

Theological Review (Beirut), Vol. 16, No. 1, April 1995, pp. 26-46.

CHRISTOLOGY IN A MIDDLE EASTERN BIBLICAL CONTEXT

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In his recent book, *The Arab Christian: A History in the Middle East*, Kenneth Cragg writes, "It is intriguing to wonder about a west Asia cradling Christianity without the long legacy of Alexander of Macedonia."¹ His point is that if Alexander had decided to march west and conquer the Romans and the Gauls, the intellectual and spiritual history of the Middle East would have been significantly different.

The early Judaism of first-century Palestine was influenced by Hellenism. St. Paul effectively proclaimed the Gospel in the Greek language to the Greco-Roman world. The ecumenical councils did their work in Greek with a Greek philosophical frame of reference. Then in the early seventh century the Middle East was conquered by a new force from the desert which brought with it a respect for the person of Jesus whom it saw in non-Greek categories. Regarding this understanding of Jesus, Cragg writes,

(they)... believed that Christians had "de-Semiticized" Jesus, distorting him into the Incarnate Word who had to be restored to the authentic tradition of prophethood alone.²

Cragg's book as a whole has been sharply and tellingly criticized by Habib C. Malik of Lebanon.³ I find myself in sympathy with Malik's views.

Yet, Cragg's remark stirs the mind to a new question. That question is: does the New Testament present any view of Jesus that grows out of concrete images rather than abstract concepts attached to Christological titles? We are convinced that it does. Furthermore, does Jesus himself offer any clear explanation as to who he is? Is it possible to "re-Semiticize" Jesus?

If by "re-Semitization" we mean "turning Jesus into a desert dweller," then obviously such an attempt is misguided and doomed to failure. Rather the question is: Is there in the Synoptic Gospels an expression of Christology that focuses on a retelling of some of the stories of the Old Testament? There is.

We hasten to add that in no sense would we cast any hint of shadow onto the Nicene Creed or the Chalcedonian formulations. Quoting Montefiori, Fuller succinctly observes,

¹ K. Cragg, *The Arab Christian: A History in the Middle East*, Louisville, Westminster/John Knox, 1991, p. 19.

² *Ibid.*, p. 18.

³ H.C. Malik, "Book Review" of *The Arab Christian: A History in the Middle East*, by Kenneth Cragg, *The Beirut Review: A Journal on Lebanon and the Middle East*, No.3, (1992), pp.109-122.

It is sheer biblicism to maintain that the church should merely repeat "what the Bible says" — about Christology as about everything else. The Church has to proclaim the Gospel **into** the contemporary situation. And that is precisely what the Nicene Creed and the Chalcedonian formula were trying to do. The definition of Chalcedon was the only way in which the fifth-century fathers, in their day, and with their conceptual apparatus, could have faithfully credalized the New Testament witness to Christ.⁴

At the same time, there has developed in Christian thinking an attitude that says, "no other **expression** of Christology can be fully acclaimed." But what if the same **meaning** is set forth in the New Testament itself in other ways? In such a case, are we bound to funnel these other Biblical ways of understanding Jesus through the language of Chalcedon?

To put it in another way, the title "Son of God" has become central in historic Christian thinking, and rightly so. The difficulty is that on the popular level, Christians often think it is impossible to formulate any authentic Christology without using it. To observe the inadequacies of such an assumption we need only note that in the great Christological affirmations of John 1:1-14 this title does not appear.

Nor do we have any intention of endorsing the false dichotomy of "Greek is bad and Hebrew is good." When we look behind both Chalcedon and Nicea, to the Apostle Paul, we find him brilliantly formulating and proclaiming the person of Christ in language that a Greco-Roman mind could and did grasp. The very coming of Greek language and culture to the Middle East can only be properly understood as a part of God's plan for the "fullness of time" within which he brought forth his Son.

Thus the point is not to set aside Nicea, Chalcedon or the great visions of John 1:1-19 and Col. 1:15-20 and look for something "better." Rather, following on Fuller's insightful remarks, our task is to "proclaim the gospel **into** the contemporary situation." Our Middle Eastern world, in spite of its great philosophical tradition, both Christian and Muslim, still demonstrates great skill in the use of concrete images for the creation of meaning. Many two-thirds world cultures may be similar.

Our task is to see if there is a New Testament understanding of Jesus that maintains loyalty to the whole witness of the New Testament, while focusing on "concrete images" that may speak powerfully to a Western and non-Western mind. We think that there is such a Christology in the New Testament, and that it is traceable to Jesus of Nazareth. A brief venture into this topic is the intent of this article.

Christology has captured the serious and sustained attention of important figures in New Testament studies all through the twentieth century. W. Bousset (1913, E.T. 1970), A. E. G. Rawlinson (1929), V. Taylor (1958), O. Cullmann (E.T. 1959), R. H. Fuller (1965), F. Hahn (E.T. 1969), J. D. G. Dunn (1980), C. F. D. Moule (1977), E. Schillebeeckx (E.T. 1981), I. H. Marshal (1990) and many others come to mind. The debate has focused on **titles**. How are the great names for Jesus, such as "Son of God," "Son of man," "Messiah" and "Lord," to be understood?

⁴ R. H. Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology*, London, Colling, 1965, p. 250.

This has been called "ontological Christology." The Middle East has seen centuries of debate about these tides.

A second focus, represented by Culmann, is to look at what Jesus **did** rather than at his being. This later inquiry has been named "functional Christology." These two forms of Christology are important and inseparable. Fuller notes,

Encounter with Jesus is encounter not only with God in revelatory-redemptive **action**, but encounter with his **being**.⁵

Granting the full significance of both the **being** of Jesus and of his divine **actions**, the Synoptic Gospels present us with a third way to understand who he is. This third way I have chosen to call "hermeneutical Christology." Such language is precise but useful only for specialists. The phrase is my own and by it I mean,

An investigation into how Jesus tells us who he is by creating a new symbol or by taking a symbol or text from the Old Testament, reshaping it and applying it to himself.

This third type of Christology makes no use of the major traditional titles (ontological Christology) although titles such as shepherd are involved. Nor does it focus on Jesus acting in the place of God. Rather we will observe Jesus start with well-known Old Testament stories or symbols and retell them with himself at the center. In the process he tells us profound things about himself in earthy, concrete images that are a development of the theological method of the Old Testament world.

The initial question becomes, is there any first century precedent for this type of development out of the Old Testament? There is. It is observable in Hillel the elder.

Hillel *ha-zakin* (the elder) lived one generation before Jesus. He was the founder of a famous school of rabbinic studies (*beth Hillel*) and his influence was enormous. Gamaliel, Paul's teacher (Acts 22:3), may have been a son or grandson of Hillel.⁶ Flusser argues that Hillel's teachings influenced Jesus.⁷ Flusser goes on to present remarkable evidence of where Hillel took Old Testament texts that refer to God and applied them to himself. Flusser writes,

Hillel's self-esteem was very high, so exceptionally high that in later rabbinical tradition it was often denied that he really spoke about himself in those exalted sayings, but it was assumed that he was referring to God.⁸

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 248. Emphasis mine.

⁶ F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1977, pp. 49-52. H. L. Strack, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, New York, Jewish Publication Society of America, 1931, p.109.

⁷ D. Flusser, "Hillel's Self-Awareness and Jesus," in *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity*, Jerusalem, The Magnes Press, 1988, pp. 510.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 509-510.

Flusser lists two pieces of tradition about Hillel where Hillel applies Old Testament texts about God to himself. These are:

1. ...to the place that my heart loves, there my feet lead me; if you will come into my house, I will come into your house, but if you will not come in my house, I will not come in your house, as it is said (Ex. 20:24): 'In every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you.'⁹
2. My humiliation is my exaltation, my exaltation is my humiliation — it means 'who sits exalted humbles himself to see' (Psalm 113:5f).¹⁰

Flusser goes on to argue that Hillel was really trying to "express the sublime dignity of men."¹¹ Noting New Testament verses about God that are applied to Jesus, Flusser writes, "An exalted self-awareness thus caused in both cases a somewhat similar development."¹²

What Flusser and the rabbinic tradition understood from these texts is outside our topic. Yet the two passages noted above are of great significance for our "hermeneutical Christology." They make clear that there **was** a **precedent** one generation before Jesus, within first century Palestine, for what we will observe in the teachings of Jesus. We will limit the discussion to three passages. The first is Luke 7:36-50. To this we now turn.

The text opens with the assumption that the woman has heard Jesus preach his message of forgiveness for sinners.¹³ A group of Pharisees, led by Simon, decide to have a little "chat" with Jesus. The text demonstrates that they intend to examine him and see if he is a true prophet. No doubt they are also eager to hear his views on various theological topics. Simon invites the young rabbi to a meal with a circle of other guests. The Pharisees were **very** careful about withdrawing from the *'am ha-'aretz* (the people of the land) for their meals. We can be assured that the guests were all from the religious establishment of the village. In the opening scene Jesus enters the house of Simon and, to everyone's shock, all the traditional courtesies of welcome are omitted. This omission features prominently in the text and needs examination.

Every culture has special ways of greeting a guest on the entering of a house. The omitting of these courtesies is **always** an offense, particularly if there are other guests. This is profoundly true in the Middle East. The guest of the first century in Galilee or Judea would naturally receive a kiss of greeting from the host. If the guest was of the same rank as the host the kiss would be on his face. If Simon considers Jesus as his superior Simon would kiss him on his hand. But to fail to kiss him at all was unthinkable. Yet this was what happened. Second, water must be

⁹ Ibid., p. 511; cf. *Tosefta Sukkah* 4.3; b.t. *Sukkah* 53a.

¹⁰ Ibid., p 512; *Leviticus Rabbah*, Chap.1.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 514.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, London, SCM Press, 1963, p. 126.

brought for the washing of the feet and hands. A gentile slave would wash the guest's feet. A member of the house would not. But to offer no water at all would never happen. The soap of the first century was olive oil. This also was considered the minimum any host could offer to any guest. The rabbis taught "the absence of oil is a bar to the saying of grace."¹⁴ This Talmudic text makes clear that dirty hands made one unfit for prayer and that the hands could not be washed without the oil. Thus the meal could not begin until the oil was brought. Yet no oil was offered to Jesus. There can be no doubt that the insult was deliberate.

In v. 45 Jesus confirms that the woman was already there **when he came in**. Thus the woman was a witness to this public humiliation of Jesus. Sympathetic to him, she was naturally offended. What went through her mind is clear from her response. In effect, she said to herself, "If **they** will not wash his feet — never mind — I will wash them." If she asks for water, they will not give it to her because they will rightly perceive that she is trying to soften the blow of their displeasure. Boldly and dramatically the woman begins to wash the feet of Jesus with her tears. She then uncovers her head, unbinds her hair, and uses it as a towel to dry his feet. All those present were naturally electrified.

In that culture, a woman's hair was to be seen only by her husband. She first lets him see it on their wedding night and any wife could be divorced for letting her hair be seen in public.¹⁵ The text affirms that Jesus did not sit, he **reclined**. This means that the guests were prone on a six-foot wide U-shaped couch called a triclinium. His feet were uncovered and extending to the outer edge of the couch. The woman would have knelt down and bent over his feet and thus could easily have used the hem of her long dress to dry his feet. In choosing to use her hair she makes some form of an ultimate pledge of loyalty to him.

The guests were inevitably shocked! In the story Simon passes judgment on Jesus and in the process reveals his own soul. We, the readers, are then told the purpose of the banquet. Simon thinks that a prophet is someone who **avoids** sinners. Thus, in his mind, Jesus is not a prophet. Simon cannot imagine a prophet who **wants** sympathetic dealings with sinners. After accepting, and thus approving of what she is doing, Jesus is expected to defend his actions. In good Middle Eastern fashion, he does so with a story. The story is deceptively simple. Close examination takes the reader into great depths. The text is as follows:

(Jesus said) "A certain money lender had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he forgave them both. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, to whom he forgave more." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly."

As the account continues Jesus bluntly points out to Simon how the woman compensated for Simon's mistakes by offering the omitted hospitality. **Simon** was responsible for a kiss of greeting, along with the providing of water and oil for washing. The despised **woman** compensated for Simon's boorish behavior. Jesus concludes with the telling summary in v.47

¹⁴ *B.T. Ber.* 53b.

¹⁵ *M. Katuboth* 7.6. Danby 255.

which has been traditionally translated, "Her many sins have been forgiven, for she loved much" (cf. KJ, RSV).

The difficulty with this translation is obvious on reflection. In the parable, noted above, there is a sequence. First, the money lender forgives the debt. Second, the debtor responds with grateful love. The second half of v. 47 has the same order. It reads, "He who is forgiven little, loves little." That day, the woman had heard the message of Jesus that God loves sinners. She accepted this life-giving message and came to show her gratitude to the one who set her free. She was forgiven. She **then** responded with grateful love. But the traditional translation of v. 47a reverses this order. If, with the Authorized Version, we read, "Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; **for** she loved much:" then it appears that she "made a fuss" over Jesus. He **enjoyed** it and rewarded her with his forgiveness!!

In our Middle Eastern context it is critical to correct this translation error. With this error it appears that the great prophet Jesus is acting in a dishonorable fashion! A woman of the street makes a fuss over him. He likes it and rewards her!!

The key to the problem is Greek perfect tense which reflects a present condition resulting from a past action. This perfect tense is used in this key sentence. Jesus says, "Her sins **have been** forgiven" (i.e., previously forgiven). Now, in this scene, she is responding with love like the debtors in the parable. Gratefully, recent major English language translations have solved the problem for us. The NRSV reads,

her sins, which were many, have been forgiven,
hence she has shown great love.
But the one to whom little is forgiven,
loves little.

The New English Bible translates:

her great love proves
that her many sins have been forgiven;
where little has been forgiven,
little love is shown.

The Jerusalem Bible reads:

her sins, her many sins, must have been forgiven her
or she would not have shown such great love.
It is the man who is forgiven little
who shows little love.

The Jerusalem Bible comments, "she shows so much affection because she has had so many sins forgiven."¹⁶ All three of these translations bring this verse into harmony with the parable

¹⁶ JB, 105, n.j.

Jesus had just told.

Thus the parable, with its concluding dialogue, falls into four scenes. These are as follows:

1. A **MONEY LENDER** has two **DEBTORS**
a. One debtor owes 500 denarii
b. The other owes 50 denarii
[Who is the money lender?]
[like the woman]
[like Simon]
2. The **DEBTOR** cannot pay
3. The **MONEY LENDER** forgives both
a. The 500 denarii debtor and
b. The 50 denarii debtor
[Jesus is the creditor]
[He forgives the **woman**]
[Does he forgive Simon?]
4. The **DEBTORS** respond with love for the **MONEY LENDER**:
a. The Debtor who was forgiven 500 — loves much
b. The Debtor who was forgiven 50 — loves little
[Jesus is the money lender]
[like the woman]
[like Simon]

The question we must ask is: who does the **money lender** represent and who are the two **debtors**? With the words on the right above I have tried to highlight what is clearly affirmed and what is only suggested. We need to start with number four.

At the conclusion of the entire scene Jesus says to the woman, "Your sins have been forgiven." The audience (and the reader of the gospel) know that Jesus **does** forgive sins (cf. Luke 5:24). Indeed, here in 7:49 the assembled guests remark, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" But what Jesus announces in this verse is what the priest had the authority to say in the temple at the conclusion of the *tamid* daily sacrifice of the lamb without blemish. Only here, Jesus is making this awesome pronouncement apart from the temple and its ceremonies. Thus Jesus identifies himself as the money lender of his parable who forgives the debts of the debtors. It follows naturally that the debtor in the parable who was forgiven 500 denarii (and loved much) is the woman. Simon, by contrast, appears as the one who was forgiven little and thus responded with little love.

The startling part of this deceptively simple discussion is the identification by Jesus of **himself** as the money lender to whom grateful thanks for forgiveness received should be offered. The temple sacrificial system provided for an offering of thanksgiving that any worshiper could make at any time to **God**. Jesus does not say to the woman:

Do not offer your great love to me! I am but a messenger of God. Go to the temple and offer a thanksgiving sacrifice to **God** who alone can forgive your sins and alone is worthy to receive your thanks.

Rather, he in effect says to Simon and his guests:

I have forgiven/mediated the forgiveness of this woman's sins. She has offered much love

to me. This is only natural because I am like the money lender in the parable who was loved by the debtors.

The startling nature of Jesus' application of his own parable to himself is often overlooked. Jesus **accepts** in his own person the grateful response of the forgiven woman. Jesus is **at least** saying:

I am the unique agent of God. I mediate God's forgiveness. Gratitude for forgiveness received is appropriately expressed to me.

In Arabic, to describe the Christology of this passage, I use the phrase "*mandub allah al fareed*" (the unique representative of God). But there is more.

If, at the end of the parable, Jesus is talking about himself, what then about the beginning? Jesus affirms himself to be the money lender at the **end** of the parable, who has the right to forgive the debts and the right to receive due thanks from the debtors. Who then is the money lender at the **beginning** of the parable? To put it another way, if Jesus "writes himself into the play" as the **money lender** in #3 and #4, who is the money lender in #1?

The obvious answer to this question is: God is the one to whom we are indebted for our sins. Thus the money lender at the opening of the parable is a symbol for God. This identification is almost certain because all through the New Testament **debts** and **sins** are closely related. This can be seen as follows:

(1) The word *Khoba* in the Aramaic of Jesus' time means both **debts** and **sins**. This Aramaic word no doubt stands behind the two versions of the Lord's prayer. Matthew reads, 'Forgive us our **debts** as we also have forgiven our **debtors**.' Luke's gospel records the same prayer with "Forgive us our **sins** as we forgive those who are **indebted** to us." In Aramaic, the same word root would appear in each text. (2) *Khoba* (debts/sins) also stands behind the Greek in Luke 13:2 which has the word **sinner** and its parallel in 13:4 reads **debtors** (RSV: offenders). (3) In Matt. 18:23-35 a servant is forgiven a large debt by his master and then fails to forgive a fellow servant a small debt. The unforgiving servant is punished. Jesus responds, "So will also my Heavenly Father do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart." That is, the remission of a **debt** is used as a parable about forgiveness of **sin** (by God). (4) Col. 2:13-14 uses the symbolism of the canceling of a bond to explain what has happened on the Cross. That is, a certificate of indebtedness, a bond, is equated with sins which are canceled by the Cross.

These texts make clear that Jesus' little parable is about God to whom the believer is indebted for his/her sins. The money lender is God. The debts are what is owing to him. Simon represents one type of sinner (the insiders who keep the rules) and the woman represents the rest of humankind (the outsiders who do not keep those rules). Thus, as Simon hears the parable, he no doubt understands it to be a parable about God and the sinners who are indebted to him for their sins. But by the time the startling discussion between Jesus and Simon is over it is clear that **Jesus** has cast **himself** into his parable as the agent of forgiveness. That is, Jesus asks his listener to observe a symbol for God gradually transformed into a symbol for himself.

To reflect on the money lender in the parable is to reflect on God **and** to reflect on the person of Jesus. Is it not possible to see here a parabolic form of the Johanine affirmation, "The Father and I are one" (John 10:30)?

In summary, in this text Jesus starts with a symbol for God which he shapes into a symbol for himself. No **titles** for Jesus are involved. Concrete images are employed to create new meaning that illuminates the person of Jesus and his union with God. But this is not the only case of this extraordinary theological method.

In Luke 15:1-32 there is a parallel. Before proceeding we need to summarize the methodology of the text just examined. The observable steps are:

- (1) A parable opens with a clear symbol for God.
- (2) A symbol for "sinners" quickly follows.
- (3) A symbol for "the righteous" is added.
- (4) The symbol for God quietly and almost unnoticeably becomes a symbol for Jesus who deals with both the sinners and the righteous.

In Luke fifteen this same methodology appears. It is on display in each of the three well-known parables. The first is the parable of the lost sheep.

Often this parable is read in isolation from the Old Testament. When this happens a significant part of its meaning is lost, because the Old Testament has at least three clear cases of a good shepherd who goes after a lost sheep. We have already examined these texts in detail.¹⁷ Here we would limit ourselves to the Christology in the text.

In Psalm 23, God the good shepherd "restores my soul." The Hebrew *yashubib nefashi* literally means, "he brings me back." The Arabic versions use this translation. *Yashub* is the common Hebrew verb for repentance. The psalmist senses that he is lost, and rejoices that God the good shepherd comes after him, brings him back/causes him to repent and leads him in the paths of righteousness.

Jeremiah 23:1-6 expands these same ideas. In this text God sees the shepherds "destroy and scatter the sheep." God then promises that he **himself** will come and bring back the scattered sheep and restore them to their fold. Ezekiel 34:1-31 goes over the same ground in as much expanded form. In all three God is the good shepherd who himself will act in history to save the flock (i.e., his people).

In Luke 15:1-3 the Pharisees complain that Jesus is welcoming sinners and eating with them. Jesus responds with "this parable." Three parables follow the use of this singular. Clearly Luke (or his source) saw the three parables that follow as a unit.

When Jesus retells this well-known story about a shepherd who goes after his lost sheep, he is certainly talking about himself. The Pharisees have complained, "This man receives sinners."

¹⁷ K. E. Bailey, *Finding the Lost: Cultural Keys to Luke Fifteen*, SL Louis, Concordia, 1992, pp. 194-212.

Jesus replies, It is worse than you imagine! I not only "receive" sinners, I go out and carry them home that I might be with them. Here the full force of the hermeneutical Christology appears. Starting with an Old Testament symbol for God (the good shepherd) Jesus tells a story in which **he**, the good shepherd, is out searching for his lost sheep. Thus Jesus is saying, "In my search for the unrighteous, God is at work fulfilling his promise to David, Jeremiah and Ezekiel to enter history and save."

In this light the "simple" pastoral parable emerges as a startling Christological statement. In this case a title **is** involved, that of shepherd. Function is involved in that *this* shepherd **acts** to save. But these *are* set in the framework of an Old Testament text which Jesus reshapes and then applies to himself. Thus all three forms of Christology noted above appear in this one text.

The imagery shifts, but the Christology does not. In the second parable Jesus presents himself as a good woman who is ready to pay **any** price to find her lost coin.

The third parable of this trilogy, however, brings the whole to its climax. In this parable of the prodigal son, Jesus opens with a father (God), a prodigal son (the sinners) and an older son (the righteous). The father grants freedom to the prodigal who demands his inheritance, sells it, departs and loses everything. The prodigal then plans to return, work as a paid employee and return the money.¹⁸ Thus he returns hoping for servant-hood, not sonship. But on his return, to his utter amazement, he finds his father leaving the house and running to him to find him, "bring him back," and to inaugurate, for the first time, authentic sonship. This is precisely what we observed **God** doing for the lost in Psalm 23:3, Jer. 23:3 and Ez. 34:11. The father also mirrors the shepherd of Luke 15:6 and the woman of 15:8. Who then is the Father?

Obviously, at the opening of the parable the father represents God. However, the chapter opens with a complaint from the Pharisees who grumble,

This man (Jesus) **receives sinners**
and **eats** with them (15:2).

Jesus replies to this complaint with a story about,

a **man** (the father) who **receives a sinner** (the prodigal)
and **eats** with him (the banquet with the fatted calf).

Thus in **some** sense, and at **some** point in the story, this symbol for God becomes a symbol for Jesus. Here we deal with great mysteries. No language can capture the theological density of this picture. We draw near with a sense of approaching holy things. This point is reached where the father (God) empties himself and in humiliation runs to truly "find" his son and bring him back. Here, as in Luke 7:36-50, the symbol for God quietly and unobtrusively becomes a symbol for Jesus who in this story tells the reader who he is and what he has come to do.

Again, an Old Testament title, Father (cf. Ps. 2:7; Is. 63:16; 64:8) is reshaped with Jesus

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 109-142.

emerging at its center. A high Christology is proclaimed in concrete terms that can lead the reader into great depths of reflection on the identity of Jesus.

Our final text is another apparently simple parable, that of the two builders in Luke 6:46-49. A wise man and a foolish man are contrasted. One builds a house on the ground with no foundation. The second digs through the hard clay to reach the solid rock underneath and builds his house on a solid foundation. The issue is foundation versus no foundation. The parable seems simple, colorful and straightforward. The point seems clear. To hear and to do the words of Jesus is to build on a foundation. To hear and fail to do is compared to building without a foundation. But when the Old Testament symbols in the story are identified much more appears.

In Isaiah 28:14-20 the prophet, speaking for God, thunders at the political establishment that thinks it can save the nation from the Assyrians by making a covenant with Egypt. When "the overwhelming scourge passes through" (read: Assyrians), the leadership of the nation thinks they will be safe because they have a "refuge" and a "shelter" (read: covenant with Egypt). But no, writes the prophet, this covenant is "a covenant with death" and when the storm strikes, their refuge and shelter will be swept away by the flood. Yet, all is not lost. God promises a new foundation. The promise is:

Behold, I am laying in Zion for a foundation
a stone, a tested stone,
a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation.
"He who believes will not be shaken."

The parable of Jesus takes symbols from this parable of Isaiah and reuses them. Many things are similar. Both have a storm. The critical issue in each is the foundation. Each has two houses and in each, one house falls.

But Jesus' parable also moved beyond the picture of Isaiah. This can be noted as follows: (1) In Isaiah one house is standing. The second house is only a promise of a sure foundation yet to be laid. In the parable of Jesus both houses are fully built in the present. (2) Isaiah calls on the people to "hear the word of the **Lord**." Jesus commands, "hear and do **my** words."

As we note these similarities and contrasts our question continues to be: What is Jesus saying about himself? The crucial key has to do with the **foundation** which Isaiah says will be laid in Zion.

When the second temple was built under Herod the Great, the old holy of holies was located. In the middle of the floor of that sacred spot the builders discovered a single stone, three fingerbreadths above the rest of the floor. That stone was called "the foundation stone." The *Mishnah* reads:

After the ark was taken away a stone remained there from the time of the early Prophets, and it was called 'Shetiyah'. It was higher than the ground by three fingerbreadths. On

this he used to put [the fire-pan].¹⁹

Shetiyah means "foundation." This section of the *Mishnah* describes the liturgy of the Day of Atonement and all the prescribed movements of the High Priest. The above text appears in the middle of the description.

At the climax of the ceremonies on the Day of Atonement the high priest entered the Holy of Holies and placed a bowl of burning coals heaped with incense on this stone which once supported the ark in the first temple.

The two Talmuds (400-500 A.D.) are extended commentaries on the *Mishnah* (200 A.D.). The Babylonian Talmud affirms that when God created the world he first made this stone and then out of it formed the rest of the world.

To summarize, a stone slightly elevated above the rest of the floor of the Holy of Holies was left in place when the second temple was built. It was understood to be the base on which the ark had stood. In the *Mishnah* (200 A.D.) it is **named** "foundation." The Babylonian Talmud affirms that this famous stone was the beginning of all creation (B .T. Yoma 53b).

These significant witnesses make clear that Is 28:16 was seen as referring to the temple and that a raised stone in the Holy of Holies was called "the foundation." Was this stone in the most holy place not a foundation stone of second temple Judaism? It was in Zion. It was a sure foundation. It was precious, tested stone and he who believed (the LXX added "in it") would not be shaken. Through the building of the second temple was not the promise of Isaiah 28:16 fulfilled?

In such a world Jesus told his parable about two buildings. As noted, his story also told of a storm that would destroy one of the buildings. But the other structure, built on "the foundation" of hearing and doing his words, would not fall.

Isaiah was addressing the nation. His message was,

The Assyrians are coming and the covenant you have made with Egypt will not save you. The house you have built will fall. But, all is not lost. God promises a new foundation in the future. This future foundation alone offers security.

Jesus must have known of this stone in the Holy of Holies called **the foundation stone**. He could not have missed the sense of security that the community around him felt as they gazed on the buildings of the temple and participated in its rituals. God had promised this new foundation that would never be shaken. Now it was in place among them!

Like Isaiah, Jesus also boldly addressed the nation. In effect he said,

The foundation on which you have built is not adequate. Serious conflict with Rome is

¹⁹ *Mishnah, Joma* 5:2, Danby 167.

approaching. Lines are hardening. When the storm strikes, your house will fall. But all is not lost. The promise of God through Isaiah comes true in me and my words, not these buildings. If you hear and obey me you will dwell in a house that will survive the storm.

In the Biblical tradition, and in Middle Eastern culture generally, the words of a person and the person him/herself, are the same. To hear and obey the **words** of Jesus is to hear and obey his **person**. In short, Jesus says to his audiences, "I am the foundation promised by God, not a set of buildings." What then happens to this startling affirmation in the rest of the New Testament?

Two decades later Paul addressed the Corinthians and referred to the church as the temple of God which is holy (I Cor. 3:16-17). Four times in the same passage he boldly affirms that this new temple is built on "the foundation" which is Jesus Christ (cf. I Cor. 3:10, 11, 12, 14). Has Paul heard the parable? All we know is that while discussing "the temple" he affirms that Jesus is "the foundation." He also must have known that the temple authorities identified a special stone in the Holy of Holies as the **foundation** promised by Isaiah.

Finally, St Peter tells his readers,

Come to him, to that living stone, ... in God's sight chosen and precious; ... For it stands in scripture: Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and he who believes in him will not be put to shame" (I Pet 2:4-6).

For the first-century Jew, the central place of worship in the whole world was Jerusalem with its ancient sacred stone. Jesus shifts this focus from a holy stone to a holy person. Paul and Peter know of this shift and reaffirm it.

To conclude, Hillel took Old Testament texts which referred to God and applied them to himself. His followers were confident he did not mean what he said. They found other explanations for his words. Jesus, in like manner, applied Old Testament texts about God to himself, but his disciples believed him.

Money lender, shepherd, woman, father, and foundation stone, all became means in the mind of Jesus to proclaim his identity and his message.

Not all of these will be equally useful in any given context. Yet, does this particular kind of a trajectory through the mind of Christ provide a new path along which we can travel as we seek to avoid the land mines and road blocks of the past?

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