

PARALLEL GUIDE 2

The New Testament Message: The Gospel of Jesus and the Faith of Israel

Summary

Continuity exists between the Old and the New Testament, but the core of the New Testament is found in the Four Gospels. The Gospel According to Mark sets out its purpose clearly. It narrates the life of Jesus. It does this with a method that was a popular genre in its time, the biography of heroes, but it also follows the expectations of the Scriptures, the Old Testament.

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Learning Objectives

- Learn what is the relationship between the Old and New Testament
- Identify key political/religious elements of the Jewish world at the time of Jesus
- Learn what is the “radical discontinuity” between the followers of Jesus and other groups who grew out of Judaism at the time of Jesus

Assignment to Deepen Your Understanding

1. Read about the Qumran literature. Perhaps you can find some texts on the World-Wide Web. What does looking at such a text tell you about the Holy Scriptures and what we have today?
2. This is a short chapter. Read it a second time. If you were to explain the dead and risen Lord, the Messiah, to someone who had not heard of Christianity, how would you do this?

Preparing for Your Seminar

1. Identify elements of 21st-century society that mirror or parallel the various groups that existed in Judaism 2000 years ago. Which positions do you like best? Be prepared to justify this in group discussion. Take a position that does not suit you. Be prepared to offer a rationale for it.
2. Perhaps you will wish to hold a *seder* meal during the year. Become familiar with this tradition. In what way do a *seder* meal and the salvation story parallel salvation in the New Testament?

Works Cited

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Additional Sources

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On biblical interpretation at the beginning of the Christian era:

James L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible As It Was at the Start of the Common Era* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1998).

On Israel's "story":

N. T. Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol. 1, *The New Testament and the People of God*, cor. ed. (London: SPCK; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1993). See especially 215-23, 403-409.

On "the kingdom of God" in the first-century Palestinian synagogue:

Bruce Chilton, *The Glory of Israel* (Sheffield, England: JSOT, 1983).

On the significance of the resurrection narratives:

N. T. Wright, "The Resurrection of the Messiah," *Sewanee Theological Review* 41/2 (Easter 1998), 107-40.

THE NEW TESTAMENT MESSAGE:

The Gospel of Jesus and the Faith of Israel

Those who come from a study of the Old Testament to study the New Testament will find continuity. The New Testament is about people who still tell the story of God's way with Israel as their story, and still see themselves as heirs to God's promises through Abraham and Moses. To this very day "We were once the slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt," says the Jewish liturgy for Passover (*Passover Haggadah*, Birnbaum, 1976, 65).

Where did they find that story and the record of those promises? Primarily in the Old Testament itself—"the Scriptures"—whose extent ("the canon") had not yet been defined as it was later to be defined, for Jews by the rabbis and for Christians by the councils and tradition of the church, but that already consisted for all Jews of the Pentateuch, the prophets, and the Psalms.

**The Old
and
New
Testaments**

Is it possible for us to know how Jesus or his followers would have been understood when they quoted passages from the Scriptures or alluded to them? Can we discover how Jews contemporary with the writing of the New Testament used and interpreted their Bible? To a considerable extent the answer to those questions is "yes." There exists a body of literature—ancient Jewish paraphrases and commentaries, documents like those discovered at Qumran (the "Dead Sea Scrolls"), and, of course, the New Testament itself—from which we can learn a great deal about biblical interpretation at the beginning of our era.

What do we learn?

First, it was assumed among the faithful that the Scriptures, however difficult or obscure they might sometimes appear, were always both coherent and relevant to the life of God's people, even if at times somewhat cryptic and requiring interpretation. "Whatever was written in former days," Paul said, "was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope" (Rom. 15:4). Any faithful Jew would have said the same.

**The Jewish
Point
of View**

Second, the Scriptures told a story: Israel's story. In its outlines virtually all Jews of the period who regarded themselves as in any degree faithful would have understood this story in more or less the same way. It told how one wise, good, and loving God created the world, and how through the disobedience of Adam and Eve, our first parents, sin and death entered the world; how God called faithful Abraham and entered into covenant with him as one through whose offspring the damage done by Adam and Eve might be healed; how God, faithful to the covenant with Abraham, called Abraham's offspring Israel out of Egypt and gave them Torah (the Law) by the hand of Moses, thereby signifying their special calling and status; how Torah held out to Israel the ways of life and death, prosperity and exile, and offered hope beyond exile; and how Israel, exactly as Moses and the prophets warned, disobeyed God's commandments, choosing instead exile and death.

The Meaning of Jewish History

The story came down to the present where it was clear, in view of the general grief of the world (Israel, for example, was still in bondage to foreigners) that in all essential ways the Exile still persisted. And the story went on into the future. It looked for a time when the Exile would end, when Israel would be restored, and when God's purposes for the human race would be fulfilled. A restored Israel would become the true humanity that it was called to be, finally filling the place from which Adam and Eve fell. Such was the basic story as it might have been told by any Jew of the first century.

Third, the matter could hardly be left there. The prophets had made it clear that it was because Israel disobeyed God's commandments that it was sent into exile. The Jews who came home as a result of Cyrus' edict in 532 BCE seem to have been particularly conscious of this. How should or could Israel obey God's commandments properly? The Scriptures, we have said, were believed to be both relevant and coherent, but they were also seen to be cryptic and needing interpretation. They said, for example, that no work must be done on the Sabbath: but what exactly did that mean? What qualified as work? And what did not? If God was to restore the creation, was there a role that Israel was supposed to play in bringing that about, and if so, what was it? Who precisely would constitute the final restored humanity? All Jews? Or only some? What would happen to human beings after death? What would happen to Gentiles? Here a whole series of problems arise at a second level beyond the basic story.

At this level we do not have to read far in the New Testament or, indeed, any of that other literature we mentioned, to realize that by no means did all Jews tell the same story. Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, and Qumran sectaries evidently had markedly different views on a number of the questions to which we have just pointed. Paul is said on one occasion to have made astute use of just such differences of opinion to divide his opponents in the Jewish council (see Acts 23:6-9). So marked are these differences between parties that some scholars say that at this period it is not correct to speak of "Judaism" at all. Instead we should speak of various "Judaisms." Even those who identified themselves as Pharisees seem by no means always to have agreed with each other. Later rabbinic traditions are rife with tales of rivalry and disagreement between the two great Pharisaic houses of Hillel and Shammai.

Into this mix, that is Judaism in the first Christian century—"second temple Judaism," as it is often called—there came what might at first sight have been taken for one more such group, with its own particular "take" on the biblical story: the followers of Jesus of Nazareth. As it turned out, this group was to have a future quite different from that of the others. A closer look at its claims might suggest that its "take" on scripture likewise involved a change more radical than that of any other group. This involved a difference in understanding the second level of the story and also a change in understanding of the story itself—or at least of their relationship to it.

As you listened to or read aloud Mark's *Life of Jesus*, you may have noticed that he began by speaking of "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ"—that is, the good news of Jesus the Messiah, Jesus the anointed (1:1). *Christos* is a Greek word meaning "anointed," and its Hebrew equivalent is *Messiah*. In calling Jesus

“anointed” Mark used an expression whose meaning was by no means clear or limited to one set of ideas. In first-century Judaism there were many different ways of understanding the messianic hope. One thing we may say with certainty: “anointed” was a biblical word. It was regularly used of God’s agent, or agents, in the fulfilling of God’s promises to Israel. That is what Mark is talking about here. That is the claim he is making for Jesus.

Mark begins his story of Jesus’ public ministry with his proclamation of the imminent Kingdom of God (1:15). Later we learn that disciples of Jesus have already been given “the secret of the kingdom of God” (4:11), and that if they are willing to suffer with him, they will experience that kingdom “in power” in their own lives (9:1). Amid all this talk of God’s kingdom neither Jesus nor Mark (nor, incidentally, any of the other evangelists) ever tells us what the kingdom actually is. Why? Most probably because the evangelists, and Jesus himself, could have assumed what their first-century audience would understand by it. Careful examination of the Isaiah Targum (an Aramaic paraphrase of Isaiah that represents synagogue use and interpretation of Isaiah over a number of centuries) suggests that Markan usage (and synoptic usage) was similar to that of the first-century Palestinian synagogue. The phrase “kingdom of God” was used to speak of God’s active, personal intervention to redeem and restore Israel. Look at this passage in Isaiah:

. . . the LORD of hosts will come down
to fight upon Mount Zion and upon its hill.
Like birds hovering overhead, so the LORD of hosts
will protect Jerusalem;
he will protect and deliver it,
he will spare and rescue it. (Isa. 31:4-5)

The Targum paraphrases the first part by saying “the kingdom of the LORD of hosts will be revealed to settle upon the Mount of Zion and upon its hill” (Targum Isa. 31.4). Hence when it is said that in Jesus’ ministry “the kingdom of God” is at hand, what is being claimed is that, *in and through Jesus, God’s promises are being fulfilled and God is intervening to redeem and restore Israel.*

Mark’s story ends with the proclamation of Jesus who has been crucified and is now risen from the dead (16:6). Mark does not end with a proclamation of Jesus the martyr living on in the hearts and teaching of his faithful followers, or of Jesus the righteous man cruelly done to death whose soul is now safe in the hands of God—notions that Mark and his contemporaries were evidently perfectly capable of expressing if they had so chosen (see, e.g., Wisd. 3:1-9). Mark’s story ends with the proclamation of Jesus risen. The resurrection of the dead, like the coming of the Messiah and the presence of God’s kingdom, is an idea inextricably linked in Jewish tradition with hopes that God would act decisively to fulfill the promises of scripture and restore Israel (so, classically, Ezek. 37:1-14). When Jesus’ followers declared that he had risen from the dead, they could have meant only one thing: *that God had begun to fulfill God’s promise to Israel, and that in Jesus’ Resurrection they had received a downpayment, a firstfruit, of the general resurrection.* This, of course, was precisely what Paul claimed:

The Easter Proclamation

Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as in Adam all die, so all will be made alive in Christ.
(1 Cor. 15:20-22)

This, then, is the radical discontinuity between those who followed Jesus of Nazareth and all others who hoped in the God of Israel. Jesus' followers believed that in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, God had not only remained faithful to the promises but had begun to fulfill them. What for the prophets had been the "last" days were now present—and far from being merely "last," they were turning out also to be the first days of something wholly new. Certainly the followers of Jesus continue to experience the sorrows of the world, and look to the future for final deliverance. They continue to pray, "thy kingdom come." "Blessed," their Lord said, "are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. . . . Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled" (Matt. 5:4, 6). They will be comforted, and they will be filled, but not yet. Still they live in the world that crucified Jesus, and the memory of his cross is a perpetual witness to the fact that the world is not yet as it should be. Nevertheless there is for them an "already" as well as a "not yet," for Christ is risen. So they pray and mourn and hunger and thirst and protest the state of the world in a context, and above all in a relationship with their Lord, that seems to them "already" to be a taste of the Eden restored and the age to come. This tension between "already" and "not yet" was perfectly expressed by St. Paul:

If the spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

(Rom. 8:11, 14-17; cf. Gal. 3:23-4:7)