According to African practice a reconciler normally functions in two contexts: one has to do with prayer for the prosperity of the community, and the other has to do with healing a broken relationship. In this study, reconciliation between two parties provides a context for discussing an alternative term for the Day of Judgment.

With regard to eschatological expectation in the New Testament from the African perspective, the term “reconciliation” can replace the predominant Swahili word *hukumu*, which means a legal prosecution. The term *hukumu* has to do with a human legal system, and it implies that the Day of Judgment is a day of terror, without considering that there are others who believe in salvation through Jesus. However, the proposed term “reconciliation” is more appropriate, because it has social and religious implications from an eschatological perspective. If the Day of Judgment is now known as the day of reconciliation, Jesus Christ, who is the leader on that day, can be known by the term

“reconciler”. This will help Africans to see Christ as the one who revives the broken relationship between God and them. If the Cross is the turning point, we can also contend that the Day of Judgment is the day of fulfillment of God’s reconciliation, which began at the cross.

Having suggested the alternative term “reconciliation” for the Day of Judgment and the new title “reconciler” for Christ, I close by suggesting that studies on Christology in the African context be a future area of study, in order to bring an African perspective to New Testament eschatology.



## **PART III**

# **THE NEW TESTAMENT FROM BOOK TO BOOK**

In this chapter the entire New Testament is covered in the form of introductions to the individual books. All 27 books are dealt with. With each book we ask: What is the central message? What do we know about the author, his purpose in writing and the date of writing? Significant passages from each book are discussed as well.

### **20.1. Matthew**

The Gospel according to Matthew was the main gospel in the early church. Therefore its place in the New Testament is at the beginning, although it is not the earliest of the gospels. Matthew has several famous passages, for example the Sermon on the Mount and the Great Commission.

The question of Matthew's authorship is problematic. The original book is anonymous. The title "according to Matthew" was added probably in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, according to some scholars perhaps earlier. The earliest mention about Matthew as the author comes from Papias, who was bishop of Hierapolis in Phrygia in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. He writes that Matthew compiled the sayings in Hebrew (or Aramaic) and each translated them as best he could. The testimony of Papias, however, is difficult to translate, and it has been often disputed. It is not likely that the Gospel of Matthew was originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic. Its Greek text has direct connections to Mark's text, and it cannot be translated backwards into Hebrew.

Although most scholars today think that the author of the Gospel of Matthew is not known, it is nevertheless possible that the author was the Apostle Matthew himself. Another possibility is that the material in the gospel has some links with the apostle but that it has been edited later on. But the authority of the gospel does not depend on the identity of the author.

Another question we must ask at the outset is when the gospel of Matthew was written. As was pointed out earlier, the dating of the gospels is not easy. Matthew has frequently been dated to the 70's or 80's AD. Supporters of this view think that the mention in Matt 22:7 about the burning of a city is a reference to Jerusalem's destruction in 70 AD. This is not a very strong argument. On the other hand, there are several references to the temple's existence. In Matt 5:23 Jesus speaks about offering a gift at the altar, in other words in the temple, and Matt 17:24-27 mentions paying the temple tax. If there was no temple at the time of writing, these texts are meaningless. Therefore it is possible that Matthew was written as early as the 60's.

Scholars have also studied the possible target group of the gospel. The most common view has been that it was written for the Jewish Christian church. Matthew quotes frequently from the Old Testament, which is natural if the addressees were Jewish. The gospel begins with the genealogy of Jesus which is full of Old Testament names and proves that Jesus was a descendant of David. This was very important for the Jews. The genealogy also emphasizes the fulfillment of the Torah.

On the other hand, Matthew places a lot of emphasis on the role of the Gentiles. Even in the genealogy we meet four women whose role is much disputed among the Jews. Some of them were prostitutes and some Gentiles. There were Gentiles whose faith was much greater than that of the Jews (Matt 8:5-13). The Gospel of Matthew ends with a command to preach the gospel to the whole world (Matt 28:18-20).

It seems clear that Matthew has used several sources when writing his gospel. He has followed the text of the Gospel of Mark faithfully. In addition, there are plenty of passages that he has in common with Luke. In other words, he has used the source which is called the Q-source. He may also have used sources or merely written what he remembered about Jesus' words and deeds.

Matthew begins with the genealogy of Jesus. Luke has recorded another genealogy in his gospel (Luke 3:23-38). Matthew begins with Abraham, Luke with Adam. From David to Jesus the lists differ from each other. The most likely explanation is that Matthew follows the genealogy of Joseph and Luke that of Mary, although both of them conclude with the name of Joseph. If this is the correct interpretation, Jesus was

the descendant of David both through his father (officially) and his mother (biologically).

Both Matthew and Luke tell about Jesus' birth and childhood, although very briefly. Matthew has placed the Sermon on the Mount near the beginning of his gospel. Luke has similar material, but he has scattered it in different parts of his gospel. It is possible that Jesus preached the entire sermon in one go, but it is equally possible that Matthew has combined several sayings of Jesus and formed this sermon. The purpose of the Sermon on the Mount is to show how the people of God should live in this world. The aim is the same as that of the Ten Commandments. It shows the way to a good life, but not to salvation. It also shows that nobody is able to keep God's law. That is why we need Jesus in order to be saved.

The parables of the Kingdom of Heaven (Matt 13) are typical of Matthew. The parables of the sower, of the weeds, of the mustard seed and yeast, of the hidden treasure and the pearl and of the net belong to this compilation which illustrates God's Kingdom. Jesus' eschatological speech (Matt 24) is longer than the one found in the other gospels. The parables of the ten virgins and the sheep and the goats teach about the end times.

Matthew ends his gospel in the same way as the other gospels: he describes the last days of Jesus. Jesus' trial, crucifixion and resurrection make up the climax of the message of all four gospels. It has been said that the gospels are passion narratives with extended introductions.

The last verses in Matthew contain the Great Commission. It resembles the last verses of the Jewish Bible, 2 Chronicles 36:22-23. There Cyrus, the great king of Persia, declares, "the Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Anyone of his people among you – may the Lord his God be with him, and let him go up." Matthew wanted to give the same impression; that is why his "Bible" ends in the same way. The difference is that now the Lord of earth and heaven is Jesus Christ. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him. His church is the real temple in this world. And he will be with us always, to the very end of the age.

**Joe M. Kapolyo** of Zambia writes about Matthew, “Matthew’s Gospel has many lessons to teach Africa today:

**Leadership:** Matthew presents Jesus as the perfect teacher and leader. Those who seek to follow him must place the needs of those they lead before their own. In the church, leadership must be characterized by service.

**Mission:** Matthew stresses the importance of the Christian mission that Jesus began. Jesus calls the African church to reach out with his love to the peoples of Africa and all the peoples in the world. African churches must learn to be more active in mission and cease to be merely passive receivers of the gospel.

**Living in community:** Matthew shows us how we should live with one another. Jesus’ followers are all equal before him, and Africans must learn to abandon their concern for titles and status. The poor, the disabled, the downtrodden, refugees and those with HIV/AIDS are all our brothers and sisters in Christ. Humility is the basis of proper relations within the church.” (ABC, p. 1105)

## **20.2. Mark**

The gospel of Mark is the shortest of the four gospels and in all probability the earliest. Almost everything in it can be found in Matthew and Luke as well. As the first document, which is called “the gospel”, it is a very important work. Mark is the creator of the gospel in its literary form.

It is not certain who the author of this gospel was, because the original texts of the gospels do not mention the name of the author. However, a very early tradition claims that the author was John Mark, a co-worker of Paul (Acts 12:12, 25; 13:5, 13; 15:37, Col 4:10; 2 Tim 4:11; Phlm 24).

The earliest mention comes from Papias. The text of Papias was preserved by Eusebius who wrote in 325, “*And the Presbyter used to say this, Mark became Peter’s interpreter and wrote accurately all that he remembered, not, indeed, in order, of the things said and done by the Lord. For he had not heard the Lord, nor had followed him, but later*

*on, followed Peter, who used to give teaching as necessity demanded but not making, as it were, an arrangement of the Lord's oracles, so that Mark did nothing wrong in thus writing down single points as he remembered them. For to one thing he gave attention, to leave out nothing of what he had heard and to make no false statements in them."* (Ecclesiastical History, 3:39:15)

This information fits in with what is said of Mark in 1 Pet 5:13. There are also some similarities between Mark's gospel and Peter's letters. In addition, if we compare the preaching of Peter in Acts 10:34-43 with the sequence of events in the Gospel of Mark, we find the same structure. Also, the way in which Mark introduces Peter makes it very probable that Peter himself was the source. Therefore it is highly likely Mark is the author of this gospel and that he was closely connected with Peter. According to tradition, Mark's gospel was written in Rome at the end of the 50's or at the beginning of the 60's.

For whom was Mark written? Mark translates some Aramaic expressions into Greek or explains them (e.g. Mark 7:3-4 and 15:34). This means that his audience was at least partly made up of Gentile Christians. On the other hand, he and his readers knew the identity of Alexander and Rufus, sons of Simon from Cyrene (Mark 15:21). This tells us that they knew some Jewish people and that part of Mark's audience must have been Jewish Christians.

The Gospel of Mark is action-oriented. It contains many short accounts of Jesus' miracles but no long speeches. Jesus is constantly on the move, healing, exorcising demons, confronting opponents, and instructing the disciples. Mark connects the stories frequently with the word "immediately" (Greek *euthys*).

In the middle of the Gospel there is a story that is also found in Matthew and Luke: the account of Peter's confession of Christ and the subsequent rebukes that were related to Jesus' prediction about his death (Mark 8:27-33). This event, which took place at Caesarea Philippi, was the turning point in Jesus' ministry. Before that he performed great miracles to show who he was. After this first revelation of his approaching suffering there were no great miracles. Instead, Jesus was teaching about his suffering and death. Peter found it impossible to understand this. How could the Messiah and the Son of God suffer and die?

Mark wants his readers to understand, who Jesus is and what real discipleship is all about. He begins his gospel, not from the birth of Jesus, but from the ministry of John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus. From Mark 1:16 to 8:26 Jesus is in Galilee. The journey to Jerusalem begins in Mark 8:27, and, as in the other gospels, the end is devoted to the passion narrative.

The last verses of Mark, 16:9-20, have been placed in parentheses in many Bible translations. The reason is that these verses are not found in the earliest and most important manuscripts. It is very probable that this passage did not belong to the original gospel of Mark. It is not known whether Mark had another ending, which has disappeared, or whether he actually wanted to end his gospel in such a mysterious way. The reader is expecting a continuation, to know what happened next. It is likely that somebody wrote the continuation with that in mind during the first half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. His record of what Jesus said may well be reliable, although it was not found in Mark's original text. That passage was later deemed reliable by the Church and appended to the gospel.

### **20.3. Luke**

The Gospel of Luke is the first part of a two-volume work by the same author. The second part is called Acts. Luke's gospel is the longest book in the New Testament, and it contains a good deal of material not found elsewhere. Although the text itself does not name the author, it is quite generally accepted that he is Luke, a companion of Paul and a medical doctor (Col 4:14, 2 Tim 4:11, Phlm 24). There are several passages in Acts where the author uses the word "we", showing that he was present on those occasions (Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18 and 27:1-28:16).

The beginning of Luke is important, "Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so

that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught” (Luke 1:1-4). This is a typical beginning in classical letters, but at the same time it tells something about the way in which Luke constructed his gospel. He knew that several other writers had already done something similar. He also emphasizes that some of his sources had been eyewitnesses and that he had studied carefully the things he wrote about.

The dating of the Gospel of Luke depends on many things, e.g. the time of writing of Acts. It has been frequently dated in the 70’s or 80’s AD. However, there are good reasons to date it to the early 60’s. There is no mention in Acts of the Neronian persecution (later in the 60’s) or Paul’s death during those persecutions or the destruction of Jerusalem (in 70). Therefore it is natural to assume that both the Gospel of Luke and Acts were written before the latter part of the 60’s.

The Gospel of Luke is addressed to “most excellent Theophilus”. Theophilus was probably Luke’s friend and patron, who may have paid the costs of the books dedicated to him. The adjective “most excellent” probably means that Theophilus was a person of rank. The same word is used in the New Testament about two governors: Felix (Acts 24:3) and Festus (Acts 26:25). A personal name at the beginning of the Gospel does not mean that he was the only addressee. It is clear that Luke had in mind a larger group of people, probably Gentile Christians in particular.

It is clear that when he was writing his gospel, Luke knew Mark’s text and used it. He also had access, together with Matthew, to a common source which is called the Q-source. This has been proved by a process of reconstruction on the basis of the material, which Matthew and Luke have in common (see **The Synoptic problem**). In addition, Luke is thought to have used some other oral or literary sources. The inferred oral sources are known as the L-source. When he was using Mark, Luke sometimes shortened the stories. Luke has a lot of material that does not appear in Matthew or Mark. The long passage Luke 9:51-19:27 is the prime example of material that does not appear in the other gospels.

Another example is the story of the birth of Jesus. Luke also wrote the famous narratives of the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan. Luke emphasizes the importance of the position of women, children and poor people. He also warns against focusing on riches.

**Paul John Isaak** of Namibia writes about this message in Luke, “Luke focuses on Jesus’ attitude to social issues and is committed to a prophetic concern for the poor, the oppressed, widows, the ill, senior citizens, children and those with disabilities. This social gospel was an unmistakable feature of Jesus’ ministry... Luke also shows Jesus affirming the value of several other groups that were denied full acceptance in the society of his day, including women, children, Samaritans, Gentiles, tax collectors and sinners... We are called to a prophetic ministry that is rooted in local congregations and grass-roots communities struggling with major social issues. Being engaged in such ministry will result in conflict, mutual reprimands and bitter debate as we seek to resolve differences or to bring inconsistencies to light... Luke’s vision of the gospel is rooted in a profound experience of spirituality, from which emerged a community to opposing all forms of injustice in society and seeking to embody God’s new world.” (ABC, pp. 1203-1204)

The Holy Spirit has a central role in Luke’s gospel. In addition, this gospel reminds its readers about the importance of prayer, and it is also the gospel of joy. The word of God is important to Luke. He quotes often from the Scriptures and emphasizes Jesus’ words according to which “everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms” (Luke 24:44).

Luke’s gospel is Jerusalem-oriented in a special way. The first episodes take place in Jerusalem, and the last scene of the events is also Jerusalem. After the resurrection Luke differs from the other gospels in that he does not mention Galilee any more. In addition, towards the middle of the gospel it is said that “Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem”. Also, the famous encounter on the road to Emmaus is found only in Luke.

#### **20.4. John**

The Gospel of John differs remarkably from the three synoptic gospels. Although John begins with a prologue and ends with the passion story of Jesus like the other Synoptics, he has only a few stories in common with them. The cleansing of the temple (in John in the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, in the Synoptics at the end of the ministry) and the feeding miracle are almost the only stories which occur in all four

gospels. In addition, the style in John and in the Synoptics differs a lot. Concerning the history of Jesus' ministry, the Synoptics tell about only one journey to Jerusalem, but John mentions four journeys. There are also differences in the chronology of the last days of Jesus.

The question of the author of John's gospel has caused a lot of discussion among theologians. Like all the other gospels, the original Gospel of John is anonymous. That designation, however, is very early. But the identity of this John is not quite clear. The most common traditional answer is that he was John, the son of Zebedee, a disciple of Jesus. But there was also another John, who was called "the Elder" and who has also been suggested to be the author of the Gospel of John.

Several ancient authors mention that a disciple of Jesus wrote this gospel. The following quotation comes from Irenaeus who lived in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century and knew Polycarp personally. Polycarp on the other hand had known many apostles personally. He died as a martyr in 156 at the age of eighty-six. Irenaeus writes,

*"I remember the events of those days more clearly than those which have happened recently, for what we learn as children grows up with the soul and becomes united to it, so I can speak even of the place in which the blessed Polycarp sat and disputed, how he came in and went out, the character of his life, the appearance of his body, the discourse which he made to the people, how he reported his converse with John and with the others who had seen the Lord, how he remembered their words, and what were the things concerning the Lord which he had heard from them, including his miracles and his teaching, and how Polycarp had received them from the eyewitnesses of the word of life, and reported all things in agreement with the Scriptures."* Very probable John in this text is the disciple of Jesus. Irenaeus writes also that *"John the disciple of the Lord, who leaned back on his breast, published the Gospel while he was resident at Ephesus in Asia"*.

We can accept the traditional view of the authorship although there are some open questions. Could John have said about himself that he was "the disciple whom Jesus loved"? And who are those that write at the end of the gospel "We know that his testimony is true"? It is very probable that some pupils of John edited the gospel later on and that they added their testimony to the end of the gospel. Actually it looks like the

original book ended in 20:30 and that the last chapter is a later addition. Such passages as John 2:12 and 2:21-22 may be examples of similar edited clarifications as well.

The dating of John's gospel is also a question where opinions vary a great deal. According to the most popular theory, it should be dated in the 90's, which would make it much later than the other gospels. This theory is based mostly on the observation that John's gospel differs so greatly from the others and that the destruction of the temple must be in the distant past because it is not mentioned in the text. Also, John 16:2 may contain a reference to a curse called *Birkat-ha-Minim* which was issued c. 85 AD with the express purpose of dispelling the Christians from the synagogue.

On the other hand, the fact that John's gospel knows nothing about Jerusalem's destruction may point to a date before that terrible event. In addition it mentions that "there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool." If Jerusalem had been already destroyed, the text would read "there was in Jerusalem". It is also possible that John uses the present tense, although the things he is writing about belong to the past. As for conflicts between Jews and Christians, they were a fact of life as early as the time of Paul in the 50's. To sum up, John's gospel cannot be dated with absolute certainty, but a date in the 80's or 90's seems likely.

It is noteworthy that the writer of the gospel knows Jerusalem's geography and Jewish customs very well. He mentions religious rituals (2:6; 7:37; 18:28; 19:31-42), Jewish practices (4:27) and Sabbath rules (5:10; 7:21-23; 9:14-16). John mentions such places in Jerusalem and its surroundings as the Pool of Bethesda with its five covered colonnades (5:2), the Pool of Siloam (9:7) which was found by archaeologists in 2004, the Kidron Valley (18:1), two different places called Bethany (1:28 and 12:1), and Aenon near Salim (3:23). Other geographical sites mentioned by John are Cana in Galilee (2:1; 4:46; 21:2), Sychar in Samaria (4:5) and Mount Gerizim, "this mountain", in 4:21. All of these texts are proof that the writer knew the country and its life extremely well.

John's gospel differs from the Synoptics also in its description of the pre-existence of Jesus (1:1-5; 8:58; 17:5). Theologically this can be combined with the doctrine of the virgin birth recorded in Matthew

(1:22-23) and Luke (1:34-38). According to John, Jesus also spoke directly about his divinity (10:30-38; 14:9).

Comparing the human with the divine is a typical construction in John's gospel. Examples of this are wine and "new vine" (ch. 2), birth and new birth (ch. 3), water and living water (ch. 4), bread and living bread (ch. 6), darkness and light (ch. 8), and death and eternal life (ch. 11). In all these passages the listeners think that Jesus is speaking about earthly things when he is in fact referring to heavenly things.

Another typical feature is the "I am" –sayings. Jesus says that "I am the bread of life", "the gate for the sheep", "the good shepherd", "the resurrection and the life", "the way and the truth and the life" and "the true vine". He even said, violating the rules of grammatical construction, that "before Abraham was born, I am!" (John 8:58). This Greek phrase (*ego eimi*) occurs also in John 6:20, where Jesus meets his disciples in the storm, and again in John 18:5, 6, 8, where Jesus is asked who he is. All of these sayings are very important, because they not only clarify the authority of Jesus but also connect him with the holy name of God in Exod 3:14, "God said to Moses, 'I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

We mentioned a text-critical problem when dealing with Mark's gospel, but there is one in John as well. John 7:53-8:11 does not occur in the most original texts. This passage has been incorporated into John quite late. In some manuscripts it has been placed after John 7:44, in some others after John 7:36 or 21:25, even after Luke 21:38. This tells us that the place of this passage has varied and that it did not belong to the original text of John's gospel. In spite of that, the passage may well tell the authentic story about Jesus and the woman caught in adultery.

The discrepancy between the passion stories in the Synoptics and John is another difficult question. The Synoptics seem to speak of the 14<sup>th</sup> of Nisan and John of the 15<sup>th</sup> of Nisan as the day on which Jesus died. The most likely solution is that the Synoptics (Matt 26:17, Mark 14:12 and Luke 22:7) speak about the eve of the Passover when the lamb had not yet been slaughtered. Therefore the lamb is not mentioned as part of the supper. The death of Jesus, in turn, took place the next day, the day of the Passover, as John explains (John 13:1-2 and 19:14).

In summary, the message of John is exceptionally profound, because the Gospel reveals both the human and the divine nature of Jesus very clearly. It also contains one of the clearest New Testament teachings about the Holy Spirit.

## **20.5. Acts**

After his gospel, Luke wrote the Acts of the Apostles, the second volume of a history of Christian beginnings. The name of the book is of later origin. If Luke had given the title, it might have been “The Acts of the Holy Spirit”. In Acts we can follow the life of the early Christian church during three decades. The first main character is Peter (in chapters 1-12), and the second is Paul (in chapters 13-28).

The question of authorship was already discussed in connection with the Gospel of Luke. The same man wrote these two volumes, and we have reason to believe that he was Luke, a companion of Paul and a medical doctor (Col 4:14, 2 Tim 4:11, Phlm 24).

Scholars have suggested a number of possible dates for the writing of Acts. The earliest are in the 60’s, and such time spans as 80-95 and even 115-130 have been suggested as well. The best arguments have been presented for the 60’s, because the book does not mention the Neronian persecution or Paul’s death. Furthermore, it does not seem to contain any references to the Pauline letters.

The relationship between Acts and the Pauline letters has been under considerable debate. Some scholars argue that there are too many discrepancies between them. But it is possible to combine the information in the following way:

<u>Event</u>	<u>Paul's letter</u>	<u>Acts</u>
Persecution	Gal 1:13, 14	Acts 9
Conversion	Gal 1:15, 17a	Acts 9
Arabia	Gal 1:17b	not mentioned
Damascus	Gal 1:17c	Acts 9
Jerusalem	Gal 1:18, 19	Acts 9
Syria and Cilicia	Gal 1:21	Acts 11:25
Jerusalem after 14 years	Gal 2:1-10	Acts 11 or 15
Philippi	1 Thess 2:1-2; Phil 4:15-16	Acts 17
Thessalonica	1 Thess 2:1-2; Phil 4:15-16	Acts 17
Athens	1 Thess 3:1-3	Acts 17
Corinth	2 Cor 11:7-9	Acts 18
Troas	2 Cor 2:12	not mentioned
Macedonia	2 Cor 8-9	Acts 20
Corinth	2 Cor 12	Acts 20:2b-3
Jerusalem	Rom 15:22-25	Acts 21
Rome	Rom 15:22-25	Acts 28

We can regard Acts as the first history of the Church, and indeed it contains several historical details which are very accurate. During the first centuries the titles of officials varied a lot, but in Acts the designations are exactly right. The description of Jerusalem's temple in Acts 21 shows that the author knew the place. Luke mentions such historical incidents as the death of Herod Agrippa I (12:19-23), a severe famine in the mid-40's (11:27-30), the edict of Claudius expelling Jews from Rome (18:2), and the replacement of the Judean procurator Felix with Festus. All of these facts are confirmed by secular historical sources.

Acts contains several long speeches. In fact they make up more than one third of the entire book. A critical reader may well ask whether it was possible to record long speeches accurately in antiquity. Thucydides states a good example of how speeches were recorded and preserved in the ancient world. He describes this procedure in his history of the Peloponnesian War,

“As to the speeches that were made by different men, either when they were about to begin the war or when they were already engaged therein, it has been difficult to recall with strict accuracy the words actually spoken, both for me as regards that which I myself heard, and for those who from various other sources have brought me reports. Therefore the speeches are given in the language which, as it seemed to me, the several speakers would express, on the subjects under consideration, the sentiments most befitting the occasion, though at the same time I have adhered as closely as possible to the general sense of what was actually said.”

If we compare James’ speech in Acts 15:13-21 with his letter, we find many similarities. We can also study Paul’s speech to the Ephesians in Acts 20:18-35 and find a lot of similar expressions in Paul’s letters, especially in Thessalonians. We can conclude that although the very words (*ipsissima verba*) of the speeches were not preserved, the voice of the speaker (*ipsissima vox*) was.

The Book of Acts begins with the story of Jesus’ ascension to heaven. Chapter 2 is very important, because it tells what happened at the first Christian Pentecost. The Holy Spirit descended upon the gathered people, and as a result three thousand of them were baptized and became Christians. This was the birthday of the Christian Church. The following chapters tell about the life of young church in Jerusalem. The first Christian martyr was Stephen (ch. 7). The conversion of Paul (originally Saul), who had persecuted Christians, marks a turning point in Acts (ch. 9). Another important event is the meeting of Peter and the Gentiles in Caesarea (ch. 10). These were the first steps toward the big change, when the originally Jewish Christian church turned to the Gentiles. Acts 13:46 is an important verse, “Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly, ‘We had to speak the word of God to you [Jews] first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourself worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles.’”

Chapters 13-28 contain the story of Gentile mission in Acts. The transfer from the Jewish Christian church to the Gentiles was not easy and gave rise to heated debates among the first Christians. Acts 15 tells about the first Christian council in which this issue was discussed. The council came up with a compromise suggestion, outlining rules that

were to be adhered to in order to avoid further conflicts (see the article by Gerson Mgya).

**Paul Mumo Kisau** of Kenya comments on Acts by saying, “One of the major themes in Acts is inclusiveness. Luke provides strong evidence that the community of believers transcends all racial, regional and social barriers. The church should not be divided on the lines of race, region or social class. Believers are called to reach out to everyone.... The African continent entered the twenty-first century ravaged by wars both large and small. It knows far too much of hate and disharmony. The church in Africa needs to be challenged by the inclusiveness of the earliest community of believers to provide an alternative model. By spreading the gospel to all, we can counter this torrent of evil.” (ABC, p. 1297)

Paul’s strategy was to begin from the biggest cities (see **Paul as a missionary**). After that the newly converted Christians were able to spread the Gospel more easily to the surrounding areas. Paul’s dream was always to go to places in which the Gospel had not been preached. After traveling unbelievable distances in Asia Minor and Greece he still wanted to push on. His next goal was Rome, but there was already a Christian church in Rome, established probably soon after the first Pentecost. Therefore Paul wanted to continue on to Spain, which was thought to be the end of the world.

As Acts ends, Paul is in a Roman prison. We do not know for certain what happened to him after that. We do not even know why Luke finished his story in this way. One possibility is that he intended to write a third part to his history work, but this plan never became a reality. Another suggestion is that he closed his text in this way on purpose and that he wanted his readers to continue what had been started.

## 20.6. Romans

The Letter to the Romans is the longest of Paul’s letters and theological-ly the most significant. Martin Luther writes in his preface to Romans, *“This letter is truly the most important piece in the New Testament. It is purest Gospel. It is well worth a Christian’s while not only to memorize it word for word but also to occupy himself with it daily, as though it*

*were the daily bread of the soul. It is impossible to read or to meditate on this letter too much or too well. The more one deals with it, the more precious it becomes and the better it tastes.*” No other New Testament letter contains such thorough and fundamental teaching about salvation, righteousness through faith, sin, and the Christian life. The role of Israel in salvation history is also dealt with in detail.

Romans is exceptional in that Paul is writing to a church which he has not founded and not even visited. He tells about his plan to visit Rome in Rom 15:22-28. He is thinking about traveling to Spain and stopping in Rome on the way in order to meet the Christians living in the capital of the empire. He would like to be encouraged by their faith and come to them “in the full measure of the blessing of Christ”. He is introducing himself and his doctrine to a church that does not know him very well. At the same time he hopes that the Roman Christians would help him continue his journey. His passion is “to preach the gospel where Christ is not known”.

Paul must have written Romans near the end of his third missionary journey. Paul had decided to travel first to Jerusalem (Acts 19:21; 20:16, cf. Rom 15:26). Corinth is the most likely place of writing, and the date is c. 57 AD. The letter is addressed to “all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints” (Rom 1:7). The Roman church had probably been established by Jews who had been converted on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:10). The Roman historian Suetonius wrote in 49 AD that the Emperor Claudius “*expelled the Jews from Rome because they were constantly rioting at the instigation of Chrestus*”. Chrestus may well mean Christ. This event is also mentioned in Acts 18:2, where Luke says that Aquila and Priscilla had recently come to Corinth from Italy “because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome”. From Paul’s letter to the Romans it seems clear that there were both Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome at the time. The long list of friends greeted by Paul may seem strange in the light of the fact that Paul had never visited Rome. Therefore some scholars think that the list did not belong to the original letter. However, people traveled a lot in those times, and Paul had met a great number of people, not just Priscilla and Aquila, during his journeys in other places.

Romans deals with several central doctrinal issues. Rom 1:17 is the opening verse of the teaching of righteousness through faith. This topic continues in chapters 2-4. Paul states that “no one will be declared righteous in his [God’s] sight by observing the law” (Rom 3:20) and that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). Therefore we are “justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Jesus Christ” (Rom 3:24). Abraham is an Old Testament example of a man of faith because he “believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness” (Rom 4:3-5).

In Romans 5-8 Paul writes about baptism, the law and the gospel, and the new life in the Holy Spirit. This section ends with a beautiful doxology in 8:31-39. Chapters 9-11 deal with Israel’s destiny. The crucial question is: has God rejected his people for not believing in him? Paul’s answer is, “By no means!” (Rom 11:1). He even reveals a secret which he must have learned from the Lord himself, namely that “Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved” (Rom 11:25-26).

The final chapters, 12-16, deal with the Christian life. We are urged to give ourselves as living sacrifices to God and told to use the gifts which God has given to us (ch. 12). Submission to the authorities is expected from the Christians (ch. 13), although those authorities are not always Christians themselves. In the church we must take care of those who are weak (ch. 14) and seek unity among ourselves (ch. 15). The last chapter (16) is full of personal greetings.

There are several other topics in Romans, e.g. the question of homosexuality in Rom 1:18-32. **Yusufu Turaki** of Nigeria writes, “Homosexuality, defined as ‘sexual attraction to or sexual relations with members of the same sex’ has been around for a very long time in all societies. But whereas in the past homosexual behavior was widely regarded as sinful and abnormal, today it is presented as an acceptable alternative lifestyle. Many homosexuals insist that they are a minority group and that condemnation of homosexuality represents a denial of human rights. In defence of this position, they argue that homosexuality

is a biological condition that has nothing to do with morality or spirituality – it is not a matter of choice, but is genetically determined... African tradition has varied in regard to the practice of homosexuality. It is accepted in some communities and rejected in others. Homosexual acts have been seen as the way to gain certain spiritual powers... Our view on homosexuality should not be derived from human sources but from the Word of God. The Bible clearly defines homosexuality as a sin. We see this in the punishment of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18:16-19:29) and in Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10. It is described as a depraved and sinful practice in Romans 1:24-27... God clearly defines a proper sexual relationship as being between a man and his wife who become one flesh (Gen 2:24)." (ABC, p. 1355)

Salvation by faith is the central issue in Romans. **Tokunboh Adeyemo** of Nigeria writes about this topic by comparing the message of Christianity with other religions and their roads to salvation. He argues that different religions offer different prescriptions for achieving salvation, for example performing the right rituals, losing all desires, behaving in the right way, achieving union with the Absolute, pursuing pleasure and obeying laws. "All these approaches differ from Christianity in the way they address the fundamental problem of sin. In all non-Christian religions, sin is regarded as an act. If sin is an act, then people can learn how to avoid doing it. All the paths to salvation outlined above attempt to prescribe how this can be done. However, if sin is actually part of our nature, it cannot be avoided – a saviour offers the only hope. Think of a drowning swimmer in the middle of the ocean? What can he do to save himself? ... The critical component in Christianity is the cross, where the sin factor was dealt with. God made Jesus to be sin though he was sinless so that anyone who believes in him can receive God's forgiveness and be saved." (ABC, p. 1353)

### **20.7. 1 Corinthians**

The Apostle Paul visited Corinth during his second missionary journey (Acts 18). Paul stayed there a year and a half working together with Priscilla and Aquila. All three were originally tentmakers. Before coming to Corinth Paul had faced problems in Thessalonica and Berea

(Acts 17). That was probably why he approached Corinth “in weakness and fear, and with much trembling” (1 Cor 2:3).

After Paul’s departure from Corinth, Apollos and some others continued to teach there. We don’t know exactly what they were teaching, but some confusion had been caused. As a result, the young church had been divided into several parties, and the position of Paul had been questioned (1 Cor 1:10-12; 4:1-21; 9:1-2). Paul received news from Corinth and learned of the problems in the church. 1 Corinthians is Paul’s answer to these problems and questions. He wrote the letter probably from Ephesus during his long term of ministry there in 52-55.

We have in our Bible two letters of Paul to the Corinthians. It is possible that Paul wrote as many as four letters, two of which have disappeared. In 1 Cor 5:9 Paul writes, “I have written to you in my letter...” which may be a reference to the first letter that has disappeared. The next letter could be our 1 Corinthians. Then in 2 Cor 2:4 he says, “I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears...” This does not fit in with 1 Cor, and therefore we can assume that he is referring to the third letter. 2 Corinthians would be, then, Paul’s fourth letter to the Corinthians. There are also other theories on the number of letters and how they should be combined. Some scholars think that chapters 10-13 of 2 Cor constitute the third letter, which has been called “the tearful letter”.

In a sense, we can be happy about the problems in the Corinthian church, because they are the reason why Paul wrote his letters to Corinth. 1 Corinthians contains several doctrinal teachings of great importance. Without them we would be much more poorly informed about those issues. Paul deals with the doctrine of the church, the apostleship, how to solve conflicts in the congregation, marriage, food sacrificed to idols, behavior in meetings of the church, the Lords’ supper, spiritual gifts, and the resurrection body. Some of these topics are touched on below.

Food sacrificed to idols may not be a problem in western churches in this day and age, but the situation is different in many Asian and perhaps also in some African churches. In any case, the way in which Paul approaches the issue is very helpful in dealing with many controversial topics that are being discussed among Christians. There are

always issues which some Christians will consider sin and some others will not. Concerning food taboos, Paul’s advice in 1 Cor 8 is that in principle a Christian is free to eat anything, because it is not the food that makes him unclean. However, he must not use his freedom thoughtlessly and cause his brother to fall into sin.

Spiritual gifts are dealt with in 1 Cor 12-14. This is the most comprehensive teaching on this issue in the New Testament (see also Gerson Mgya’s article). Paul begins his text in the same way as several other topics in Corinthians, “Now about spiritual gifts, brothers.” This tells us that the Christians in Corinth have asked his opinion about the gifts. It also seems clear that there were groups in the church which put so much emphasis on some spiritual gifts that in their opinion those who did not have them were not good Christians at all. These Corinthian “charismatics” did not trust Paul because according to them he was not spiritual enough. Paul is wise and does not blame the charismatics for the way in which they are using God’s gifts. On the contrary, he encourages them to use their gifts but to use them for the building of the church. He also widens their horizons concerning the gifts. Not only those who speak in tongues are spiritual, but also those who are apostles (Paul himself!), teachers, administrators, singers, etc. (1 Cor 12:28; 14:26). The main emphasis is that all spiritual gifts have been given “for the common good” and “to build up the church” and “everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way” (1 Cor 12:7; 14:12, 40). It must be remembered that “all these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines” (1 Cor 12:11).

The following table illustrates on the one hand the unity and on the other hand the multiplicity of the gifts. This is merely the text in 1 Cor 12:4-6 in table form.

GIFT	DIFFERENT	SPIRIT	THE SAME
SERVICE	DIFFERENT	LORD	THE SAME
WORKING	DIFFERENT	GOD	THE SAME

The first column gives three different names to the spiritual gifts, in Greek *kharisma*, *diakonia*, *energeema*. They are different (the second column), and their multiplicity is enormous. The third column emphasizes the giver of all gifts: the Triune God, not only the Holy Spirit but

also the Son and the Father. We don't have three Gods but just one (fourth column).

The teaching in 1 Cor 15 is the most central in the Bible concerning the resurrection of Christ and the resurrection body of the Christian. Verses 3-5 contain one of the oldest confessions of faith, "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve" (1 Cor 15:3-5). This formulation is pre-Pauline, because he writes that he has received it from the church.

Next Paul emphasizes that Christ's resurrection is the cornerstone of Christianity, "If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith" (1 Cor 15:14). It is understandable to be interested in life after death and want to know what the resurrection body is like. In verses 35-58 of this chapter we are given the best biblical answer to that question. The resurrection body is like a plant which cannot grow without seed. The plant (the spiritual body) comes out of the seed (the natural body). It has something in common with the seed, but at the same time it is totally different. There is a unity, but the form is not the same. They belong together, but they are different by nature.

At the end of 1 Corinthians Paul sends greetings, as in most of his letters. He also reminds Christians to set aside a sum of money for the collection he will make. It is worthwhile to note that the day on which this should be done is "the first day of every week". This suggests that the Christians gathered for worship on Sundays, not any more on Saturdays like the Jews. Act 20:7 testifies about this as well.

## **20.8. 2 Corinthians**

The second letter to Corinthians was sent to the same church as the first letter. As we mentioned above, Paul may have written more than two letters to Corinth and this "second" one may in reality be the fourth. But we speak here only of the first and the second letters which we have in our Bible. It is probable that Paul wrote this second letter also from Ephesus.

The situation in Corinth has changed in some respects after 1 Corinthians. 2 Corinthians is the most personal of all of Paul's letters. He reveals his feelings and inner struggles in this letter more openly than in any other epistles of his. 2 Cor resembles 1 Cor in that some issues are examined in more detail than in any other New Testament book. Paul deals with such topics as comfort, the glory of God, the ministry of reconciliation, sharing and giving among Christians, and his personal thorn in the flesh.

It is possible to identify at least one group of Paul's opponents by reading 2 Corinthians. Paul calls them false apostles. They rejected Paul's claim to apostlehood. They also attacked Paul's personal integrity in financial matters. These opponents were Jewish Christians who were proud both of their Jewish ancestry and the fact that they were servants of Christ. Paul accused them of preaching another Jesus and a different gospel (2 Cor 11:4).

Paul feels constrained to point out that his ministry does not lack commendation (2 Cor 3:1-3), knowledge (11:6), or authority (13:10). He also points out that he has experienced visions and revelations of God (12:1-5) and that he has performed signs and wonders (12:11-12). But then he expresses his opinion about triumphalism by emphasizing that the one who preaches the gospel of the crucified Christ will exemplify in his ministry the same kind of weakness in which Christ was crucified (4:7-12; 12:9-10; 13:3-4).

Writing about the thorn in his flesh, Paul reveals his own weakness in a very touching way (2 Cor 12:1-10). He says that he could boast of his visions but that then he would risk the temptation of becoming proud. That is why God has allowed a serious difficulty in his life. We do not know what his "thorn" was. Many suggestions have been made: an illness, a personal sin which caused him to fall time and again, extremely trying friends or co-workers, or memories of his early life as a persecutor of Christians. Whatever that thorn was, it must have been very unpleasant and painful. He prayed and prayed that God would take it away. But God did not answer, and Paul continued his life and ministry. At times this difficulty resurfaced and rendered him nearly unable to work. Again he asked God to take the unbearable weight from his shoulders. He felt that he could have served God much better

without this load. But God did not take it away. Paul tried to accept it and continued his ministry. But later on the thorn was again causing almost unbearable pain. He prayed and prayed, and at last the answer came, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” This answer meant that instead of removing the difficulty God helped Paul understand the purpose of it all in a new way. He needed the thorn, and without it he would not have understood that God’s grace was his only hope. Paul learned through this inner battle that he was at his strongest when he was weak. This teaching is called the theology of the cross, as opposed to the theology of glory.

## **20.9. Galatians**

It is indisputable that the author of the letter to Galatians is Paul, but it is not clear when, where and to whom it was written. Galatia means either the northern part of Asia Minor (present-day Turkey) or its southern part. If the South Galatian theory is correct, the letter was written quite early during Paul’s ministry. The North Galatian theory fits in better with Paul’s late ministry. The main point at issue is whether Paul wrote the letter before or after the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15). The early possibility is preferable, and in that case the date of writing is c. 48 AD. That would make Galatians the earliest of Paul’s letters.

The beginning of Galatians differs from most other Pauline Epistles. He begins by introducing himself and sending greetings in the name of the Lord. But after that he usually writes some positive things about the church he is addressing. In this case he has nothing good to say. He plunges directly into his main theme by saying, “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel “(Gal 1:6). Paul makes immediately clear what his message is. He goes on to explain emphatically what salvation by grace means. This letter resembles Romans in the sense that Paul focuses on two issues: righteousness and the correct understanding of the relationship of the law and the gospel.

Who were the advocates of “a different gospel”? They can be called Judaizers. In other words they were Jewish Christians, who demanded

the Gentile Christians to keep the Jewish law and be circumcised. Paul opposes them uncompromisingly, emphasizing the absolute pre-eminence salvation by grace, salvation as a free gift. If anything is added to the grace of God, it is not grace any more.

Gal 1:11-24 is the only passage in Paul's letters where he describes what happened to him after his conversion. We learn that he spent three years in Arabia before joining the disciples in Jerusalem. He emphasizes that he has received his gospel not from people but from God. He must have studied his Bible from a totally new perspective, and his eyes must have been opened to the gospel of Jesus during that period.

The main message of Galatians is expressed e.g. in Gal 2:16, "[We] know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ." Later on he asks, "Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?" and answers, "Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, 'The righteous will live by faith'" (Gal 3:5, 11). Paul also reveals the secret of the blessing given to Abraham (Gen 12:1-3) as he writes, "He [Jesus] redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit" (Gal 3:14). What, then, is the meaning of the law? It is God's holy will which shows how we should live as God's children. But keeping the law is not the way to salvation. Instead, the law shows that we are sinners and lawbreakers. Paul writes, "But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe" (3:22).

After emphasizing that salvation comes through grace, Paul moves on to teach about the life of a Christian. It includes an inner battle between our sinful nature and God's holy will. The Holy Spirit in us wants us to love God and our fellow men and walk under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Instead, our sinful nature causes us to be tempted to commit sins of every description. Paul lists the acts of sinful nature in 5:19-21 and the fruit of the Spirit in 5:22-23. We cannot achieve "fruit of the Spirit" in our own strength; they are God's gifts which will grow in our lives as we follow him.

## 20.10. Ephesians

The traditional view is that Ephesians was written by the Apostle Paul. In modern times this has been questioned by many scholars. This issue was dealt with earlier in **The question of Pauline authorship**. There is enough evidence to support Pauline authorship of Ephesians.

This letter was written in prison (Eph 3:1; 4:1). This is usually understood to refer to Paul's imprisonment in Rome toward the end of his life, in other words to the early 60's. The letter claims to have been addressed "to the saints in Ephesus" (Eph 1:1). The word "in Ephesus" is not found in some early manuscripts. Therefore many scholars think that it is a later addition and that the original aim was to send the letter to several churches. The fact that there are no personal greetings in the letter speaks for this theory. In spite of that it is possible that the letter's original address was Ephesus.

Ephesians is a letter for the Church. More than the other New Testament epistles it emphasizes the importance and structure of Christian congregation. Christ is the head of the Church, which is the body of Christ, and all Christians are members of this body. Each Christian has gifts of his own and a place of his own in the Church. There are many different tasks for them, but the Church is one, united in Christ.

The greeting in the beginning of the letter is long. There is a confession of faith in the middle of it, "In him [Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins" (Eph 1:7). In chapter 2 Paul writes that we were dead in our transgressions and sins but that God made us alive in Christ, by grace. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph 2:8). Therefore all Christians are one in Christ. He has destroyed the barrier between Jewish and Gentile Christians.

Chapters 3 and 4 teach "how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ" (Eph 3:18). Although we are one body in Christ, each of us has received different gifts from God. He "gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so

that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God..." (Eph 4:11-13).

The list of apostles, prophets, evangelists and teachers is a description of different tasks in the early Church. These are not, however, the only tasks but merely examples of the variety of gifts and duties in the Church. In this light it can be accepted that the office of the apostle disappeared after the New Testament era. We have pastors and other church leaders in our churches, but they are not called apostles any more.

**Adama Ouédraogo** of Burkina Faso writes that in African churches several people have been called apostles and prophets. Some of them have performed their duties commendably, but there have been others who have caused a lot of problems. He continues, "There are also some more negative aspects associated with the emergence of African prophets and apostles. Many of them lack biblical and theological training and rely solely on their own gifts. But the growth of the church depends on the exercise of a variety of complementary gifts. An apostle or prophet cannot go it alone without the help of teachers (Eph 4:11-14). Those who want to preach the word of God must therefore study it seriously or surround themselves with those who have done so."

Ouédraogo writes about the serious problems caused by false prophets, "Many African prophets and apostles also indulge in a personality cult. They cloak the events of their lives, including the circumstances of their call, in mystery, sometimes citing biblical allusions to the Messiah. They give the impression that they have come down from heaven like Jesus or that they have as much power as he does. Some even claim to be Christ's successors or even another Christ. Such claims make them objects of worship. Sadly, many of them gain almost total control of the minds of their followers. The New Testament warns us against such people (Matt 24:11, 24; Jude 4-16)." (ABC, p. 1434)

The final chapters of Ephesians contain exhortations to Christians. In Eph 5:21-33 we have the clearest teaching on marriage in Paul's letters. Paul emphasizes the importance of mutual love between the spouses and compares it with the close relationship between Christ and the Church. Paul's teaching about man as the head of the family has aroused heated discussion about gender equality. It is important to

remember that the passage which says “wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord” is preceded by “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph 5:21-22). Husbands must not subdue their wives. Paul writes to them, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” Christ’s love is the model for the husband in this respect. The Christian husband is not an autocrat. His love for his wife is a serving love, and he is ready to give himself up for her. According to Paul, the spouses are different but also equal, and love is the bond that ties them together.

**Yusufu Turaki** of Nigeria writes about the relationship between man and woman, “This divine arrangement does not imply that women are in any way inferior to men or men superior to women. Both wives and husbands have been assigned roles in the home and in the church. In 1 Corinthians 11:12, Paul explains the hierarchy: God is the head of Christ (though both are essentially equal), Christ is the head of the man, and the man is the head of the woman. If wives are to model their behavior on the relationship between the church and Christ, then husbands are to model their behavior on the way Christ loved the church and demonstrated his love by dying on the cross. Such divine love goes far beyond sexual love or even friendship love. It sacrifices itself for the one it loves.” (ABC, p. 1436)

### **20.11. Philippians**

Like Ephesians, Philippians was written by Paul from prison (Phil 1:7, 13, 17). Where the prison was located is not clear. Acts tell about his imprisonment in Caesarea (Acts 24:27) and in Rome (Acts 28:16). Besides, Paul writes in 2 Cor 11:23 that he had been in prison “more frequently” than the others, which makes it clear that he had undergone more imprisonments than the ones mentioned in Acts. There are advocates for both places among the scholars, and some suggest even Ephesus. We have no final answer to this question, and therefore the question of the date of writing must be left open as well.

The letter to Philippians has been called “a letter of joy”, because Paul encourages his addressees to rejoice, even in the midst of difficulties. This short letter contains important teaching about Christ’s humility and

exaltation. He came down from heaven, lived as man among men, and was obedient to death, but is now exalted to the highest place. Paul tells us about his personal feelings and sends greetings to some friends of his. The relationship between Paul and the church in Philippi seems to have been very close. That is why this letter contains many touching and encouraging passages.

Paul begins by greeting “all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons”. “Overseer” (Greek *episkopos*) occurs only here and in Acts 20:28, 1 Tim 3:2, Tit 1:7 and 1 Pet 2:25. Later on the word has often been translated “bishop”, but at this stage the offices in the church had not been established. *Episkopos* and *presbyteros* (“elder”, e.g. Acts 14:23) may have referred to the same office.

After greeting the church warmly Paul considers whether it is better for him to die or to live, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body” (Phil 1:21-24). This may suggest that Paul was struggling with exhaustion, but that he finally concluded that life is a gift from God and that he must work as long as God gives him life and breath.

The hymn in Phil 2:6-11 seems to be a liturgical text, and Paul had probably learned it from the church. Paul emphasizes that Christians should be like Christ and to live in humility. This hymn clarifies in a very special way the two natures of Christ. He was fully human and fully divine. In his earthly life he took “the very nature of servant, being made in human likeness”. This led him to the cross. Then “God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father”.

In chapter 3 Paul testifies what it means for him to follow Jesus, “But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost

all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ” (Phil 3:7-9).

In chapter 4 a passage not only encourages us to leave all our difficulties to God in prayer but also promises that he will take care of us, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:6-7). It is noteworthy that what the text promises is not that all our prayers will be answered. But it does promise that we will have the peace of God in our hearts. God answers in the way that serves our best interests. We are to trust him and to rest on his promises.

## **20.12. Colossians**

The authorship of Colossians has caused a lot of discussion among scholars. Traditionally it has been considered a Pauline letter, and this is also its self-evidence in verses 1:1, 23 and 4:18. In modern times some scholars have challenged the traditional view and attributed the letter to some of Paul’s followers. This “deutero-Pauline” view is based on three considerations: the letter’s language, theology and relation to Ephesians. According to this view, the letter contains many words that are not typical of Paul, it leaves out some central theological Pauline emphases and has some others not found in the other Pauline letters. It is also claimed that it is too close to Ephesians in its content. However, these arguments are not convincing, and what is more, there are inner contradictions between them. Therefore, we are well justified to believe that this epistle was written by the Apostle Paul.

Colossians is also a prison letter. But again, as in the case of Ephesians, we don’t know which imprisonment Paul is referring to. That is also why the date of writing is uncertain. If the letter was written in Rome, it will have to be dated to the early 60’s; if not, then the date is probably some time in the late 50’s.

The church at Colossae had not been founded by Paul (Col 2:1). In all likelihood, Epaphras was the evangelist who brought the gospel to that

city (Col 1:7). Paul may have sent him to Colossae. There was some disturbance in the church, and Paul sent this letter to teach the Christians. He warns the Christians not to accept the “hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ” (Col 2:8). His solution is to emphasize the supremacy of Christ. He also gives some advice about the way in which Christians ought to live.

The Christological hymn in Col 1:15-20 is unique in Paul’s writings. Christ is introduced as one who was already present in creation. “For by him all things were created... all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.”

Here we meet the message that has later been called the doctrine of Jesus’ *pre-existence*. The Old Testament basis for this doctrine is found in Prov. 8:22-31, which tells about the personal Wisdom who “was appointed from eternity, from the beginning, before the world began”. The equivalent of this Wisdom (Greek *sophia*) is the Word (Greek *logos*) in John 1:1-4, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men.” References to the pre-existence of Jesus can also be seen in John 8:58 and Hebr 10:5-7 (quoting from Ps 40:6-8). In addition, it is interesting to note that the first Hebrew word in the Bible, *bereshit* (‘in the beginning’), is made up of two parts: *be* and *reshit*. Both can be translated in several ways. *Be* can mean in/through/by/for, and *reshit* can mean beginning/head/firstborn. All of these possible translations are found in the hymn of Col 1:15-20!

In Col 2:18 Paul warns against worshipping angels. **James Nkansah-Obrempong** of Ghana writes about this, “What are the theological implications for the believer of what has been said? First of all, we need to remember that angels, demons and powers are all created beings (Col 1:15-16). Thus they are not to be worshipped. Only God and the Lord Jesus Christ deserve our worship. Scripture forbids us to worship or put our trust in any other spiritual beings – including ancestral spirits – or

the spiritual forces of witchcraft or demonic powers channeled through charms, amulets and the like (Col 2:18-19). While Satan is active in the world through his agents, African Christians need to remember that witchcraft, sorcery and all forms of demonic activities have been conquered and rendered powerless by Christ through his death and resurrection. Satan and all his demonic forces have been defeated and therefore, they cannot exercise any power over believers and the church (Col 2:15). Thus believers need not fear them.” (ABC, pp. 1454-1455)

The structure of Colossians resembles that of most Pauline letters. The first chapters tell about Christ and salvation in him. The last chapters give instructions on how to live as a Christian. This order is important: we do good works because we have been saved by grace. In other religions the order is the opposite: people must do good works to be saved. Chapters 1 and 2 of Colossians teach about Jesus and salvation and chapters 3 and 4 about Christian life.

Paul gives important advice to his readers, “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry... as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you... Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly...” (Col 3:5-17).

### **20.13. 1 Thessalonians**

Pauline authorship of 1 Thessalonians has been widely accepted. Paul links Silas and Timothy with him in the salutation (1 Thess 1:1). The letters to the Thessalonians are quite early among the Pauline epistles. They were written from Athens or Corinth in about the year 50.

Paul had faced difficulties in Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-9). Later he received good news from the church through Timothy, and in this letter he thanks God for the faith of the Thessalonians. After some encouraging words he exhorts them to live in harmony with their faith. Some Jews had attacked the church. On the other hand, the surrounding

Gentile world was full of temptations for the Christians, and they were told to avoid sexual immorality.

*Parousia*, the second coming of Jesus, is an important issue in both letters to the Thessalonians. In this first letter Paul seems to think that his coming is imminent and will take place during his lifetime. He writes, “According to the Lord’s own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words” (1 Thess 4:15-18).

For Christians death is a step into eternal life in which they will meet Jesus face to face. After the death of a loved one, family members and relatives go through a time of sadness and longing. Therefore it is important to give space for grief and mourning. **Joe M. Simfukwe** of Zambia writes, “Unlike unbelievers, Christians mourn with a hope rooted in the resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Thess 4:13-18). His resurrection assures Christians of a future resurrection of the body to eternal life.”

Simfukwe writes about African burial rituals, “Some of the rituals associated with burial reflect a fear of the deceased. Thus in Zambia the body must be buried with the head pointing in the right direction to prevent the deceased from returning to haunt the living. The burial may be followed by other rituals designed to protect the living, such as passing through the funeral house and washing in medicated water before dispersing. Many tribes have an inheritance ceremony where the name and the status of the deceased are passed on to some chosen relative. Ritual protection of the widow or widower is common, with the widow sometimes being inherited by a relative of the dead husband. The ritual cleansing may even require the surviving spouse to have intercourse with a relative of the deceased in order to protect himself or herself from the spirit of the deceased coming to seek sexual union, which is believed to be both possible and dangerous. The cleansing

ritual is also a way of releasing the surviving partner so that he or she may safely enter new sexual relations with the blessing of the family of the dead relative. Because of the spiritual and psychological power of such rituals, Christians should not simply ban them, but should thoughtfully and sensitively replace them with alternative rituals that will meet the spiritual and psychological needs of the fearful widow or widower” (ABC, p. 1462). One more warning concerning these rituals is in order. Christians should avoid all extramarital sexual relations, because they are forbidden in the Bible, and also because of the risk of contracting HIV/AIDS.

The last chapter contains exhortations to the Christians. Paul instructs them as follows, “And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else. Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not put out the Spirit’s fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil” (1 Thess 5:14-22).

## 20.14. 2 Thessalonians

The authorship of 2 Thessalonians was already discussed in **The question of Pauline authorship**, and the conclusion was that it is an authentic Pauline letter. It is important to notice that the letter ends like this, “I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand, which is the distinguishing mark in all my letters. This is how I write.”

2 Thessalonians was written not long after 1 Thessalonians. There are many similarities between them, but also some striking differences. The situation in Thessalonica has changed. Some Christians have started to think that the coming of Christ will take place so soon that instead of going on with their normal lives they are just waiting for *parousia*. Paul warns them by saying that they should not “become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come. Don’t let anyone deceive you in any way...” (2 Thess 2:2-3).

The teaching about “the man of lawlessness” is unique to this Pauline letter. Paul does not use the designation “Antichrist”, but that is what he means. He is “the man doomed to destruction” and “he opposes and exalts himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, and even sets himself up in God’s temple, proclaiming himself to be God” (2 Thess 2:3-4). This resembles the description of the beasts in Rev 13. The Old Testament example of Antichrist is found in Dan 8:23-26. That passage refers to Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who is a symbol of the coming Antichrist.

But what is Paul referring to when he writes that this opponent of God sets himself up in God’s temple? The actual temple building in Jerusalem would be the most concrete explanation, but the last temple was destroyed in 70 AD, and after that there has been no temple in Jerusalem. Does he mean a third temple, which will possibly be built in the future in Jerusalem? Nobody knows. The second possible explanation is that the church is God’s temple in a symbolic way. Paul uses this symbol in two of his letters (1 Cor 3:9, 17, Eph 2:21-22). The difficulty with this explanation is that Antichrist cannot come into God’s kingdom. He is always outside the real church of God. Therefore some have suggested that this is a reference to a church which is a church only by name, the apostate church that has conformed “to the pattern of this world” (Rom 12:2) and is no more the church of Christ. But this church cannot be called God’s temple. Therefore the question must be left open.

The main message of 2 Thessalonians is to encourage the Christians to “stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you...” (2 Thess 2:15). “But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one. We have confidence in the Lord that you are doing and will continue to do the things we command. May the Lord direct your hearts into God’s love and Christ’s perseverance” (2 Thess 3:3-5).

### **20.15. 1 Timothy**

The letters to Timothy and Titus belong to the so-called Pastoral Epistles, because they were addressed to leaders in a local church. The question of the author of the Pastoral Epistles was briefly touched on above in **The question of Pauline authorship**.

It is not very easy to conclude when the Pastoral Epistles were written, because the historical information in them does not fit in well with that of Acts. Therefore there are two possibilities. Firstly, Acts does not tell everything about Paul's life and journeys. For example, it is difficult to know when and where everything that is told in 2 Cor 11:23-27 took place. Secondly, it is not clear what happened after the two years of imprisonment in Rome (Acts 28:30-31). The most common explanation is that Paul was released and that he continued his missionary activities. He had been dreaming of going on to Spain (Rom 15:23-24). It is not known whether he ever got there, but it seems likely that he continued his travels in Asia Minor. Later on he was imprisoned again and martyred under Nero in Rome, probably in 64 AD.

If the theory of Paul's release from the Roman imprisonment is correct, then the Pastoral Epistles were written at the beginning of the 60's. The letters are private communications to Timothy and Titus. Paul was very fond of Timothy. He writes in 1 Cor 4:17-18 about "Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord" and says that Timothy will remind the Corinthians of his way of life. Again in Phil 2:22 Paul writes, "But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel." Paul also adds Timothy's name to the opening greetings of some of his epistles, e.g. 2 Cor 1:1; Phil 1:1; Col 1:1; 1 Thess 1:1 and 2 Thess 1:1. All this gives credence to Paul's greeting, "To Timothy my true son in the faith" (1 Tim 1:2).

1 Timothy is a very important letter, because it sheds light on the ministry in the early Christian church. The other Pauline letters tell almost nothing about that. It is also noteworthy that Paul is much more interested in the character of the people who minister in the church than the ecclesiastical activities. He lists the qualifications of the overseer of the church (1 Tim 3:1-7). The Greek word used here is *episkopos* which can be translated 'bishop', but in those times the office of a "bishop" was not the same as later on. In all likelihood it meant the same as "elder" (Greek *presbyteros*) in the early church (1 Tim 5:17-19). Here they seem to be separate designations, but in Tit 1:5-9 they are synonymous. Today we would speak about ministers or pastors.

Another group which Paul mentions is the deacons (1 Tim 3:8-10). Again, there is a list of qualifications, but nothing is said about their actual duties in the church. “Wives” in 3:11 may mean wives of deacons or deaconesses. All these instructions that are given to those who serve in the church should be taken very seriously in our churches as well. The personal life of those ministering in the church is more important than their external status.

Paul’s words regarding the role of women in the church (1 Tim 2:12, cf. 1 Cor 14:34) have been interpreted in different ways. Some Christians think that he forbids women to teach in the church, and as a result women should not be ordained as pastors. Others think that these texts are just occasional remarks and that they should not be taken as principles or rules to be obeyed.

**Nyambura J. Njoroge** of Kenya writes about the role of women in the church, “Because of deeply entrenched patriarchal, hierarchical and sexist attitudes and practices, and male-dominated leadership in many of the churches in Africa, women have a critical and prophetic role to play in ‘stirring the waters’ and ‘speaking the truth’ by asserting their God-given humanity and gifts – not for their own sake but for the sake of the integrity of the gospel. Many women continue to claim their full potential and have taken leading roles. Like the Samaritan woman (John 4:1-42), when women in Africa drink the water offered by Jesus, they go out to witness and spread the word of truth in their homes, villages, communities and churches with determination, boldness, courage and humility. Some have founded churches, preached, taught Christian theology to people of all ages and translated the Scriptures into African languages.” (ABC, p. 1471)

Paul also encourages Timothy and the others to persevere in the right faith. “The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons” (1 Tim 4:1). These can be resisted with sound doctrine. Paul writes, “If you point these things out to the brothers, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, brought up in the truths of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed. Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives’ tales; rather, train yourself to be godly... Command and teach these things. Don’t let anyone look down on you

because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching” (1 Tim 4:6-13).

### **20.16. 2 Timothy**

As was mentioned earlier, the authorship of 2 Timothy has raised a lot of discussion among biblical scholars. In spite of that, the arguments which have been presented against Pauline authorship are not very convincing. 2 Tim 4:13 is a strong argument for the letter’s authenticity, “When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments.” If Paul had died many years previously, this note would be totally unimportant and odd.

The date and occasion of writing is the same as with other Pastoral Epistles. It is likely that they were written after Paul’s release from his Roman imprisonment at the beginning of the 60’s.

2 Timothy was written at a time when Paul was contemplating his own death; thus it has the character of a last will and testament. This gives the letter a unique atmosphere. It was written in the shadow of martyrdom, and this is what Paul considered important in his last communication to a trusted friend and co-worker.

Paul begins with an exhortation to Timothy and clarifies what is essential in the faith. Timothy is encouraged to “fan into flame the gift of God... for God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. So do not be ashamed to testify about the Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life – not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Tim 1:6-10).

Paul also encourages Timothy with these words, “Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure,

we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us; if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself” (2 Tim 2:11-13). The last words in this passage are particularly comforting: God is faithful even when we are not.

Here, as in his first letter to Timothy, Paul emphasizes the importance of sound doctrine. 2 Tim 3:16 is a fundamental Bible text concerning the authority and inspiration of the Scriptures, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness...” According to this verse, the entire Old Testament is inspired by God. The same testimony could have been given about the New Testament, but there was no New Testament when Paul was writing. Later on, in 2 Pet 3:16, Paul’s letters are considered equal to the Old Testament Scriptures.

Paul bids farewell to Timothy in the last chapter of his letter, “For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing” (2 Tim 4:6-8).

### **20.17. Titus**

Paul’s opening greeting (Tit 1:1-4), which is longer than usual, contains a reminder of God’s promise of eternal life and the fact that he has sent his Word at precisely the right time. Paul has left Titus in Crete to set things in order in the local church. Now he urges Titus to appoint elders in every town, giving directions about the kind of persons who are suitable for this office. Crete has only been mentioned once before in relation to Paul (Acts 27:7-8), but back then Paul did not stay there long. Therefore it must be concluded that he visited there at a later date, after his Roman imprisonment. Accordingly, the letter to Titus should be dated to the beginning of the 60’s together with the other Pastoral Epistles.

Paul gives Titus advice on how to arrange the life of the church, including appointing the elders. The text gives credence to the conclu-

sion that the church in Crete was young and not very deeply rooted in the faith. We can see this from the instructions according to which the older women are not to be addicted to wine, the younger women are to love their husbands and children, and slaves are not to steal from their masters. Christians in general ought to respect authority, do what is good and avoid slander.

Paul exhorts Titus to teach what is in accord with sound doctrine, because some people have brought false teachings to the church. Both teaching and life must be in harmony with God's will. Christians should show true humility toward all people, not only toward other Christians. Paul reminds the church also of the second coming of Jesus (Tit 2:13).

### **20.18. Philemon**

In this short private letter Philemon is encouraged to take back his former slave Onesimus. Written in prison, the letter has many similarities with Colossians. Those who send greetings are mostly the same (Philemon 23-24, Col 4:10-14), and Onesimus is also mentioned in Colossians (Col 4:9). Therefore it is likely that both letters were sent from the same place at about the same time.

The letter is addressed to Philemon, Apphia and Archippus, although Philemon is the actual recipient. It is likely that Apphia was his wife and that all three belonged to a house church. Onesimus, who had been Philemon's slave, had run away from his master. In the meantime Paul had met him, and he had become a Christian. Now Paul writes to his master asking him to take Onesimus back.

This short letter does not contain anything doctrinally important, but it reveals something significant about Paul's attitude in general and also about his attitude to slavery. Paul asks Philemon to take Onesimus back, "no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother" (v. 16). Slavery was common in the Roman Empire, and the New Testament does not directly oppose it. But with this attitude slavery disappeared little by little.

## 20.19. Hebrews

Hebrews is an anonymous letter. Some church fathers thought that it was written by Paul, but even they acknowledged that its language and style is different from the other Pauline letters. Later on, the reformers suggested that the author was Clement of Rome, Luke or Apollos. Priscilla, Silas, Timothy, Epaphras and even Mary, the mother of Jesus, have also been suggested, but none of them have gained much support. Nowadays almost nobody argues for Pauline authorship. It is better to say that we do not know who wrote the letter, but it is almost certain that the first readers knew it. In all likelihood, the author was a Hellenistic Jew who had become a Christian, was a second-generation believer and had a good educational background.

The addressees and the date of Hebrews are very difficult to determine as well. The letter seems to speak about second-generation Christianity (Hebr 2:3), and therefore it cannot have been written before the 60's. Nothing is said about the temple, but it seems that the sacrifices were still in use (Hebr 10:1-3). If this is the case, Hebrews must have been written before the year 70, when the temple of Jerusalem was destroyed.

Is Hebrews a letter or just a religious essay? Scholars have had several opinions about this. We can conclude that although Hebrews does not name the writer and although its form is like a sermon, it has also features of a letter (e.g. Hebr 13:22-25). Perhaps it was originally a sermon to which features of a letter were later added.

The overall theme of Hebrews is clear: the unqualified supremacy of God's Son, Jesus Christ. The new covenant which Jesus inaugurated is superior to the covenants that preceded it, his priesthood is better than Levi's, and the sacrifice he offered is superior to the ones that were offered under the Mosaic code. The content of Hebrews thus greatly enriches New Testament Christology. It helps us understand how the first Christians interpreted the Old Testament, and at the same time it gives a model for typological interpretation of the Bible.

The author begins by writing that God has revealed himself during the earlier times through the prophets but that now in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son (Hebr 1:1-2). The first Old Testament quotation comes from Ps 2:7, which is interpreted christologically.

Another important verse, Hebr 2:8, explains that although Christ has all authority in heaven and on earth “yet at present we do not see everything subject to him”. This authority will not be revealed before Jesus’ second coming.

In the following chapters Jesus is presented as greater than Moses (ch. 3) and Melchizedek (ch. 7). He is the real High Priest (chs. 4 and 8) and the ultimate sacrifice (ch. 9). He fulfills in himself what the old covenant could not fulfill (chs. 9 and 10). Some key passages for interpreting Hebrews are 8:5, “They serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven”, and 9:9, “This is an illustration for the present time”. These verses help us understand the typological interpretation which the writer uses.

Between all these great theological topics the author inserts exhortations to the readers, such as the following ones: “We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away” (Hebr 2:1). “Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it” (Hebr 4:1). “...let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful” (Hebr 10:22-23).

Chapter 11 is a famous text on great Old Testament champions of faith. It lists many who believed in spite of difficulties and misfortunes. In chapter 12 we are called to be like them, because we believe in Jesus, “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart” (Hebr 12:2-3).

## 20.20. James

The letter of James has been placed in the New Testament among the so-called General Epistles, because it is not addressed to a specific church. It has a typical epistolary introduction but lacks the usual postscript, and it contains no personal greetings.

The letter claims to have been written by “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (Jam 1:1). In the New Testament we find four people who have this name: (1) James the son of Zebedee, brother of John, one of the Twelve; (2) James, the son of Alphaeus, also one of the Twelve; (3) James, the father of Judas; and (4) James, the Lord’s brother, who had a leading role in the early church in Jerusalem (Gal 1:19, Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18). The last-mentioned is the most suitable candidate because of his status in the church. It has also been noted that there are striking similarities between the Epistle of James and the speech attributed to James in Acts 15:13-21. In addition, the letter alludes frequently to the teachings of Jesus.

The letter of James can be dated to before the Jerusalem Council in 49 AD, although there are no certain fixed points which would help in dating it. The letter consists of a series of loosely related homilies with such themes as trials and temptations, the right kind of listening, the relationship of faith and deeds, taming the tongue, earthly and heavenly wisdom, patience in suffering, and the prayer of faith.

The relationship between Paul’s and James’ theology concerning the doctrine of justification or faith and deeds is a much-discussed issue. Paul writes that “to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness” (Rom 4:5). James, instead, claims, “What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? ... faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” (Jam 2:14-17). The solution to this dilemma is that Paul and James mean different things with the same words. Paul speaks of the declaration of our righteousness and James of the demonstration of our righteousness. They are looking at the issue from opposite angles. The story of the Last Judgment in Matt 25:31-46 sheds light on the problem. When the judgment is proclaimed, the emphasis seems to be on deeds, on what the saved people have done and what the unsaved people have not

done. But the key is in verse 25:37, “then the righteous will answer him”. One group was righteous, the other was not. Their deeds resulted from their faith.

In chapter 5 James teaches about praying for the sick. This is the only Bible passage where such advice is given. The text reads, “Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective” (Jam 5:14-16). This kind of prayer with anointing of oil is used in some churches but in some others it is totally unknown. It is good to know that the Bible encourages us to pray for each other and also for the sick so that they could be healed. Healing is not our responsibility; it is God’s responsibility. Our duty is to pray, and God will answer the way he sees fit.

### **20.21. 1 Peter**

The writer claims to be “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 1:1) and “a fellow elder, a witness of Christ’s sufferings” (1 Pet 5:1). Traditionally it has been taken for granted that the author is the Apostle Peter. Later on many scholars have argued against this view for the following reasons: how could an uneducated Galilean write such good Greek, why doesn’t the author tell more about the earthly life of Jesus, and why is the letter so dependent on Pauline theology? There are good answers to all three arguments. Firstly, Peter was not necessarily uneducated in spite of the mention in Acts 4:13 about “unschooled, ordinary” men. In all likelihood, this characterization means that Peter and John were not skilled in rabbinic learning. Besides, Greek was widely spoken in Galilee at the time. In addition, we are told that the letter was written “with the help of Silas” (1 Pet 5:12), which may mean that Silas (Silvanus) was the secretary whose task it was to polish up the language. Secondly, there are allusions to Jesus’ ministry; especially 1 Pet 2:20-25 can be linked to Mark 8:31-32, 10:32-34, and 14:27, 65. It is also worth mentioning that there are resemblances between this letter and the words attributed to

Peter in Acts (cf. 1 Pet 2:6-8 with Acts 4:10-11, and 1 Pet 2:24 with Acts 10:39). Thirdly, the differences between Paul and Peter have often been exaggerated. They shared a common Christian tradition.

The place of origin of the letter is referred to in 1 Pet 5:13, "She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you her greetings." Babylon must be here a code name for Rome. The letter is addressed to "God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia" (1 Pet 1:1). These places were in the northern part of modern Turkey. The letter was probably written in the 60's. Persecution was in the air, and this points to Nero's reign, the traditional time and occasion of Peter's death.

1 Peter is full of theological teaching. It tells a lot about God, more than most New Testament books. It refers to the suffering of Christ in many different ways. We are redeemed "with the precious blood of Christ" (1 Pet 1:18-19). "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed (1 Pet 2:24). Christ "died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God" (1 Pet 3:18). "...since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude..." (1 Pet 4:1). The suffering of a Christian is also a central issue in 1 Peter.

Besides the deep theological themes 1 Peter encourages the Christians to serve each other with their gifts, "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ" (1 Pet 4:10-11).

## **20.22. 2 Peter**

The style and language of 2 Peter are very different from those of 1 Peter. This is one reason why many scholars think that this letter was not written by Peter. Some other objections to Petrine authorship have been raised as well. The author writes in 3:4 that "ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of

creation". It has been pointed out that the lifetime of Peter is too early for Christians to be referring to their early leaders as "fathers". A similar problem has been found in the fact that Peter equals Paul's letters to "the other Scriptures" (2 Pet 3:16). It has been said that the existence of an authoritative collection of the Pauline Epistles was very unlikely during Peter's lifetime.

These objections can be countered by saying that if Peter used another secretary, the language differences can be accounted for. "Fathers" in 3:4 may refer to Jewish patriarchs, not necessarily to the first Christian fathers. And the reference to Pauline letters does not need to mean that all of them were available, only the ones which Peter knew. In other words, there are sufficient reasons for considering that this letter is authentically Petrine, one of them being the author's personal testimony about the transfiguration of Jesus (2 Pet 1:16-21).

Those who suggest that the letter is pseudonymous (not written by Peter) date the letter to the second century AD. If Peter wrote the letter, as we believe, it must have been written before the apostle's death, which is thought to have occurred no later than 68 AD.

One can wonder why the only story which the Apostle Peter tells about his life with Jesus is the event on the Mount of Transfiguration. It must have been a very special experience and left deep traces in Peter's memory. Besides, Peter has already written a lot about Jesus' suffering in his first letter. The experience on the mountain was important and a great blessing in Peter's later life. He concludes the narrative by saying that "and we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it." Perhaps he wants to emphasize that spiritual experiences are important but that faith should be based on the word of God.

A central passage concerning the authority of the Bible is found at the end of chapter 1. Peter writes, "Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet 1:20-21). This statement implies that the prophetic texts in the Bible (in the Old Testament) were inspired by the Holy Spirit. In other words, this is a testimony of the divine origin of the Old Testament.

It is really interesting that in chapter 3 Peter lifts Paul's letters to the same level with Old Testament Scriptures when he writes, "Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation. Just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction" (2 Pet 3:15-16). Peter calls Paul a dear brother and admits that sometimes Paul's letters are difficult to understand. The main point here is his testimony about their being like "the other Scriptures". This is the only text in the New Testament which testifies about its divine authority.

Chapter 2 is very similar to Jude, and scholars have discussed whether Peter has borrowed from Jude or Jude from Peter. We don't know the answer, but the chapter is a warning about false teachers, and it also gives examples from the Old Testament. In chapter 3 Peter writes about the second coming of Christ. He uses the story of the Flood as an example. Noah's contemporaries did not understand that destruction was coming, nor do people realize now that the end of this world is approaching. That is as certain as the coming of the Flood. This text gives the Flood a theological interpretation. It was an illustration of the Last Judgment. Once God destroyed the world with water; in the end he will destroy it with fire. We are living between these two main events. And we are called to believe in Jesus in order to be saved in that last day.

Peter also quotes Ps 90:4 in the midst of his teaching, "Do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day" (2 Pet 3:8). This verse makes it possible for us to accept the scientific world view with its millions of years. The days of creation may have been longer periods than 24 hours.

Peter ends his letter with an exhortation to the addressees, and us, "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen." (2 Pet 3:18).

### **20.23. 1 John**

This epistle is not a typical ancient letter in its form, nor is it a pure sermon or an abstract treatise, because it contains some concrete historical elements (e.g. 1 John 2:19). The traditional view of the author is that he is the Apostle John who also wrote the Gospel of John. This letter has several similarities with the gospel, and we can agree with this traditional view. The date of writing is difficult to determine, for it depends on the dating of John's gospel. In all probability, the letter should be dated to the early 90's AD.

The three letters of John open a window to the New Testament church toward the end of the apostolic age. They encourage the Christians to remain in Jesus Christ and warn against heresies which threaten sound doctrine in the church. John begins his first letter in the same way as his gospel, by writing about the true life in Jesus. He also emphasizes that the message he is proclaiming is the one which the church has had from her beginning. Jesus is the light, and we should walk in that light. When we fall into sin, we must confess our sins and believe that the blood of Jesus will purify us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:1-9).

As we read 1 John, we may wonder what the writer means when he says that "no one who lives in him keeps on sinning" and "no one who is born of God will continue to sin" (1 John 3:6, 9). This seems to be in contradiction with the biblical view that we Christians are sinners all our lives (e.g. Rom 3:23). It is good to notice that John himself writes that "if we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). This is the basic truth about us. We are sinners and will never be anything else. However, in chapter 3 John emphasizes that the Christian should not live in sin continually, intentionally, without coming to Jesus for cleansing. The Christian is a sinner and righteous, both at the same time. He trusts in the forgiveness of his sins every day. He will never be good enough in himself, but he is holy because of Jesus Christ.

Beginning with this essential Christian truth concerning our relationship with Jesus, 1 John continues by encouraging the Christians to walk in harmony with their faith, "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust

of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does – comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever” (1 John 2:15-17).

After that 1 John warns against heresies and heretics whose teaching is very dangerous for the church. Paul predicted in his farewell speech to the Ephesians, “I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them” (Acts 20:29-30). Now John writes about those whom he calls “false prophets”, “deceivers” and “antichrists” that “they went out from us, but they did not really belong to us” (1 John 2:19).

Scholars have spent a lot of time studying the identity of John’s adversaries. Such movements as Gnosticism, Docetism, Montanism and Cerinthianism have been suggested. All of them had features in common with the heresies described in 1 John, but none of them fits in with the text in all details. We can say that the false prophets mentioned in John’s letters were people who were “early Gnostics” and had adopted some features from various heresies. They denied that Christ had come in the flesh, which may mean that they did not believe in the true humanity and true divinity of Christ. For some heretics Jesus was just a wise man, not divine, and for some others divine but not really human.

John writes about antichrists in the plural and about the spirit of the antichrist (1 John 2:18; 4:3). This means that doctrines and people that oppose or imitate Christ in an unbiblical way are always present in the world. The final Antichrist will be the fulfillment of this ideology at the end of the age. Christians ought to beware of them, because “the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work” (1 John 3:8). We must believe that “Jesus is the Christ” (1 John 5:1), and we must love one another because God has first loved us (1 John 4:19). Everything depends on our relationship with Jesus, because “he who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life” (1 John 5:12).

### **20.24. 2 John**

The writer of this short letter is identified as “the elder”. The style and content are similar to 1 John. The letter was written by the same author, although some scholars have suggested that the author was John the Elder, not John the Apostle. The expression “the chosen lady and her children” refers to the congregation to which this letter was sent. “The children of your chosen sister” (v. 13) is a reference to a sister church.

The writer expresses his joy that his addressees walk in the truth and love each other. He also gives some warnings and exhortations, “Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son.” (vv. 7-9).

### **20.25. 3 John**

The author of 3 John also calls himself “the elder”. This letter is addressed to a man called Gaius. John gives a very positive testimony of him and offers some advice on how to deal with traveling evangelists. Hospitality is the duty of the Christians in such cases.

John mentions two other Christians by name. One of them, Diotrophes, is rebuked by John for “gossiping maliciously about us”. Instead, Demetrius “is well spoken of by everyone”. Thus we have here two different examples of wandering evangelists, a good one and a bad one. As Christians, our lives must be in harmony with our message.

### **20.26. Jude**

The author introduces himself as “Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James”. In all probability, Jude and James (mentioned in verse 1, and also the author of the epistle bearing his name) were both brothers of Jesus (Judas in Mark 6:3). Why don’t they call themselves

brothers of Jesus? We can assume that they preferred to see themselves as servants of Christ rather than claim kinship with him. Instead of emphasizing a close connection with Jesus, they preferred to identify themselves with other believers.

Jude warns in his letter about heretics “whose condemnation was written about long ago”, “godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord” (v. 4). He takes many examples from the Old Testament, but there are also two references to apocryphal Jewish writings: in verse 9 he refers to *The Assumption of Moses* and in verse 14 to *The Book of Enoch*, also known as 1 Enoch.

The most frequently discussed topic concerning the Epistle of Jude is its relationship with 2 Peter. 2 Peter 2 and Jude are very similar, and although they are not identical, there must be a literary connection of some kind between them. Three possibilities have been presented: Peter has used Jude, Jude has used Peter, or both have a common source. Scholars are not unanimous about the correct answer. The most common suggestion is that Peter has used Jude, because it is difficult to understand why Jude would have written a letter which is just a copy of a letter by the Apostle Peter. Why Peter would have borrowed text from Jude is not easy to explain either. The common source could be something similar to the common source behind the Synoptic gospels. This may well be the most likely alternative.

The dating of Jude depends on the solution to this question. It has been frequently suggested that Jude was written in the 60's. This would make it one of the earliest New Testament writings.

## **20.27. Revelation**

According to the most ancient tradition Revelation was written by the Apostle John. However, this view has been challenged by scholars through the centuries, at first by Dionysius in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. The book itself does not claim authorship by an apostle, and its theology and style differ a great deal from the Gospel of John. These objections are not very serious, because it is not necessary to emphasize the apostle-

ship of the author in a letter, and there are no major theological differences. Besides, the subject matter of the two works is different.

The language, however, is a bigger problem. The Gospel of John has been written in fluent Greek, but the language of Revelation is totally different. It contains several grammatical errors and the construction of the Greek language brings to mind Hebrew or Aramaic. We can ask why John, who was able to write pure Greek in his gospel, would now use worse language. Scholars have suggested that if the writer was the same he chose this kind of style deliberately because of the immediacy of his visionary experience or as a protest against the upper classes. In any case, the name of the writer is John, and he claims to be a prisoner on the island of Patmos. The book has mostly been dated to the final years of the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian (81-96 AD).

The interpretation of the Book of Revelation has been and still is one of the most difficult issues in biblical studies. Four different ways of interpretation have dominated the discussion through the centuries. They are the following:

1) *Contemporary-historical interpretation*. This means that everything John writes describes his lifetime. The symbols in the visions refer to people, countries, and events in John's own day.

2) *Church-historical interpretation*. According to this view, Revelation draws a sketch of history from the time of Christ to our own day. This approach was popular with the Reformers, who identified the beast in Revelation with the Pope.

3) *Eschatological interpretation*. The supporters of this view think that from chapter 4 on Revelation speaks about the final days of human history.

4) *Idealistic interpretation*. Some scholars are convinced that we should not try to identify the events portrayed in John's visions. They argue that the symbolism is designed to help us understand God's person and his ways with the world in a general way, not to enable us to map out a course of events.

The view of the writer of this book is in some ways close to alternative no. 3, the eschatological interpretation of Revelation. There are some

truths and good points in the other interpretations as well, but the biblical message fits in better if we believe that John's visions are related to the end times of the world. This makes interpreting Revelation very difficult, because it is not easy to know how literally or how symbolically the visions should be interpreted. Therefore we are inclined to say, along the lines of alternative no. 4, that the main purpose of the visions in Revelation is not to help us determine where we are today in relation to the end-time schedule. The main purpose is to encourage the Christians to trust that God has control of his world even during the most difficult times.

A rough division of the book can be found in verse 1:19: "What you have seen" is chapter 1, "what is now" refers to chapters 2-3, and "what will take place later" to chapters 4-22. The material in chapters 4-22 is much more difficult to divide. One way to divide the book is the following: Prologue (1:1-20), The message to the seven churches (2:1-3:22), A vision of heaven (4:1-5:14), The seven seals (6:1-8:5), The seven trumpets (8:6-11:19), Seven significant signs (12:1-14:20), The seven bowls (15:1-16:21), The triumph of God Almighty (17:1-20:15), A new heaven and a new earth (21:1-22:5), and Epilogue (22:6-21).

Another possible division is worth considering. If we read the Book of Revelation thinking that the events are progressing all the time, it is difficult to understand what this means in relation to the end times. But if we start from the assumption that the narrative has several endings and several beginnings, it is easier to understand its message. The first ending could be in 6:17, "For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?" Chapter 7 takes the reader to heaven and chapter 8 back to this world, and the end time portrayal starts again. The following ending is in 11:19, where God's temple is opened and cosmic phenomena occur. Chapter 12 takes the reader again to look at salvation history, and chapter 13 starts the end-time events for the third time. The third ending could be in 14:20, where the great winepress of God's wrath is trampled. Chapter 15 illustrates once again the heavenly world, and from chapter 16 on we follow for the last time what happens in the world up to the end. Such a division helps us avoid forced interpretations of the order of the eschatological events.

It is good to pay attention to the fact that Revelation begins and ends with the glorification of Jesus Christ. He is the center of the book, not the eschatological visions. Jesus is both the powerful and divine King and also the pierced and crucified “Lamb who was slain”. God’s sovereignty is emphasized more than in any other New Testament book. He is the sovereign Lord, and everything is under his control. The Antichrist and his kingdom will come, but God is always greater than he and also ultimately victorious. We don’t know which period we are living in today, but everything in Revelation is in effect already now. The Book of Revelation wants us to focus on Jesus. With our eyes on him we can stand firm in every situation of our lives.

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