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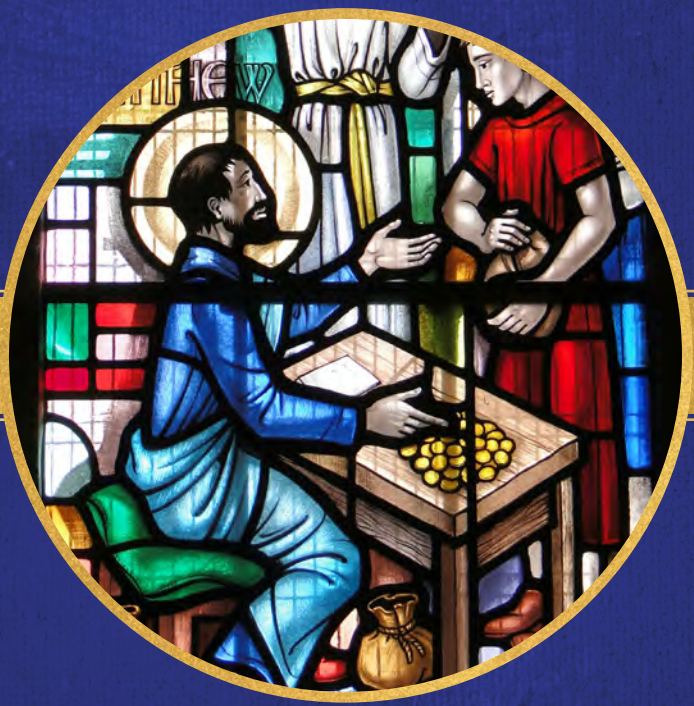
THE PEOPLE'S BIBLE COMMENTARY

— The Gospels and Acts —

THE PEOPLE'S BIBLE COMMENTARY

— A Bible commentary for every day —



Matthew

John Proctor

BRF Centenary Classics

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THE PEOPLE'S BIBLE COMMENTARY

Matthew

John Proctor

PREFACE

This commentary was written with churches and church people in mind. Some Christians have followed it in their daily Bible reading. Others have used it to help them lead Bible study. Preachers have turned to it, as they think about their sermons for Sunday. All of that is exactly what we hoped for when BRF asked me to write this commentary. It is a joy to know that it is being reissued. I hope it will help many people to grasp the good news of Jesus and to follow it in their own living.

There are some excellent big commentaries on Matthew's gospel, some stretching to several volumes. I have learned a lot from these. Yet for many people a big commentary would be no help at all – they would find it too costly or too heavy. So this much smaller commentary aims to digest the insight into Matthew that specialists can give, and to reflect on Matthew's message for today. What does it mean in the 21st century to hear the good news, to welcome God's kingdom and to be a disciple of Jesus? What can we receive from this gospel for Christian living in our times and among our neighbours?

God has surely given us four gospels for a good reason. Each of the four is unique. They tell of the same Lord, but in different ways. Each has its own angles and emphases, as it shares the message of Jesus. Here are some of Matthew's:

- Roots and continuity were important to Matthew. He wanted to connect the Christian good news with the past, with the story of God's work in the Old Testament. He believed that history pointed forward to Jesus, and that the New Testament story is rooted in the Old. To read Matthew is to be reminded of a God who works through the generations, and to think again about our own debt to the past.
- Matthew's gospel follows a sandwich pattern. Word and deed alternate. Blocks of Jesus' teaching are interleaved with blocks of action, with reports of things he did and people he met. Action and teaching mesh with one another, and in the mesh is a message. Belief in Jesus and practical Christian living are linked. True Christian living should be an integrated whole, where faith and conduct nourish one another.
- Matthew is a demanding gospel. It takes Christian commitment seriously – commitment to Jesus, to discipleship, to high standards of conduct, to one another. To read with care is likely to be a searching

experience. Yet Matthew was realistic. He knew that Christians are fragile, vulnerable and fallible. His gospel urges us to be patient with one another, and to find gentle ways of supporting each other in the church and in the Christian life.

- Matthew is a gospel of hope. He believed in the lordship of Jesus Christ, in Jesus' authority and presence in the church's mission, and in his coming to judge the world. To follow Jesus is to be in his company, under his command and within his care. Matthew wrote to give Christians confidence as they served Jesus in a complex world and in difficult times. We may read this gospel, and share its message, with that same aim. We too can be confident in the Christ who is with us always, whose word and presence we proclaim and enjoy.

Some people who use this commentary may worship in churches that use the Revised Common Lectionary. This calendar of Bible readings runs over three years of Sundays. In Year A of the three-year cycle – starting in Advent 2022, 2025, 2028 and so on – most of the gospel readings come from Matthew. Roughly half of this gospel will be read in main Sunday services, but it is not followed in precise gospel order, because we cover the sweep of the gospel story from Jesus' birth to resurrection in the four months from December to Easter. This involves a very selective approach to gospel readings in these months. The rhythm of the church year, rather than the flow of Matthew's text, sets the tone and context for these.

Once we come into the weeks after Trinity Sunday, from June to November, however, the gospel readings run steadily through Matthew from chapters 7 to 25, sometimes skipping a slice but always moving forward. Many of Matthew's main themes figure plain and large: miracles and mission, preaching and parables, crisis and controversy, fellowship and following. For churches who want to trace the movement and message of a big biblical book, the Revised Common Lectionary offers a great deal. Listen to Matthew's gospel in worship, and live by it through the year.

John Proctor

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INTRODUCTION

Jesus of Nazareth has a strong claim to be the most influential person who ever lived. Two thousand years after his own time, hundreds of millions of people in every part of the world are glad to be known as Christians, as his friends and followers. The life he lived, the things he said and did, how he died and what happened afterwards, make a remarkable story. Christians have always wanted to know about Jesus, to understand the Lord who launched our faith.

Why write gospels?

That is why we have gospels. Probably they arose something like this. For a few years after Jesus' time, people remembered what he had said and done. Memories were good in the ancient Middle East, as they have to be in any culture where paper is expensive. But the people who remembered gradually died out, and Christians wanted a record of Jesus that they could keep. So about a generation after Jesus' lifetime, the gospels started to appear.

That is very approximate. Nobody really knows when Matthew was written. Guesses vary from about AD40 to AD100. Many scholars come down in the middle of that range, between about 60 and 90. Around that time, the record of Jesus' life that we call Matthew's gospel was put to paper.

Global or local?

For whom was the gospel written? Two answers are popular today. One says that Matthew (and Mark, Luke and John) always meant their gospels to be widely read. The church of that day was spread across much of southern Europe, western Asia and northern Africa. There were good communications between various Christian centres. The gospels were bound to travel. The gospel writers believed that Jesus' story was worth telling and wanted to preserve it for their own generation and those who would follow. From very early on, the four gospels belonged to the whole church.

A second approach suggests that the four gospels were written for Christians in different local areas. Each of the writers was trying to help the Christians he knew best. So each gospel is angled differently, to reflect the needs and circumstances of the writer's own local church. If we follow that sort of tack, we may try to read between the lines of each

gospel to find out about the needs and situation of the first readers, as well as about Jesus himself.

There is some truth in both those theories. The early Christians were interested in Jesus. They thought his life was important. They wanted to preserve their memories of him, so others could know about him too. Jesus is the main focus of the whole gospel story and of Christian faith. But the four gospels do have different selections of material and different emphases. They are portraits, not engineers' drawings. To some extent they each reflect their own author's perspectives on Jesus and the questions and concerns of four different groups of early Christians.

Why read four gospels?

So I take a positive approach to the gospels. I value the material they contain, and I believe they give a true picture of Jesus. But none of them gives the whole truth. All of the gospel writers had to choose what to include and how to present it. Let me mention four reasons why it is helpful to have several gospels.

- **Selection:** Some material in other gospels is not in Matthew. For example, Matthew only shows Jesus making one journey to Jerusalem, at the end of his ministry. Jesus goes with grim foreboding, expecting to suffer. His enemies there act quickly and harshly against him, very soon after he arrives. That sequence of events is easier to understand if we connect it to John's gospel, which shows Jesus making several visits to Jerusalem. By the time of the last Passover visit he was known in the city and was a marked man. Both he and his enemies were ready for trouble. The accounts in two different gospels mesh together, to give a fuller and clearer picture of Jesus' career.

- **Order:** Some material in Matthew is in a different order in other gospels. For example, much of the teaching in Matthew 5—7 (the sermon on the mount) is scattered through Luke. Matthew seems to have a tendency to collect material on a similar theme and include it in one place in his gospel. There is something similar in Matthew 8 and 9, which shows a series of miracles in quick succession, whereas in Mark the same material is spread more widely, across Mark 1—5.

- **Detail:** Some material in Matthew is briefer than in other gospels. Mark reports action at length. Matthew cuts to the main point. Compare Mark 5:21–43 with Matthew 9:18–26, for example. Mark shows

each scene very closely and clearly; Matthew makes an impact by moving swiftly from one incident to the next.

- **Angle:** Some material in Matthew is told a bit differently in other gospels. Look at the comment on Matthew 26:26–30, for example. Jesus' words at the last supper vary a little as we move from one gospel to another. The main lines of the incident are very clear, but each gospel has its own emphasis and angle.

So for many reasons it is helpful to have four different gospels. But in some vitally important ways they are closely similar, both in broad outline and even in some fine details. Why is this? Why in particular are Matthew, Mark and Luke so very like each other at so many points?

Identify your sources

Most people who study the gospels think Matthew knew Mark's gospel, or something very like it. The two gospels have a great deal of material in common. Most of that material – indeed all of it after Matthew 13 – is in the same order, and much of it has similar wording. So the thought that Matthew knew and used Mark, and adapted Mark's material into his own gospel, has become widespread in modern study of the gospels.

However, a lot of Matthew's material is missing from Mark. About half of that extra material, almost all of it sayings of Jesus, is very like parts of Luke's gospel. This raises the suspicion that Matthew and Luke both had the same source for this stuff. This source has been named 'Q', which is the first letter of the German word for 'source', and a suitably mysterious title for a shadowy body of material about which we really know very little indeed.

Everything in the two paragraphs above is sensible guesswork; we cannot be certain. Matthew, like many a modern journalist, does not identify his sources. Even so, something like the above may very well explain Matthew as we now have it. But as we read Matthew, it is important to hear the way he tells the story of Jesus, to listen for his own emphases, and trace his own plan.

Matthew's plan

Have you ever been in an old building that was converted from one use to another during its lifetime? Both the original design and the later modifications contribute to the ground plan and the shape of the rooms. Some people think that has happened to Matthew. At any rate there seem to be two plans, dovetailed into each other.

The 'Jesus began' plan

The first three or four chapters of Matthew are a sort of preface to the main action. Jesus is born; later on he is baptised and tempted. Then he is ready to start his ministry, and at 4:17 it says, 'From then on Jesus began to preach.' The gospel then shows Jesus making God's kingdom known, in word and action, in and around Galilee.

Gradually we see a very mixed response arising, and there is a hint that serious difficulties may be emerging, when we read in 11:20, 'Then he began to speak against the places which had not heeded his word.'

Opposition now starts to sharpen, and at 16:21 we realise where this will lead: 'From then on Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, suffer and die.'

By using the word 'began' as a milestone, we have found the route the gospel takes. By that plan, Matthew's gospel has twelve chapters about the mission of Jesus in Galilee (4—16), and twelve chapters leading to the Passion of Jesus in Jerusalem (16—27). Once we pass chapter 16, the story is drawn to the cross like a moth to a lamp. Opposition steadily advances, the moment of destruction is inevitable, and there is a deepening mood of sorrow and fear. Only at the very end does hope return, with Easter and resurrection and a completely new beginning.

The 'Jesus finished' plan

The first plan has picked out the action of the gospel – what Jesus did. The second plan picks out what Jesus said. The words 'When Jesus had finished these sayings' come five times in Matthew (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). Each one ends a major block of teaching, the five great sermons of Matthew's gospel. Each of the blocks has a main theme running right through:

- Chapters 5—7, the sermon on the mount, about practical living.
- Chapter 10, about mission and evangelism.
- Chapter 13, a long string of parables about God's kingdom.
- Chapter 18, about Christian community and relationships.
- Chapters 24 and 25, about the future.

So the teaching and action are interspersed, like a giant multi-decker sandwich. Each section of teaching connects with the action around it, and carries the story forward.

Why two plans? Many people answer something like this. Mark used

the first plan: half of his gospel is about Jesus' mission in Galilee, and half is about Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and his suffering and death there. Matthew adopted Mark's plan. But Matthew also knew a good deal of Jesus' teaching, most of which Mark had missed (including the so-called 'Q' material), and wanted to highlight this. So the second plan, overlaid on the first, draws attention to Jesus as teacher. The church remembers and trusts the Lord who lived, died and rose again. The church also values and follows what he taught. Both aspects are important to Matthew.

Who was Matthew?

Jesus had a follower called Matthew, a former tax collector, whom he had called and who belonged to the circle of twelve disciples. We meet this man at Matthew 9:9, and there is an ancient tradition that his personal reminiscences of Jesus have come into this gospel. But did he actually write it? Many people think it would be odd if Matthew, who was one of the twelve, copied from Mark, who was not.

Matthew's gospel also shows a close acquaintance with Jewish religious lore and custom, and tax collectors were not very religious Jews. Some of the style in the gospel seems to be much more like that of a Jewish religious teacher. So could Matthew the tax collector be the source for some of the information, but someone else be the writer? And is there a trace of that writer – rather like a film director appearing for a moment in the film – in Jesus' saying about the 'scribe trained for the kingdom' (13:52)? None of the other gospels has this saying, but the writer of Matthew feels it describes his own calling, and is glad to include it.

If we take that approach, whom shall we mean when we say 'Matthew': the tax collector, or the writer of the gospel? I shall use the name 'Matthew' to refer to the person who wrote the gospel, and to the way he tells the story of Jesus.

Matthew and Judaism

In many ways, Matthew is the most Jewish of the gospels. It shows a strong acquaintance with Jewish customs and laws (for example, 5:23; 17:24; 23:5). It stresses how the ancient law of the Old Testament is fulfilled in the teaching of Jesus (5:17), and how the prophecies come to fulfilment in his life and work (1:23; 12:17). In some sections it presents Jesus as a new Moses (see comment on 2:13–23, pp. 26–27).

Yet Matthew also includes some sharp criticism of Jewish leaders. This is clearest in chapter 23. We also read that 'the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom' (21:43). Some of Israel's ancient privileges are being taken over by the community that Jesus is founding. So Matthew's gospel is very Jewish in its background and atmosphere, but it also tells of Judaism being split by the coming of Jesus. At the start of Matthew's gospel, we see Jesus' mission focused on Israel. But Israel divides: there is a core of opposition among the nation's leaders, yet many of the ordinary people are warm and receptive. Although Matthew does not directly mention this, the Christian gospel made great strides among the Jewish people in the years after the resurrection, as the church began to grow. But it was never accepted by the nation's official leadership.

Matthew's church

The strong Jewish flavour to Matthew's writing suggests that he was writing for a Jewish audience, probably for a group of Jewish people who had accepted and believed in Jesus. Matthew saw this faith as a true fulfilment of their ancient Jewish heritage. Prophecy and law found focus and completion in Jesus. Jesus was Israel's Messiah, and God's ancient purpose was being carried forward through him.

Yet Matthew's first readers may have had very awkward relations with some of their neighbours, who did not share their beliefs. Jews who had accepted Jesus would have been suspect, seen as a fringe group within Israel. That may be the reason Matthew included so much controversial material, involving disputes and criticism between Jesus and his opponents. All the gospels show some of this, but it is clearest in Matthew, and it may have been especially relevant to his readers' own situation. (The comments at the start of chapter 23 discuss this point further.)

But Matthew did not expect Christianity to stay within a Jewish horizon. He was convinced that the church's mission should include Gentiles too. Jesus sometimes met Gentile people during his mission in Galilee. When he saw their faith, he recognised and welcomed it. Those contacts were a hint of what was ahead. Once Jesus is risen, the horizon is the world. After the resurrection the Christian message spreads out to all the nations.

Matthew and Christian living

Three major emphases stand out when we compare Matthew with other gospels.

- Matthew's is the only gospel to use the word 'church' (16:18; 18:17). He shows very clearly that Jesus is gathering and shaping a community.
- There is a lot of material in Matthew about practical living. Jesus' teaching about lifestyle and relationships has a very prominent place. Matthew obviously believes that faith must show itself in everyday life.
- Matthew includes a great deal of Jesus' teaching about judgement. God weighs and measures the way people live. Faith that does not show itself in deeds is hollow, and will never be able to bluff God. God is rich in forgiveness, but that does not give Christians the right to be casual or complacent about how we live.

So Matthew's Christianity is church-centred: we belong to one another. It is practical: we aim to express our faith in love and action. And it is serious: we trust God's mercy, but we must not be careless and complacent in the service we offer.

Text and translation

Have you ever noticed a footnote in your Bible saying, 'Some manuscripts have…' or 'Other ancient authorities read…'? We do not have the original manuscript of any book of the Bible. Thank God, the early Christians copied out the biblical books, by hand. But some of the first copies got lost, decayed or were destroyed in persecutions. So when we want to find out what Matthew wrote, we use the earliest copies we have. But these manuscripts come from several generations after Matthew's own time.

These manuscripts do not agree with each other precisely. That can always happen with copying by hand. Where we meet disagreements in wording, we have to work out as well as we can which version is original – what Matthew actually wrote. Very rarely those differences affect a whole verse – included in some manuscripts, missing from others. Examples are 6:13; 16:2–3; 17:21; 18:11; and we now doubt whether those five verses were actually written by Matthew. Yet much, much more often we have no serious disagreements in the manuscripts:

what we read in our 21st-century English Bibles is based on a very solid knowledge of what Matthew wrote in the first century.

Matthew did not write in English. He used Greek, though not exactly the language spoken in Greece today. In some places it has been hard to translate the Greek into English, and English Bibles show different meanings. One example is in 28:17: the last few words could mean 'but they doubted' or 'but some of them doubted'. Were all the disciples hesitant, or just a few of them? We do not know. That sort of problem is occasionally to be expected when we use a very old piece of writing. It is hard to know fully and exactly what the ancient language meant. But most of the time we can be confident in our modern translations. In our day, as for the last 2,000 years, Christians are happy to use the four gospels because they were written close to the time and place where Jesus lived, and give us the best information we have about his life and work.

Matthew's good news

So Christians read Matthew as an introduction to Jesus. That was Matthew's main motive, to present Jesus clearly and helpfully, so that his readers would understand and trust Jesus. The word gospel means 'good news', about Jesus and about the life he invites people to live.

So listen to the teaching of Jesus in Matthew, take it seriously, and try to apply it in your own life. Value your Christian relationships with the brothers and sisters who help you to follow this way. And treasure above all your relationship with Jesus who is 'with you always, to the end' (Matthew 28:20).

The Bible quotations included in the commentary are usually taken from the New Revised Standard Version; occasionally I have used a translation or paraphrase of my own.

Some further reading on Matthew

A lot has been written about Matthew's gospel in recent years, and I have learned much from these books. This list aims to give credit for that. It also suggests books that might help you to explore Matthew further.

50 Matthew 13:44–52

Treasure new and old

So far, the parables in this chapter have spoken of the kingdom's struggles, and of its certain growth. They trace what God is doing. Now come three short, punchy stories that urge us to join in.

Doing business with God

It must be every farmer's dream to turn up a hoard of gold coins beneath the blade of the plough (v. 44). In the Holy Land, territory that had often been fought over, there was always a chance. A former tenant might have hidden valuables in the ground before fleeing or going out to war.

Historians have puzzled over the legal background. Would it be lawful to cover treasure up and then buy the field, without telling the owner? Certainly that question could have been in Jesus' mind. Perhaps he told the parable with a twinkle in his eye, to stir people into thinking about such an odd and dubious tale. But his main point is at the end of this little story: the kingdom is so important, it is worth everything you have to make sure you secure it.

That matches exactly the parable of the pearl merchant (vv. 45–46). Again the story is about a single treasure which turns a businessman into a lover. Suddenly he can no longer simply buy and sell. Here is something so precious that he must possess it. And so he is possessed by it; he gives himself to make sure he gets it. This is not commerce; it is commitment.

Matthew has already shown his readers a couple of times that Christians must not be preoccupied by property and possessions (6:19–34; 10:9–10). These two little stories, with their line about 'selling everything', remind us that seeking and serving God's kingdom may involve material sacrifices. Commitment to Christ includes the commitment of our wealth.

Coming to the surface

A drag-net was long, and hung from floats a few feet beneath the surface of the water. It could be positioned by two boats and then hauled in by ropes to the shore. The sifting of the catch was an everyday job, but Jesus uses it as a picture of God's great day of judgement (vv. 47–48).

An explanation is given with the parable, rather like the one that followed the wheat and the tares (13:37–43). But the focus here is sharper: nothing is said about waiting; there is only one point, the final sorting out. The emphasis is on the down-side of judgement (vv. 49–50). Alongside the two little treasure parables, which stress the excitement of finding the kingdom, this strikes a solemn warning. It is vital to be 'righteous', to be like soil that welcomes the gospel seed, to grasp the kingdom when the opportunity arises and to serve it faithfully from then on.

The first time I worked carefully through Matthew, I was struck by its solemnity. This gospel presents discipleship seriously. Every one of the five long discourses ends with a parable about judgement and reward (see also 7:13–27; 10:41–42; 18:23–35; 25:31–46). 'Don't be casual,' Matthew seems to be saying. 'Don't take the kingdom for granted. Take it seriously.'

Wealth to share

The disciples have been given privileged insights into the parable material (13:11, 36). They still need to 'hear' (13:18, 43) and to respond earnestly and actively (vv. 44–46). But their nearness to Jesus gives them a special role. They have been able to understand, and now they can share that understanding with others. They will have a teaching role in the church to come.

So when Jesus says, 'Have you understood?' he goes on to speak of the 'scribe trained for the kingdom' – someone who knows the ancient scripture, and can use it to proclaim and explain the freshness of God's kingdom. Treasure is to be grasped (v. 44), but also shared (v. 52). The kingdom message is to be passed on, in a way that shows its firm base in God's past work.

So the disciples' task is threefold: to grasp the message of the kingdom; to live by its truth, as people whose lives will be judged; and to share its message.

For reflection

The gospel still needs teachers whose message is up-to-date and yet is firmly grounded in ancient scripture. There is just a suspicion (see the section 'Who was Matthew?' in the Introduction, p. 13) that 13:52 is Matthew's own 'signature', his hopes and ideals for his own teaching ministry. Could it also be yours?

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Matthew's gospel, written close to the time and the places where Jesus lived, is clear, organised and practical, giving prominence to Jesus' teaching about lifestyle and relationships. Alongside this focus on how faith shapes everyday living, Matthew looks back into Jewish history, emphasising how the events of Jesus' birth and life, cross and resurrection, fulfilled Old Testament prophecy about the Messiah, and telling of the Son of God who is 'with you always, to the end of time'.

Revd John Proctor recently retired as a minister of the United Reformed Church. He worked at URC's central office in London from 2014 to 2020, and prior to that he was based at Westminster College, Cambridge, for nearly 30 years.

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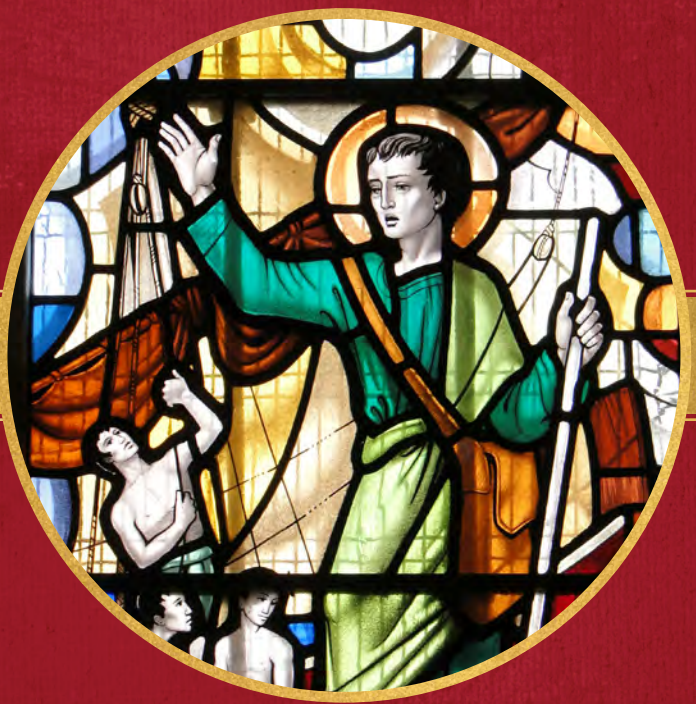

Mark

Dick France

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THE PEOPLE'S BIBLE COMMENTARY

Mark

Dick France

PREFACE TO THE 2010 EDITION

The first issue had no space for a preface, so all the general things I wanted to say about my approach to Mark had to go into the first two readings. Since then I have published a much bigger commentary on Mark (719 pages, on the Greek text!) and an even bigger one on Matthew. But further study has not changed my overall approach to the gospel in any significant way, and I hope readers will still be willing to tackle those first two readings seriously before launching into the text proper. Mark left us a *book*, not a collection of individual readings, and it is only when we appreciate his work as a whole that we have the necessary framework into which the individual parts can be fitted with real understanding.

It is always a pleasure to hear from readers who have found benefit from one's writing. I have been especially pleased that several have told me that they have taken up my suggestion of reading or listening to the whole of Mark's gospel in a single session (either alone or in a group) before tackling the individual readings, and that this has given them a new, and sometimes significantly different, appreciation of Mark's message. I am happy to repeat that recommendation for a new generation of readers.

Enjoy Mark!

Dick France

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INTRODUCTION

Many members of the first-century churches could not read, and many more could not afford to possess a scroll of their own. So we should think of our New Testament books as intended to be read aloud, when the members of the church were gathered together.

Mark's gospel, the shortest of the four, may well have been intended to be read out in a single session. It takes about an hour and a half to read aloud, and the experience of listening to it (and still more of reading it) in this way is thrilling, as those who have attended Alec McCowan's hugely popular one-man recitations of the gospel will know.

Mark the storyteller

It is when you read Mark's gospel in a single session that you see most clearly what a well-written story it is. Threads of continuity come to light, and there is a skilful build-up (and sometimes release) of tension, comparable to that achieved by some of the best dramatists.

The author must have been a popular communicator. His style is more expansive and vivid than that of the other gospel writers, and he seems to relish a lively scene. His gospel is shorter than the others not because he writes concisely (where he runs parallel with the other gospels, especially Matthew, he is often much more long-winded), but because he has limited his material. While he says much about Jesus' power as a teacher, he offers less of his actual teaching than the other gospels. He writes rather of eager crowds and impressive miracles, of dramatic confrontation with opponents both human and demonic. He allows us to feel the disconcerting impact of Jesus on his often bewildered disciples, and to share with them the experience of having their world turned upside-down by the revolutionary values of the kingdom of God. He presents in all its starkness the paradox of a rejected and executed Messiah, of a Son of God who meets with incomprehension and hostility from the people of God.

It is all intensely moving, as the story forges ahead with breathless urgency towards the inevitable showdown in Jerusalem, where on a small local stage a drama of cosmic proportions is played out.

The trouble is that for most Christian readers it is now all so familiar that it is almost impossible for us to feel the disconcerting and yet exhilarating impact which the story must have had on those who first heard it. Let me urge you, therefore, if you possibly can, to arrange at best to

hear Mark's story told in a single session, or, failing that, to set aside an hour and a half and read it through yourself (in a modern version) as if it were a novel, trying to put yourself in the position of those who first heard the story and for whom it was all so powerfully new. When you have done that, you will be in a better position to see the significance of the individual sections as we work through them in this book.

Mark and Peter

Very early Christian tradition tells us that the gospel was written by John Mark of Jerusalem (Acts 12:12), who was later a colleague both of Paul (Acts 12:25; Colossians 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:11) and of Peter (1 Peter 5:13), and that it was when he was Peter's assistant that Mark decided to record the stories about Jesus which Peter was in the habit of telling in his later days in Rome. The early writers are divided as to whether he did this while Peter was still alive (and with his blessing) or after Peter's death in, probably, AD64 or 65. It seems a plausible tradition, and in Mark's action-packed gospel it may well be that we hear at least an echo of the enthusiastic way in which Peter would have told the stories of the man who had changed his own life and outlook so irrevocably.

The value of Mark

In the early centuries of the church's life, Mark's gospel was undervalued. It was felt to be inferior especially to that of Matthew, which had so much more detailed teaching of Jesus and went into greater theological depths. Since they believed that Matthew's gospel was written first, Mark was too easily dismissed as his 'lackey and abridger' (Augustine). It was only with the growth in the 19th century of the belief that Mark was the earliest gospel that this shorter book came into its own. Nowadays most scholars value Mark as the earliest surviving record of the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. Mark's Greek is lively but not very polished, in the style of the popular storyteller, rather than the sophisticated prose of a professional writer. Where a stylist would recommend subordinate clauses, Mark often strings sentences together with a simple 'and', so that the story rattles quite jerkily along. He is particularly fond of moving the action on with 'immediately' (eleven times in chapter 1 alone, though English versions tend to ration them). It is not easy to get bored as you listen to Mark!

Dick France

88 Mark 14:1–2, 10–11

The priests and Judas Iscariot

The plot against Jesus

We have had plenty of indications of how the religious authorities are reacting to Jesus. Even as far back as 3:6 they were plotting his death. Now he is in Jerusalem, within their grasp, and the time has come. But the same Passover festival which has brought Jesus to Jerusalem has also brought thousands of other pilgrims to the temple, and many of them already know Jesus and are his enthusiastic supporters – as the pilgrim crowds have demonstrated when they escorted him into the city with shouts of Hosanna. To make an open move against Jesus would be likely to provoke a riot.

During the day, Jesus spent his time in the temple, very publicly. The only answer, then, is to try to arrest him at night, when there are no crowds of supporters around. But how do you find one among 100,000 Passover visitors? The city was far too small for the crowds who came at festival time, and the visitors spread out to the surrounding villages or camped on the hillsides around the city. They must find inside information of where Jesus and his disciples are staying.

The informer

And that is where Judas comes in. His betrayal of Jesus consists first in his willingness to tell the authorities where the disciple group may be found at night, and indeed, as we shall see, to lead them there in person and identify Jesus so that they can arrest him. This is the service they most need from him, and it is for this that he is to be well paid. We shall see also, however, that when Jesus is brought to trial the high priest will be well informed about the sort of things Jesus has been saying about himself and his mission. Since most of the relevant sayings have been uttered in private to the disciples, it seems likely it is Judas who has fed the authorities with appropriate evidence which they can use against Jesus when the time comes.

Why did he do it?

It has always seemed incredible that a man who has devoted a year or more of his life to following Jesus could suddenly turn against him in this way. Few have been able to believe that a cash payment would alone be enough to motivate such a radical decision. Beyond that we are in the area of conjecture.

One interesting fact is that Judas' name, Iscariot, may indicate that he came from a town, Keriot, in southern Judea. If so, that would probably mean that he was the only non-Galilean among the twelve. So he may have come to feel out of place in this Galilean movement, and the more so when the group has come down to Judea and the Galilean crowds have welcomed 'their' prophet into the capital. So perhaps there is an element of racial prejudice in Judas' decision.

But it is likely that there is a more fundamental reason than that. As they have journeyed towards Jerusalem, Jesus has again and again made it plain to his disciples that he has no intention, as many had hoped, of leading a movement to restore Israel's national independence; his mission is not to lead his people to victory but to be rejected and die. Peter's remonstrance against such an idea (8:32) would have been echoed by the other disciples, and they have followed him reluctantly and with bewilderment.

If Judas originally joined the movement for motives of high-minded patriotism, he will have watched with dismay as Jesus has stubbornly rejected any such mission. And now in Jerusalem Jesus has made matters worse by actually attacking the temple itself, the very symbol of national pride, and daring to predict its destruction. Judas' desertion would then have been the result of disillusionment: this is not the sort of movement he had thought he was joining. His approach to the priests would then be partly an attempt to save his own skin while there is still time; but it might also arise from a genuine conviction that Jesus has embarked on a dangerous and unpatriotic course and must be stopped before he does any more harm.

For meditation

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The late Revd Dick France was an Anglican clergyman and a New Testament scholar and writer. He taught at London School of Theology before becoming principal of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford.

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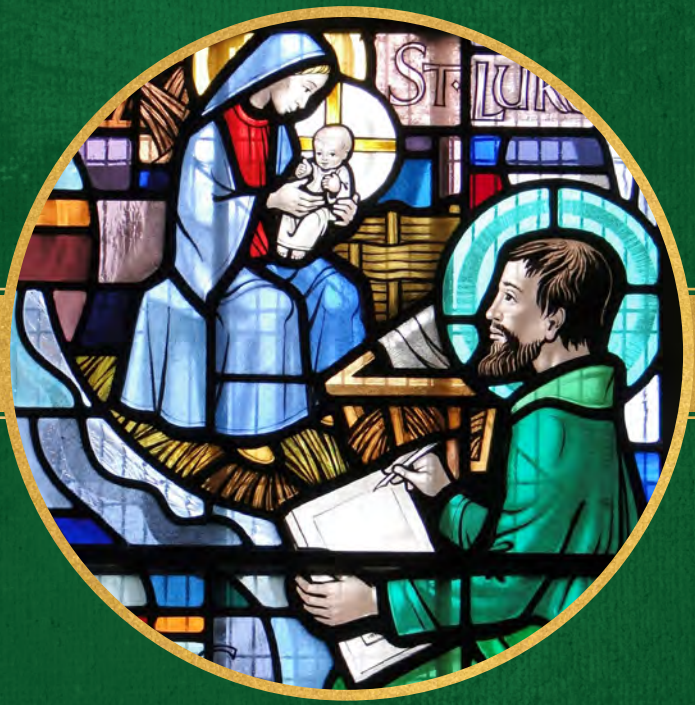

Luke

Henry Wansbrough

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THE PEOPLE'S BIBLE COMMENTARY

Luke

Henry Wansbrough

PREFACE

Each of us has a favourite gospel. Mine varies – now one, now another. Augustine was right when he said that looking at Jesus through the gospels is like looking through a prism: you need all four individual angles to gain an adequate picture. Two of the ways in which Luke looks at the good news of Christ are especially important to me.

For Luke Jesus is the Saviour. Yes, of course, Jesus saves in all the gospels; the very name 'Jesus' means 'Saviour'. But it is only in Luke that he is called the Saviour, and that from the very beginning. The angels at Bethlehem bring this news of great joy: 'To you is born this day a Saviour who is Christ the Lord' (see Luke 2:11). In the temple the aged Simeon echoes them, 'My eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared in the sight of every nation' (see v. 30). At the end, too, the passion and death of Jesus are scenes of healing, forgiveness and salvation. Jesus heals the ear of the high priest's servant. He forgives those who are nailing him to the cross. He welcomes the penitent thief into paradise, and all depart from the scene beating their breasts. Throughout the gospel Jesus not merely accepts sinners and forgives the penitent; he goes out to find them. He calls that inquisitive crook Zacchaeus down from his sycamore tree in Jericho to be a disciple. In the parables there is joy in heaven when the man searches and finds the sheep he has lost, and the woman the coin she has lost, not to mention the wholesale celebration when the father finds the prodigal son he has lost. For the great feast the Master positively forces and squeezes the guests into his banquet.

The other aspect is the ever-present Spirit. Luke had experienced the Spirit at work in the churches of Paul, the Spirit-filled chaos at Corinth. In his second volume, Acts, Luke describes the Spirit active in the earliest days of the Christian movement, guiding and gently coaxing the enthusiastic followers in the right direction. Shining his light further back he shows us the Spirit again at beginning and end of Jesus' own story. The whole explosion is ignited when the Holy Spirit comes upon Mary and the power of the Most High covers her with its shadow. Jesus is filled with the Spirit when he goes out into the desert to ponder his mission and confront his demons. When he sets out his programme in the synagogue at Nazareth, the Spirit of the Lord is upon him. When the risen Christ finally departs from his bewildered followers, he sends them back into Jerusalem to await the signal for the start of their own

mission, the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. Luke reassures us of the presence of the Spirit in Christ's Church to this day.

You must experience the good news of Luke for yourself, and I pray that these pages may help you to appreciate and love it.

Dom Henry Wansbrough OSB

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INTRODUCTION

The evangelist Luke wrote nearly a quarter of the New Testament – one of the longest of the gospels and its companion volume, Acts. So on any count he is an important witness to the Christian message and to its development in the early church. Some scholars think he was responsible also for adding touches to other writings of the New Testament. Who was this important writer? There is no suggestion that he was one of the twelve, the original companions chosen by Jesus, or indeed that he knew Jesus during his lifetime; but tradition has it that he accompanied Paul on some of his journeys, for certain passages in Acts are written in the first person plural: 'We travelled… We embarked…' Tradition also holds that Paul mentioned this Luke, 'the beloved physician', as his only faithful companion in prison (Colossians 4:14; 2 Timothy 4:11). 'Luke' is, of course, one form of 'Lucius', a very common name in the Roman world. So to know that the author was called Luke does not of itself tell us very much.

Luke's world

More important than knowing the identity of the author in the sense of 'Luke Who?' is to know that he received the apostolic tradition about Jesus from the early communities. Not himself an eyewitness of the life of Jesus, he listened to the reports handed down in the Christian communities about the Master. He stresses that he did his research among the previous accounts of the good news. He obviously drew heavily on Mark, the first gospel to be written, and on another source, either Matthew or a collection of the sayings of the Lord commonly known as Q and now lost. He also had his own sources, on which he drew for such events as the stories of Jesus' infancy or the appearances after the resurrection, and especially the parables. The language of these is so thoroughly Lukan that they are most likely to have been received by him in oral form; he was the first to commit them to paper. He himself was thoroughly familiar with Judaism, but he does not expect his readers to know the Jewish tradition too well. From the way he writes, it is clear that he moved in a more sophisticated society than Mark, and a more Gentile society than the very Jewish Matthew. His courtly vocabulary and style (from 'Theophilus, your Excellency' onwards) places him within literary circles. The subtlety and wit of his writing suggest an educated background. The ease with which he handles financial and

economic affairs similarly places him in moderately affluent society. It is all the more remarkable that Luke misses no opportunity to underline the responsibility and danger of being wealthy, and the need for generosity, and to stress that Jesus came to bring the good news first of all to the marginalised and wretched.

Luke the person

In reading a gospel it is a joy to get to know the author. It is, after all, through his (unlikely in that day to be 'her') eyes that we see Jesus and hear his message. Luke is a gentle and sensitive person, very aware of the importance of little touches of affection. He explains the grief of the widow of Nain by telling us that her son was her only son. When Peter denies Jesus, he is brought to repentance because Jesus just turns silently to look at him. Luke has a gentle wit too, and can quietly make fun of the rich fool in the parable, showing the man's self-importance by his repeatedly talking about himself. The characters in his parables are not like those in Matthew's parables, pure villains or pure heroes; they are mixed characters like the rest of us, with good and bad points, often doing the right thing for the wrong reason, so that we can become quite attached to rascals like the crafty steward or the lazy householder. One thing Luke stresses above all is that we are all sinners, in need of repentance on our part and forgiveness on God's. He portrays with particular tenderness the difference between the proud Pharisee and the humble tax-collector at prayer, and with particular warmth the joy at the repentance of a single sinner, or the delicacy of Jesus' silent welcome for the woman who was a sinner. His word-painting, too, is brilliant, so that the stories of the infancy of John the Baptist and Jesus, before their mission begins, breathe the atmosphere of the Old Testament: we are still living in that world and awaiting the coming of the Spirit at the baptism of Jesus.

Four faces of a prism

One of the most enriching advantages of studying the gospels is the possibility of seeing Jesus through the eyes of the four different gospel writers. Each is different, each puts the message differently, each stresses different aspects of Jesus. Down the ages, writers have likened the aspects portrayed by the four gospels to four different portraits of the same person. Augustine of Hippo called them four facets of the same prism. They complement one another and, through this

interplay, all together add up to a richer and more profound picture of the Master than each separately could provide. From the earliest time they were all accepted by Christians as a valid record of what Jesus did, taught and suffered. Other versions of the Jesus story were rejected by Christians. Such versions have survived in a few copies, or been recently rediscovered in single copies by researchers, after being lost or hidden for centuries. Others presumably – perhaps including some of the accounts mentioned by Luke in his preface – are still lost. Obviously they were not felt by the first Christian generations to render an acceptable or reliable picture of their Lord and Master, or – as other theological traditions have it – to be inspired. The Christian community did not recognise in them the face of Jesus.

How to read this book

Like the other books in this series, this book is not meant to be a technical commentary, discussing the views of scholars, putting forward many possibilities and assessing them all. In most cases I have simply chosen the interpretation which seemed to me best. All reading should, of course, be done with a critical mind, but criticism is not the purpose of this reading. The purpose of reading the gospel is to come closer to the Lord, the Lord God in the Lord Jesus. I suggest that you read the passage given, slowly and prayerfully, then read the comment (or part of it) till you have enough thoughts for reflection. There is no need to read a whole section at one sitting. If part of a comment provides you with enough material for thought, stop; then start again on another occasion. It may be useful to have a gospel text beside you, so that you can refer to it while you read the comment. The comment is only a means to an end, and the end is a loving understanding of the gospel itself. While I have been writing this commentary, Luke has become a gentle friend. Let him lead you to the Lord and Saviour he portrays.

58 Luke 15:11–32

The prodigal son

This third parable of repentance and forgiveness has had difficulty finding a title. Should it be 'the prodigal son', 'the forgiving father' or even 'the powerless father' (because he is so helplessly affectionate)? Luke's story is told with all the delicacy and character of his artistry. The story is told with a fine balance, the geographical movements away and back neatly parallel to each other, and symbolising the breaking and mending of the relationship. The son is lost – the son is found. The son loses everything – the son receives everything. In the centre of all is the son's repentance.

The younger son

The audacity of the younger son is breathtaking. He treats his father as virtually dead already. Not only the insult, but the financial loss: presumably the father has to sell up half his property to provide the wastrel with his cash. The lowest point to which he sinks is of course tending unclean animals and even envying them. Luke is a realist and knows the usefulness of some such jolt towards repentance. This is a classic case of the Lukan anti-hero doing the right thing for the wrong reason. It is then that he is forced to take stock, and breaks out into that feature of so many of Luke's parables, a little puzzled speech to himself about what he should do (just like the rich fool, the crafty steward or the unjust judge).

The elder son

The portrait of the elder son is also masterly. His resentment after all his years of loyal labour is utterly justified on any ordinary human level. No doubt he had had to work all the harder both for lack of his brother's labour and to make up for the sale of half the property. And, after all, the calf *we* had been fattening (yes, I've been working at that too) was part of his own share of the property. So he refuses even to acknowledge his brother; he calls him 'this son of yours'. Quite without justification he introduces 'loose women' into the equation, though there has been no indication that they were among the wastrel's excesses. This detail is due entirely to the elder brother's own malice and jealousy. But then

his anger is so well justified that the slight exaggeration of a carelessly chosen word is not surprising.

The father

Well, perhaps he was a bit too indulgent at the beginning. He accepts the insult and the impoverishment – but then most parents and superiors have to learn when to bite their tongues. It is not always helpful to tell home truths to the young. (Paul agreed: 'Everything is permissible, but not everything builds people up' – 1 Corinthians 10:23.) When the first dust of the son's arrival appears on the horizon, the father *runs* to meet him, affection overcoming the demands of dignity in an oriental gentleman who is no longer young. He embraces the son and will not even listen to the nice little prepared speech, which is interrupted in the middle, no doubt smothered in the embrace. He reassures the wastrel that all is forgiven and that trust is restored by even giving him the authority of a ring, so that he can sign away the rest of the property if he likes.

Nor is the resentful elder brother neglected: the celebration has begun when the father even leaves his place at the head of the table, deserting his guests and new-found son, to go out and try to coax away his resentment. He has the generosity to acknowledge (and it takes courage to give ground to an angry man) that 'all I have is yours'. To the hurtful gibe 'this son of yours' he replies gently with 'your brother'. A less generous story would have finished with a sharp contrast in the father's attitude to the two brothers and would have left the self-righteous elder brother to swelter in his own resentment. But this father's affection is so limitless that even such behaviour must be drawn back into love.

Prayer

Father, I have the faults of both the brothers. Coax me always back into your love.

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Dom Henry Wansbrough OSB is a monk of Ampleforth in Yorkshire. He is executive secretary of the International Commission for Preparing an English-language Lectionary (ICPEL).

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THE PEOPLE'S BIBLE COMMENTARY

— A Bible commentary for every day —

John

Richard A. Burridge

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THE PEOPLE'S BIBLE COMMENTARY

John

Richard A. Burridge

PREFACE TO THE 2010 EDITION

So much has happened since I wrote the first edition of this commentary in 1998. Then it was one of the first to be published in a new series for BRF to be called *The People's Bible Commentary*, of which I was also privileged to be one of the three general editors. It is a joy that within ten years we were able to complete the project for the whole Bible in 32 volumes, including scholars from a wide range of countries, different backgrounds and various Christian denominations. Yet the format of each volume has remained the same, providing double-page readings of each book, passage by passage, either for daily use or to assist with study groups, talks or sermons. It has been a delight as I go around the country taking study days and training sessions to find that my commentary and the series as a whole has become greatly appreciated by clergy and lay people alike. Indeed, over the last decade, I have found myself regularly turning to many volumes in the series, either for my own personal Bible study or as part of my preparation for preaching.

I was honoured that the Archbishop of Canterbury and the planning group, led by Professor Gerald West from Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, should have chosen this commentary as preparatory reading for the Lambeth Conference 2008. Accordingly, we produced a slightly updated second edition, which was then sent to all the Anglican bishops throughout the world with a daily reading plan for the six months February to July 2008. Archbishop Rowan himself began the Conference by leading the bishops in three days' retreat with addresses on St John, while the rest of the Conference started each day with study of John's gospel in small groups. I hope and pray that we may follow the bishops' example in our own reading of the fourth gospel.

I remain deeply grateful to Richard Fisher and Naomi Starkey at BRF, and to our colleagues at Hendrickson for the American version, and I pray that this new edition may help us love Jesus and each other more.

Richard A. Burridge

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I learned so much while I was writing this book, despite my years of preaching and teaching it in universities and churches. The list of books at the back contains the key works to which I have been indebted for so much of the material in this commentary.

I am also grateful to my undergraduate students at the University of Exeter and King's College London for their encouragement and ideas, as well as to various postgraduates for their stimulation. Congregations in Exeter University Chapel, King's College Chapel and St Andrew's Church, Whitehall heard quite a lot of this preached over the years. While I was writing the commentary, I delivered the daily key note Bible readings on John for the Diocese of Rochester's 'Forward in Mission' conference in October 1997; my thanks to all who participated, especially the Bishop of Rochester and Canon Gordon Oliver.

Revd Shelagh Brown of BRF invited me to write this and was very encouraging at the beginning; her sudden death in July 1997 left us all the poorer. I am grateful to Naomi Starkey for her editorial assistance and the way she took over the project, as well as to my colleagues as editors, David Winter and Henry Wansbrough as we completed the commentaries on the entire Bible. Many people acted as 'trial readers' of these studies while they were being written, but I am particularly grateful to Jane Pendarves and Betty Jeffery for all their time, interest and helpful suggestions.

As always, it was my wife, Sue, and our daughters, Rebecca and Sarah, who put up with author's stress and preoccupation at the computer. Without their continuing love and understanding, it would not have been possible.

I am grateful to Professor Raymond Brown for the constant inspiration of his writings on John and for his personal warmth and interest in the first edition of this commentary. Following his sudden death when it was just about to be published, I gladly dedicated this book to his memory.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

A book in which a child may paddle but an elephant can swim deep.

Welcome to all those who cannot wait to get in the water

Whenever we go to the beach, my children rush to take off their shoes and socks and go paddling immediately – and I was the same at their age. So this is a quick word of encouragement and safety warning to those who want to jump straight into the text. John's gospel is a lovely story. It can be enjoyed by those who know little of Jesus and nothing of the background, which is why it is often given out at churches and meetings to those who are enquiring about the Christian faith. So, go ahead and splash around in it! You can jump about and dip in here and there, because these little studies are all separate in themselves. On the other hand, you might want to use it for your early morning bathe and exercise, and take one or two sections each day for meditation and prayer. If you have the stamina, you can immerse yourself in reading it straight through, for each part flows into the next.

But, as that little saying above about John notes, it is also a book in which the real heavyweights, the mystics and the theologians, have been drowning for centuries! Beneath that placid surface run powerful undercurrents and eddies which will circle you around and bring you out some way forward or back from where you went in. I have tried to chart some of these as we go along, but if you get into difficulties, you might find it helpful to get out, sit on the beach and read these notes. And of course, if you want to do some serious wallowing in John, a little bit of preparation is always a good idea.

You will need a Bible, New Testament or gospel text open as you read. Each study is on a small section and we shall usually work through it verse by verse. Quotations tend to be from the RSV or NRSV, but often I will paraphrase the meaning of the original Greek. You should be able to follow it with any translation, and try several for variation.

What is this book?

It is called a 'gospel', or *eu-angelion* in Greek, which means a 'good message' or 'good news', connected with the word 'angel' or messenger. In the Old Testament this means the 'good news' of God's peace

and salvation, brought to poor and hurting people trapped in pain or oppression (Isaiah 52:7; 61:1). In the Greco-Roman world, it was used for the latest proclamation from the local government or the emperor. But what it is called does not tell us what it is. In its form and content it describes a couple of years of the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth, a preacher, teacher and wonder-worker in the Roman province of Judea, concentrating particularly on his trial and execution by the political and religious authorities and the rather strange things which happened afterwards. It is not what we would expect from a biography today.

On the other hand, it is very like many ancient accounts of teachers, philosophers, generals and statesmen. They tended to be quite short; John is just over 15,000 words, or about a sixth of this book. It was the amount which could fit on a single scroll of papyrus and be read aloud in a couple of hours. Because they were relatively short, such works could not cover all of a person's life. So they would focus on some significant stories from someone's public life in society, including a concentration on their death, to show what they were really like. These books were not meant to be accurate historical reporting, nor were they fiction or legend; they would include stories about the person and the kind of things they said and did, to interpret their significance. So John makes it clear that he has made a similar selection from the 'many other things Jesus did' to show the reader who Jesus is, 'the Christ, the Son of God' (20:30–31; 21:25). Therefore we must expect to find both story and interpretative reflection, both history and theology.

This explains why the book is structured in two main sections. The first describes Jesus' ministry, from his baptism and meeting his first followers through his teaching and miracles as some people come to believe and accept him while the opposition of others, particularly the authorities, grows over a couple of years (1:19—10:42). It is sometimes called the 'Book of Signs' because of the way Jesus' miracles are used to show who he is. The second half covers only his last few days, teaching his disciples and his trial, death and resurrection (13:1—20:31), often known as the 'Book of Glory' because John uses 'glory' to describe what happens to Jesus. From these two parts emerges a clear picture of who Jesus is and what happened to him. Around these sections, the writer has arranged a prologue, like an overture to set out the main themes (1:1–18), an interlude at half-time to help change gear (11:1—12:50) and an epilogue to tie up some loose ends (21).

How was it composed and produced?

This book is called 'the gospel according to John'. It does not say it was written *by* him, but is 'according to' his teaching and interpretation. In fact, even this description is not original, but dates from the second century when the four gospels were collected together and given these titles to distinguish them from one another. Furthermore, John is never mentioned in the text. There is an unnamed disciple described as 'the one Jesus loved' who is present at the last supper, the trial, the cross and the resurrection (see on 13:23; 18:15–17; 19:26–27; 20:2–8 below). In the epilogue, he is claimed as the 'witness' who caused it all to be written but who may have since died (see on 21:24). Since the only possibilities in that chapter are the 'sons of Zebedee and two others' (21:2), he has been traditionally identified as the apostle John, son of Zebedee.

It was quite common in the ancient world for the followers of a great man to write up his ideas and teachings, as Plato did for Socrates. If John had led this particular early church for many years, it might be better to think of him as the 'authority' rather than the 'author' of the gospel 'according to John'. Since we do not know who actually wrote the book, in this commentary we shall use 'John' to refer to the 'writer', 'author' or 'evangelist', and sometimes even to describe the text itself in the traditional manner.

Whoever wrote it seems to have worked independently of the other three gospels. Matthew, Mark and Luke are often called the 'synoptics' because when you 'see' them 'together' (*syn-optic-* in Greek), it is clear that the texts are related, probably with Matthew and Luke using Mark as a source. While John has some of the same people and similar stories, he uses different words and writes in a completely different style with many individuals, events and teachings occurring only in this gospel.

Because of the interlude and the epilogue, and the way the story jumps around between Galilee and Jerusalem, some scholars think the gospel may have gone through several editions before reaching its final form. Certainly it seems to show the effect of years of theological reflection and teaching. However, the attempts to reconstruct earlier versions vary so much that it is probably impossible. Furthermore, with the one exception of the woman taken in adultery (see on 7:53—8:11 below), all the ancient manuscripts have the gospel in the form we have it today. So we shall take the gospel as we find it and work through it verse by verse.

How does it read?

This gospel is written in a very distinctive style, which seems to have emerged through years of teaching and prayer, meditation and theological reflection. Furthermore, the whole gospel uses this style and vocabulary. Punctuation marks were not put into manuscripts until a thousand years later, and sometimes it is difficult to see where they go. Thus it is not clear whether the most famous verse, 'God so loved' (3:16), is spoken by Jesus or is a comment from the writer; the same difficulty makes it unclear whether 3:31–36 is spoken by John the Baptist or another narrative comment (see on 3:9–36 below).

Style and vocabulary

In fact, we could all probably write in John's style after spending a while immersed in the gospel. It has a limited vocabulary with a number of key words repeated over and over again, such as look, see, witness, know, believe, have faith, world, glory, abide, remain, hour, send. Other words are in contrasting pairs: light and darkness, truth and falsehood, life and death, above and below, love and hate, father and son. The sentences tend to be short, but they build on each other in steps and stairs and spirals, connecting and reconnecting. Someone has said these words over and over and over again in prayer and teaching. It is ideally suited, therefore, for use now in contemplation and the little prayers and suggestions at the end of each section in this commentary are designed to help you reflect on the passages and let them soak into you.

Time

Time also seems to behave in a similar way for John. Unlike the other gospels, which seem to relate only one season of ministry leading to a Passover, John has a logical sequence over several years with three Passovers (2:13; 6:4; 12:1). But time seems to go round and round, to speed up and slow down. The first half of the gospel occupies at least two years, while the second half is little more than a week. Little references like 'now', 'already', 'recently', 'day' abound. At first, Jesus' 'hour' has 'not yet come' (2:4; 7:30; 8:20), but when it arrives it is both the 'hour of glory' and the Passion (12:23, 27; 13:1; 17:1). There are 'flash backs' and 'flash forwards' which connect parts of the narrative: for example, 7:50 and 19:39 refer back to Nicodemus' visit by night in 3:2, while 11:2 looks forward to Mary's anointing in 12:3. There are even references out beyond the story to the disciples' later reflections (2:22; 7:39; 21:23).

Levels of meaning

Like many in the ancient world, John tends to see the world in different levels, with earthly things reflecting or foreshadowing heavenly realities. This is also true of the way he writes. To go back to our opening analogy, the surface looks placid, but underneath flow ever deeper currents of meaning. Most of Jesus' conversations begin with natural things, like birth (3:3), water (4:7), bread (6:25), sight (9:1), but questions and misunderstandings soon follow. As Jesus takes his questioners deeper, John invites us to look beyond earthly things to spiritual realities, to the true bread or true vine. If we look closely at what is happening, some of the stories and images, like the manna in the desert or the figure of the good shepherd and the sheep, are being played out in Jesus' life and eventual death. There is tremendous irony below the surface, so that Jesus' talk of 'being lifted up' actually means a cross (3:14; 8:28; 12:32) or the soldiers' mocking someone who really is the 'king of the Jews' (19:1–3, 19–22).

Signs and discourses

While John narrates several of Jesus' miracles, he never calls them this. They are 'signs', which 'reveal his glory' (2:11). People believed in him because of the signs (2:23; 7:31; 10:41). The writer tells us that Jesus did many more of them of which these are only a selection to help us believe in him (20:30–31). Most analyses of the gospel suggest that there are seven signs:

- changing water into wine (2:1–11)
- healing the official's son (4:46–54)
- healing the paralysed man (5:1–15)
- feeding the 5,000 (6:1–15)
- walking on the water (6:16–21)
- giving sight to the blind man (9:1–7)
- raising Lazarus from the dead (11:17–44)

In addition, there is the huge catch of fish in the epilogue (21:1–11). In order to include this one but still keep to the perfect number seven, some remove one of the others, like the walking on water, because it does not seem to 'sign' anything. Certainly, some of the signs lead naturally into Jesus' debates and discourses, which draw out the meaning of the 'sign', and some are linked to the seven 'I am' sayings. Thus the feeding leads to the debate about the 'bread of life' (6:25–59) and the

blind man is connected to 'the light of the world' (8:12; 9:5). However, other signs, like the water into wine or the official's son, do not lead to a discourse, and John never mentions the word 'seven', so perhaps we should be careful about trying to be too clever sometimes!

These notes on John's style and way of writing might help us in our studies ahead. The levels of meaning suggest that we should start by reading each passage as a whole at the surface level, but then be ready to go back over it looking more deeply. Use any connections John makes by word echoes or references to time to see how it all links together and to the rest of the gospel. Meditate upon the words he uses and let the simple style and vocabulary sink into you in prayer as you use each section as a 'sign' to reveal God's glory in Christ.

What was the situation?

Whoever was involved in writing and producing this gospel was very familiar with the multifaith, multicultural world of the eastern Mediterranean in the first century. It was a real melting pot because of the Romans' deliberate policy of bringing all the countries and peoples together in one empire of peace and easy communications. Probably nothing was seen like it again until today's 'global village'. Just like today, lots of ideas and beliefs were circulating and being mixed together and their effect can be seen in the gospel.

The Greek background

The dominant Greek philosophical tradition from Socrates and Plato was essentially dualist, contrasting the real but invisible realm of the intellect, the soul and the gods with our material physical universe. In addition, Stoicism stressed the logical stability and rationality (called *logos* in Greek) behind the cosmic order which made ethical demands on people's lives. Meanwhile, religious cults and sects abounded with stories of divine figures who came from the realm of light above to save us from this dark world, and they often had initiation ceremonies into the 'mystery' or 'secret knowledge' which could set people free. The influence of all this can be clearly seen on this gospel, both in the prologue and in the way John portrays Jesus coming into the world to bring salvation. This need not imply that the writer had ever belonged to or studied any of these groups in particular detail. The ideas saturated the culture, and like any good evangelist, John is trying to present Jesus in a way that people will understand.

The Jewish background

At the same time, he is obviously steeped in the Hebrew scriptures and Jewish beliefs. Many of the stories are set against the background of the great Jewish festivals, such as the sabbath (5), Passover (6), Tabernacles (7—8), Hanukkah (10) and Passover again (13—20), and draw their themes from the rituals and beliefs at each feast. Many of the events take place in and around the temple in Jerusalem. The debates between Jesus and his opponents are conducted according to Jewish customs about witnesses and evidence (see on 5:30–47 below) and great heroes like Moses and Abraham are brought in. The themes of the law, the prophets and the scriptures run constantly just below the surface, and particular quotations and prophecies are used through the Passion (see on 12:15; 19:24, 28, 36). Furthermore, modern study of other groups, like the Essenes and the Qumran community near the Dead Sea, and of the development of the rabbinic traditions has all shown many links with the ideas and beliefs described in this gospel.

This Jewish background is not surprising. After all, with the exception of a few Samaritans, Greeks and Romans like Pilate (4:7, 39; 12:20; 18:28) everyone in the gospel is Jewish – Jesus, the disciples, the crowds, the leaders, the priests. Jesus is explicitly called 'a Jew' and he says that salvation is 'from the Jews' (4:9, 22). John uses the phrase 'the Jews' nearly 70 times, in contrast to only a few mentions in the other gospels. So it is a shock to discover that it often describes Jesus' opponents, particularly among the religious leaders (see on 1:19 below) – so we shall denote this with inverted commas. People are frightened of 'the Jews' in case they are put 'out of the synagogue', *aposynagogos* (9:22; 12:42; 16:2). While people could be punished by being barred from the synagogue for a week, or a month, or even totally excommunicated in the Old Testament (see Ezra 10:8), this does not seem to have happened to Jesus and his disciples, who went to synagogue as good Jews regularly in the gospels and Acts. Of course, there was opposition and conflict (Luke 6:22), but this technical term, *aposynagogos*, seems to belong to a later period.

After the Jewish War and the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by the Romans in AD70, the surviving rabbis regrouped Judaism around the synagogue and study of the Torah. A prayer called 'the blessing against the heretics' was put into the synagogue liturgy, probably at the Council of Yavneh in AD85, asking that the '*nosrim* and the heretics perish quickly'. If the *nosrim* mean 'Nazarenes' this would make it very

difficult for Jewish Christians to attend synagogue and pray against themselves. Regrettably, the split between the early churches and the synagogues developed rapidly after this.

Thus it is possible that John's gospel is being written in the late first century after the war, in the period leading to the Council of Yavneh or even after it, and John's use of the phrases 'the Jews' and *aposynagogos* reflects that unhappy time. Perhaps he is aware that some of his readers may have suffered the traumatic experience of excommunication. So he relates their current painful situation to the conflict and opposition from the leaders in Jesus' own day. This is important to remember as it shows John's careful attempt to make his story of Jesus relevant to the people he was writing for. It does not give any justification for the anti-Jewish way the gospel has sometimes been used in later centuries, particularly most recently by the Nazis (see on 8:44 below).

So John is probably writing for a mixed group of people, reflecting the multicultural situation of that period. They would know something of Greek philosophy and Near Eastern religious cults, as well as recognise the allusions to Jewish beliefs and practices. Some might be converts from Hellenistic religions or Jews who have found their faith fulfilled in Jesus as Messiah.

John the Baptist

Another possible group would be followers of John the Baptist. The Jewish historian, Josephus, refers to the Baptist's ministry of preaching and baptising people. Some people may have been baptised while on pilgrimage or visiting Jerusalem and then taken their new faith back to the cities of Asia Minor or Greece. Thus Paul finds disciples of John the Baptist in Ephesus (Acts 19:5). John shows that some of Jesus' early followers had also been disciples of the Baptist (1:35–37). Whenever John the Baptist appears in this gospel, he directs people to Jesus. It is made clear that he is 'not the light' himself, but a witness 'to the light' (1:8). His 'witness' is then repeated and expanded (see on 1:24–34). He does not even mind when his followers complain that Jesus is baptising more people, saying 'He must increase and I must decrease' (3:30). Some scholars have interpreted this material as an 'attack' on the Baptist, seeing it as an attempt to persuade his followers to join the new Christian church. Certainly, John is keen to encourage everyone to find life though faith in Jesus as Christ, but this need not imply a particular attack on anyone, especially not the Baptist. Later Jesus pays him the

compliment of 'bearing witness to the truth' as 'a burning and shining lamp' (5:33–35).

Peter and the beloved disciple

If the 'disciple Jesus loved' is the 'authority' behind the gospel, it is interesting to consider his relationship with Peter. They always seem to appear together and the beloved disciple usually goes one better than Peter. Thus he is next to Jesus at the supper and asks Peter's question for him; he gets Peter into the high priest's courtyard; he is at the foot of the cross when Peter is nowhere to be seen; he beats Peter to the empty tomb and is the first to believe; he tells Peter that the stranger on the lakeside is the risen Jesus; and he will live long when Peter is martyred (13:23–25; 18:15–17; 19:26–27; 20:2–8; 21:7, 22). Some scholars read this as a game of 'anything you can do, we can do better'; so they argue that John is promoting his church and attacking the churches linked with Peter.

On the other hand, there is a lot of positive material about Peter: Simon is one of the first to follow Jesus and is renamed Peter, the 'rock', by him; he is the one who makes the confession of faith when others are leaving; he wants to be washed all over by Jesus; he tries to defend Jesus; there is no cursing, swearing oaths or bitter weeping at his denial; the beloved disciple waits to give him the honour of being first into the tomb and the first to meet Jesus at the lakeside; finally he is restored by the good shepherd to the pastoral care of his flock (1:42; 6:68; 13:9; 18:10, 27; 20:6; 21:7, 15–17). This is all too much for an 'attack' on him. Peter is just another human being who tries to follow Jesus, who sometimes gets it wonderfully right and other times horribly wrong – but he is forgiven and restored by Jesus, so there is hope for us also. The anonymity of the beloved disciple makes him almost an 'ideal figure' – and we are all encouraged to fill in the blank with our own face and name and become a 'disciple Jesus loved'.

John and other early Christian groups

In recent decades, it has been fashionable to reconstruct the 'community of the beloved disciple', the church within which and for which the gospel was written. Some have even read the gospel as a kind of symbolic history of John's community, taking Jesus' encounters with people as allegories of the church being started from disciples of the Baptist and some Jerusalem Jews with missions to the Samaritans and

the Greeks leading to its eventual expulsion from the synagogue. All of these people may well have been found in the communities which read John's gospel. However, if he had wanted to write recent church history for them, it would have been easier to do it like the book of Acts. The variety of reconstructions and the lack of any external evidence has meant that such approaches are less common now. There is clearly a long process of prayer and reflection behind the gospel over many years, but all we have is the finished text.

Others have tried to relate the gospel to the epistles of John and the book of Revelation, calling them all 'Johannine' books. The epistles are certainly written in a similar style and share John's vocabulary. They are also involved in a situation of splits and conflicts, especially against early Docetic heretics, so called because they thought Jesus only seemed (*docein* in Greek) to be human (1 John 4:2–3; 2 John 1:7). This fits in with John's stress that the 'Word became flesh' (1:14). Revelation has many similarities to this gospel, but also differences of style, vocabulary and content.

Without any further evidence it is difficult to be sure about all of this, and going much further into these complex issues would take us away from our task here of studying the gospel. What this brief survey has shown is how John does not write in a vacuum. Like all those who wrote ancient biographies, he is trying to tell people about his subject, Jesus, and to interpret him afresh for their situation. As we study his gospel today we can have no better aim.

What does it teach?

John is not just a beautiful writer who is clever enough to fit his message to the situation facing his initial readers; he is also the sublime theologian of the early church. Debates raged about the meaning of his apparently simple words as ever deeper levels were explored. He was used by all sides in the various controversies over the formation of the creeds during the next few centuries, and he was loved by groups in the mainstream, at the fringes and way outside what came to be seen as orthodox Christianity. Equally, over the last two millennia and all around the world he has provoked an extraordinary output of homilies, sermons, statements, books, lectures, courses, papers, essays, dissertations and so forth. Here we can only sketch out briefly a few key aspects of his theology.

Christology

John is clear at the end of the gospel that his purpose is that we might believe that 'Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God' (20:31). He has perhaps the highest Christology, or understanding of Jesus, in the whole of the New Testament. At the same time, we must be careful about reading the arguments of later debates back into his text. John stresses that we see the 'glory of God' in the 'Word become flesh' against the philosophical and religious background of his own day; but the later arguments about the nature of Jesus and the Trinity were based on a much more complex philosophy. These debates were really about *ontology*, the nature of 'being' within the Godhead and *how* Jesus could 'be' both human and divine. John just asserts that he *is*; he is more concerned for *function* – what Jesus said and *did* then, and still does now, for human beings. It is no accident that John's style is a lot more full of verbs and 'doing' things than 'static' nouns of 'being'.

As we shall see in the prologue, he draws upon the rich philosophical tradition of the 'Word', *logos*, behind the cosmos to explain who Jesus really is as that Word becomes flesh and dwells among us (1:14). He also uses the Jewish tradition about the Word of God, which he combines with the figure of God's Wisdom, who was with him at the creation and comes among men and women to teach them the way of God (Proverbs 8:22–31).

He uses a number of *titles* to describe Jesus. The gospel opens with debate about who the Christ might be (1:20); John the Baptist says that it is not him. Soon Jesus is called 'Christ' by the first disciples, some Samaritans and other believers (1:41; 4:25, 29; 11:27). 'Christ' is the Greek form of the Hebrew 'Messiah' and both words mean God's 'anointed one'. In the Hebrew scriptures priests, kings and prophets were all anointed as a sign of God's special task for them. Later there emerged a longing for someone who would be *the* Messiah, God's anointed person to bring in his kingdom. When Jesus enters Jerusalem to be hailed as 'king' (12:13) the authorities are worried and he is executed as 'king of the Jews', which is also a messianic claim. John makes it clear that Jesus lived and died as the 'Christ'.

However, John's reason for writing connects 'Christ' with 'Son of God' (20:31). God is called Father over 100 times and Jesus is identified as the 'Son' about 50, so John is making a clear statement about his relationship to God. The name of God was linked in the Old Testament with ultimate Being, 'I am who I am' (Exodus 3:14). In John's gospel,

Jesus makes seven 'I am' statements, claiming to be the bread of life, the light of the world, the door to the sheepfold, the good shepherd, the resurrection and the life, the way, truth and life, and the true vine (6:35, 41, 51; 8:12, 9:5; 10:7, 9; 10:11, 14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1, 5). Not only do these hint at the divine name, 'I am', but the descriptions are all central images of the Jewish faith and law being now fulfilled in Jesus.

John also depicts Jesus being aware of his unique relationship with God, knowing that he was pre-existent with God and is going to return to him in glory. He is the source of all life and all judgement is committed to him (3:16–21; 5:19–29). The Father inspires and indwells all he says and does so much that to see him is to have seen the Father, for 'the Father and I are one' (14:9–10; 10:30). At the same time, 'the Word became flesh' (1:14), so John shows Jesus' humanity: he gets tired and thirsty in Samaria; he weeps at his friend's grave; he is tempted to shrink back from being crucified; and on the cross he is thirsty and really dies a human death (4:6–7; 11:33–38; 12:27; 19:28, 34).

This is indeed a highly developed Christology and shows how much John has thought and reflected on the meaning of Jesus over many years. And yet, it is only the logical outworking of the picture of Jesus in the other gospels who taught us to call God *Abba*, our Father, and who was bringing in the kingdom of God through his parables and miracles. At the same time, John's understanding of Jesus was to set the tracks on a course which would lead to the later debates and creeds.

Eschatology

We have already noted John's interest in time. The Hebrew prophets looked forward to the 'last day', the 'day of the Lord', when God's justice would finally be revealed at the end of time. The Greek word for 'end' is *eschaton*, so the study of things to do with 'the end' is called 'eschatology'. In the other gospels, Jesus says that the end, the 'kingdom of God', when God's kingship will be recognised by everyone, was breaking into our time here and now through his teaching and miracles (Luke 11:20). However, they also each contain long sections of Jesus' teaching about the end, when he will come again on the clouds of glory to judge everyone (Mark 13:3–37; Matthew 24—25; Luke 21:5–36).

John does not have anything quite like these blocks of teaching about the coming of the end. Instead, Jesus talks as though his coming into the world has brought the end here already. So, although God did not send his Son to condemn the world, but to save it, the coming of

light into darkness inevitably creates shadows; the arrival of Jesus has brought about the judgement, the 'critical moment' when some people reject the light and prefer to remain in the shadows (3:16–21). So we say that John sees eschatology as 'realised', made real in the present in our decision here and now. As people accept and believe in Jesus so they come into eternal life now, so much that Lazarus can even be raised from the dead now without having to wait for the end of time (see on 11:17–44 below).

On the other hand, Jesus still talks of 'the last day' (e.g. 6:39–40; 12:48). While all the benefits of eternal life and knowing God can be received as we accept Jesus, there is still inevitably a future dimension to judgement. Perhaps the best section about John's understanding of eschatology is 5:19–29. Here Jesus says that all judgement and authority to give life has been granted to him by God the Father. In 5:19–24 this seems to be happening now in the present, while in 5:25–29 it is all repeated in the future tense. The two sections are linked by 'the hour is coming, and now is' (5:25). This is the heart of what John is trying to say: 'the hour is coming' when there will be judgement and eternal life, but it 'now is' available to us in Jesus, here, already.

Church and sacraments

Perhaps no topic so divides scholars as John's understanding of the church and the sacraments. On the one hand, scholars of a more Protestant background point out that there is little about this in the text of the gospel. In reply, those from a more Catholic tradition see images of the church and sacraments all over the gospel. In part, this situation arises from John's habit of writing on several levels at once; two commentators can look at the same passage and see different things depending on how deep they look.

On the surface, the first group are right to point out that none of the key words about the church are ever used in John; there is little emphasis on the twelve apostles, but lots of stories about various people, most of whom are never heard of again – the Samaritan woman, the woman taken in adultery, the blind man and so on. It is all very individualistic, with individuals coming to Jesus, but not through the church or the community of faith.

In response, the other group look more deeply at Jesus' great images of the shepherd and the sheep, or the vine and the branches and notice how corporate these are. Part of the problem is that English does not

distinguish between 'you-singular' (the old 'thee' and 'thou') and 'you-plural'. It is thus easy to take all the wonderful promises of Jesus at the last supper in an individualistic way as addressed to each believer personally. However, closer inspection of the Greek reveals that these are all 'you-plurals'; we experience the promises of Jesus and the presence of the Spirit all together as the community of believers. We shall try to point out these 'you-plurals' in these studies. Furthermore, it is John's gospel where Jesus gives us the example of washing each other's feet and the 'new commandment' to 'love one another as I have loved you'. The mark of the church by which people will know we are his disciples is if we love one another (13:1–11, 34–35; 15:12–13). It is hard to have a higher understanding of the church than that!

Unfortunately, mention of the last supper causes the more Protestant scholars to jump up again. They note that it is curious that there is no institution of the Holy Communion at the last supper, just the foot washing (13:1–11). What is more, there is no account of Jesus actually being baptised either, but it is just passed over briefly in a mention by John the Baptist (1:32–33). There is no command to baptise or to 'do this in remembrance of me' for the Communion. Instead, there is a great stress on the Word and on Jesus' teaching; we should get rid of our altars and fonts and build bigger pulpits!

The sacramentalists have to admit that the omission of Communion and baptism is rather embarrassing, on the face of it at least. But, if we look below the surface, suddenly we are awash with sacramental references. Water is in nearly every chapter at the start, from the Baptist, to water into wine, to being born of water and the Spirit, to living water, to healing by water, to streams of living water, and so on through to Jesus washing the disciples' feet (1:26–33; 2:1–11; 3:5; 4:10–15; 5:1–9; 7:38; 9:7; 13:1–11). Equally, water is turned into vast quantities of wine, Jesus calls himself the 'true vine' and there is lots of bread around, even at the last supper (2:1–11; 15:1; 6:1–14, 31–35; 13:26–30). The feeding of the 5,000 looks like an open-air Communion and it is difficult to interpret the debate about eating his flesh and drinking his blood as anything other than the Eucharist (6:1–14, 50–58).

This is an excellent example of how the way we read John's style and manner of writing can affect our view of his theology, particularly with regard to the deeper levels of meaning. Are these things really there below the surface, or are they merely reflections of our own views? We will point out the main passages for the debate as we go through the

gospel, and you will have to think about it and ask the Holy Spirit to help you decide.

Truth, theology and history

Clement of Alexandria said towards the end of the second century that John was a 'spiritual gospel' written later to supplement the 'physical facts' described in the other three gospels (according to Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* VI:14:7). This came to represent how John was viewed up to this century – that John knew the synoptics and wrote later to provide spiritual reflection upon their historical accounts.

The development of modern scholarship and literary criticism tended to confirm this approach to John. For most of this century, scholars thought that John was written at the end of the first century, or even into the early part of the second; his philosophical awareness seemed very Greek and to have lost touch with the Jewish background of Jesus and the early disciples; everything was seen to have a theological purpose or spiritual meaning and none of his events or conversations were thought to have any basis in history. The only possible historical material John had would have come from the synoptic gospels. One example of such an approach is that the five porticoes at the pool of Bethesda were interpreted from St Augustine onwards as symbolising the five books of the law of Moses – identifying the sick but not able to heal them; then Jesus does what the old law could not and makes the man whole (5:1–9). Obviously, in this view, the porches had no historical existence; Jerusalem was destroyed a generation or more before the gospel was thought to have been written, so neither the writer nor the first readers would have known anything about what it had looked like.

Over recent decades, however, this approach has been seriously challenged. First, most scholars now consider that John was written independently of the other gospels, and they are therefore no longer the yardstick by which he is to be judged. Certainly he shares some old material with them which was passed on through the oral tradition, which may or may not have an historical basis; each must be assessed on its own merits. Furthermore, we have become more aware of the amount of theological interpretation in the other gospels which makes them more like John. Like other ancient biographies, all the gospels set out to explain and interpret their subject and his significance.

While the synoptic gospels are now seen as more theological, conversely John has been shown to be more historical. Research on the

Dead Sea Scrolls and on the beliefs of the Essenes and other Jewish groups of the early first century has revealed lots of ideas and thoughts which are quite similar to John's approach. These groups were all destroyed in the Jewish War of 66–70 and their beliefs were lost. Without them, John's ideas used to look quite late and Greek. Now we know that they were not so different from other earlier, Jewish writings. Similarly, developments in archaeology in Israel and Palestine over recent decades have revealed a lot more about Jerusalem and Judea before the Jewish War – and John's awareness of places and geography now seems quite good. Even the Pool of Bethesda has been excavated and we can now walk among its five porticoes! Of course, this cannot prove the historicity or otherwise of any miracle or conversation Jesus or anyone else may have held there – but it does caution us against assuming that everything is only symbolic and theological.

This all means that the process by which John's gospel came to be written is a lot more complex. Both the previous extreme views are too simplistic. John's awareness of Greek philosophy and the painful separation of the early churches from the synagogues in the latter part of the first century mean that this gospel is not meant to be a straightforward eyewitness accurate record of what a Galilean fisherman heard and saw Jesus say and do. On the other hand, his knowledge of early Aramaic terms, like 'Messiah' or 'Cephas' for Peter (1:41–42), his use of ideas common to Jewish groups wiped out – and awareness of places destroyed – in the Jewish War of 66–70 suggests that the gospel contains a good historical foundation dating back to the first half of the century. If the 'witness' behind the gospel, identified as 'the disciple Jesus loved', was John son of Zebedee some of it will have come from him. It is not just a later Greek symbolic invention.

As Pilate says in John, 'What is truth?' (18:38). To us today, truth is about recordings of what an American President might or might not have said – and even then the truth is hard to discover! On the other hand, we consider 'myth' to be '*un*true', a fairy story. The people of Jesus' and John's day, however, had different ideas and we must not impose our concepts of truth on to first-century texts like the gospels. To the ancients, 'myth' was the medium whereby profound truth, more truly true than mere tape-recorded facts could ever be, was communicated – hence John's use of the words 'true' and 'truly' nearly 50 times. John's gospel has an underlying basic level of historical information about the sorts of things Jesus said and did and the places where they

happened, leading up to his trial and death. Over that are laid levels of awareness of the complex melting pot of the first century, including Jewish beliefs from before the destruction of Jerusalem and Greco-Roman religious and philosophical systems. In writing his brief account of Jesus, he is trying to get from one level to the other. He has prayed and reflected on 'the many other things Jesus did' and makes a selection under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in order to 'bear true witness' in the situation of his first readers about the *truth* of who Jesus *truly* is and *really* means for them – 'so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name' (20:30–31; 21:24–25).

The kids are splashing about, and the elephants are enjoying wallowing; the children of God are enjoying new life in Christ, and the theologians are plumbing ever greater depths. Breakfast on the beach is over, and it is time for us to immerse ourselves in John's living waters. Enjoy it!

Richard A. Burridge

1

John 1:1–2

In the beginning

The opening of John's gospel is one of the most magnificent pieces of religious literature ever written. Not surprisingly, it has inspired vast amounts of analysis and interpretation. And yet, we are not even sure quite what it is. Is it an introduction, a hymn or a poem? Arguments rage over whether it extends from verse 1 to verse 14 or to verse 18, whether or not the passages about John the Baptist belong here (1:6–8, 15), and how its structure might be analysed.

It is usually called 'the prologue', although it is more like an overture, for it introduces some key themes and particular words which the writer will use over and over in the gospel. On the other hand, some of its ideas and phrases never appear again, including the central idea of 'the Word'. Therefore scholars have wondered whether it was written by the same author as the rest. Some suggest that it may have been an early hymn, which already existed and which the evangelist adapted for his purposes. Others think that it was composed later and added to the already completed gospel. Indeed, I wrote the rest of this commentary first and came to the prologue last!

So, read it now as the introduction to the gospel and these studies. It will give you a flavour of the great journey we are about to undertake, and you will hear some of the major themes. Don't worry if some ideas are difficult or the motifs too grand at this stage. Come back and study it again after you have finished the whole gospel – and see how all the things you have learned and friends you have made are hinted at here.

Begin at the beginning

So we begin, as John does, at the beginning. Mark starts his gospel with Jesus being baptised by John the Baptist, Matthew begins with Jesus' birth, while Luke takes us back to the birth of John the Baptist as the one who prepared his way. John is traditionally symbolised by an eagle, and he certainly takes the high-flying perspective here! Jesus cannot be introduced in terms of time, place and human ancestry: he existed 'in the beginning' (1:1). This phrase would remind his readers immediately of the opening words of the Hebrew scriptures, 'In the beginning' (Genesis 1:1). Indeed, while *genesis* is the Greek word for 'beginning' or

'origin', the Jews called the first book of the Bible by its opening Hebrew words, 'In the beginning.' Yet John goes even further, for Genesis starts with the creation of everything *at* the beginning; John takes us back *before* then, when only God existed.

The Word

John does not actually name Jesus until the end of the prologue (1:17). Instead, he calls him 'the Word'. The Jews thought that God's word was alive and active (Isaiah 55:11) from the creation – when God had only to say, 'Let there be…' for things to come into being (Genesis 1:3, 6, 9, etc.) – to God's word coming through all the prophets. In Greek philosophy from early thinkers like Heraclitus to the Stoics, who were also popular among the Romans, the 'word', *logos*, was used for the logical rationality behind the universe. In later Jewish beliefs, this masculine principle was complemented by the feminine figure of Lady Wisdom, who was present with God at the creation (Proverbs 8:22–31). This idea was developed in the writings between the times of the Testaments, as can be seen in the book of Wisdom in the Apocrypha (7:22—10:21). There was further speculation in Jewish mysticism about the role of both wisdom and the law with God.

But it is John who pulls all these threads together with the amazing idea that the Word was not only pre-existent with God but also personal. In 1:1–2 he states that 'the Word was with (the) God', including the definite article 'the' to stress how the Word existed with the creator Father God of Jewish monotheism – for there is no other god. Furthermore, 'the Word was God' without any article. He does not say 'the Word was *a* god', with the indefinite article, implying that Jesus was some sort of lesser divinity, as some groups believe who have split away from orthodox Christianity both in the past and today. Nor does he say 'the Word was *the* God', for that would imply that Jesus was all there is to God. No, he carefully writes 'the Word was God', divine, personal, existing in the unity of the Godhead and yet somehow distinct – for 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us' (1:14). That is the wonderful story which John is setting out to tell us.

Prayer

God our Father, inspire our study of these written words that we may know your living Word, Jesus Christ.

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Revd Professor Richard A. Burridge served as dean of King's College London for over 25 years, from 1993 to 2019.

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THE PEOPLE'S BIBLE COMMENTARY

Acts

Loveday Alexander

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INTRODUCTION

> *Bilbo often used to say that there was only one Road; that it was like a great river: its springs were at every doorstep, and every path was its tributary. 'It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out of your door,' he used to say. 'You step into the Road, and if you don't keep your feet, there is no knowing where you might be swept off to.'*
>
> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*.

Welcome to the journey!

'This book will make a traveller of thee,' says John Bunyan at the beginning of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and the same could well be said of the Acts of the Apostles. The book of Acts is the story of a journey. It tells the story of the birth of the church, and its journey outwards and across the world from where it all began, in an upstairs room in Jerusalem. Woven into this story are the journeys of a whole host of individual travellers, apostles and others, moving back and forth across that Mediterranean world and spreading the word wherever they go. But it's also the story of the journey of faith, a journey to which every reader is invited: it's no accident that one of Luke's favourite metaphors for discipleship is 'the Way'.

As so often in the Bible, the journey starts with a vision, which empowers and controls the travellers and to which they constantly revert. The story begins on a mountaintop, the classic location for vision in the Bible, where the heavens open and angels and mortals speak face to face (ch. 1). Then comes the communal visionary experience of Pentecost, when the empowerment of God's Spirit becomes something visible even to the crowds in a Jerusalem street (ch. 2). Further into the narrative, the two controlling visions are Peter's rooftop trance (ch. 10) and Paul's encounter with the risen Christ on the Damascus road (ch. 9); each is recounted over and over again, as the characters in the story are challenged to unravel the true significance of what God is saying to them (chs. 11; 15; 22; 26). And vision provides not only the starting point for mission but also its content: 'We cannot but speak of the things which we have seen and heard' (4:20; 26:19).

Journey into outer space

Like any road movie, Acts contains a strong geographical element. It's the one book in the New Testament where you really need to keep an eye on the map. Most Bibles include a map of 'The journeys of St Paul', and there are excellent maps available in Bible atlases and other guides. (Tip: a modern physical map of the eastern Mediterranean will often give you a much better flavour of the terrain covered in the book.) More than any other book of the New Testament, Acts conveys a sense of the excitement and romance of travel. It's a cosmopolitan book, moving with ease from the narrow streets of Jerusalem to the classical elegance of Athens, from the high passes of the Turkish-Syrian border to the back streets of Rome. And on the way we meet a variety of deftly drawn characters, from the Ethiopian court treasurer (ch. 8) to the friendly Roman centurion Julius (ch. 27). Acts reminds us that there's a big wide world out there – a daunting prospect to the Galilean disciples on the Mount of Olives, as Jesus gives them their marching orders (1:8). But gradually, as we read, we come to share with them the unfolding excitement of finding that God is out there too, waiting to meet them and surprise them in this strange world that is also God's world.

Journey into inner space

There's also a more hidden journey, a journey of discovery in which the familiar turns out to be more surprising than we thought. 'Who will show me the way?' asks the Ethiopian, sitting in his chariot on the Gaza Road and poring over an ancient scroll (8:31). It's not a road map he's asking for but a new way to read the age-old scriptures, and that's what Philip provides (8:35). Acts conducts its characters (and therefore its readers) into an inner journey of exploration under the guidance of God's Holy Spirit, working out how the 'this' of personal experience corresponds with the 'that' of God's revelation. This is not always an easy thing to do. Often it means facing up to the puzzlement and hostility of our closest compatriots. Even harder, it means confronting our own prejudices and facing up to our own persistent refusal to recognise God's Spirit at work. So there's a lot of conflict built into the story of Acts; and some of the shortest journeys in the book, geographically speaking, turn out to be some of the longest and most significant in terms of inner space.

A guide for time travellers

This commentary is designed as a kind of interactive travel guide for readers of Acts, helping you to relate to Luke's story on three levels.

My first priority is to describe the journey itself from the point of view of the author and his first readers, taking pains to listen carefully to the story as he tells it, to pick up the clues he has laid for informed readers, and to try first of all to understand the story in its own terms. This is a basic courtesy we owe to any book, especially to a book written 2,000 years ago in a very different culture from our own. That means trying to experience the journey from the viewpoint of the characters in Luke's story, hearing the conversations and debates from inside, trying to understand both sides before jumping to conclusions about what's going on. It also means trying to hear Luke's story through the ears of his original readers, asking about the literary echoes or political resonances that would be picked up by a first-century audience.

Second, we can take a step back and ask how Luke's story relates to other stories we know of from that time and place. This means filling in some of the historical information we need, to understand the significance of Luke's story: who was this emperor or that official? What else was going on at the time? How does Luke's version of events tie in with other evidence – Paul's letters, for example? I have tried to indicate what the main historical questions are and where you can find out more if you want to.

And third, we need to move back into the 21st century (which of course we never really left) and ask how Luke's story relates to our own stories. There are many different kinds of travel guides, but most of them fall into two categories: those that offer an armchair substitute for travel, and those that incite you to get out there and sample the real thing. My hope and prayer is that readers will find this guide provoking in many different ways, and that you will be able to use it to inform and inspire your own journeying on the Way, whether individually or as a group. So each reading ends with a question, a quotation or a prayer, suggesting ways to link up with some of the stories that belong to our lives today – things that are happening in the newspapers, in our churches or in our own spiritual lives. Use these any way you want, and treat them as a springboard to make your own connections between Luke's world and ours – or simply as a framework for your own prayers.

Basic orientation

The rest of this introduction will deal with the basic information and equipment you need for the journey. You may like to read it all before starting, or you may prefer to save it up and refer back to it as the need arises.

The author

Like most New Testament scholars, I use the name 'Luke' as shorthand for 'the author of Acts – whoever that was'. This is the name that has been attached to the third gospel and Acts from earliest times, both in the manuscript tradition and in the early church writers who quote him. But it's worth pausing at the outset to ask what we know about the person who put this crucial story together – and what kind of detective work has gone into piecing the story together.

First, we know from Acts 1:1 that the author has already written a book about Jesus – and it doesn't take much detective ability to work out that this 'former treatise' is the third gospel, which is dedicated to the same person, Theophilus, and is written in very much the same style. So 'Luke' is actually the author of two books, which together make up almost a quarter of the whole New Testament. And our author tells us a bit more about himself in the preface to the gospel, at Luke 1:1–4. This preface doesn't give the author's name (although the masculine participle used in verse 3 does tell us that he was male). In some ways the preface tells us more about who Luke was not than who he was: he wasn't the first to write down the story of Jesus (v. 1); he wasn't an eyewitness (v. 2). But the whole way he writes tells us quite a bit about the sort of person he was: rational, business-like, reassuringly pragmatic, full of words like 'carefully', 'accurately', 'thoroughly', 'in an orderly fashion' (vv. 3–4). It's as if Luke wants to reassure his readers that the extraordinary story they're about to read is one that belongs in the real world, a world of people like Theophilus who like to check out the reliability of what they're told (v. 4) – in other words, a world of people like you and me.

Nevertheless, this sober, rational author is not standing outside the story he tells, like an investigative journalist. He has a personal stake in it. The 'we' of the preface to Luke's gospel aligns the writer with the whole Christian tradition, with all those who have received the testimony of the original eyewitnesses (v. 2). In fact, he's part of the community in which the whole extraordinary business has come to

pass (v. 1). And towards the end of his second volume, the 'we' slips in again in a way that implies that the author is actually part of the story he narrates (Acts 16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1—28:16). It sounds as if our author was one of those who accompanied Paul on his travels, including the last, fateful trip to Rome. If so, all we need to do is to work out from Paul's letters which of Paul's many friends and co-workers is the most likely candidate for the job. It seems safe to assume that the author isn't any of the people he mentions in the third person (Barnabas, Timothy, Gaius and so on – you can work it out for yourself if you want to). That still leaves quite a few options: Paul had a lot of friends! (Look at Romans 16, for example.) But as far back as we can see (as early as Irenaeus, writing around AD180), the favoured candidate is the attractive if shadowy figure of the beloved physician of Paul's prison epistles, the co-worker who sends greetings to the house churches in Colossae, the faithful Luke who sticks with the apostle in prison: look up Philemon 24; Colossians 4:14; 2 Timothy 4:11.

Not all scholars accept that this detective work has come up with the right answer. Some would argue that the 'we-passages' of Acts are just a literary device or that the author has incorporated some genuine diary entries from one of Paul's companions. Many find it hard to believe that a close companion of Paul could have written Acts, on the grounds that the Paul whom Luke portrays is actually rather different from the Paul who comes across from his letters. That's an issue we shall look at from time to time in the second half of Acts, but for my part (in common with a number of other recent commentators), I find that on balance the traditional authorship is the simplest way to account for all the data. Not that Luke's viewpoint is identical with that of Paul's letters in every respect. Luke hardly ever calls Paul an apostle, for example, and (as we shall see) he has certainly been selective in the story he tells. But then, which of our closest friends would portray any of us exactly as we would like to portray ourselves?

Ultimately, I don't believe that the name of the author is what really matters. Much more important is to work out why the author has shaped his story in the particular way he has. For that, it is highly significant that the author (let's stick with calling him Luke) has chosen to align himself with the first-hand experience of Paul's travelling companions. And that, I believe, provides a vital clue to the distinctive viewpoint that gives his story its shape.

The shape of Luke's story

It's helpful to think of Luke's story as a drama in four acts. The first three correspond roughly to the threefold geographical plan outlined in Jesus' commission in 1:8: Jerusalem (Act I: chapters 1—7); Judea and Samaria (Act II: chapters 8—12); 'to the ends of the earth' (Act III: chapters 13—19). Act IV (chapters 20—28) brings Paul back to Jerusalem, and tells how he eventually ended up travelling to Rome as a prisoner.

Looking forward, in other words, the story proceeds like a series of chain reactions (Pentecost; persecution; mission), each one triggering the next. As we watch each explosion, it's impossible to predict where the debris will end up: the potential is global (2:9–11), and Luke doesn't attempt to tell all the stories that his narrative opens up. (What happened to all the other apostles, or the other deacons?) But unrolling the story backwards, it's quite easy to see how each step links back to the one before. Starting out from the Mount of the Ascension, there's no way you could predict Paul's imprisonment in Rome, but if you begin at the end you can trace the causal links all the way back. And the wonderful thing that Luke wants to impress above all on his readers is how each step – even the apparent disasters – is under the guidance of God's Holy Spirit. Like Joseph, Paul could have said, 'It was God who brought me here to preach the life-giving gospel of salvation' (compare Genesis 45:5).

So in many respects the easiest way to understand the shape of the drama is to begin at the end. 'And *that's* how we got to Rome!' says Luke triumphantly, after all the excitement of the shipwreck (28:14) – as if the whole point of his story is to explain how Paul comes to be arriving in Rome, accompanied by a Roman centurion, charged with disrupting the peace and generally causing mayhem back in Jerusalem. In fact, I believe that is precisely Luke's point. The whole last quarter of the book tells the long and complicated story of the riot in the temple that triggered it all off and the series of trials in which Paul has to defend himself before the Jewish and Roman authorities. But of course we want to know how he came to be in the temple in the first place, and why he got people so wound up: so that takes us back into Act III, which tells the extraordinary story of Paul's mission, and how he kept trying to give his message to Jewish audiences around the Mediterranean world and then finding that he was being pushed into giving it to the Gentiles too. But Paul wasn't acting just under his own steam: Act II takes us further back, to the heavenly revelation that stopped Paul in his tracks and

made him a follower of Jesus instead of a persecutor of Jesus' disciples, and shows how Paul's story ties in with the stories of other people following this Way that people call 'the sect of the Nazarenes' (24:5, 14). And that takes us, finally, to Act I (chapters 1—7), which tells the story of how the sect originated and its links with the hidden substratum of Acts, the good news that God has sent salvation for the whole world in Jesus, the Christ (compare Luke 1:68–79; 24:44–47).

Journey's end

The final scene of Acts also provides a vital clue to Luke's original audience and situation. Luke tells us a lot about Paul the missionary, preaching to the Gentile world (in Act III), and Paul the prisoner, making his defence before the Roman empire (in Act IV). In the final scene of the book, however, Paul is neither of these. His final words are addressed to the leaders of the Jewish community in Rome, who ask him (in surprisingly neutral tones), 'Tell us about this sect.' In essence, I believe that Luke's whole story is the answer to that question – although my hunch is (along with most scholars) that Luke is actually writing after Paul's death and after the destructive and futile rebellion against Rome that left the temple in ruins.

The final scene of Acts is a kind of freeze-frame that encapsulates a key moment in the long, fraught history of Jewish–Christian relations. Acts records three decades of dialogue, debate and division – sometimes violent – over 'the Way' within the Jewish community. Much of this dialogue takes place on the margins, in the border zones where different groups within the Jewish family are jostling for position, each at times trying to edge the others out. So there are times when Luke speaks of 'the Jews' as outsiders, and times (much more often) when Paul and Peter address their fellow Jews as insiders in impassioned, prophetic appeal. That's the time warp Acts is caught up in, a freeze-frame that's hard to recapture from where we stand today. But I believe it is essential that we give full weight to all the voices in that dialogue, within and outside the church, refusing to foreclose the debate – which in many ways foreshadows the debates going on in the church today between continuity and innovation, 'traditional' and 'emerging' patterns of church life. In our ready identification with one side or the other, with the prodigal or the elder brother, it's all too easy to shut out the voice of the Father who says to both brothers, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours' (Luke 15:31).

1

Acts 1:1–5

Act One: Jerusalem

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then they said among the nations, 'The Lord has done great things for them.' The Lord has done great things for us; we are glad.

PSALM 126:1–3 (RSV)

The opening chapters of Acts capture something of the dream-like quality of the psalmist's vision of the restoration of Zion. Restoration, and the fulfilment of the age-old promises, is very much what the first quarter of the book is about. But restoration is also about repentance, and that is what is on offer for the people of Jerusalem and their rulers.

The story so far

Like the preface to Luke's gospel (Luke 1:1–4), the opening verse of Acts is essentially a kind of label stuck on to the front of the book, in which the author momentarily speaks in his own voice and addresses the reader direct. The practical reason for putting the label here is that each of Luke's two volumes is about the right length for a scroll, so this point marks the break. Because a scroll has no spine or dust jacket, ancient authors normally used the first sentence to supply the essential information that readers needed to identify what they were reading. The effect is rather like changing reels halfway through the film in an old-fashioned cinema. For a few moments we slip out of the narrative world and back into the real world of authors and readers.

Volume two

The first thing we learn as we open the book is that it's the second volume of a diptych, the second half of a book that describes 'all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning' (v. 1). And it's not just a loosely connected sequel. It's easy to see from the first verse that Luke expects his readers to know what has happened in the gospel. He makes very few concessions to new readers: there are no footnotes or helpful glosses to tell them who John or the apostles were. Everything in the

second volume, Acts, presupposes the story of the first (that is, the story of Jesus) and there are all sorts of links and connections that observant readers can pick up between the two.

Captain and crew

The preface also lays the groundwork in important ways for the second half of Luke's story. It introduces the key characters of Acts, beginning with Jesus himself. Luke's story of Jesus is shaped in a particular way, focused on the actions and teachings of a holy man (v. 1), just as many Greek biographies described the actions and teachings of a philosopher. That story is directed towards the ascension (v. 2), which creates the centrepoint for the whole two-volume work. For Luke, the ascension of Jesus is not an afterthought, tacked on to tidy up the end of the narrative: the passion, resurrection and ascension are a unit, beginning as far back as Luke 9:51. But the story doesn't end with Jesus' departure to heaven: the opening scene of Acts creates a double overlay with the last chapter of the gospel (Luke 24), both describing in different ways the captain's final instructions to his crew. In a sense, everything in Acts stems from this moment. In the chapters that ensue, we shall follow the apostles' attempts to carry out the mission Jesus has entrusted to them.

The apostles and the Spirit

The apostles (v. 2) are therefore the next most important characters. We shall hear much more about them as the story progresses, but this brief introduction already tells us that they were chosen by Jesus and instructed by Jesus – companions who shared table-fellowship with him (the meaning of 'staying with them' in v. 4, NRSV). The essence of their commission lies precisely in being entrusted with the unique experience of seeing Jesus alive after his passion (v. 3), witnessing the 'many convincing proofs' of his resurrection life. Transmitting this experience to an unbelieving world, offering living proof of Jesus' continued (but hidden) resurrection life, is what they are about. They are not alone: Jesus' instruction is 'in the Holy Spirit' who has been with him since the beginning of the gospel story (Luke 1:35; 3:22; 4:14). And more is on its way: the promise of the Father (compare Luke 24:49) is about to be realised not many days from now (vv. 4–5). There's a sense of expectancy here which takes us right back to the beginning of the gospel.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, as we read the story of the apostles, help us to catch a glimpse of what it means to be your disciples, and to take our place in your mission in the world.

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