

The Law and the Prophets up to John the Baptist

John the Baptist sent his disciples to ask Jesus “*Are you he who is to come or shall we look for another*” (Mt 11,2-3). In response, Jesus affirms that he is the one who fulfils the messianic prophecies (Mt 11,4-6; cf. Is 26,19; 29.18-19; 35,5-6; 61,1), and on a different occasion he announced that he had come to fulfil the Law (Mt 5,17). For those who doubted that he would **completely and comprehensively** fulfil the Law and the Prophets, Christ went on to add: “*All the Prophets and the Law prophesied up to the time of John*” (Mt 11,13). In a slightly different context Luke repeats the same doctrine “*The Law and the Prophets were until John, and from then the Kingdom of God is being preached and everyone is straining himself to enter*” (Lk 16,16; cf. Rom 10,4). The theme of Christ’s fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets recurs so often in the New Testament, and especially in the Gospels, that it must be considered a key element of his mission.¹

It has therefore become an indisputable dogma of Christian belief that, through Jesus Christ, all that remains incomplete and unfulfilled in the Old Covenant finds its perfect fulfilment in the New Covenant (cf. Heb 8,13). “*All power in heaven and earth has been given to me*” (Mt 28,18). “*The Father loves the Son and has given everything over to him*” (Jn 3,35; cf. Jn 17,2). The difference between the Old and the New Covenants can be summarized by one word: ‘fulfilment’.

This qualitative difference between the Covenants is therefore reflected in the Scriptures.² Although the content of the Old Testament Law and Prophets has not changed ‘one iota’ (cf. Lk16,17; Mt 5,18), their function certainly has. Up to John the Baptist their function was to prepare the people of Israel for the coming of the Messiah. After his coming, the Law and the Prophets have become witnesses to the messianic plan of redemption embodied in the New Testament.³

¹ We find this in all the Gospels, but especially in those of Matthew and John (e.g. Mt 1,22; 2,15.17.23; 4,14; 8,17; 12,17; 13,14.35; 21,4; 26,54.56; 27,9; Mk 14,49; Lk 4,21; 18,31; 21,22; 22,37; Jn 1,23; 2,16-17; 6,31.45; 7,38; 12,13-14.38-40; 15,25; 19,24.36-37). The theme is continued throughout the New Testament writings.

² See the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993) III A 2: “The authors of the New Testament accorded to the Old Testament the value of divine revelation. They proclaimed that this revelation found its fulfilment in the life, in the teaching and above all in the death and resurrection of Jesus, source of pardon and of everlasting life.”

³ There is no question here of the replacement or abolition of the Old Covenant, but just its fulfilment in the New Covenant. This is not a theology of ‘replacement’, in which there is no place whatsoever for the Old Covenant, but rather a theology of ‘fulfilment’, in which the Old accompanies the New and

So the role of the Old Testament Prophets now consists in their witness to the Messiah, who came to fulfil the promises of God and therefore determine what must happen in the future. However, the Gospels tell us very little about this future or what the Messiah Jesus said about it (cf. the ‘synoptic apocalypses’, Mt 24; Mk.13; Lk 17,22–37; 21,5–36). Instead, in John’s Gospel, Jesus explains why he has avoided speaking in detail about the future fulfilment and goes on to describe how he will soon provide his disciples with further insight into the subject: “*I still have much to tell you, but you cannot bear it now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you to the whole truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take from what is mine and declare it to you*” (Jn 16,12–14).

At this point, it is necessary to consider how the Spirit of Truth declares to us ‘the things that are to come’ while at the same time glorifying Christ. Of all the prophecies in the New Testament,⁴ the Apocalypse is unique because Jesus gave it to the churches with the specific purpose of showing “*his servants what must soon take place*” (Rev 1,1; 22,6). As such, the Apocalypse precisely fulfils the function of the Spirit of Truth, to ‘declare the things that are to come’ (Jn 16,13). It also glorifies Christ by ‘taking from what is his and declaring it to the churches’ (cf. Rev 1,1-2).

However, the Apocalypse does not declare these things ‘out of the blue’. More than any other writing in the New Testament, the Apocalypse continually evokes the Old Testament Scriptures.⁵ Having this deep affinity with the Old Testament, the Apocalypse reveals how the risen Christ completely fulfils “*the Mystery of God as he announced to his servants the prophets*” (Rev 10,7), up to and beyond his Second Coming at the consummation of history. On these grounds many commentators have perceptively understood the Apocalypse as a “re-reading” (*une relecture*) of the Old

acts in a real way as a witness to its significance: “By ‘Old Testament’ the Christian Church has no wish to suggest that the Jewish Scriptures are outdated or surpassed. On the contrary, it has always affirmed that the Old Testament and the New Testament are inseparable.... It is in the light of the Old Testament that the New understands the life, death and glorification of Jesus.” Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People And Their Sacred Scriptures In The Christian Bible* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2002) II A 1.

⁴ I.e., Mt 24; Mk.13; Lk 17,22–37; 21,5–36; 1Thess 4,15–18; 2Thess 2; 1Cor 15,20–28; 2Tim 3,1–9; 2Pet 3,1–13; Rev 4–22.

⁵ “To take an obvious example: although the Book of Revelation contains no explicit quotations from the Jewish Bible, it is a whole tissue of reminiscences and allusions. The text is so steeped in the Old Testament that it is difficult to distinguish what is an allusion to it and what is not.” Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People And Their Sacred Scriptures In The Christian Bible*, I A 1.

Testament Scriptures in the light of the Christ event.⁶ Furthermore, according to its own words, the Apocalypse is not just one of several different ways of reviewing and integrating the Old Testament Scriptures in the light of the risen Christ, because it presents itself as the unique and authentic instance of this prophetic act (Rev 22,6-20).⁷

Revealing how Jesus Christ completely fulfils the Law and the Prophets, the Apocalypse replaces the prophets of the Old Testament as the principal source of information about the future. For the believer in Christ, it is therefore no longer acceptable to consult the prophets of the Old Testament directly for details about the future fulfilment of the promises of God, even though many of these promises have not yet been fulfilled.⁸ Instead, this information must be sought primarily in the Apocalypse, which is “The Revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave to him to show his servants what must happen soon” (Rev 1,1-2).

In fact, returning to the Old Testament prophecies for information on the future leads to conclusions that seriously contradict God’s Word in the New Testament Apocalypse. This is especially true for the prophecies of the restoration of

⁶ “(John) had an astonishing grasp of the Jewish Scriptures, which he used with creative freedom. He never quotes a passage verbatim, but paraphrases, alludes and weaves together motifs in such a way that to follow up each allusion usually brings out further dimensions of meaning... In fact Revelation can be seen as a Christian re-reading of the whole Jewish Scriptural heritage, from the stories of the Beginning to the visions of the End” J.P.M. Sweet, *Revelation*. S.C.M. Pelican Commentaries. London: S.C.M. Press, 1979, 40. Ugo Vanni describes it like this: “The author never uses an explicit quotation, but inserts entire expressions from the Old Testament, often literally but with some slight alteration, so bringing the context of the Old Testament back to life with the prospect that has been added to it by the New.” See also: Ugo Vanni, “Gerusalemme nell’Apocalisse”, in *L’Apocalisse: Ermeneutica, Esegese, Teologia*, Bologna: EDB 1988, 369; A.Feuillet, *L’Apocalypse: État de la question* (Paris: Desclée, 1963) 65 ; H. Kraft, «Zur Offenbarung des Johannes » *Theologische Rundschau*. Neue Folge 38 (1973) 85; D.Hill, “Prophecy and Prophets in the Revelation of St. John” *New Testament Studies* 18 (1971-1972) 417; Pierre Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001, 86.

⁷ It is therefore the most authoritative and comprehensive example of “re-reading” in the New Testament, and directly answers the question posed by the Pontifical Biblical Commission in *The Jewish People And Their Sacred Scriptures In The Christian Bible*: “How is this ‘re-reading’ to be done? It extends ‘to all Scriptures’ (Lk 24:27) to ‘everything written in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms’ (24:44), but the New Testament only offers a limited number of examples, not a methodology” (II A 1). There is therefore no need for contemporary theology to search for ways “of re-establishing a Christian interpretation of the Old Testament that would avoid arbitrariness and respect the original meaning” (op. cit. II A 4), as this has already been given to us in the Apocalypse.

⁸ “Christian faith recognises the fulfilment, in Christ, of the Scriptures and the hopes of Israel, but it does not understand this fulfilment as a literal one. Such a conception would be reductionist... It would be wrong to consider the prophecies of the Old Testament as some kind of photographic anticipations of future events” Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People And Their Sacred Scriptures In The Christian Bible*, II A 5. But it is legitimate, and indeed necessary, to refer to these prophecies in the clarification of the meaning of Christ’s prophecy in the Apocalypse: “Conversely, the New Testament cannot be fully understood except in the light of the Old Testament” (op. cit. II A 6).

Jerusalem and the eschatological return of the Lord's dwelling.⁹ These Old Testament prophecies are held up by some Christians as proof that Christ is going to return to historical Jerusalem in order to establish his millennial kingdom amongst the Jewish people. But is this really what Christ has determined and communicated through his prophecy in the Apocalypse?

By claiming that Christ's millennial kingdom is yet to start, these Christians are implying that they are not already participating in his kingdom, despite the fact that since the days of John the Baptist "*the kingdom of heaven is being announced and everyone is straining himself to enter*" (Lk 16,16; cf. Mt 11,12). They seem unaware that Christ's kingdom exists in the Universal Church. This is consistent with the fact that most of these millennialist Christians are from communities and movements that have broken away from this Church.¹⁰

More importantly, this millennialist approach takes no account of what Christ has determined for the fulfilment of the Old Testament restoration prophecies. In Revelation 21 and 22, this fulfilment is described as his Bride, the New Jerusalem, which comes down from heaven to earth, after the final judgment, to be at the center of the New Heavens and the New Earth. In his section on the Book of Revelation in *Jesus and the Holy City*, Rev. Peter Walker affirms "What is revealed, however, is decidedly a *new* Jerusalem. Any identification or connection with the earthly Jerusalem cannot be maintained. This new Jerusalem stands in deliberate contrast to the former Jerusalem. There is no encouragement to believe that the earthly Jerusalem might somehow be metamorphosed into the heavenly one, for John expressly says that this Jerusalem 'comes down *out of heaven*'. He depicts a radically new eschatological reality: "a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth have passed away" (21:1).¹¹

Before the final judgment at the end of history, there is nothing in the prophecy to suggest that the Lord intends to reign in, or from, historical Jerusalem. On the contrary, it is related how, during the last few years of history, the Holy City will be trampled by the nations for 42 months (11,2; cf. 13,5). During this period

⁹ E.g. Mic 4,1-5; Is 2,2-4 ; Is 60-66; Zech 14; Ezek 40-48.

¹⁰ Since one of the rules for the correct interpretation of Scripture is to read it in the 'the living tradition of the whole Church' (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 113), it is possible that not being a member of the Church may be an impediment to knowing exactly what Christ has or has not determined for the future.

¹¹ P.W.L. Walker, *Jesus and the Holy City: New Testament Perspectives on Jerusalem*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans 1996, 249.

Jerusalem will be called the ‘great city’ (Rev 11,8) like Babylon (Rev 14,8; 16,19; 17,18; 18,10), and instead of being ‘spiritually’ called ‘Zion’ she will be called ‘Sodom and Egypt’¹² (Rev 11,8). Furthermore, it is in this city that the false-messianic leader fully reveals himself to kill the two witnesses of the risen Christ (Rev 11,7), at the start of his 42-month reign (cf.13,5). At the end of his reign, this city, which is clearly distinguished from the cities of the nations, is split into three by the great earthquake (Rev 16,19).

There is absolutely no indication in the Apocalypse that the Lord’s *Shekinah* will ever again reside in historical Jerusalem.¹³ Far from being the city of the Lord, historical Jerusalem is going to be the centre of the brief but global empire of the ultimate antagonist of Christ (the ‘beast from the sea’ of Rev 13). Viewed this way, then, the future of historical Jerusalem is so bleak that it arouses concern about the eternal salvation of those who continue to reside in her. Awareness of this should cause Christians to witness their love even more selflessly to the Jews in order to win them to Christ, and thus bring them to salvation.¹⁴

This example clearly shows the error of reading the prophecies of the Old Testament literally, while ignoring their New Testament fulfilment.¹⁵ Unfortunately, the error has a large following, because of its origins in the doctrine of Biblical inerrancy – one of the principle doctrines of Protestant Christian ‘Fundamentalism’. This doctrine permits equal value to be given to texts of the Old and New Testaments, and resolves the inevitable contradictions by making an unscriptural distinction

¹² Apart from representing ‘oppression’ and ‘corruption’, these are two cities from which the people of God had to flee at short notice.

¹³ The same conclusion has been drawn from a recent study of all the New Testament writings: “the overall conclusion of our analysis of the New Testament is that in the strictest sense of the word, Jerusalem has lost whatever theological status it previously possessed. The way the Old Testament ascribes to Jerusalem a special, central and sacred status within the on-going purposes of God is not reaffirmed by the New Testament writers. Instead they see God’s purposes as having moved forward into a new era in which the previous emphasis on the city (as well as on the Land and the Temple) is no longer appropriate. The coming of Jesus has been its undoing.” Walker, *Jesus and the Holy City*, 319-20.

¹⁴ So there is no question, here, of hating or insulting the Jews because of the evils and persecutions that are to come.

¹⁵ “Within Christian theology it is therefore illegitimate to approach the Old Testament text as though the New Testament had not been written. Nor is it possible to attempt a mediating position whereby the New Testament critique of Jerusalem is acknowledged, but the Old Testament understanding of the city is somehow allowed to stand, unaltered and unscathed. Christians, having accepted that Christ has come, cannot ignore that reality when it comes to interpreting the Old Testament scriptures. Needless to say, this has implications for contemporary ‘Christian’ approaches to Jerusalem, many of which seem to by-pass the New Testament in their elevation of the Old”, Walker, *Jesus and the Holy City*, 313.

between the destiny of the Church and that of the believers from Israel (cf. Gal 3,28; Col 3,11; Eph 2).¹⁶

The fundamentalists who return literally to the Law or the Prophets of the Old Testament, without taking into account the prophecy of their fulfilment by Christ in the Apocalypse, either do not understand the full significance and value of the Apocalypse, or they seriously underestimate the central role of the Messiah in his plan of redemption. Or, even worse, they are denying that Christ is the Messiah and are therefore expecting another. For whichever of these reasons, fundamentalist Christians are spreading illusions about the future of historical Jerusalem.

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¹⁶ This approach leads to the so-called 'dual covenant' theology, which has arisen as a reaction to the theology of 'replacement'.