

Chapter Two

(*precis, November 2009, followed by earlier text in need of rewriting*)

Promise and fulfilment

In Jesus Christ, the Old Testament is seen to bear witness to the promise of God's approach in sovereignty now fulfilled in Jesus himself. Jesus himself understood this to be his vocation, revealed to him by the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit enlivened his followers to see this vocation fulfilled in his crucifixion and resurrection.

God's approach: the Old Covenant

The Old Testament tells the story of God calling his people to find their ultimate context in him and his purposes. It witnesses to the Word of God which is *transcendent* and *inculturated* in its engagement with humankind through God's chosen people. The culture of this people is not of itself divine; rather it is the locus of God's ever faithful, covenantal initiative towards a people who for their part are fitful in their response. The drama of this divine engagement is played out in two strands:

- (1) Divine engagement, through God's chosen people, with other cultures and their religions through the biblical period - Canaanite, Egyptian, Babylonian - ranging from transforming renewal to polemical opposition.
- (2) Divine engagement with the religious culture of God's chosen people themselves, repeatedly deepening and correcting their response to God. This is now explored in relation to the traditions of temple, monarchy, religious law, priesthood and sacrifice, and racial identity. This is similarly a story ranging from transforming renewal and deepening to opposition and correction, and it has a growing focus on personal knowledge of God in righteousness.

God's approach: the New Covenant in Jesus Christ

In the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth those elements of Jewish religious culture outlined above are incarnated in a new and ultimate way, and their full meaning disclosed. We here explore, in turn, the fulfilment in Jesus of temple, monarchy, religious law, priesthood and sacrifice, and racial identity.

God's approach: The finality of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus

In Jesus' death and resurrection, God's self-disclosing approach takes on final, unqualified form. Precisely as the ultimate temptation of evasion arises for Jesus himself (seemingly abandoned by God) and for those addressed by him (who yield to this temptation, killing him), Jesus embraces God in faith. Here arises the ultimate, unqualified time of trial, in which the possibilities of despairing evasion and hopeful trust confront each other in a final way beyond human comprehension, and God's faithfulness urges the last word. By Jesus, we are ourselves drawn into the forever unfathomable mystery of this encounter.

(earlier text, in need of rewriting)

God has acted, and revealed himself, in a final way in Jesus Christ. In so doing God has acted so as to become, and revealed himself as being, our ultimate context. In this event, our contexts of one kind and another are brought to light as provisional and

relative to this ultimate context. They become 'signs' in a Biblical sense, at once pointing to the sovereign approach of God, and themselves embodying God's approach. Jesus' acts of healing and other symbolic acts are signs; his parables are verbal signs; above all his death and resurrection is the final sign of God's approach.

In this event, we have seen, our understanding of 'context' is itself transformed. In God our ultimate context is revealed as acting personally towards us, an eschatological mystery inviting our participation in a life which enlarges us without limit. We may however resist God's approach; when this happens other, false 'contexts' are generated for human life, which do not point to and embody the approach of God but rather function as idols of one kind or another. We have seen that our resistance to God has two faces - one is dismissive evasion, the other disoriented evasion. In Christ these are overcome and our ultimate context restored and confirmed in God.

This appreciation of the Gospel as breaking open our contexts to the ultimate context of God enables us to understand the character of the Gospel as at once inculturated and transcendent. It shows the Gospel as having this character already in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus himself. Thus *the Gospel comes to us embedded in human culture*, in the first instance in the culture of first-century Palestine and its religious heritage. We have no Gospel which stands apart from and prior to engagement with human culture. In this engagement, culture either becomes a sign pointing to God or else an idol resistant to God. This engagement does not make the Gospel captive to culture; rather, when the Gospel engages the culture as sign, God *breaks open the horizons of culture to the transcendent horizons of the in-breaking Kingdom*.

We shall now consider further, the particular cultural and religious heritage in which the Gospel was first embedded, and the manner in which the Gospel engaged this. Whereas this heritage was in the first instance the religious context of the Gospel, the Gospel now became itself the context of understanding of this heritage. We shall consider in what terms we may understand this. Finally we shall consider how the subsequent Christian heritage and key aspects of its life can be understood in terms of the *missio Dei*, which is our ultimate context, breaking through provisional contexts which point as signs to God.

Biblical salvation-history

Jesus, life, death and resurrection were, as Christians believe, in fulfilment of the Hebrew scriptures. How shall we understand this in terms of our present account of the approach of God in Christ as our ultimate context?

On the one hand, the Jewish religious heritage was not simply one among any number of contexts broken open by the sovereign approach of God. Behind the Gospel's primary engagement with the Jewish religious heritage lay a long history of God's engagement with that heritage. On the other hand, the Gospel which Jesus proclaimed was not captive to his religious heritage; he came with transcendent power to challenge this heritage and to redefine it by reference to God's approaching sovereignty.

Accordingly our question about the relation between the Jewish tradition of faith and the Gospel, for which the word 'fulfilment' is used, is a twofold one. On the one hand it concerns the fact that the relationship of the Gospel to any human culture which it engages is one of transcendence over and inculturation within that culture. Given that this is the case, what account can we provide of the distinctiveness among religious cultures of the Jewish tradition of faith as testified in the bible, which reveals our warrant for speaking of this particular tradition as *related to the Gospel in a unique way*, as that which finds its fulfilment in the Gospel? On the other hand our question concerns the nature of the relation between the Jewish tradition of faith and the Gospel of Jesus Christ such that there is warrant to *distinguish* the latter from the former as its fulfilment.

Framed in terms of our present account, we shall answer this twofold question by describing how the Jewish tradition of faith is (1) more than one among other cultures engaged by a transcendent God, being like the Gospel itself precisely about the engagement between God and human culture, while being (2) less than the Gospel because it is in the Gospel alone that humankind is fully and finally engaged by God.

In the first place, then, the story of Jewish faith is the story of God's engagement with a people, in challenge and confirmation, judgement and blessing, showing forbearance in the face of fitful responses. It is the faithful action of God towards human beings who, as he binds himself to them in covenant, become his people which makes the Jewish story of faith uniquely related to the Gospel of God's sovereign approach in Jesus Christ. It is the story of an engagement which, like God's engagement through the Gospel, is at once transcendent and inculturated. This religious cultural heritage is not 'divine' in itself, we should note; what is divine is the story of God's faithful approach to humankind as he calls and binds himself in covenant with his chosen but fallen people - a story which is definitively revealed in Jesus Christ.

Let us briefly review the Jewish story of faith. As we do so, we must be clear that we do so within the context of the Gospel; it is the Gospel which provides for us the climax of the story, and so doing shapes how we understand, from beginning to end, what story it is which is unfolding.

The story of God's engagement with humankind through his chosen people may be reviewed in two inter-related parts. The first part comprises the story of continuing engagement between Jewish faith and other, existing religious cultures; the second part comprises the story of Jewish religious culture itself and of God's continuing engagement with it. Let us review each in turn.

It may seem that a brief review such as the following is merely a dispassionate account of ideas and practices, their interaction and development, which raises no questions about their truthfulness. In fact, however, the ideas and practices in question are of interest precisely because they represent contexts in which the question of faithfulness and unfaithfulness to the truth of God arose in a new way. They reflect the new approach of God.

Were the responses and developments faithful ones, or not? The question itself cannot be asked or answered from a dispassionate viewpoint. Asked from the viewpoint of faith in Christ, we look first to Christ himself and consider what position he took on them as pointing to himself.

Engagement with other religious cultures

The writing of the Old Testament, and the earlier telling of some stories within it, spanned more than a millennium. This long period was marked by a series of continuing encounters, in Hebrew experience, between their God and the deities of other religious cultures. Let us frame each of these encounters in terms of the approach of the God and Father of Jesus Christ to humankind. We shall begin from God's call of, and promises to, Abraham. We shall view each encounter as the inculturated and transcendent engagement of God with a religious culture. Sometimes in this engagement, affirmation of an existing religious culture predominated, and this was substantially incorporated into faith in God; at other times, opposition to an existing religious culture predominated. In either case the meaning of the religious terms involved - whether these were appropriated from, or framed in opposition to, other religious cultures - were prone to change in meaning with the course of engagements stretching down centuries.

Let us review the most significant of these encounters. This first is indicated by the repeated use of the term 'el' for God in the Old Testament. 'El' or 'Il' was the proper name of a God in Old Akkadian (pre-2350 BC), Ugaritic and then Canaanite texts. In each of these contexts the picture becomes more clear of a God who is a creator and patriarch who is basically benign towards humankind. In parallel with this, however, in all three contexts the term 'el' is also used as a general term for 'a god'. It is this latter, general use which is prevalent among the 238 occurrences of this term in the Bible. When it is used as a proper name in the Bible, it refers to the God of Israel; it is never used to refer to a God distinct from the God of Israel. This convergence is notably portrayed in the story of Abraham being blessed by Melchizedek, Priest of El and King of Salem (Jerusalem - the future location of the Temple, of course). It is further underscored from a Christian perspective by the author of the Letter to the Hebrews who argues that Melchizedek was greater than Abraham, and that as one whose name meant 'King of Righteousness' and who ruled over the place whose name meant 'peace' bore 'the likeness of the Son of God'.

In the assimilation of 'el' to the God of Israel, characteristics of El were seen to apply properly to the latter - as everlasting, creator, and mighty; as 'great and terrible' but also as 'merciful and gracious'. As the centuries passed, these terms would not only shape the Jewish idea of God, but would also find their meaning shaped by their application to this God. Among the developments which would represent changes to the earlier understanding of El were (1) the 'jealousy' of God, whereby worship of other Gods was an offence because God alone was worthy of worship, and (2) the election of Israel, whereby a unique responsibility towards God lay upon the people to whom God had chosen to make himself known.

Whereas the figure of El was incorporated into that of the God of Israel, other divine figures which featured in Near Eastern and especially Canaanite mythology were set

in opposition to the God of Israel. Even though some of their features might nevertheless be taken as belonging properly to God, the deities themselves were attributed a distinct (and inferior or ultimately illusory) identity, over against the God of Israel. Foremost among these was the figure of Baal. Thus the myth of Baal's conflict with and victory over the chaotic forces of sea and river was allowed to become a picture of God's work in creation. In Psalm 29, for example, we find God portrayed in imagery strikingly reminiscent of Baal. Baal was also pictured as having rights of ownership in the locality of particular shrines dedicated to him ('Baal' means 'Master of the House'), and in particular owned the power of fertility for crops and livestock in that locality. This fertility was secured, it was believed, by ritual enactments of the cycle of death and new life which mark the agricultural seasons. This power of fertility, too, was attributed by the Jewish people to the God of Israel rather than to Baal (among the Psalms, Psalm 65 is striking in this regard); however the rituals of Baalism were shunned and worship was directed away from localities to the One Lord whose temple was in Jerusalem. The major agricultural feasts of the Canaanites, meanwhile, were given new meaning as celebrations of God's saving action through Moses; instead of being rooted fundamentally in the cycle of fertility, they became rooted in the historical, saving acts of God towards his people. The feast of unleavened bread became a celebration of the passover; the feast of weeks became a celebration of the giving of the Law; and the festival of the booths became a celebration of the wandering of the Israelites in the wilderness, led under the providence of God to the land he had promised them.

However the picture is of centuries of conflict between Baalism and the claims of the God of Israel over his people, beginning from the time of Judges and marked with recurrent lapses into Baalism which were checked in the reforms of King Hezekiah and later of King Josiah. Among the prophets, Hosea stands out as confronting Israel as behaving like a faithless, promiscuous wife in her attraction to Baalism.

When Babylonian armies attacked and defeated Jerusalem, taking away as prisoners of war any inhabitants who possessed skills of value to them, these exiled Jews found themselves immersed in a religious culture not unrelated to Baalism. Many of the features of Baal were to be found in the Babylonian God Marduk. In this context new and more systematic attempts were made to frame distinctively Jewish belief, in addition to preserving the law of Moses and the writings of the prophets. The stories of the patriarchs, of the Exodus, the conquest and the development of the monarchy were shaped into a story of God's dealing with his own people and their fitful response to him. Further, Babylon's ancient myths of creation and primordial conflict were addressed and other stories told in their place. In place of a creation story centred upon violent discord between divine figures was told the story of a good God who alone created all things according to a moral purpose, and of a humankind which fell from these purposes. In place of the Babylonian story of a great flood in which trickery and bribery feature was told the story of God pursuing his good purposes and entered into covenant with all nations to forgive and forebear their failure.

During the time in which Jews lived in exile in Babylon, their captors were defeated by Persian armies bringing Jewish exposure to another religious culture. This culture, of which Zoroastrianism was a form, maintained a strongly dualistic picture of cosmic conflict between the forces of light and darkness. This conflict continues into an apocalyptic battle until there breaks in an abrupt end to the age, the resurrection of the

dead, judgement, and the beginning of a new age free from suffering and death. In some versions an other-worldly figure called the Son of Man appears in connection with the beginning of the new age.

Jewish engagement with Persian religion, followed by the continuing vicissitudes of history, led to Jewish apocalyptic writings incorporating the above themes. These feature among the latest of the writings included in the Old Testament, notably Daniel; many more were written from then onwards into the early Christian period. Tensions remained, however, between apocalyptic beliefs and the older faith in the God of Israel: Satan could hardly be accepted as an opponent equal to God, and the worldwide, abrupt displacement of one age by another stood in tension with belief in a God who had chosen a particular people for his own to fulfil his own good purposes within history.

In the face of continuing domination by one foreign power after another, Jewish ritual practices - notably male circumcision, keeping the sabbath, and food laws - acquired new significance. Meanwhile there appeared writings exalting the resolute confession, by individual Jews under intimidation, of exclusive faith in the God of Israel. In Daniel, famously, we read the story of Daniel in the lion's den and the story of the three men thrown into the furnace. Later, around 150 BC, the themes of maintaining religious customs and exalting sacrificial confession came to the fore in connection with the Maccabean revolt. Antiochus Epiphanes, successor to sought to suppress Jewish religious customs including circumcision and keeping the sabbath, and desecrated the temple at Jerusalem, setting up an altar to Zeus. The implicit claim was that the God of Israel was but a local deity and a local manifestation of the universal Zeus. The ensuing revolt produced martyrs who were exalted for their sacrificial confession of the God of Israel and their defence of his religion.

But question of God's engagement with human culture as a sign, transcendent and inculturated, arises not only as the question of God's engagement, in the Jewish tradition of faith, of other religious cultures; it also arises as the question of God's engagement, in the Jewish tradition of faith, with the culture of that tradition itself, shaped as it is by a history of precisely such engagements in the past.

Engagement with the religious culture of Israel

But God's engagement was also with Hebrew culture itself. That is to say, this culture did not of itself centre upon God's engagement, but needed this to be endlessly developed, corrected and renewed. It is necessary to approach this in two complementary ways. On the one hand we may say that the one, unchanging purpose of God can be seen to unfold; this emphasises the continuity of God's purposes in history. The true meaning unfolds, of what has been given. On the other hand we may say that God repeatedly breaks through every understanding of himself, with 'the new': God shows himself larger than every meaning we find in him.

We can reflect upon this approach of God through the story of God's saving acts, and through the symbols in which God engaged his people. Each of these, by virtue of their central place in the bible, provides immediate testimony to the continuity of

God's purposes; however, as we consider them more closely we become aware of new challenges which required that these develop in new ways.

The story of God's saving acts

We see this, firstly, as we consider ways in which the story of God's purposes is understood and understood anew in scripture. Tom Wright presents this as a story which, within the Old Testament, has not yet been completed. He notes that the story was, by Jesus' day, completed in a variety of different ways. Let me quote him:

Thus, the call of the patriarchs was set against the backcloth of creation and fall. ... Abraham was seen as the divine answer to the problem of Adam. The descent into Egypt and the dramatic rescue under the leadership of Moses formed the initial climax of the story, setting the theme of liberation as one of the major motifs for the whole, and posing a puzzle which later Jews would reflect on in new ways: if Israel was liberated from Egypt, and placed in her own land, why is everything not now perfect? The conquest of the land, and the period of the Judges, then formed the backcloth to and preparation for the next climax, the establishment of the monarchy, and particularly of the house of David. David was the new Abraham, the new Moses, through whom Israel's god would complete what was begun earlier. Again came the puzzle: David's successors were (mostly) a bad lot, the kingdom was divided, the prophets went unheeded, and Judah eventually went into exile. Promises of a new exodus arose naturally in such a context, and led to the ambiguous new beginnings (or were they false dawns?) under the Davidic ruler Zerubbabel and the high priest Joshua, and under Ezra and Nehemiah. The biblical period (normally so-called) runs out without a sense of an ending, except one projected into the future. This story still needs to be completed.

Tom Wright goes on to describe how this story was completed in various different ways by religious groups contemporary with Jesus including the Pharisees and the Essenes among others.

What do our present reflections bring to this summary account? They bring certain emphases arising from the character of God's action as a revealed, transcendent and inculcated sign of his sovereignty. Firstly, they emphasise that the events in which God acts stand in paradoxical relation to the kingdom of God. While on the one hand they do represent the action of God, on the other hand there are not simply to be identified with the action of God. Accordingly we can speak, as does Tom Wright, of the story of God acting, then of things going wrong and of the story awaiting a further episode; but we shall equally want to say that the events in which God acted pointed to the story of God as something more than themselves, a bigger story breaking in than these events provide in themselves (We shall note below, when we consider the symbols of law and monarchy, the questioning which was already there within the Jewish tradition of faith towards a simply identification of God with the heritage of Moses and David).

Accordingly the action of God - in Abraham, Moses, David, and others - represents not only the answer to loss and longing about what has gone wrong, but the birth of a

hunger inspired by God in the first place; it represents not only the conclusion of an unfinished story, but the appearance of the divine story in the first place. Of course in retrospect, when the story has taken shape, the pain and suspense which the story resolves may be seen as the point of departure of the story, but in reality it is the story in its completeness which makes these and their resolution the story of God which it is.

The character of God's action as sign means not only that it points beyond the events themselves which are a sign of God's kingdom, but also that the questioning, waiting and searching which find themselves answered in these events are directed beyond the events themselves towards God's kingdom. So although from one point of view questions give way to answers, and seeking gives way to finding, from another point of view the approach of God carries forward the questioning and seeking too, as part of the whole movement of questioning and knowing, seeking and finding, the reality of God. These questions can never be answered by such events; this story can never be completed in history; it can only be intensified as an unfolding story, awaiting disclosure as the story it has really been, from beginning to end.

Tom Wright points out that the story of God's action was attributed a variety of endings in Jesus' time. Indeed it was possible for the story of God's liberating action to be interpreted in ways which ultimately denied God. One false conclusion to the story would be the arrival of an expected political Messiah, overthrowing Roman rule and any others who would violate Jewish sovereignty in future. This would affect not only the conclusion but the meaning of the story from beginning to end: it found the story of God fully captured in the political acts of God towards the Jewish people. This conclusion to the story would deny the transcendence of God over the fortunes of Jewish religious culture. Another false conclusion of the story would be obedience to the law of God. Again this would affect not only the conclusion of the story; it would shape its meaning from beginning to end. It would find the story of God fully captured in God's giving of the law.

By emphasising the character of God's action as a sign we also emphasise the role of faith in seeing, in historical events, the approach of a God whose action transcends historical events. Thus the faith of Abraham, Moses, David and others receives acclamation in the New Testament from the author of the Letter to the Hebrews (Chapter 11), and the faith of Abraham is exalted by Paul notably in his Letter to the Romans, Chapter 4. The faith to see God at work appears first in those who will themselves be the obedient agents of God, before it appears in those who acclaim these people as God's agents. Their faith awaits its completion, however, like the story itself of God's approach to his people, until the coming of Christ and faith in him (Hebrews 11.39-40).

Jewish Religious Symbols

What is true for the overarching story is also true for the institutions which had their meaning as symbols of God. Fundamental among these were the temple, the monarchy, the law, priesthood and sacrifice, and the race. Here we don't have successive versions so much as points of recognition of ambiguity - each could become an end in itself, no longer a sign but identical with God. Even though

originating in God, it could become an idol trusted in place of God. In the Old Testament we find debate about this, which may be taken as an indication precisely that God was encountered as retaining transcendent freedom even over his own chosen institutions.

The Temple at Jerusalem housed the Ark of the Covenant. This had accompanied the Israelites during their wanderings through the wilderness under the leadership of Moses and was the meeting-place between Moses and the Lord. It was the place of the Lord's presence, which was therefore now found in the Temple. The Temple therefore embodied the unique identity of Israel. It was the place where all the people of Israel gathered as one to worship God during major religious festivals.

How far did the Temple function as a sign of God's presence, and how far did it distort into an idol, capturing God and his action in its own terms and becoming an object of trust in the place of God himself? Jeremiah apparently thought so when he warned people not to trust in the words 'This is the temple of the Lord!', as if to say 'nothing can happen to this!'. He reminded them of what had happened to a previous temple - Shiloh - and claimed that the temple was at risk of coming to the same end if it was not a sign of God morally, to a moral people.

Following the destruction of the Temple by Babylonian forces in 586BC there arose divergent visions of the place of the Temple in God's future purposes. There was some apparent rejection of the place of the future place of the Temple, as for example in Isaiah 66.1,2: The heavens are my throne and the earth is my footstool. Where will you build a house for me, where will my resting-place be? These are all of my own making, and all belong to me.' More records have been preserved, however, of a vision of the future rebuilding of the Temple. Sometimes this future Temple appears more than earthly, as in Ezekiel Chapters 40-48. Certainly the rebuilding of the Temple by Herod fell short, for many, of the purity of the vision of the new Temple intended by God.

The Temple was at the centre of the whole of Jewish life, but above all of its worship of God. Basic to this worship was the offering to God of sacrificed animals and crops. **Sacrifice** and the **priestly service** of those appointed to make sacrifice were also fundamental symbols of Jewish religion. How far did sacrifice function as a sign of God's approach, and how far did it distort into something which captured God and framed God in its own terms? Although sacrifice was practiced more widely among middle-eastern peoples, in Jewish religion it was a sign of God's covenantal care over his people; but it could reduce to a piece of magic performed to placate or manipulate an unpredictable deity. Accordingly it was sometimes seen as the object of false trust, as could other religious rituals including keeping festivals, and fasting. We first find polemic against sacrifice in Amos 5.21-27 (admittedly addressing the northern shrine of Bethel, but the people are called to come not to Jerusalem but to the Lord (Amos 5.4,5), and the logic of the appeal - 'did you bring me sacrifices and offerings those forty years in the wilderness? No!' (Amos 2.25) - applies equally to sacrifice at Jerusalem). We meet it again in, for example, Psalm 50.7-15, Psalm 51.16,17 and (most polemically) in Isaiah 66.3,4. If one is to speak of sacrifice as what God requires, it will be the sacrifice of a broken, chastened heart (Psalm 51.17) or of justice and righteousness (Amos 5.24). What is most repellent to God is trust in ritual sacrifice unaccompanied by moral obedience (Amos 4.4). We are reminded that

sacrifices and offerings were a sign rather than magically effecting, in themselves, obedience to God.

Associated with the Temple and its priestly ministry from the time of its construction was the **Monarchy**. It was the first King of all the twelve tribes of Israel who chose Jerusalem as his royal city and brought to it the recovered Ark of God. David was the recipient of promises of God towards him and his descendents, that one of them would always rule as king of Israel. How far did the monarchy function as a sign of God's approach, and how far did it distort into a false capture of God, reducing God to its own terms? One can see how the political joining of the tribes of Israel, with the promise of new security and economic benefits, would be a sign of God's blessing; although doubts were expressed at the time (according to biblical records) whether this did violence to the status of God as the true king of Israel. The kings of Israel would be anointed, signifying the conferral of the Spirit of the Lord upon them for their task as leader of his people. But the temptation was there, to take for granted God's blessing upon the dynasty of David, allowing the exercise of kingship to slide towards the enjoyment of unchallenged power and wealth which marked other middle-eastern monarchies. Accordingly prophets warned errant kings that they would be rejected by God (Jeremiah). When, following the Babylonian invasion, the Davidic dynasty was cut short, the symbol of the King was broken open to new understanding. On the one hand it acquired more-than-earthly resonances of a Messiah ('anointed one') who would bring the final fulfilment of God's purposes on earth. On the other hand there arose more mundane expectations of a political liberator.

The historical vicissitudes of the Jewish Temple, its priesthood and sacrifices, and of the Davidic monarchy form the background to continuing reflection upon the place and the future destiny of these symbols of God's presence among his people. The situation is very different when we turn to another symbol fundamental to the Jewish tradition of faith - that of the **law** of the Lord. While the law contained many prescriptions concerning the performance of activities in the Temple, and also many concerning social and ritual conduct among those living in the land of Israel, there was much that could be preserved, interpreted and applied in the conditions of exile. With the loss of Temple and sacrifice, monarchy and land, their symbolic power came to be invested increasingly in the law. The Torah came to be regarded as a timeless gift made in heaven and mediated to God's people through an angel. The practice of the law, and above all the practices of male circumcision, keeping of the sabbath and maintenance of purity laws relating especially to food became fundamental markers of the people of God's covenant.

How far did the law, and keeping of the law, function as a sign of God engaging his people, an inculturation of God's approach? And how far did it become a matter of false trust, domesticating God to itself and guaranteeing his presence and blessing? On the one hand the removal, in exile, of the circumstances to which the law normally addressed itself meant that like the other major religious symbols of Temple, sacrifice and monarchy it was broken open to possible new horizons of meaning. And like these symbols it was subject to reflection: what did true obedience mean, such as truly embodies the approach of the transcendent Lord? Thus we find the vision of a new covenant in which the law of God is written on the hearts of his people, and high and low alike know the Lord. We also find a vision of the coherence of the law, as was

already implied in the impassioned pleas of the prophets for justice, righteousness and mercy, and as was later expressed by summing up the law in the two great commandments. Side by side with this, however, we find another, more mundane process of re-interpretation of the law which was concerned with how to apply specific directives to changing circumstances. We have noted how the circumstances of exile and then of successive foreign occupations prompted much attention to the latter, as a way of preserving the distinct identity of the Jewish people; but it has to be said that this could lead to a reduction in the understanding of what God requires of his people, which domesticated God and made a false idol of the law.

Now Temple and sacrifice, monarchy and law all reflected the act of God in calling, liberating and blessing a particular people with his presence and promises. This **was God's covenant with the people of Israel** - a final religious symbol to which all others were related. This covenant had various elements: God's promise of blessing to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their descendants for ever; God's covenant with Moses, all the people and their descendants, instituted as they were given the law of the covenant; and God's covenant with David and his descendants, promising that one of them would always reign in Israel. How far did this covenant, and membership of the Jewish people with whom this covenant was formed, function as a sign of God engaging his people, and how far did it distort falsely into a synonym for this, reducing God's action to its own terms? Again in the message of the prophets we find the latter tendency challenged. Notably, Amos... Later, in the exile, we find the Babylonian King Cyrus boldly described as chosen and anointed by God to fulfil his purposes; while the prophet, when he speaks of God's 'servant Israel', clearly has in mind a narrower group than the Jewish race as a whole - a righteous group (or even an individual) which suffers for the sake of others. And we have already noted the vision of new covenant characterised by personal knowledge of God among its members. The symbol of God's covenant people was kept open as a sign in such ways. However, the same circumstances which encouraged using obedience to the law as a way of preserving the distinctive identity of God's covenant people also encouraged a policy of racial separation which equated belonging to the covenant with having a Jewish identity. Once again, exilic and post-exilic trials brought the temptation of distorting the sign of covenant into a false idol, this time focussed upon racial identity.

Let us now turn to Jesus of Nazareth, and consider how each of these Jewish religious symbols find themselves fulfilled, and find fulfilled their operation as signs of God's approach, at once *inculturated* and *transcendent*.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God

The early Christians believed that the story of God's saving acts had come to a climax in Jesus of Nazareth and that Jewish expectations of a new and final act of God, discerned in the Hebrew scriptures, were fulfilled in him. Accordingly the Jewish religious symbols which were so integral to this story were seen as finding their fulfilment in Jesus: their meaning as signs of God's sovereign approach, transcendent and inculturated in the Jewish tradition of faith, was fulfilled in Jesus. Let us briefly review this now. Much which follows will be familiar, but it is appropriate to survey it in this context. We shall then go on to consider in what terms we are led to think of the sign of God's sovereign approach as *final* in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Jesus and Jewish religious symbols

The Temple: At Jesus' trial he was accused of having threatened to destroy the Temple. The Gospels certainly record him as having predicted the destruction of the Temple (e.g. Mark 13.2). Also, he acted with such authority towards it - as, for example, when he overturned the tables of traders within it - that he was doubtless seen as a threat by the Temple authorities. On that occasion, according to St John, when these authorities asked for a sign legitimating Jesus' authority to act in this way he said 'Destroy this temple... and in three days I will raise it up again'. St John writes that in the retrospective light of the resurrection Christians understood that 'the temple he was speaking of was his body' (John 2.21).

Jesus justified breaking the sabbath by pointing out that the priests in the Temple break the sabbath and are not held to be guilty, and that 'there is something here greater than the temple' (Matthew 12.5,6). Later in the same Gospel Jesus' sustained condemnation of the scribes and pharisees culminates in a lament over Jerusalem: 'How often have I longed to gather your children, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings; but you would not let me. Look! There is your Temple, forsaken by God and laid waste...'

Again, it has been argued that on other occasions when Jesus spoke in parables of a 'house' he would have been understood as referring to the Temple. Thus Jesus told parables in which a master returned to his house and called his stewards to account; he would have been heard as speaking of the imminent return of the Lord to his Temple. Again, it has been argued that when he contrasts the man who builds his house on rock with one who builds his house on sand, Jesus would have been heard as contrasting those who build on him with those who rely upon the Temple. Jesus also referred to himself parabolically as the cornerstone of a house, quoting the text 'The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief corner-stone.' (Mark 12.10)

Sacrifice: Jesus' final visit to Jerusalem was for the passover, and at supper he spoke of his blood as the blood of the new covenant. In so doing he presenting his coming death as a sacrifice. The image of Jesus as a sacrificial lamb is used by several authors in the New Testament (John 1.29, 1.36; I Cor 5.7; 1 Peter 1.19, and repeatedly in Revelation). We shall return to the theme of covenant below.

Jesus' death is more widely referred to as a sacrifice by St Paul (e.g. Romans 5.9) and St John (1 John 2.2, 4.10). But it is in the Letter to the Hebrews that we find the most sustained presentation of Jesus as both high priest and sacrifice, as both offering and offered in fulfilment of Jewish practices under the law of Moses.

Monarchy: popular expectation of God's saving action focussed on the arrival of a new 'Son of David', an Anointed One (Messiah, Christ) who would liberate Israel and rule her as king. The prophets had spoken of such a restoration of the Davidic monarchy in lyrical terms as the fulfilment of God's purposes for his people. While Jesus was wary of being identified as a merely political liberator - other aspiring political Messiahs had already been killed by the Romans - he appears to have seen

Messianic expectations as destined to fulfilment in himself. When John the Baptist sent disciples asking if Jesus was 'the one who is to come', Jesus demonstrated that the Messianic prophecies discerned in Isaiah 35 were being fulfilled in himself. He accepted the testimony of Peter that he was the Messiah, and by seeing in John the Baptist the return of Elijah, forerunner of the Messiah, accepted the same designation of himself.

St Matthew begins his Gospel by tracing the ancestry of Jesus back to King David, while St Luke tells the story of Jesus birth in Bethlehem, the City of David, from where the Messiah was expected to come (Micah 5.2). However the term 'Messiah', when it used to acclaim Jesus in the New Testament, is most often coupled with the term 'Son of God' (it is different where 'Christ' has come to be used as a standard title for Jesus). This reminds us that the title Messiah, when applied to Jesus, acquires meaning beyond what was captured by expectations of restoration of the Davidic monarchy. Thus at her visitation Mary is told of the child she would bear 'he will be called Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David, and he will be king over Israel for ever' (Luke 1,32,33). St Mark begins by describing his Gospel as that of 'Jesus Christ the Son of God'. And in St John's Gospel, Martha says 'I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God who was to come into the world' (John 11.27), while John declares having written his gospel 'in order that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that through this faith you may have life by his name' (John 20.31).

St Paul describes Jesus as on the human level a descendent of David, while on the level of the Spirit he 'was proclaimed Son of God by an act of power that raised him from the dead'. The use of term 'Son of God' to signify origins from God rather than simply from Davidic ancestry seems to originate with Jesus himself, and notably from his baptism. We have already noted that Jesus used Psalm 110 to argue with the Pharisees that the Messiah was to be *more* than a son of David, and be one who as David's Lord would set David in a new context.

The law: we have noted that strict adherent to the Law, or Torah, was championed by scribes and pharisees who saw this as the assured way of securing God's promises to his chosen people and keeping before themselves their distinction from other nations; especially visible and open to policing were keeping the sabbath and maintaining purity in matters of food and social contact. Jesus came into conflict with those who falsely exalted the Law in this way when he set obedience to the law within another and deeper context - that of God's sovereign approach through himself. 'The Son of Man is Lord even of the sabbath', he says (Mark 2.28); see also Mark 2.25,26 . When Jesus violates purity laws by eating with sinners he says that 'I did not come to call the virtuous, but sinners' (Mark 2.17). Mark 7.1-23 deals at some length with food laws; Jesus charges the scribes and pharisees with failing to distinguish between God's law and human traditions.

In St Matthew's Gospel, famously, Jesus sets his own injunctions in contrast with the law of Moses, and in fulfilment of God's purposes through the law. 'There must be no limit to your goodness', he concludes, 'as your heavenly Father's goodness knows no bounds' (Matthew 5.48). That the law of Moses might express less than God's purposes is indicated when Jesus speaks of divorce as a rule granted by Moses by way of concession to people's stubbornness; Jesus goes on to contrast this with God's

intentions in creation (Mark 10.2-9). In general terms all that had been written in 'Moses and the Prophets' found its fulfilment in him (Luke 24.27,44).

Looking beyond the four Gospels, we find Jesus' relation to the law of Moses is a central theme in the Letter to the Hebrews in conjunction with the themes of covenant, priesthood and sacrifice. Whereas Jewish High Priests had traditionally been appointed by the Law, Jesus has been appointed Priest by an oath - God's oath 'You are Priest forever' -which supersedes the Law (Hebrews 7.28). Again, the Law 'contains but a shadow of the good things to come, not the true picture' (Hebrews 10.1). Once again in these terms Jesus is portrayed as fulfilling the purposes for which the Law was given; the Law is set in the deeper context of God's purposes in Christ.

But it is in St Paul's letters that we find Jesus' relation to the law of Moses formulated most fully, in the course of his mission to the gentiles. Especially in his letters to the Romans and the Galatians Paul addresses this issue which is raised acutely by the mixing of Jews and gentiles within the church. Paul declares that the law was given by God as an 'interim measure' (Galatians 3.19) pending the fulfilment, in Jesus, of God's promises to Abraham. This fulfilment bestows life as the Law was never able to do (Galatians 3.11, 3.21), as the Spirit is received through faith (Galatians 3.14). The Law, which is holy and just and good (Romans 7.12), exposes human sin, but has no power to overcome it. When keeping the law is made the foundation of our relationship with God, therefore, through the sin which enslaves us we are imprisoned and held 'in close custody' by the law (Galatians 3.23). Those who insist that Christians - including gentiles - must keep the Jewish Law (notably, undergoing circumcision) are seen by Paul as claiming a foundation for relationship with God which is rival to that given by faith in Jesus and in the Spirit - a claim which must be resisted.

The covenant: Closely bound up with the Law is the fundamental relationship between God and the Jewish nation embodied in the covenant. Once again, the covenant (expressed in covenants given to Abraham, Moses and David) had absolute status in Jewish religion, being given for all time. When it seemed as if God had abandoned his covenant with Israel, prophets proclaimed that God would do no such thing (e.g. Jeremiah 33.20-35), but would call to mind his covenant and 'establish an everlasting covenant' (Ezekiel 16.60-62). God, said Jeremiah, would establish 'a new covenant' which would not be like the existing one, and which would institute the promised blessings of God in a way that the first had not (Jeremiah 31.31f). It is against this background that

Jesus, at his last supper, spoke of his blood as 'the blood of the (new) covenant' (Mark 14.24; 1 Corinthians 11.25).

The covenant established by God with Abraham 'and his descendants forever' incorporated a racial component which would have been reinforced by the belief that children were conceived entirely from the father and therefore the descendants of Abraham were 'in his loins'. To be a 'son of Abraham' was to be within the covenant.

John the Baptist challenges the absolute status of this claim: 'do not imagine you can say "We have Abraham for our father". I tell you that God can make children for Abraham out of these stones' (Matthew 3.9). The same presumption is challenged by Jesus in St John's Gospel: he implies that the pharisees are sons not of Abraham but of

Satan (John 8.39-58), whereas true sonship is from God (John 1.12,13; John 3.1-8). Being a son of Abraham, meanwhile, is relativised by Jesus' statement 'Before Abraham was born, I am' (John 8.58). Also, having been confronted with the remarkable faith of a Roman centurion, he says that 'many will come from east and west to sit with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob at the banquet in the kingdom of heaven. But those who were born to the kingdom will be thrown out into the dark...' (Matthew 8.11-12)

Beyond the four Gospels, we have already noted the sustained portrayal in Hebrews of Jesus' relationship to the Jewish heritage of priesthood, sacrifice and law. This is framed fundamentally in terms of the institution of a new covenant. Jeremiah's prophecy regarding this is quoted (Hebrews 8.8-12), and the former covenant is spoken of as inferior (7.22), faulty (8.7), and obsolete (8.13).

St Paul challenges the traditional Jewish understanding of the descendants of Abraham who belong to the covenant and its promises. In Romans and Galatians he argues that it was his faith which saw Abraham justified before God (Romans 4.1-3; Galatians 3.6) and that his true descendants are those who show the same faith. In Romans Paul speaks, like the fourth Gospel, of the vital sonship as that which comes from God, whose Spirit makes us cry 'Abba, Father' (Romans 8.14-23). He also challenges a simplistic faith in Abrahamic descent by pointing to God's sovereign work of election among his descendents, choosing Isaac and Jacob to the exclusion of their brothers (Romans 9.6-13).

As I have said, much of the above will be only too familiar to many readers but a useful purpose is served by gathering these together as the particular religious symbols, belief and practices with which Jesus engaged in order to disclose the gospel of the sovereign approach of God.

The finality of Christ

We have seen that Jesus understood himself, and his followers understood him, as fulfilling the elements of Jewish religious tradition and their meaning as signs pointing to and embodying the presence and action of God. Now this religious tradition had itself seen a series of new beginnings, renewals and recapitulations; however there had grown the hope and expectation of a further new beginning which would this time be a final, decisive fulfilment of God's purposes. It was this final fulfilment which was announced in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Was this announcement true? Is there a fulfilment here such that there could never conceivably arise further new beginnings in future which would point to God beyond the revelation of God in Christ?

To pursue this question is not simply to ask about the truth of a claim with taken-for-granted meaning. We have to explore what is *meant* by finding this finality in Christ - without deferring the question of truth. And we must begin by exploring what this meant for Jesus and his first followers, explore at once their possible meaning and the possibility of its truth, allowing the possibility that these may both dawn upon us together. We must imaginatively enter into the situation of Jesus and of his followers and ask how it came about that they understood God as acting here in a final way. It may

be that when we see this, we will see that the idea of God's future action surpassing what he has done in Christ makes no sense; it may be when we enter the presence and stand in the light of what God has done in Christ, we see that to conceive the possibility of such future, surpassing action cannot be done except on the basis of a false assumption.

When we enter imaginatively into the situation of Jesus we are first reminded that Jesus anticipated a *coming* fulfilment of God's purposes through himself, rather than a fulfilment *already achieved* in his lived embodiment of God's sovereignty. He spoke of a ransom he would pay (Mark 10.45) a baptism he had to undergo (Luke 12.50), an 'exodus' he would accomplish (Luke 9.31). When we speak of the finality of Christ in terms faithful to his own understanding, its focal reference is to his death and resurrection.

In what follows we shall reflect upon the meaning of this death and resurrection as presenting us at once with the grief of unqualified despair and the gift of hope beyond measure. The former, we shall see, is both occasioned by the latter and finally defeated by it. It is occasioned by the fact that Jesus came in fulfilment of the deepest hopes of God's people - their hopes that God would fulfil his purposes by sending his Anointed One or Messiah. These great hopes were dashed by the crucifixion of Jesus - not only dashed for those who believed Jesus was the expected Messiah, but also dashed in truth if he was indeed the Messiah. They were ultimate hopes and they were dashed in an ultimate way. Correspondingly, however, the resurrection of Jesus signifies that the final defeat of these hopes will paradoxically *not* be the last word, but that these hopes will despite all have the last word.

We recognise that we speak here of a mystery. We can find no detached viewpoint from which to speak, no encompassing horizon within which to speak, with regard to this immeasurable blessing and loss, this unqualified hope or despair for humanity. We speak from within the midst of human life of what might have the last word upon each and all of us. We speak of horizons within which we stand - horizons open to blessing and loss, hope and despair beyond what we have yet experienced. To speak of this final hope and final despair is to speak of matters beyond our experience - of the further, decisive gift of life and of the further, decisive grief of being robbed of life in a final way. To speak of hope having the last word over despair is not only to speak of the mystery of a hope which we have yet to fathom fully; it is also to speak of a grief we have yet to plumb fully. It is to speak, paradoxically, *both* of the last word lying in life and hope from God *and* of life and death in unending conflict with each other, each claiming the last word over the other.

Let us enlarge further upon this explication of Jesus' death and resurrection as the final sign of God's kingdom. Central to this explication is the human experience of immersion in horizons open to unqualified blessing and loss, hope and despair into which are led by our own confrontation with Jesus, his death and resurrection. However this human experience is not first our own. It is first the experience of Jesus himself as he faces the prospect of his death. Let us first consider, therefore, Jesus' confrontation with unqualified hope and despair, and then our own experience of this into which he leads us.

Jesus' own confrontation with unqualified hope and despair can be thought of as having two inter-related elements. The first arises for Jesus in relation to God, and the second in relation to humankind. Let us consider firstly, the unqualified hope and despair which arises for him in relation to God.

Jesus was filled with great hope in God. God's people had long awaited the fulfilment of his purposes among them, and Jesus believed himself called as the one through whom this would finally come about. In the four Gospels, Jesus' awareness of his Messianic calling is conveyed in many contexts but especially in the stories of his baptism and his transfiguration. Jesus lived a life of total commitment to this hope in God.

As Jesus faced the prospect of his death, however, such hope in God - the hope which had inspired God's chosen people down the centuries and which had come to be focussed in the awaited Messiah - faced the intimation of its final denial and defeat. There had of course been defeats and disappointments for God's people in the past, but God had always inspired new hope - the hope of a new start, a new exodus, a new liberation for his people. But this time it was different. This was precisely about the fulfilment of this fitful history, the fulfilment of God's purposes once and for all. If God were now to allow his own Messiah to be killed, it would surely mean that God's purposes were thwarted, not fulfilled, and that God was not faithful, but had abandoned his purposes. The last word would lay in defeat and despair, for what hope in God could there remain in these circumstances?

Accordingly Jesus' death necessarily appeared to him obscenely futile - a final, triumphant mockery of the goodness and faithfulness of God. It confronted Jesus as the great final *peirasmos*, the ultimate temptation to lose faith and to despair of God.

Jesus' hope in God was also, implicitly, a great hope that God's purposes would be fulfilled among his people. They would be given a new heart, and would respond worthily to God and participate in the fulfilment of God's purposes among them. Again, Jesus committed himself wholly to awakening this response among God's people. His hope in them hinged utterly upon such a response.

As Jesus faced the prospect of his death, however, hope for God's people seemed robbed of all grounds. The resistance which Jesus had met from religious leaders was culminating in the most outrageous denial of God's good purposes. Even one of his own disciples would betray him; the disciple who had declared him to be the Messiah would deny knowing him, and his other followers would flee. There had of course been rebellion, blindness and betrayal among God's people in the past; but there had also been many stories of repentance and renewed faithfulness. But this time it was different. If the Messiah himself is rejected, what hope could possibly be placed in God's people? What possible hope could remain for them?

When we turn from Jesus' encounter with ultimate hope and despair to that of his followers and of all who are led into this by Jesus, we find similar dynamics at work. They are at work firstly in relation to God. For on the one hand the followers of Jesus have faith in Jesus as the Messiah and share his great hope that God will fulfil his purposes in him. On the other hand they find him abandoned to death by God; with Jesus they have every reason to despair of God and his purposes.

The followers of Jesus are also led by him to share in his encounter with ultimate hope and despair in relation to the people of God. On the one hand they are led by their faith in him as Messiah to share in his great hope that through him God's people will be brought to a faithful response and rise to the fulfilment of God's purposes among them. On the other hand the followers of Jesus find this hope utterly defeated as he is rejected and killed. Moreover this rejection extends to the followers of Jesus themselves; they find themselves on the side of those who have abandoned Jesus to his fate.

In summary, then, the crucifixion of Jesus confronts both he and us with unqualified grounds for despair both in God and in ourselves; and it does so precisely because Jesus has been alive with, and enlivened us with, hope beyond measure in God and his action.

It is this ultimate spectre which confronts Jesus. And paradoxically he embraces it: he faces the unfaceable; he trusts God where God's trustworthiness has lost all meaning; he hopes where no hope is conceivable; he affirms purpose in that which is utterly senseless and futile. In so doing he takes responsibility for the faithfulness of God among people who find no further reason either to trust God or to trust his gracious action in their own hearts.

It is in this context that the resurrection of Jesus is disclosed with immeasurable meaning. Jesus' paradoxical trust and hope in face of utter despair and futility is now confirmed as a unique act of faithfulness to the truth of God, and reveals this truth in a final way: where despair and futility claim the last word, there God's gift of life and hope are shown to prevail.

This truth always remains to us a mystery in which we are caught up. On the one hand it presents the final victory of hope over despair, of the gift of new life over the grief of death; on the other hand it remains always beyond us and beyond our experience of grief and despair. Let us enlarge upon each pole of this paradox in turn.

The resurrection of Jesus presents the final victory. Whereas we live vulnerable to further grounds for grief and despair than we have yet experienced - grounds which would claim the last word over the hope with which we now live - these are not the last word and will not have the last word upon us. Every new experience of defeated hope which intimates such defeat as final will be incorporated into a message of more ultimate hope. In the crucifixion of Jesus the ultimate denial of hope has already confronted the world; the worst has come to the worst; and it has been incorporated into the hope of resurrection.

Equally, however, the resurrection of Jesus remains beyond us and beyond our experience of grief and despair. This means we must resist any idea that either Jesus or we can 'see past' Jesus' death from some vantage point upon both his death and resurrection. We must not overlook, firstly, the spectral power of his approaching death for Jesus himself by passing on too smoothly to his resurrection. We must resist the temptation to think that Jesus must have accepted his death in a perfectly rational, purposeful (albeit costly) act as a means to an end, as when a person dies in the act of saving the life of others. For Jesus to believe that the final defeat of God's purposes

left any 'end' in place was to trust in the inconceivable. Equally we must resist the temptation to think that we can see, in the light of the resurrection, a divine plan at work in Jesus' crucifixion which was not visible to Jesus within his earthly life. Belief in such a plan requires our trust as it did for Jesus; only insofar as we know the continuing force of Jesus' crucifixion as an utter denial of grounds for hope in God or humankind can we know Jesus' resurrection.

As we are drawn into the presence of the mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection, we find that our embrace of hope and grief is enlarged between them in a dynamic way. This may be thought of in the following way. As the resurrection brings home to us the true status of Jesus as God's Messiah, it brings home anew the horror of his being crucified. But this new appreciation of the horror of Jesus' crucifixion, as grounds for utter despair, serves in turn to highlight the wonder of Jesus' faith in facing and accepting this unfaceable event in trust. So we are brought to new appreciation of Jesus for who he was and for his sacrifice. But this in turn heightens further, our sense of the horror of his being crucified. In this way crucifixion and resurrection, despair and hope resonate together. And they do so in an ultimate way; they represent the deepest, widest horizons we may inhabit.

When we speak of the finality of Jesus as a sign of God's kingdom, we speak of this dynamic, self-transcending engagement between life and death, hope and grief.

Resurrection brings the disclosure that paradoxically this was within God's purposes: Jesus embraces God's absence, allowing it within God's purposes, and embraces human rejection, embodying God's purposes in his own forgiving love. [always was so - Isaac's sacrifice, temple destroyed etc. Not on the one hand final loss; nor on other, easy means to end]