



Turning Lost Students into Christ-Centered Laborers

JESUS AND THE GENTILES • H. Cornell Goerner

We have tried to read our Bible as Jesus read His. This took us quickly through the Old Testament, the only Scriptures Jesus had. In all three sections of the Hebrew Bible, (the books of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms), we found God's concern for all the nations and peoples of the earth, and His plan for dealing with them through the Messiah. We believe that Jesus mentally "underscored" these passages in His Bible, and planned deliberately to fulfill them by His life, His death, and His resurrection.

Turning now to the New Testament, we find in the Gospels that the words and actions of Jesus confirm this all-inclusive concept of His ministry. The New Testament flows right out of the Old, with unbroken continuity. In the distinctive title He chose for himself, in the strategy of His ministry, and in His clear teachings, it is obvious that Jesus undertook a mission for all mankind.

Malachi and Matthew

As one closes the Old Testament and opens the New, it is as though just a few days intervened. Matthew begins right where Malachi ended. And no one was more conscious of that than Jesus was. He knew that He had come to fulfill what Malachi had predicted.

The four short chapters of Malachi are an unrelieved denunciation of the nation of Israel. It warns of an imminent Day of Judgment to be announced by a forerunner and then instituted by "the messenger of the covenant." This messenger would come suddenly to the temple and inaugurate a new era, not only for the people of Israel, but for the whole world.

The coming judgment was called "the Day of the Lord." It would be "a great and terrible day" of testing, when the righteous would be separated from the wicked, as gold is refined by a smelter, as dirt is removed from clothing by caustic lye soap, as chaff is separated from wheat at the threshing floor, and as an unfruitful tree is chopped down and consumed in a furnace (Mal 3:2; 4:1,5).

The judgment would be particularly severe on Israel and its leaders because of specific sins which are denounced: sham and hypocrisy in worship services (1:7-14); social injustice (2:10); pagan religious practices (2:11); divorce (2:16); withholding the tithe (3:8-10). But above all, the prophet declares, God's patience is coming to an end because the people who were supposed to exalt Yahweh and cause him to be revered and worshiped among the nations of the world, have failed to do so. Instead, they have profaned His name and caused Him to be dishonored (1:15-14). But God's purpose will not be defeated, for from east to west, all over the world, His name is to be exalted among the nations, and in every place prayers and worship are to be offered to Him (1:11).

The keynote is sounded in Malachi 1:10: "Oh, that there were one among you who would shut the gates, that you might not uselessly kindle fire on My altar! I am not pleased with you," says the Lord of hosts, "nor will I accept an offering from you. For from the rising of the sun, even to its setting, My name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense is going to be offered to My name, and a grain offering that is pure; for My name will be great among the nations," says the Lord of hosts."



Because God is so concerned that He be exalted among the nations, He is about to act, Malachi warns. He will first send a messenger to prepare the way for him (Mal 3:1). Then He will come Himself, as the messenger of the covenant, who will inaugurate the time of judgment (Mal 3:2-3). The forerunner will be an “Elijah,” a fiery prophet of doom (Mal 4:5). If he is not heeded, then fierce judgment and destruction will be certain.

All of these elements of Malachi are reflected in the third chapter of Matthew’s Gospel. John the Baptist came preaching, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt 3:2). This is the equivalent of “the Day of the Lord” in Malachi. The time of God’s judgment is fast approaching! This is “the wrath to come” (Matt 3:7). John uses the same figures of speech which are found in Malachi; the wheat and chaff are to be separated. To emphasize that the judgment is to be upon the Israelites, and not just the Gentiles, as some of the Jews believed, John declared in effect: “Don’t think that you will escape because you are ‘sons of Abraham.’ I tell you, God is not dependent upon you. He can raise up ‘sons of Abraham’ from these stones, if He wishes. He will use others, if you are not worthy. You will be judged and punished, regardless of your Hebrew heritage” (Matt 3:9, author’s paraphrase).

Jesus picked up this message of warning to the nation of Israel. Immediately after His baptism, we are told: From that time Jesus began to preach and say: “Repent, before it is too late. The time is short. The day of God’s judgment is at hand.”

Jesus identified John the Baptist as the Elijah whom Malachi had promised. Just after John’s imprisonment, Jesus declared: “For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (Matt 11:33-15, RSV).

Jesus was warning that a turning point in history was at hand. The last of the prophets had been sent to give a final warning before judgment came upon the nation of Israel. Some months later, after the death of John the Baptist, He again identified John as the Elijah foretold by Malachi:

“But I say to you, that Elijah already came, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they wished. So also the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands. Then the disciples understood that He had spoken to them about John the Baptist” (Matt 17:12-13).

During His last week in Jerusalem as He taught in the temple, Jesus was consciously fulfilling what is written in Malachi 3:1-2: “Behold, I am going to send My messenger; and He will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold He is coming,” says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap.

John the Baptist had been sent as a messenger to prepare the way. He had done his work. Now the Lord himself had come to announce a new covenant to replace the Old Covenant that had been broken. (“The Lord whom you seek” is not Yahweh, but the expected Messiah, indicated by “Adon” in the Hebrew. The Lord of hosts who is announcing the coming of the Lord [Adon] is Yahweh. Jesus, with His knowledge of Hebrew, understood this distinction.) The people had been seeking the coming of the Messiah, they thought, but actually they were not ready for His coming and the judgment which it brought. Only those who were spiritually prepared could endure His coming.

This is what it means to close the Old Testament and open the New Testament. Jesus knew that the covenant made at Sinai had been broken again and again by a disobedient people, and after a long line of prophets sent to win them back had failed, God’s patience was approaching an end. A new covenant was to be sealed with a faithful remnant of Israel, who would then call the Gentile nations to repentance in the name of the Messiah, the judge of the living and the dead. Judgment must begin with the house of Israel. It then must be proclaimed to all the nations. This was the note of urgency with which Jesus began His ministry. Matthew fulfills Malachi!



From the Beginning

As we have already seen, the vision of a universal kingdom was integral to the plan of Jesus from the very beginning of His ministry. The fact that one of the wilderness temptations involved “all the kingdoms of the world and their glory” (Matt 4:8) is conclusive. Jesus did aspire to world dominion. His ambition to rule over the nations was not wrong. The temptation was to take a short cut to that noble goal: to adopt the methods of the devil. In rejecting Satan’s methods, Jesus did not give up His aim of worldwide authority. Rather, He chose the path of suffering and redemption which He found outlined in the Scriptures.

The first sermon at Nazareth demonstrates that His life purpose extended far beyond the nation of Israel. He was not surprised that His own people did not receive His message. “That’s the way it has always been,” He said. “The prophets have always found greater faith among foreigners than among their own people” (Luke 4:24, author’s paraphrase). He then gave an example: “There were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah...and yet [he] was sent to none of them, but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a widow” (Luke 4:25-26). His hearers knew the rest of the story told in 1 Kings 17. Received into a Gentile home, Elijah performed the miracle of replenishing the flour and oil, then later restored the widow’s son to life—not a Jewish widow, but a Gentile!

Jesus did not stop with Elijah. He rubbed salt into the wounded feelings of His audience with the story of Elisha. For Naaman, the Syrian, was not only a Gentile, but a military leader-captain of the Syrian army which at that very time was at war with Israel and had almost eradicated the hapless little nation (2 Kings 5:1-14). Yet, although there were many lepers in Israel, “none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian” (Luke 4:27). No more dramatic illustration could have been given that the grace of God was not limited to the people of Israel and that Gentiles often displayed greater faith than those who were considered “children of the kingdom.” Small wonder that the proud citizens of Nazareth were infuriated at this brash young man, who insulted their nation and called in question their privileged status as God’s “Chosen People”! But for His miraculous power, they would have hurled him to His death on the jagged rocks at the foot of a cliff (Luke 4:28-30).

To the Jews First

Jesus did have a deep conviction of a special mission to the Jewish nation. He expressed this so strongly that some have concluded that He envisioned no mission beyond Israel. But careful consideration of all His words and actions reveals that it was a question of strategy: As Paul later expressed it, His mission was “to the Jew first, and also to the Greek” (Rom 1:16; 2:10).

Jesus’ concern for Israel was shown in the instructions to the twelve disciples as He sent them out on their first preaching mission. “Do not go in the way of the Gentiles,” He said, “and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 10:5-6). The reason is obvious. The time was short, and doom was coming to the nation, if there was not speedy repentance. The need was urgent, more so for Israel than for the Gentile nations, whose time of judgment would come later. Indeed, in the very same context is the prediction that the preaching ministry of the disciples would be extended to the Gentiles; “You shall even be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to the Gentiles” (v. 18). But they must concentrate upon the Jewish cities first, because their time of opportunity was short (v 23).

Luke tells of a later preaching mission in which seventy others were sent out two by two (Luke 10:1). Just as the twelve apostles symbolically represent the twelve tribes of Israel, the seventy symbolize the Gentile nations. In Genesis 10, the descendants of Noah are listed, seventy in number.

Rabbinical tradition assumed that this was the total number of nations, scattered over the earth after the Tower of Babel, and repeatedly referred to the seventy Gentile peoples. Jesus may have used this means of symbolizing His long-range purpose. The twelve were sent to warn the tribes of Israel of impending judgment. The seventy were sent later on a training mission in preparation for their ultimate mission to the whole world.



Contacts with Gentiles

Most of the public ministry of Jesus was conducted in Jewish territory. Under the circumstances, the number of personal contacts with Gentiles recorded in the Gospels is surprising. He healed a Gadarene demoniac (Matt 8:28-34). Among ten lepers healed, one was a Samaritan, and Jesus remarked upon the fact that only the foreigner returned to thank him (Luke 17:12-19).

A Samaritan woman was the sole audience for one of Jesus' greatest sermons. She received the assurance that the time was near when God would be worshiped, not just in Jerusalem or at Mt. Gerizim, but all over the world, "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:5-42).

A Canaanite woman's faith was rewarded when her daughter was healed. Much has been made of Jesus' puzzling remark at the beginning of the encounter: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt 15:24). This may have been a deliberate rebuke of His disciples, who wanted to send her away with her request unanswered, and who shared the racial prejudice which was common at the time. The significant point is that Jesus did minister to this Gentile woman, and praised her faith in the presence of His disciples and the Jewish onlookers (v. 28).

The centurion whose servant was healed was almost certainly a Roman. Commander of a band of one hundred foreign soldiers quartered at Capernaum to keep the peace, he was despised by the Jews who resented this "army of occupation." Conscious of his own authority as a military man, he humbly assured Jesus that it would not be necessary for him to go to his house to heal the servant (and thus perhaps render himself unclean by entering a Gentile home). "Just say the word and my servant will be healed," he declared with genuine faith (Matt 8:8). Jesus turned and announced to the Jewish crowd which was following him: "I tell you the truth: I have not found a single Hebrew who showed as much faith as this Gentile military leader" (Matt 8:10, author's paraphrase). He did not stop there, but continued with this solemn prediction: "I tell you, many such foreigners shall come from the east and the west to join Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But many others who thought they were 'sons of the kingdom' (the Chosen People of Israel) shall be shut out" (v 11-12, author's paraphrase).

The coming of a group of Greeks precipitated the final crisis in the inner life of Jesus: His decision to move on to the cross. It is clear that these were not merely Hellenized Jews, but aliens, either inquirers or proselytes, who had accepted Judaism and thus were qualified to worship in the temple area, at least in the court of the Gentiles. Their request for an audience caused Jesus to declare: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified" (John 12:23). The deep interest of the Greeks was evidence that the world was ready for His redemptive mission to be culminated by His atoning death: "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself." "All men"—Greeks as well as Jews, Gentiles, and Hebrews alike—this is the clear implication of these profound words recorded by John (12:32).

The Final Week

The events of that last week in Jerusalem bear eloquent testimony to the fact that Jesus, refusing to be a nationalistic Jewish Messiah, moved resolutely toward the cross, fully aware that He was to establish a new interracial, international people, the new Israel, destined to become worldwide in its scope as a spiritual kingdom. He entered the city on a donkey, in order to fulfill Zechariah's prediction of a king who would speak peace to the nations, and whose dominion would be from sea to sea (Zech 9:9-10). He cleansed the court of the Gentiles, declaring sternly, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations" (Mark 11:17). Standing in the temple, He denounced the chief priests and Pharisees, the official leaders of the Jewish nation, for having failed to be good stewards of the truths of the Kingdom which had been entrusted to the Chosen People, and solemnly declared, "Therefore, I say unto you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you, and given to a nation producing the fruit of it" (Matt 21:43). He predicted the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple within that generation (Matt 24:34; Mark 13:3a Luke 21:32); but when asked concerning the end of the age, He said, in effect: "Don't be misled. It will not be as soon as some think. For this gospel of the Kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all nations, and after that the end shall come" (Matt 24:4-14, author's paraphrase). Concerning His return in glory, He was purposely vague, declaring, "Of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor



the Son, but the Father alone” (Matt 24:36). But when He does come, He promised, “All nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.”

Just before the Passover, at a house in Bethany, an adoring woman anointed His body with costly ointment. When she was criticized for her extravagance, Jesus stoutly defended her with these words: “She did it to prepare Me for burial. Truly I say unto you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done shall also be spoken of, in memory of her” (Matt 26:13).

The next evening in the upper room with His disciples, He sealed the New Covenant with them, in anticipation of His death. He declared as He passed the cup, “This is My blood of the covenant, which is to be shed on behalf of many for forgiveness of sins” (v. 28). Only the eleven were present, and all were Jews. But Jesus knew that the small nucleus of a new Chosen People, the remnant of Israel, was soon to be enlarged, as the many for whom He died heard the good news and accepted Him as Lord and Savior.

Endnotes

¹ William Manson, *Jesus the Messiah* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1943), pp. 102 f.

² Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans,) p.173.

³ *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1971), p. 149.

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End

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