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Newness and Discontinuity in the Gospels

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Lecture One: Newness and Discontinuity in the Gospels

by Donald Hagner

The Gospel According to Mark

The first word in Mark, the earliest of our Gospels, is “Beginning” (*archē*), namely, “The beginning of the good news (*euaggeliou*) of Jesus Christ (the Son of God).” (Mk 1:1)¹ The *good news* is the announcement of something dramatically new, the beginning of eschatological fulfillment—i.e., fulfillment of what the prophets had foretold and of what, therefore, the Israelites for generations had longed for.

Immediately after Mark’s first sentence comes a reference (1:2-4) to what Isaiah had prophesied (Isa 40:3, together with Mal 3:1). The messianic forerunner was about to appear on the stage of history, followed quickly by the Messiah who was about to set up his kingdom. While John would baptize with water, the Promised One would baptize with the Holy Spirit, the agent of eschatological newness (1:8). This good news was not ordinary or even special good news; nor was it new in the mere sense of something added or even something different in an ordinary succession of things. Rather, it referred to a turning point in the history of salvation, ushering in the era that would be the beginning of the realization of the end time.

The first words of Jesus recorded in Mark present the fundamental assertion of the good news of God—“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news” (1:14-15). The kingdom is not simply near but something that has begun already to dawn in and through the ministry of Jesus. Thus, the time of fulfillment “has come” (*peplērōtai*, perfect tense), namely the initiation of the long-awaited eschatological age, the apocalyptic age of which Isaiah had so frequently spoken (Isa 2:2-4; 25:6-9; 35:1-10; 42:1-13; 65:17-25).

¹All Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), unless otherwise noted.

In his incisive study of “newness” in the New Testament, Roy A. Harrisville concludes that *kainos* and *neos* (the two NT words for “new,”) are synonyms and that, “Both words connote a temporal as well as a qualitative signification.” He adds that, “This fact has led us to the eschatological aspect of the kerygma as the *locus* of the New Testament idea of newness.”² The basic newness contained in the Gospels derives from the central affirmation of the dawning of the eschatological era.

Clearly, the claim of the presence of the eschatological kingdom (i.e., God’s reign here and now) but short of the consummation entails a strong discontinuity with Judaism, just as today it constitutes a main area of disagreement between Jews and Christians. Jews understandably argue that the Messiah cannot have come because the world does not appear to have fundamentally changed. Whatever newness there may be in Christianity, it does not fully match the newness expected from the prophetic promises—at least not yet. And yet the whole of the NT depends on the fundamental affirmation that Scripture is fulfilled and the new promised age has come in Jesus.

It is obvious that the announcement of the good news about the coming of the kingdom is vitally connected with Christology (i.e., the person of Jesus). Already in the beginning of Mark, Jesus has been identified as “the Son of God” (1:1, if the texts of B, D, and W be allowed), and “my beloved Son” by the voice from heaven (1:11). Still in Chapter 1, a man with an unclean spirit in the synagogue of Capernaum cries out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God” (1:24). All who witnessed this and the exorcism that followed were amazed and asked, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him” (1:27).

In response to the question posed by Jesus, Peter expresses the disciples’ growing conviction that Jesus is the Messiah (*ho christos*; 8:29). A little later in the narrative, the transfigured Jesus, together with Moses and Elijah, appears to the inner circle of disciples, and again the words from heaven spoken at Jesus’ baptism are heard—“This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” (9:7). A few lines later in 9:13, Jesus states that Elijah, the forerunner of the Messiah, “has come,” thereby identifying John the Baptist with Elijah and himself with the Messiah. Further in the narrative, Jesus asks questions that involve the drawing of the conclusion that the Messiah, the son of David, is also David’s Lord (Kyrios; 12:35-37). At his last meal with the disciples, this

²*The Concept of Newness in the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1960), 106.

Messiah, who is also *kyrios*, identifies the bread as “my body,” and the cup as containing “my blood of the covenant,”³ which is poured out for many” (14:22-24). The blood of Jesus, Messiah and Lord (NB: a dying Messiah), establishes the new covenant and with it the new era of salvation history.

The dramatic newness of the announced coming of the kingdom depends fully upon the presence of Jesus, the promised Messiah, the unique Son of God, among his people. That is why the new era is *an unprecedented turning point in salvation history*. With the coming of the Messiah, we have moved from promise and preparation to eschatological fulfillment.

Mark is not shy to draw certain dramatic consequences concerning discontinuity from the dawning of the kingdom and the presence of the messianic king. As long as the bridegroom is with the disciples, they cannot fast (2:19). He quotes the words of Jesus concerning the incompatibility of the new with the old—“No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; if he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; if he does, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but new wine is for fresh skins” (2:21-22). The new (i.e., all that Jesus brings) cannot simply be added to the old as but another in a succession of new things with no effect upon the old. The new is qualitatively different by its very nature.

From this passage, Morna Hooker concludes, “Both sayings show concern lest the old be lost; yet both point to the truth that something new and fresh cannot be contained within the limits of the old and indeed must inevitably destroy the old. So, for Mark, the new religion could not be contained within Judaism.”⁴ She writes further:

The time for restoration was past, and the time to accept the new age had arrived. It is perhaps no accident that the symbolism of tearing a garment reappears in the scene in chapter 14 where Caiaphas tears his clothes, for at that moment the old forms of religion are, in Mark’s view, doomed. Similarly, the tearing of the temple veil in 15.38 signifies the end of the old and the birth of the new.⁵

³Some relatively inferior manuscripts insert the word “new” (*kainēs*) before “covenant” (*diathēkēs*) (so too in the Matthean parallel, 26:28). This is probably due to the influence of the parallel in Luke 22:20, which may, in turn, depend on 1 Corinthians 11:25. In any event, the word “new” is both assumed and appropriate.

⁴*The Gospel According to Mark*, BNTC (Hendrickson: Peabody, 1991) 100.

⁵*Ibid.*, 100-101.

William Telford similarly concludes from the lesson of the “new patch” and “new wine” that “Judaism itself is shown to belong to the old order (Mk 2.21-2).”⁶

Immediately following the passage concerning the incompatibility of the new patch and the new wine with an old garment and old skins, Mark records two consecutive examples where Jesus challenges at least commonplace interpretations of the Sabbath commandment, if not the commandment itself. First, he allows his disciples to pluck (technically, harvest) grain on the Sabbath and then defends their actions (2:23-28), concluding with this statement—“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath; so the son of man is Lord even of the Sabbath” (2:27-28). Second, in a synagogue on the Sabbath, he heals a man with a withered hand (3:1-6) then says to those ready to accuse him, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?” It is clear from the reaction of the Pharisees that what Jesus did in these two passages was more serious than simply a matter of a difference of interpretation. After he healed the man, the Pharisees, together with the Herodians, began to plot “how to destroy him” (3:6). Telford properly sums up the matter: “The evangelist portrays Jesus as condoning the breaking of the Sabbath (Mk 2.23ff.; 3.1-6).”⁷

Mark draws a further startlingly new conclusion from the statement of Jesus that it is not what goes into a person that defiles, but what comes out of the person (7:14-23). When the disciples expressed some confusion over what this meant, Jesus explains—“Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?” To which Mark adds the parenthetical comment—“Thus he declared all foods clean” (7:19). This comment makes explicit what is implicit in the words of Jesus. The consequences could hardly be more significant for the question of continuity and discontinuity. Mark’s editorial comment is no less canonically authoritative than other content in the Gospel. It may well be that we also have Pauline influence at work here.⁸

In an ironic twist, according to Mark 10:1-12 Jesus makes the law more stringent than the Pharisees did. His absolute prohibition of divorce, allowing no exception (as, for example, Matthew does), supersedes the allowance and regulation of divorce in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. The Pharisees had put the question to him; and although their reaction to his answer is not recorded, they were surely unhappy at this

⁶W.R. Telford, *The Theology of the Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 126.

⁷*Ibid.*, 125.

⁸Exploration of this possibility can be found in Telford, *ibid.*, 164-169.

“cancellation” of Moses’ teaching. The issue involves not simply a matter of disagreement concerning the interpretation of the law, but something more grievous from the Pharisees’ perspective. Jesus approaches Scripture with an astonishing authority.

The Gospel of Mark thus presents a considerable amount of material that points to the dramatic newness of what has come with the Christ and, hence, indicates a high degree of discontinuity. Telford points to Mark’s portrayal of the Jewish leaders as hard-hearted (e.g., 3:5) and hypocritical (7:6-7).

Whatever the nuances in individual passages, it has to be maintained that the Markan Jesus is shown repeatedly throughout the Gospel as being misunderstood or rejected by the various Jewish groups, and he, in turn, is pictured as one repudiating their authority or their doctrine. . . . Time and again, their doctrinal beliefs are shown to be in error.⁹

Mark shows how the Jewish leaders rejected Jesus. To again quote Telford: “In turn, Jesus is shown rejecting them, so appearing to the Markan reader as one who no longer has Jewish roots, as one no longer to be seen through Jewish eyes, as one no longer to be accorded a Jewish identity.”¹⁰ This may be somewhat overstated, but it is not without truth.

The Gospel According to Matthew

Given that Matthew takes up some 90% of Mark, it is not surprising to see that most of the material set forth in the preceding discussion is found, with minor differences, also in Matthew. His opening chapters, of course, contain unique material. The Gospel begins with a genealogy— “An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (1:1), thus announcing the dawning of the eschatological era. The Greek word translated “genealogy” here is actually *genesis*, thus perhaps an allusion to Genesis 2:4 (the Septuagint (LXX)). The mention of Abraham and David allude to the respective covenant promises made to Israel, allowing Matthew to structure salvation history into three sets of 14 generations, climaxing in the birth of the Messiah (1:17).

Matthew begins his Gospel with a narrative (wholly lacking in Mark) concerning “The birth of Jesus the Messiah” (1:18), who is given the name “Emmanuel,” which means “God is with us” (1:23, via the

⁹Ibid., 125.

¹⁰Ibid., 157.

quotation from Isa 7:14). Throughout this Gospel there is an emphasis on the agency of the Holy Spirit, itself a mark of the promised age in the birth of Jesus (1:18, 20), the appearance of angels (1:20, 24; 2:13, 19), and the experience of dreams (1:20; 2:12, 13, 19, 22)—all common traits of apocalyptic.

By the time Jesus' ministry is reached in 4:17, we already have a stress on fulfillment of an apocalyptic character, that stress being more prominent in Matthew than in any other Gospel.¹¹ In particular, it is apocalyptic eschatology—i.e., the arrival of a unique fulfillment of the OT promises, including the anticipated transformation of the present world order—that Matthew presents. Jesus announces the gospel in 4:17 thusly, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near." The disciples are sent out to proclaim the good news that "the kingdom of heaven has come near" (10:7). In 12:28, Jesus states that "if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come (*ephthasen*, an aorist verb) to you." The era of the new covenant promised by the prophets has arrived. As in Mark, so too in Matthew, at the last supper, Jesus identifies the contents of the cup with the words, "This is my blood of the covenant,"¹² which is poured out for many," to which Matthew alone adds, "for the forgiveness of sins" (26:28), a clear allusion to Jeremiah's new covenant passage (Jer 31:34).

A constellation of apocalyptic events at the time of the death of Jesus indicates the end of the old age and the dawning of the new—namely, the tearing in two of the temple curtain, the earthquake, the splitting open of the tombs, and the resurrection of dead saints (27:51-52).¹³

As with all the Gospels, for Matthew the turning point of the ages in the dawning of the kingdom of God in history, is *dependent on Christology*. It is because Jesus is the prophesied Messiah that eschatology can be said to be inaugurated. Christology runs through the whole of Matthew like a rich vein of gold. Jesus is referred to as "Emmanuel" or "God with us" (1:23).

A high Christology is evident in the words of 10:32-33—"Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will

¹¹See my "Apocalyptic Motifs in the Gospel of Matthew: Continuity and Discontinuity," *HBT* 7 (1985), 53-82.

¹²As in the Markan parallel, some inferior manuscripts read *kainēs* (new) before *diathēkēs* (covenant) through the influence of Luke 22:20. "New" is clearly implied.

¹³In the essay referred to in note 11, I suggested that these events could well be called examples of a "realized" apocalyptic (p. 62)—i.e., apocalyptic events that have already occurred. If that is too much of an oxymoron, Matthew's apocalyptic is at least to be regarded as an "altered" apocalyptic (p. 69)—i.e., the occurrence of apocalyptic phenomena short of the consummation. The paradox here is not essentially different from that of realized and future eschatology, a paradox that pervades the NT.

acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven” (see too 10:37-40; cf. 16:24-25). Perhaps most striking is the Johannine-sounding statement in 11:25-27, where Jesus said:

I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father: and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

Peter’s confession that Jesus is “the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (16:16) is a turning point in Matthew, as in Mark. In 16:18, Jesus says to Peter, “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church [*mou tēn ekklēsiān*], and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.” From the beginning of the Gospel, Matthew has referred to Jesus as “Messiah” and as “Son of David” (e.g., 9:27; 12:23; 15:22). The Messiah is the Son of David, but he is also David’s Lord (21:41-46; so too the parallels in Mark and Luke). John the Baptist’s question from prison, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” (11:3) is answered by a brief summary of Jesus’ deeds corresponding to the prophetic expectations of the promised age to come (cf. the quotation of Isa 42:1-4 in 12:18-21).

It is clear that in Matthew we encounter the same emphasis on newness that is contained in Mark. If anything, the newness is intensified. The coming of the Messiah, the Son of the living God, into history puts us into a *new time frame*. It is a time of fulfillment, although paradoxically not the end of the story. It is the fulfillment of Israel’s hope for so many generations, as Jesus points out—“Blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear. Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it” (13:16-17).

With the coming of Christ and the kingdom, we encounter something greater than Jonah or Solomon (12:41-42), something greater than even the temple itself (12:6). The Christological implications of all of this are enormous. Just as the Shekinah glory is present among two who study Torah, so Jesus promises, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (18:20). Again, after the Trinitarian statement in the baptismal formula (“In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” [28:19]), the final

words of the Gospel state, “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (28:20).

The amount of newness in Matthew, not surprisingly, results in significant discontinuity. This is unmistakable despite Matthew’s desire to minimize it for the sake of his Jewish Christian readers. The Evangelist is keenly aware of both discontinuity and continuity. Not a few have seen 13:52 as his signature—“Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”¹⁴ Taken in the most general way, the “new” refers to the announcement of the dawning of the kingdom in and through the presence of the Christ, whereas the “old” refers to what precedes, represented most proximately by Second Temple Judaism. Stephen Barton rightly observes that in 13:52, “The new has priority over the old. . . . But the conjunction is significant; the old retains its fundamental worth.”¹⁵

Matthew’s Continuing Conservatism

Matthew picks up from Mark the double parable concerning the incompatibility of a new patch and new garment and new wine with old wineskins (9:16-17). In so doing, he affirms the newness of the gospel and the resulting tension with the old. Nevertheless, when Matthew adds the final words, “and so both are preserved” (9:17), he reveals a concern for continuity with the old. Although the “skins” that are preserved are not precisely the old skins but *new* skins, the new skins are analogous to the old. This may well point to the fact that Jesus’ teaching, although new, also possesses a considerable degree of continuity with the old—in fact, transforming it but, at the same time, preserving its essence. (The same may be true of 5:17.)

It is clear that Matthew wants to stress continuity and minimize discontinuity. A perfect example of this can be seen in his redaction of the pericope concerning what defiles (Mk 7:1-23 in 15:1-20). Three redactional changes must be noted. First, Matthew slightly softens the Markan report of Jesus’ words, “There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile” to “It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person.” Second and most notably, Matthew omits the Markan editorial insertion, “Thus he declared all foods clean” (Mk 7:19). Third,

¹⁴*Kaina kai palaia*, lit. “new things and old things,” reversing the expected order and thus emphasizing the new things.

¹⁵“The Gospel of Matthew” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Gospels*, ed. S.C. Barton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 122.

Matthew rounds out the pericope by adding a reference back to its beginning subject with the words, “But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile” (15:20), thus turning the attention away from food to ritual purity. Nevertheless, the implication that Mark draws is a justifiable one, and Matthew’s redactional changes are unable to conceal the radicalism intrinsic to the pericope.

The most famous and important Matthean passage concerning the law, unique to the Gospel of Matthew, is found in 5:17-18—“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.” From an initial impression, this would seem to be as strong a statement of continuity with Judaism as possible. In fact, however, when 5:17-18 is seen in the context of the whole of Matthew, it is clear that the continuity has to be softened by aspects of discontinuity. One example of this in the “antitheses” (a misnomer for what actually amounts to a heightening of the demands of the Torah) is Jesus’ absolute prohibition of oaths (5:33-37). And while Jesus’ loyalty to the law is apparent in his instruction to the healed leper to “Go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them” (8:4), Jesus can also say to a scribe who wanted to follow him, but only after he buried his father, “Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead” (8:22; cf. Lk 9:60), thereby going against the law.¹⁶

Despite Matthew’s softening of the more radical parts of Mark, he cannot stifle the newness altogether. The radicalness of the statement that “It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person” goes against the dietary law, even without Mark’s editorial comment—“Thus he declared all foods clean.” As we have seen, Jesus does not hold to a strict interpretation of the Sabbath law, allowing his disciples to pluck grain on the Sabbath and healing a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath (12:1-14). Matthew’s inclusion of the Markan statement that the Pharisees “went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him” (12:14) shows that the Pharisees did not regard Jesus’ actions as of minor importance.

Matthew’s version of the discussion of divorce (19:1-12) again softens the radicalism of his Markan source by the addition of the words, “except for *porneia*,”—i.e., sexual immorality (19:9; see too 5:32). To be sure, Jesus still cancels out the teaching of Deuteronomy

¹⁶Note the remark of Martin Hengel: “There is hardly one logion of Jesus which more sharply runs counter to law, piety and custom than does Mt 8.22.” *The Charismatic Leader and His Followers*, trans. James Greig (New York: Crossword, 1981), 14.

24:1-4, but his allowance of divorce on the ground of sexual immorality would have been acceptable to the Shammaites but not to the Hillelites.

There is something new here that causes a more fundamental difference and a degree of tension with the law. To be sure, the law is sustained in Matthew but with one all-important qualification—it is the law *as interpreted by Jesus*.¹⁷ The teachings of Jesus take central place in the Gospel. The commission at the end of the Gospel calls the disciples to teach new believers to obey not the Torah, but “everything that *I* have commanded you” (28:20).¹⁸ Graham Stanton rightly points out the importance of Jesus’ teaching in Matthew.¹⁹ This newness results in considerable discontinuity with the past and constitutes one of the main causes of the “parting of the ways” between synagogue and church.²⁰

There can be no doubt concerning the importance of newness for the Gospel of Matthew. But there can also be no doubt that the Evangelist intends to affirm continuity with the past. Barton expresses the tension beautifully—“The encounter between the old and new gives to Matthew its *dynamic* quality. In Matthew’s story of Jesus there is continuity with the past and discontinuity, profound indebtedness to the scriptures and traditions of Judaism, but also rupture and innovation. . . . God, in Matthew, is doing something new. The signs are manifold.”²¹

The Gospel According to Luke

¹⁷Arland Hultgren rightly states, “The will of God, [Matthew] contends, has been given in the Scriptures of Israel, as interpreted by Jesus, and in the teachings of Jesus himself, as interpreted by the scribe trained for the kingdom.” “Things New and Old at Matthew 13:52,” in *All Things New: Essays in Honor of Roy A. Harrisville*. A.J. Hultgren, D.H. Juel, and J.D. Kingsbury, eds. Word and World Supplement Series 1 (St. Paul: Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, 1992), 109-117, here 117.

¹⁸“Matthew’s strong emphasis on the importance of ‘hearing and obeying’ the words of Jesus encouraged many diverse Christian communities in the 2nd century to set this gospel alongside the law and the prophets as ‘Scripture,’ as a *new* set of authoritative traditions which in due course had to be distinguished from the ‘old.’” G.N. Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992), 383.

¹⁹“In some respects, however, the sayings of Jesus (and Matthew’s gospel as a whole) must *in practice* (though not in theory) have taken priority over the law and the prophets in the community life of the ‘new people.’” *Ibid.*, 383.

²⁰Barton makes the same observation, saying “It is evident, then, that a parting of the ways is taking place” and it amounts to “a rebuke to Israel’s failed leadership.” “The Gospel of Matthew,” 131. Cf. Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People*, 113-191.

²¹“The Gospel of Matthew,” 121-22. So too Graham Stanton, “Above all, Matthew’s gospel provided the ‘new people’ with a story which was new, even though it had deep roots in Scripture.” *A Gospel for a New People*, 383.

The two remarkable opening chapters of Luke present us with some of the richest material in the NT concerning *continuity* with the OT and with the growing Jewish expectations and hopes of the Second Temple period. The early Christian community that exults in this perspective and that draws together these themes would seem, by all rights, to be recognized and appropriately designated as a sect within Judaism. Here in several magnificent poetic passages based on Scripture, we encounter the stock imagery of Israel's hope. At the same time, however, an unmistakable note of fulfillment is exclaimed.

Luke's two-volume narrative is introduced from the very beginning as an account of events "that have been fulfilled (*peplērophorēmenōn*) among us" (1:1). In the first narrative (1:5-25), the angel Gabriel is sent by God to announce good news (*euaggelisasthai*) to Zechariah about the birth of a son to him, a son who would become the forerunner of the Messiah, performing the work of the promised Elijah (in the quotation of Malachi 4:5-6). But it is in the respective responses of Mary and Zechariah that the extent of continuity becomes most evident. Mary rhapsodizes:

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever (1:46-55).

Virtually every line of Mary's *Magnificat* draws upon OT phraseology (directly or indirectly), describing or alluding to the fulfillment of messianic promises. The past tenses (aorist in the Greek) reflect the prophetic perfect tense of the Hebrew, wherein what still lies strictly in the future, because of its predetermined certainty, can be described as already having happened. From this point of view, salvation has already been accomplished and is conceived as completed action.

What is true of the *Magnificat* is true also of the *Benedictus* of Zechariah. Here again in the Greek we encounter aorist tenses, except for the future tenses in 1:76 and 1:78. Moreover, the whole is introduced with the formula that states, “Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this *prophecy* (*eprophēteusen legōn*):”

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace (1:68-79).

Here again we have “prophecy” given, for the most part, in past tenses. It is clear in the allusions to David and Abraham, together with the explicit mention of God’s “holy covenant,” that it is *the fulfillment of the hope of Israel* that is in view. The future tenses towards the end of the passage confirm the understanding of the aorist tenses as, in effect, prophetic perfect tenses, thus expressing confident anticipation of the action of a God faithful to his word.

The problem we confront has to do with the complex character of the future expectations articulated by the prophets. Much of this concerns what can be realized through normal processes in history—i.e., the sort of things promised in the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants, things such as becoming a great nation blessed by God; achieving a great name; living in a land of peace, security, and prosperity; a nation with descendants as multitudinous as the stars; victorious over all its enemies; and with a descendant of David ruling from a royal throne in a dynasty that would be established forever. All of this is realizable in history without any direct supernatural, divine intervention. The elements of this expectation have been designated as “prophecy,” or what can be described as an earthly, national theocracy

that would amount to the literal fulfillment of aspects of the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants—in short, the restoration to Israel of a glory similar to what was enjoyed in the times of David and Solomon.

At the same time, however, growing largely out of a frustration at the lack of fulfillment in history, the prophets increasingly began to speak of a transcendent hope that could only be accomplished by a special divine in-breaking. God was going to do more than bring about a national-political kingdom in the land of Israel. He was going to radically transform the world we know—the cessation of war, the end of death, the end of sorrow or sighing, the end of all physical maladies and cries of distress; the wiping away of tears from all faces—in other words, there would be no more hurt or destruction in God’s new earth. On the positive side: the desert will blossom with rivers of water and there will be gladness, rejoicing at God’s salvation, everlasting joy, and a banquet for all people. To sum up, there will be the creation of “new heavens and a new earth” (Isa 65:17; 66:22).

Apocalyptic thus teaches a radical transformation of the age that can only be brought about by God’s direct intervention involving the end of the present age and the beginning of a new age. This is the essence of “apocalyptic” in contrast to “prophecy.” (Judgment is, of course, also a major theme of apocalyptic, but not directly relevant to our purposes here.) Thus, the writings of the OT prophets reveal an expectation that moves gradually from prophecy (or particularist, national, earthly fulfillment) to apocalyptic (or universal, transcendent fulfillment), with no clear demarcation between the two. As in the prophets, so too in the Lukan material, we encounter material of a mixed character—prophetic and apocalyptic.

In the remarkable narrative of Jesus’ sermon in the Nazareth synagogue service (Lk 4:16-30), much of it unique to Luke, Jesus reads apocalyptic material from Isaiah 61:1-2, which says, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,²² to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”²³ When he had rolled up the Isaiah scroll, he made an astounding statement—“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (4:21) This is an announcement of the fulfillment of the messianic age, not as something that will come (even imminently) but as something already present. The emphasis is clear: “today” [*sēmeron*,

²²This clause seems to be taken from Isaiah 58:6 (LXX).

²³To be noted is the omission of the final phrase of the Isaiah 61 passage—“and the day of the vengeance of our God,” words that Jesus may have deliberately omitted because of his unusual view of the coming of the kingdom without bringing the day of judgment.

together with the perfect passive verb *peplērōtai*, “has been”= “stands fulfilled”] is the beginning of the last age.

Even stronger discontinuity is expressed in 16:16, which reads, “The law and the prophets were in effect until John came; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is proclaimed.” With the coming of John the Baptist and the dawning of the kingdom, a shift in eras has occurred. John is himself the pivotal figure in the shift from the old to the new, being both the last prophet of the old era and the first representative of the new era. It is affirmed that, in some sense, the law has come to an end. To prevent a possible misunderstanding, Luke follows this statement with that of 16:17—“But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away, than for one stroke of a letter in the law to be dropped.” For Luke (as for Matthew), the law is still valid and will continue to be observed in the kingdom, but only as mediated by the teaching of Jesus in the new reality of the kingdom.

Undoubtedly one of the most remarkable passages in Luke (and only in Luke) is found in 17:20-21—“Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered ‘The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed nor will they say “Look, here it is!” or “There it is!” For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.’” These words point yet again to the presence of the kingdom in the person of Jesus. Where he is, *there* is the kingdom.²⁴ Luke should not be taken to mean that there will not be a future coming of the kingdom with observable signs, as a look at the apocalyptic discourse of Luke 21 will confirm, but merely that one need not wait till then for experiencing the kingdom. Whereas the Pharisees thought only of a cataclysmic appearance of the kingdom, Jesus stresses that the eschatological kingdom is already dawning then and there in his own ministry. The Christological import of the passage could hardly be greater. The coming of the Son of man will be sudden but not immediate (contrary to the expectation of the Pharisees expressed in 19:11), as the verses that follow indicate (17:24-25).

At the last supper with his disciples, the words of Jesus regarding the cup indicate the transition to the promised new covenant in Jeremiah 22:20, which reads, “This cup that is poured out for you is the *new* covenant in my blood.”²⁵ With the death of Jesus a new eschatological era begins, the era of the new covenant in contrast to the era of the old covenant.

²⁴Although it is possible to translate the Greek *entos hymōn* as “within you,” NRSV (with RSV) correctly translates it as “among you.”

²⁵Luke alone among the Synoptics has the secure text *kainē*, “new” modifying “covenant.” The probable influence of 1 Corinthians 11:23-25 on Luke’s text must also be kept in mind.

Newness in the Gospel of John

The Gospel of John is infamous for its anti-Judaism. Yet at the same time, John is a very Jewish gospel. Here we find in sharpest profile the now-familiar tension between continuity and discontinuity. The latter comes clearly into focus in the Gospel's frequent and painful reference to the unbelief of the Jews. Another distinctive of the Gospel is its emphasis on realized eschatology rather than future eschatology. Closely related is the very high Christology of John, which, in fact, constitutes the essential dividing point between the Jews and the believers in Jesus. This, above all, increases the sense of discontinuity with the old. At the same time, underlying is a substratum of continuity that is fundamental to everything. John 4:22 puts it as concisely as possible—"salvation is from the Jews." As in the Synoptics, the good news of John's Gospel rests on the preparation and promise of the Jewish Scriptures. The gospel is the continuation and culmination of the story of Israel.

John is almost certainly the last of the Four Gospels to have been written, probably close to the end of the 1st century. The tension, not to say hostility, between the Jews and the Jewish believers in Jesus had undoubtedly increased as the century wore on, and probably the events of A.D. 66-70 made the ongoing "parting of the ways" more evident than ever. Jewish believers in Jesus were being forced out of the synagogues. The rabbis' work at Yavneh (Jamnia) in the late 80s reconstituting the Jewish faith under the new post-war conditions resulted in, among other things, a liturgical alteration to the main synagogue prayer (the *Tefillah* or *Amidah*) in the form of an addition to the Eighteen Benedictions, namely a benediction (in reality a curse) of the *minim*, the "heretics" (alternatively, the "Nazarenes"), with the effect of driving Christians out of the synagogues. This is probably reflected in the *aposynagōgos* references (9:22; 12:42; 16:2), where expulsion of Jewish believers in Jesus from the synagogue is caused by their faith in Jesus. This is strong evidence of discontinuity.

What we find in the later decades of the 1st century is a situation where Jews and Christians are like rival siblings, each on the way to finding and establishing their own identity over against the other. This understandably involves strongly stated polarities and heated emotions, as our survey will now underline.

The Prologue (1:1-18)

Already in the opening verses some of the key motifs of the Gospel are expressed. The deity of the Son is highlighted from the start—"In the beginning was the *logos*, and the *logos* was with God, and the *logos* was God" (1:1). As the agency of creation, he brought into being all that exists, including life itself, and he was "the light of all people" and "the true light, which enlightens everyone" (1:4, 9). Yet despite the universality of these statements, "The world did not know him" (1:10) and shockingly "his own people did not accept him" (1:11). Already the unbelief of the Jews that will so dominate the Gospel comes to expression.

The climax of the prologue comes in the reference to the incarnation in 1:14, which reads, "And the *logos* became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." The author draws the appropriate conclusion that no one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son,²⁶ who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known²⁷ (1:18). This "modification of monotheism," as it is called (the Evangelist can hardly be considered a polytheist!), obviously is a very important example of discontinuity with Judaism.

Discontinuity, although not absolute, is also evident in the contrast drawn in 1:17, which reads, "The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." There is no denial here that Moses also brought grace and truth or that Jesus through his teaching upheld the goal of the law. It is rather a matter of emphasis or center of gravity.

Chapter 8: Jesus and the Unbelieving Jews

Chapter 8 of the Gospel of John contains some of the most negative statements about the Jews in the whole of the NT. Speaking to the people in the treasury of the temple, Jesus makes another astounding statement—"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (8:12; cf. 1:4). A little further on, he says, "You know neither me nor my Father.

²⁶The earliest Greek papyrus manuscripts (P66 and P75), together with the great majuscules Aleph* and B, have the remarkable reading *monogenēs theos* ("only God") rather than *monogenēs huios* ("only Son"), and this is probably to be preferred as the more difficult reading. This would then be one of the few places in the NT where Jesus is referred to explicitly as *theos*. See M.J. Harris, *Jesus as God: The New Testament Use of Theos in Reference to Jesus*.

²⁷The verb here is *exēgēsato*, "to disclose" or "expound." In effect, the Son has "exegeted" the Father.

If you knew me you would know my Father also” (8:19). After Jesus teaches them further, the Evangelist notes that, “As he was saying these things many believed in him” (8:30). To these believing Jews, Jesus says “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (8:31-32). The reference to freedom brings forth this response—“We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, ‘You will be made free?’” (8:33).

It is the appeal to being descendants of Abraham that initiates a blistering exchange. Jesus acknowledges the fact but then criticizes his listeners by saying, “If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing what Abraham did, but now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. You are indeed doing what your father does” (8:39-41). The Jews retorted with, “We are not illegitimate children; we have one Father, God himself” (8:41).

If that were so, responds Jesus, “You would love me, for I came from God. . . . Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot accept my word. You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I tell the truth you do not believe me. . . . Whoever is from God hears the words of God. The reason you do not hear them is that you are not from God” (8:42-47).

Of course, it is not literally true that the Jews are the children of the devil. The point being made by Jesus is that, in their rejection of him and their desire to do away with him, by analogy they are doing what the devil desires rather than what Abraham would have done (cf. 8:56). In that sense alone are they children of the devil. Still, it can hardly be denied that the association of the Jews with the devil in this way is exceedingly painful. And it should go without saying that it is utterly inexcusable for this text to be used as a justification for the persecution of Jews. Thus rather than continuity with Abraham we have here discontinuity.

But the confrontation escalates. The Jews accuse Jesus of being a Samaritan and having a demon (8:48). When Jesus says, “Very truly, I tell you, whoever keeps my word will never see death” (8:51), the Jews respond, “Now we know that you have a demon. Abraham died, and so did the prophets; yet you say ‘Whoever keeps my word will never taste

death.’ Are you greater than our father Abraham who died? The prophets also died. Who do you claim to be?” (8:52-53).

That, of course, is the supreme question, and the question upon which the whole passage turns. Jesus responds that it is God who glorifies him, “He of whom you say ‘He is our God’, though you do not know him, but I know him” (8:54). At this point, Jesus makes this astonishing claim—“Your ancestor Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad” (8:54-56). “Then the Jews said to him, ‘You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?’ Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.’ So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple” (8:57-59).