

# The Context of the Gospel – Then and Now

## The OT

Extensive use of the OT in the NT

Connect what they say about Jesus with events and sayings from what was then the Jewish Bible

The OT series of books containing the history of the Jewish people, poetry, proverbs and prophecies.

Jesus is seen in continuity with these writings

His ancestry is traced by two of the Gospel writers back through David, the famous king, to Abraham. In Luke's case back to Adam.

Why is this important? It shows that Jesus was a real person who was part of the ongoing history of the Jewish people.

We read the beginning of the letter to the Hebrews last week,

**1** Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, <sup>2</sup>but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son,<sup>1</sup>

In the first proclamation of the Gospel, Peter tells his audience that what was happening was a fulfilment of “what was uttered through the prophet Joel:”<sup>2</sup>

It's not only prophecy. It is the belief that God has shown himself through the events of history; through events like the exodus, the great escape from slavery in Egypt.

Look at this comparison between Jesus and Moses, the great leader at the time of the exodus.

**3** Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, <sup>2</sup>who was faithful to him who appointed him, just as Moses also was faithful in all God's house. <sup>3</sup>For Jesus has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses—as much more glory as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself. <sup>4</sup>(For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.) <sup>5</sup>Now Moses was faithful in all God's house as a servant, to testify to the things that were to be spoken later, <sup>6</sup>but Christ is faithful over God's house as a son. And

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<sup>1</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Heb 1:1–2). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

<sup>2</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ac 2:16). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

we are his house, if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus himself acknowledges and reinforces this identity with the OT

44 Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” 45 Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, 46 and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, 47 and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things.<sup>1</sup>

Witness and use of the physical world to verify the truth of what is said.

The physical world and its order is a good creation of God and we are part of that world. In the OT, it is the physical world provides the verification for the truth of what is said about God.

<sup>21</sup> And if you say in your heart, ‘How may we know the word that the Lord has not spoken?’ — <sup>22</sup> when a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the Lord has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him.<sup>4</sup>

John credentials:

**1** That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— <sup>2</sup> the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— <sup>3</sup> that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.<sup>5</sup>

It is not surprising that in the Bible, the recounting of actual events is an important part of the writings and of the Gospel. The first book of the Bible, Genesis, is mostly narrative. The NT begins with 5 books which are essentially historical narrative.

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<sup>3</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard](#)

[Version](#). (2016). (Heb 3:1–6). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

<sup>4</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Dt 18:21–22). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

<sup>5</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (1 Jn 1:1–3). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

While there is a religious interpretation of the narrative, it is clear that the interpretation depends on the truth of the narrative.

Gnosticism – the rejection of the physical world in determining what is true, and relying on an inner world, the world of our feelings or our intuition.

Search within for truth rather than receive it from outside

The gospel is a proclamation which is given to us.

<sup>13</sup> For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

<sup>14</sup> How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?<sup>6</sup>

<sup>17</sup> So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. <sup>7</sup>

We tend to be more influenced by emotive writing than by truthful writing. We place rhetoric above content. In this process we tend to copy one another with no real direction. Think of what happens on social media. The cancelling of people like Ellen DeGeneres or J K Rowling, the author of the Harry Potter series of fantasy novels. The attitudes of people towards leaders like Trump and Biden. The truth seems to matter little (and Trump seems to have brought this on himself) it’s what we feel inside ourselves that matters. Facebook and other social media are full of followers.

The Chief Rabbi in the UK, Sir Jonathan Sacks, described our society as being like a kind of ant.

4 February 2006

I HAVE acquired a wonderful tutor in the art of hope. It is called a satellite navigation system, and it lives in my car. All you have to do when setting out on a journey is to key in your destination. It then tells you how to get from here to there.

It is a marvellous device, but I suspect that whoever designed it had never met a Jewish driver. What happens is this. Once the machine has worked out the route, a polite lady’s voice tells you something along the lines of: “Keep straight for 300 yards, then turn right.”

Normally, this would suffice. But as anyone who has shared a journey with a Jewish driver knows, the response is likely to be: “What does she know? I’ve

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<sup>6</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version\*](#). (2016). (Ro 10:13–14). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

<sup>7</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version\*](#). (2016). (Ro 10:17). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

been driving this car for 20 years. I know the neighbourhood like I know my own mother. Anyone knows that in 300 yards, you turn left.”

Watching the computer’s response is an education in itself. It has done what it was asked to do, and with impeccable politeness. Now, for no apparent reason, it finds its advice ignored and its instructions flouted. With commendable patience, it makes no immediate response. It does not say, as it has every right to: “If you’re such a maven, why did you ask in the first place?”

Instead, it goes silent for a few moments, perhaps meditating on the shortness of life and the lengths of human folly. It then sends up a signal: “Recalculating the route.” Seconds later it provides you with a new set of instructions, based on wherever you have landed up as a result of going left when you should have gone right.

From this marvellous machine I have learnt one of the great lessons in life. However many wrong turns you may have taken, if you know where you want to be, there is a route from here to there. If that isn’t a source of hope, what is?

Reading James Surowiecki’s *The Wisdom of Crowds*, I came across the opposite phenomenon. He tells the story of how the American naturalist William Beebe came across a strange sight in the jungle of Guyana. A group of army ants was moving in a huge circle. The ants went round and round in the same circle for two days until most of them dropped dead. The reason is that when a group of army ants is separated from its colony, it obeys a simple rule: follow the ant in front of you. The trouble is that if the ant in front of you is lost, so will you be.

Surowiecki’s argument is that we need dissenting voices: people who challenge the conventional wisdom, resist the fashionable consensus, disturb the intellectual peace.

“Follow the person in front of you” is as dangerous to humans as it is to army ants. To stand apart, to question where the group is going, is the task of the prophet through the ages.

Wright, T. (2013). [\*Creation, Power and Truth: The Gospel in a World of Cultural Confusion\*](#)

God save us from the circular ant-trap of Gnosticism, ancient or modern.

The results, after all, are obvious. They have been chronicled by various commentators over the last two or three decades. In particular, Tom Wolfe pointed out a generation ago in his novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities* that this kind of Gnosticism leads directly to the confusion, which has grown apace since he wrote, over sexual identity and behaviour. If the outside world,

including my own body in its male or female particularity, are not the good creation of a good and wise God, but rather the inessentials made by a blind and stupid creator, and if instead my inner ‘experience’ is what really counts, then I not only can but must be true to the spark of light, and indeed of desire, which I find most deeply within myself, even if it goes contrary to the apparent order of creation, the norms of traditional society, and the teaching of the Bible and the church. What is more, in doing so I do not need to claim some space for myself out on the left margin of morality. On the contrary, I am a religious hero for acting as I have. The power of that rhetoric today, in church and world alike, shows that Gnosticism is alive and well. And unless we see it for what it is, and learn how not only to answer it but to answer truly the deep longings which drive people towards it, we shall be ministering the gospel, and debating the key issues that face us in the church, with one hand tied behind our backs. It isn’t simply a question of whether this or that behaviour is right or wrong. It’s a question of the large, implicit controlling narratives to which our culture, and our church, has become enthralled.<sup>8</sup>

In the Bible, the external evidence matters. It verifies the spiritual intuitions, or shows them to be false.

<sup>15</sup> “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. <sup>16</sup> You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? <sup>17</sup> So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. <sup>18</sup> A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. <sup>19</sup> Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. <sup>20</sup> Thus you will recognize them by their fruits. <sup>9</sup>

## The Love of God – then and now.

In the year 2000, Don Carson wrote a book called “The difficult doctrine of the love of God”

If people believe in God at all today, the overwhelming majority hold that this God—however he, she, or it may be understood—is a loving being. But that is what makes the task of the Christian witness so daunting. For this widely disseminated belief in the love of God is set with increasing frequency in some matrix other than biblical theology. The result is that when informed Christians talk about the love of God, they mean something very different

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<sup>8</sup> Wright, T. (2013). [\*Creation, Power and Truth: The Gospel in a World of Cultural Confusion\*](#) (pp. 11–12). London: SPCK.

<sup>9</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version\*](#). (2016). (Mt 7:15–20). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

from what is meant in the surrounding culture. Worse, neither side may perceive that that is the case.<sup>10</sup>

(2) To put this another way, we live in a culture in which many other and complementary truths about God are widely *disbelieved*. I do not think that what the Bible says about the love of God can long survive at the forefront of our thinking if it is abstracted from the sovereignty of God, the holiness of God, the wrath of God, the providence of God, or the personhood of God—to mention only a few nonnegotiable elements of basic Christianity.

The result, of course, is that the love of God in our culture has been purged of anything the culture finds uncomfortable. The love of God has been sanitized, democratized, and above all sentimentalized. This process has been going on for some time. My generation was taught to sing, “What the world needs now is love, sweet love,” in which we robustly instruct the Almighty that we do not need another mountain (we have enough of them), but we could do with some more love. The hubris is staggering.<sup>11</sup>

It has not always been so. In generations when almost everyone believed in the justice of God, people sometimes found it difficult to believe in the love of God. The preaching of the love of God came as wonderful good news. Nowadays if you tell people that God loves them, they are unlikely to be surprised. Of course God loves me; he’s like that, isn’t he? Besides, why shouldn’t he love me? I’m kind of cute, or at least as nice as the next person. I’m okay, you’re okay, and God loves you and me.

Even in the mid-1980s, according to Andrew Greeley, three-quarters of his respondents in an important poll reported that they preferred to think of God as “friend” than as “king.” I wonder what the percentage would have been if the option had been “friend” or “judge.” Today most people seem to have little difficulty believing in the love of God; they have far more difficulty believing in the justice of God, the wrath of God, and the non-contradictory truthfulness of an omniscient God. But is the biblical teaching on the love of God maintaining its shape when the meaning of “God” dissolves in mist?<sup>12</sup>

We need to be careful we convey what the Bible says about the love of God and about how it explains this concept. We need to realize that God’s love for humanity is not the essence of the Gospel proclamation. It is mentioned explicitly only in the 4<sup>th</sup> Gospel. It has explicit mention in the other three. The word for love, ἀγάπη,

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<sup>10</sup> Carson, D. A. (2000). [\*The difficult doctrine of the love of God\*](#) (pp. 9–10). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

<sup>11</sup> Carson, D. A. (2000). [\*The difficult doctrine of the love of God\*](#) (p. 11). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

<sup>12</sup> Carson, D. A. (2000). [\*The difficult doctrine of the love of God\*](#) (pp. 11–12). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

occurs nowhere in classical Greek literature as a noun. Grammatically, this word function very differently from our word “love”. In the NT, it is associated with action, and so is often expressed in the past tense. 1 Cor 13 is not a description of love but a description of the nature of the actions that come from a stance of love.

<sup>16</sup> By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.<sup>13</sup>

We know that God loves us Not by how we feel or some inner experience or feeling, nor by the current events in our own life – these are often ambiguous. We know by an action that Jesus has taken on our behalf.

## The resurrection of the dead

There are some aspects of the gospel proclamation by the apostles that may be related to the culture in which they lived. The meaning of the word “lord” is one that is derived from the culture of the day, both Jewish (applied to God) and non-Jewish (applied to the emperor). To confess with one’s mouth that Jesus is Lord had a very different emphasis than it has today. We might need to search for a word which conveys that meaning in today’s language.

Although the way the gospel might be presented is culturally conditioned the essence of the gospel is not.

### Resurrection

Most common belief amongst Greeks and Romans and some Jews was in the immortality of the soul.

Transmigration. Salvation is the release of the soul from the constraints of the physical.

Resurrection says no. The soul or self will be re-embodied at the end of the age. At that time each person will be judged.

he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”<sup>14</sup>

Salvation is not the release of the soul from the body to dwell in eternal bliss in heaven. It is the re-embodiment of the self and is the pronouncement of not guilty by Jesus at the judgment.

This view is significantly counter-cultural in our day as it was in Paul’s

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<sup>13</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (1 Jn 3:16). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

<sup>14</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ac 17:31). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

## The Resurrection of the Dead

<sup>12</sup> Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? <sup>13</sup> But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. <sup>14</sup> And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. <sup>15</sup> We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. <sup>16</sup> For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. <sup>17</sup> And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. <sup>18</sup> Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. <sup>19</sup> If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

<sup>20</sup> But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. <sup>21</sup> For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. <sup>22</sup> For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. <sup>23</sup> But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. <sup>24</sup> Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. <sup>25</sup> For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. <sup>26</sup> The last enemy to be destroyed is death. <sup>27</sup> For “God has put all things in subjection under his feet.” But when it says, “all things are put in subjection,” it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him. <sup>28</sup> When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all.

<sup>29</sup> Otherwise, what do people mean by being baptized on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf? <sup>30</sup> Why are we in danger every hour? <sup>31</sup> I protest, brothers, by my pride in you, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die every day! <sup>32</sup> What do I gain if, humanly speaking, I fought with beasts at Ephesus? If the dead are not raised, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.” <sup>33</sup> Do not be deceived: “Bad company ruins good morals.” <sup>34</sup> Wake up from your drunken stupor, as is right, and do not go on sinning. For some have no knowledge of God. I say this to your shame. <sup>15</sup>

Of course people had issues regarding what this is like as they would have today. How can we live forever if we have physical bodies? Surely they will be subject to disease and death.

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<sup>15</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version\*](#). (2016). (1 Co 15:12–34). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

<sup>35</sup> But someone will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?” <sup>36</sup> You foolish person! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. <sup>37</sup> And what you sow is not the body that is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. <sup>38</sup> But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. <sup>39</sup> For not all flesh is the same, but there is one kind for humans, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. <sup>40</sup> There are heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is of one kind, and the glory of the earthly is of another. <sup>41</sup> There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory.

<sup>42</sup> So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. <sup>43</sup> It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. <sup>44</sup> It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. <sup>45</sup> Thus it is written, “The first man Adam became a living being”; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. <sup>46</sup> But it is not the spiritual that is first but the natural, and then the spiritual. <sup>47</sup> The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. <sup>48</sup> As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. <sup>49</sup> Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven. <sup>16</sup>

John deals with a similar issue, but remains quite agnostic about the form of the resurrected body (except that it is physical).

<sup>2</sup> Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. <sup>3</sup> And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure. <sup>17</sup>

What is important is that belief in the physical resurrection of the dead is not just a cultural component, it was an essential feature.

We need to ask ourselves. How important is the belief in the resurrection at the coming of Christ, or even the coming itself, in our presentations of the gospel? Is it a vital component, without which there is no Gospel, or is it a secondary matter to be introduced after conversion?

It is clear from the NT that it was an essential aspect of the gospel that the apostles proclaimed.

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<sup>16</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (1 Co 15:35–49). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

<sup>17</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (1 Jn 3:2–3). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

<sup>5</sup> Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that “the person who does these things will live by them.” <sup>6</sup> But the righteousness that comes from faith says, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’ ” (that is, to bring Christ down) <sup>7</sup> “or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’ ” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). <sup>8</sup> But what does it say?

“The word is near you,

on your lips and in your heart”

(that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); <sup>9</sup> because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

<sup>10</sup> For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.

<sup>11</sup> The scripture says, “No one who believes in him will be put to shame.” <sup>12</sup> For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. <sup>13</sup> For, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” <sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version\*](#). (1989). (Ro 10:5–13). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.