



**IN THE
FULLNESS OF TIME**
(Gospels and Acts - An Introduction)
FR. T. J. JOSHUA.

DIVYA BODHANAM SERIES
GROWING IN THE WISDOM OF GOD

1

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

PREFACE

UNIT - I

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW TESTAMENT

<i>Lesson</i> 1	The relations between the New Testament and the Old Testament	9
<i>Lesson</i> 2	The Historical and cultural background.	12
<i>Lesson</i> 3	Jewish historical background of the New Testament	16
<i>Lesson</i> 4	Religious background of the People of Israel	20
<i>Lesson</i> 5	Geography of Israel	25
<i>Lesson</i> 6	The formation of the New Testament	30

UNIT II

SYNOPTIC GOSPELS AND THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

<i>Lesson</i> 1	Apostolic Proclamation	35
<i>Lesson</i> 2	The Gospels	38
<i>Lesson</i> 3	St. Mark's Gospel	42
<i>Lesson</i> 4	St. Mathew's Gospel : "A Church Gospel"	46
<i>Lesson</i> 5	St. Luke's Gospel	50
<i>Lesson</i> 6	Acts of the Apostles - First history of the Church	56

NESS OF TIME
(s-An Introduction)

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UNIT I

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW TESTAMENT

LESSON 1

THE RELATION BETWEEN THE NEW TESTAMENT AND THE OLD TESTAMENT

—New Testament impossible without Old Testament

—Meaning of "Testament"

*—How the New Testament Writers made use of
the Old Testament*

A friend of mine once remarked, "The Old Testament? I never read it; I read only the New". There may be many others who share this view. They may ask, "Isn't the Old Testament the Scripture of the Jewish nation which deals with the Law and its observance? What is its relevance for believers in Christ?". Under these circumstances it is absolutely necessary to understand the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament.

"The New Testament is hidden in the Old Testament. In the New Testament the Old Testament becomes illuminated". This Statement by Augustine is very relevant and meaningful, and in it we can see the relation between the two testaments. A good knowledge of the Old Testament is absolutely essential for a proper study of the New Testament since the Old Testament events and doctrines find their fulfilment in the New Testament.

Testament

Though we are familiar with the expression Old Testament and New Testament, sometimes they can be confused. The Hebrew word "Berith" means 'Covenant', and its Latin equivalent is 'Testamentum'. From this word, we get the English 'testament.' By Testaments we mean the Old and the New Covenants, Contracts or Agreements. On Mount Sinai Yahweh made a covenant with Israel (Exod. Ch. 19, 24), while Jesus makes a covenant with the Church on Calvary (Mark 14:24). In the Old Testament there is a reference to the covenant to be made in the future, "The time is coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah" (Jer. 31:31). This is fulfilled in Christ; hence St. Paul says, "God has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant" (2 Cor. 3:6).

We can hardly overlook the many differences between the Old and New Testaments, but their similarities and cohesion attract us and we get the feeling that they are two parts of the same book.

(a) Both Deal With The Same God

The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is the same God who speaks through Jesus in the New Testament. The God who created the universe, delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt and who spoke through the prophets, is the same one who accomplished salvation through Jesus Christ. "For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). The same God, who in former times spoke to our forefathers "...in these last days has spoken to us by a Son" (Heb. 1:2).

(b) Both Testaments Deal With A Chosen Nation

The Old Testament deals with Israel, the people of God—their origin and history, victories and defeats, and their ultimate aspirations. They are commissioned by God to carry on His mission in the world. Similarly in the New Testament the Christian Church is the 'nation' chosen by God. It is the New Israel, the continuation and fulfilment of the Old Israel. The new

community centred on Jesus Christ is God's specially chosen people and a holy nation (Ex. 19:6, compare with 1 Pet 2:9). They are commissioned to continue God's work of salvation in the world.

(c) Old Testament Events Are Examples And Models of New Testament Events

Many events in the life of Jesus Christ and in the experience of the Christian Church can be seen as symbols and signs in the Old Testament. Jesus Christ's return from Egypt as a child subsequent to Joseph's dream that Herod had died, his fast for 40 days in the desert and subsequent temptations, are all, according to the gospel writers, similar to experiences found in the history of Israel.

(d) The Old Testament Finds Its Fulfilment In The New Testament

Many prophecies and Psalms of the Old Testament are fulfilled in the New Testament and almost all the New Testament writers share such an outlook towards the Old Testament. Throughout the gospel of St. Mathew we find Old Testament passages scattered to prove that almost every event in the life of Jesus is a fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy. This can be seen in other gospels as well, though not so predominantly as in St. Mathew.

In the Epistles, Paul justifies and confirms his ideas, eg. Paul establishes that justification by faith is not a new doctrine introduced by him, but something already exemplified in the life of Abraham. He proves this by quoting Genesis 15:6 (See Rom.ch.4.)

The New Testament writers often quote from the Old Testament, not to display their knowledge, but to establish that the Christian Church is not something that emerged overnight. It came into existence as a result of a well-thought out and well-planned preparation on the part of God. The Old Testament is a long preparation for the New Testament, and the hopes and aspirations expressed in it bear fruit in the life and activities of Jesus Christ as narrated by the New Testament.

EXERCISE :

- (1) Find out the Old Testament quotations in the gospel of St. Mathew.
- (2) Which events in the life of Christ are pointed out as a fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy?
- (3) "The Old Testament is the scripture of Jesus. We in India should adopt in its place the sublime ideas of the Vedas and the Upanishads." Comment on this view of some Indian Christian thinkers.

LESSON 2

THE HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL
BACKGROUND*—Greco-Roman Cultural Background.*

—In what period and background did the Christian Church emerge?

—In what way did this background influence the Christian church and its writings?

—A view of the politics, religion, culture and philosophy of this period.

The most important factor that determines the growth of a plant is the nature of the soil and its surroundings. Similarly, it is necessary to find out in what type of surroundings the Christian Church grew and how it influenced the New Testament. In the previous lesson we learned that the roots of the New Testament are embedded in the Old Testament. But these roots reached further down into the Greco-Roman world and its cultural milieu. Hence we should learn the special features of that world.

(1) Peaceful Political Atmosphere

The Roman Empire which reigned supreme during the New Testament period was very extensive, mighty and well-organised. After 200 years of bloodshed and violence, peace and order came during the reign of Augustus, and from 27 B C onwards a stable government existed. It was a strong administrative structure in which the whole Empire consisting of most of western Europe, North Africa, Turkey and Palestine, was divided into several provinces. Rome as the centre, exercised control over the provinces by appointing governors and other Roman representatives.

The stability and control of this large and widespread empire was dependant on certain factors. An excellent system of communication, by land and sea, was developed, and the phrase "all roads lead to Rome" was coined. Although Greek was used mainly in the Eastern Empire, and Latin prevailed in the West, the majority of people spoke a "Common Greek" to facilitate communication throughout the Empire, and freely exchange ideas and philosophies. Finally, Roman Law, famous even today helped to establish a sound legal system and bring about justice and peace

(2) Social Inequalities

In spite of political unity and a stable government, there was a great deal of social inequality. Rome's conquest threw up a society based on slavery, where the slave was more often than not, a tool, treated like an animal, with no rights whatsoever as an individual. There was a great number of poor people whose wages were insufficient to allow them a decent living. On top of this, the tax levied by Rome was unbearable.

(3) A Diversity of Religions

Though there was unity in political life, there was a great deal of diversity in the religious field. Especially among the uneducated there were a diversity of gods, and temples of various gods existing side by side. Worship of the emperor became popular and temples sprouted all over the empire dedicated to one Emperor or the other. **Mystery Religions:** Mystery Religions and cults sprang up, mainly in the Eastern countries, but being popular, spread rapidly

all over the empire. They were begun by the Greeks as they meditated on the gods and showed their exploits through drama, hoping to thus share in the experience of the Gods—thus, the cults of Isis, Mithra, Dionysius, Orphic and Osiris mushroomed, centred around the worship of one particular god. They all had a strange initiation ceremony. Often the devotee hoped to die, resurrect and become immortal like the god he worshipped. Most of these religions were austere against worldly pleasures and held promise of a divine ecstasy to their followers. The nascent Church found them a great challenge, and to its credit, the Church used some of their ideas to spread its message.

Gnosticism

Gnosticism originated in the first century and grew directly out of the mystery religions. According to the gnostics, salvation could only be attained through 'Gnosis' or wisdom—not the wisdom of rational thought or scientific analysis, rather, wisdom arising out of a mystery cult, obtainable only to a few "chosen". They also attached a great deal of importance to philosophic discussion and ascetic life. It became very popular and a serious threat to Christianity in the second century. Most New Testament writers condemn it, and Paul reveals his Christology when he uses "Gnosis" with a Christian relevance.

(4) A World of Diverse Philosophies

Simultaneously many systems of philosophy were prevalent which aimed at fulfilling man's aspirations and his spirit of enquiry. This was an attraction for the intellectuals. The influence of Socrates and Plato who lived in the fifth century B. C. had not waned. It was generally felt that the basis of the visible world was the invisible world of ideas. They also held the reality of the world to come.

Stoicism

Stoicism emerged and became influential in the fourth century B. C. According to it the good life is a life lived in union with the universe. God is a force pervading throughout the universe and in Him we live, move and have our being. In moral teaching, stoicism comes very close to Jewish religious thought.

Epicureanism

It also originated in the fourth century B. C. Its noteworthy features are a concern with the world and an outlook of morality. The origin of the universe is believed to have resulted from the tension of the atom. Hence the world and man came into being by accident; there is no place for God. The aim of the Epicurean philosophy of life is to follow one's natural inclinations. Happiness and joy are to be accepted, and pain is to be rejected. Real joy comes from practising real goodness. Never give the conscience an opportunity to accuse you. In spite of all these, Epicurean philosophy finally drifted into the enjoyment of worldly pleasures.

The strong undercurrent of the above-mentioned theories and philosophies was widely felt in the Greco-Roman world of the first century. Their mixed thoughts and outlook were too strong to be ignored.

EXERCISE

1. Compare the religio-cultural setting of the Greco-Roman world in the first century and that of present day India. What similarities and differences do you notice?
2. From what philosophies is the Indian Christian Church facing challenges?
3. If the early church absorbed many things from Greek culture and philosophy, why not the Indian church follow the same example? Discuss in what way this can be done.

LESSON 3

JEWISH HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

—History just before the first Christian century.

—In what way has the historical background influenced the gospel and the Christian church?

The Christian Church gives a very important place to history. The Church believes in a God who controls, works in, and guides history. The Christ-event is a historical one. To understand this we must know the historical background preceding it. In the first century the people of Israel were struggling under a foreign yoke and eagerly awaited the coming of a God-sent Messiah.

Under Foreign Rule

Israel had a long history of foreign domination. In the second century B. C. the Syrians, under the cruel Antiochus Epiphanes (175-157 B. C.) overran the city of Jerusalem. He methodically tried to wipe out the Jewish religion and culture and replace it with a Greek one. His diabolical methods led to a revolt among the Jewish nationalists who organised a guerillatype of warfare from the mountains of Judea under the able leadership of Mattathias. In 165 B C he did succeed in defeating the Syrians and regaining the Temple. After his death his sons Judas and Simon, who called themselves Maccabees took over the leadership with fluctuating fortunes. It was during the tenure of John that the Pharisees and Sadducees came into existence, the former rabidly against the Maccabees, while the latter supported them, and were given the high Priest's position for this support. The Romans already in Syria, were invited to intervene, and thus, in 65 B. C. they entered Palestine which was in a state of civil war.

An Appraisal of the Maccabean revolution is appropriate here:

1. The Political freedom of Israel could be preserved for a short while.
2. There was economic and political progress during this period.
3. The people were brought about to a sense of duty to their country
4. The city of Jerusalem was made secure.
5. The faith of their fathers was preserved by resisting the onslaught of pagan religions.
6. Worship and sacrifices in the Temple, which were stopped were restored.
7. Some fervent religious groups emerged.
8. Certain psalms were composed during the period; for example Ps. 78, 83, 85, etc.
9. The new idea of martyrdom for the faith was generally accepted.
10. Coins were issued bearing the Maccabean name and seal.

Roman Domination (63 B C - 66 A D)

The Jews who enjoyed a certain measure of freedom under the Maccabees, once again drifted into another foreign domination. This lasted for a century. The Romans were very efficient administrators. They strengthened the Roman control by appointing regional administrators. Antipater was an Edomite who embraced the Jewish religion. With the support of the Romans he became the ruler of Judea. His son was the notorious Herod I. He became the ruler of the whole of Palestine. In 37 B. C. he was appointed administrator and he became King in 30 B. C.

It was this King Herod (The Great) who was ruler over Palestine at the time of the birth of Jesus Christ. An efficient ruler, he nevertheless did much to promote Greek and Roman culture among the Jews. Before his death he divided his kingdom

among his three sons. Archelaus became ruler of Judea, Antipas, of Galilee and Perea, Philip of Iturea and Tricooniah.

Archelaus (4 B. C. - 6 A. D.)

He surpassed his father in cruelty and wickedness, mercilessly putting to death all his enemies. Highpriests were appointed and dismissed according to his whims. The influential families conspired against him and sent representations to the Emperor in Rome to dethrone him. (Luke 19:22-27 Examine the parable in this context). At last Augustus banished him to France and appointed a Roman procurator in his place.

Antipas

In the gospels he is called 'Tetrarch' (Matt. 14:1). He would do anything to keep his position secure (Luke 13:31). Jesus refers to him as "that fox".

It was he who issued order to kill John the Baptist after Salome's dance. He married the daughter of King Aretus, but divorced her and took his brother's wife Herodias instead. This led to a quarrel with King Aretus and finally to his own down-fall, as the Emperor banished him to Gaul, (modern France) where he died.

Philip (4 B C to 34 A D)

He was a better ruler than the other two. He rebuilt the ancient city of Pania and named it Caesarea Philippi, to please the Emperor (Matt. 16:12, Mark. 8:21). When he died in 34 A. D., his Kingdom was annexed to the Roman province of Syria.

We know of two other rulers belonging to the Herod family. They are Agrippa I and Agrippa II. Agrippa I persecuted Christians (Acts 12). He was a staunch Jew and earned the respect of the Pharisees. It was with Agrippa II that Paul entered into a discussion (Acts 25, 26).

Roman Procurators

We have seen how Judea was brought under the rule of Procurators. Pontius Pilate was the fifth Procurator. The Procurators.

were mostly power-crazy. They often had like Pilate, a great hatred and contempt towards the Jews which was reciprocal.

From 66 A. D. the Jews, under the leadership of the extreme Zealots, waged open war against the Romans. As the Jews lacked man-power and organisational ability, they incurred heavy losses in the war. In 70 A. D. Titus, son of Vespasian, completely destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple was burnt down. The prophecy of Jesus that "one stone will not stand on another" was fulfilled. Nero's successors Trajan and Hadrian also cruelly persecuted and scattered the remnant of the Jews till the Jewish people lost their home-land, and their Temple. They had to emigrate to different parts of the world till in 1948 the state of Israel was formed as a homeland for the Jews by taking land from the Arab nations, which is the root of the West Asia problem today.

EXERCISE

1. Evaluate the gains made by the Jewish nation from the Maccabean Revolution.
2. What lessons do the tragic experiences of the Israelite nation teach us?

LESSON 4

RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND OF THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL

—*Doctrines of the Jewish Religion*

—*Temple and Worship*

—*Sects and groups in the Jewish Religion*

In the previous lesson we have seen the historical background of the Jews. In this lesson their religious customs and observances are described. Such a study is essential to understand many references in the teachings of Jesus and the exhortations of the apostles.

After the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, more knowledge is available about the Jewish religion of the first century and its religious customs. The Mishnas of the Jewish Rabbis and the Talmuds throw much light on this subject.

1 DOCTRINES

First we shall examine their basic beliefs :

(a) Monotheism

Belief in one God was very strong. After the captivity the Jews completely discarded idols and discovered a God who attaches great importance to moral principles. They emphasised His purity, and His righteousness. Because of God's incomprehensibility and holiness they never pronounced the name "Yahweh". The transcendent and inaccessible brilliant God made his presence felt in the world and its people through his Shekinah or glory.

(b) God's own people

There is a special relationship between God and Israel. They were miraculously delivered from Egypt, then God entered into

a covenant with them at Mt. Sinai. Hence Israel felt they were God's own people.

(c) The place of the Law

The relation between Yahweh and Israel is maintained through Torah or the Law. They believed that the Torah existed even before the creation of the earth. When the Torah was given great importance, a group of people called Sopherim (Scribes) rose up to teach and interpret the Law. The Law consists not only in the written form, but also the oral traditions, transmitted from generation to generation. The Pharisees considered both equally important and binding. The importance of the Synagogues consisted in the fact that they were centres to recite and teach the Law.

(d) Hope for the Messiah

Israel believed in a God who acted in history, in the God who delivered them from Egypt. Hence when they were suffering under foreign rule, they expected that God would send them a liberator, a Messiah who would deliver Israel from all her problems and establish God's Kingship while keeping the people in purity and obedience. Their hope about the Messiah was that he would be a great leader like Moses or a great King like David. Some thought that he would come in a supernatural manner from the clouds.

The people asked John the Baptist whether he was the messiah because the hope of the Messiah was very strong among them. The large majority of the people could not accept Jesus as the Messiah because his character and conduct were contrary to their expectation. Jesus was gentle, meek and humble, not the powerful, all-conquering hero they expected.

(e) Resurrection

In the O. T. there are not many references about life after death. There are indications in some parts that there is a continuation of life even after death (Psalms 16, 17, 49, 73; Job 14: 13-15; 19:25-29). But this will be a pale shadowy and inactive existence in 'Sheol'.

Yet during times of persecution (like the period of the Maccabees) they began to think seriously about the state of those who laid down their lives for defending the faith. A clearer conception regarding the immortality of individuals arose. As a result of all these, belief in bodily resurrection and final judgment became popular.

The thought about bodily resurrection strengthened during the time of the Maccabees (Dan. 12:2). At the time of our Lord the Pharisees believed in Resurrection while the Sadducees denied it (Mt. 22:23-33, Acts 23:6).

2 THE TEMPLE AT JERUSALEM

From the time of the Prophets, Ezra and Nehemiah the centrality of the Temple was recognised. What was its importance? The glory of God (shekinah) resided there. If God's presence was concentrated any where in the world, surely it was in the Temple, in the Holy of Holies. God granted absolution to His own people on condition that they offer sacrifices and penance.

The Jewish religion believed that on certain special occasions God would miraculously appear and work for them. They observed festivals to remember such events in the past. For example, they observed Passover to remember the liberation from Egypt; Pentecost (Festival of weeks) to remember the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai and the Festival of the Tabernacles (Sukoth) to remember their dwelling in tabernacles while they were in the desert. The Feast of Purim and the Feast of Dedication were also celebrated in this way. Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) was a day of fasting, repentance and sacrifice by which they hoped to get reconciled with God.

Besides the Temple of Jerusalem there were synagogues which served as centres for worship. The origin of the synagogues was probably during the captivity in Babylon (587 B. C.). In the Temple the main ceremony consisted of offering sacrifices, but in the synagogues the main features were the reading of scripture and study of the Law.

3 PARTIES IN THE JEWISH RELIGION

The Jewish religious life was centred around the Law, The Temple, Festivals and Synagogues. The Jews' attitude to these made them form different parties, eg. faith in the Law itself made them belong to different groups :

(a) Am Haarez (the people of the land)

They formed the large majority who had neither zeal nor interest in religious observances and so the religious leaders had contempt for them. They were also called "Sinners" together, with the tax-collectors. Yet they were "the lost sheep of Israel" whom Jesus Christ loved and moved with during his ministry.

(b) Pharisees

This word means "Separated" or "Set apart". In the previous chapter we have noted their origins. They gave the highest place to the Law which reveals the will of God. For them the oral traditions that grew were as important as the written part of the Law. They genuinely tried to interpret the Law according to the needs of the times. They believed in the resurrection of the dead, existence of angels and spirits, and also in the freedom of man. The gospels give a rather unsympathetic picture of them but does not reveal their real nature.

(c) Sadducees

'Sadducees' might have come from the word 'Sadok.' They belonged to the order of priesthood. Their origin was probably in the second half of the second century B.C. They were often opposed to the Pharisees. As they were involved in the affairs of the temple and the ministry there, they kept themselves aloof from the common people.

They accepted only the written part of the Law, and rejected the oral traditions in toto. The reason for this was clear — the Sadducees enjoyed financial and social security. So they were self-complacent and wanted no change. Hence they accepted only the unchanging written part of the Law and rejected the lively and relevant oral tradition. They did not accept the re-