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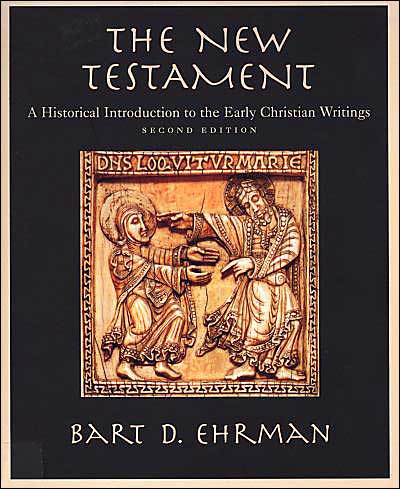
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TO THE EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITINGS

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# PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

I have received numerous comments, both solicit—

In the first edition, I quite consciously decided

ed and unsolicited, from readers of the first edition

not to do so. My decision was based on a number

of this textbook, and would like to express my

of interrelated factors: first, that people of faith

appreciation to everyone who has come to my aid.

have different kinds of faith, and there is not one

In particular I would like to thank John R. Lanci

solution to the problem of how history relates to

at Stonehill College, and my friends Dale Allison

them; second, that despite the claims of some

at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, Alexandra

modern-day apologists among us, there is not a his-

Brown at Washington and Lee University, Harry

torical solution to the problem of faith and history, Gamble at University of Virginia, Sue Garrett at

but only “faith” solutions, and since this introduc—

Louisville Theological Seminary, Amy-Jill Levine

tion is historically rather than confessionally ori—

at Vanderbilt, Jeff Siker at Loyola Marymount, and

ented, to suggest a particular solution (or even a

Judy Siker, also at Loyola Marymount—all of them

particular range of solutions) would be to compro—

fine scholars—for their sustained, detailed, and

mise its historical character; third, and perhaps

insightful remarks. I’ve done my best, at their

most importantly, some problems are more prof—

prodding, to make useful modifications—adding

itably raised than resolved. That is to say—as is

important background material at an earlier stage

the case even with a number of historical condun—

of the book (esp. on the “parties” of early Judaism,

drums—it can be useful and productive to raise an

now discussed briefly in Chapter 2, as well as more

intractable problem and urge students to resolve it

fully, as originally done, in Chapter 15), rearrang—

as they see fit. Wrestling with a problem is some—

ing material (e.g., consolidating the two treat—

times far more fruitful than learning “the” answer

ments of the book of James and focusing more on

(or even than being asked to choose from among a

the history of Palestine by giving it a chapter of its

set of possible answers, as if the question of faith

own, [Chapter 15]), and supplementing key dis—

and history were part of a multiple choice exam).

cussions (especially on the historical Jesus). I’ve

I’m still, for the most part, persuaded by these

also added bibliography here and there and pro—

arguments. And so, while I’ve tried to clarify and

vided a number of additional “boxes” throughout

sharpen the issues a bit (e.g., at the end of Chapter

(“Something to Think About” and “Some More

1 and in Chapter 14), I have not moved further to

Information”). Moreover, I’ve added a special

resolve them. I hope students will be driven to

color insert, “The New Testament in Pictures:

decide for themselves whether historical study of

Illuminated Manuscripts of the Middle Ages,”

the New Testament is at odds with, compatible

designed to show, if only briefly, how the New

with, or even necessary to their own commitments

testament came to be cherished, illustrated and—

of faith. If this were a matter of multiple choice,

most importantly for the purposes of this book—

those would be the options. The real problem, of

interpreted by Christians of later periods.

course, is how to work any one of them out to

One matter that has been widely raised by col—

one’s own satisfaction.

leagues who use the book (or at least have given

In conclusion, I should say that a number of

passing thought to using it) involves the issue of

my colleagues (some of whom teach at explicit—

faith and history. Most readers are grateful that I

ly Christian colleges and seminaries) have com—

broach the matter and are struck by how poignant—

mented on how they appreciate the consistently

ly it comes to the fore when one adopts, even with

historical, nontheological, approach precisely

beginning students, a rigorously historical

because it frees them up in the classroom to deal

approach to the New Testament. But a number of

with the theological issues it raises. My peda—

readers wish that I would not only raise the issue

gogical heart is strangely warmed by this

but also help students resolve it.

response.

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xx

# PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

My particular thanks go to my editor at Oxford

ing bring this new edition to fruition. I am grate—

University Press, Robert Miller, who has once

ful to my graduate student at UNC, Stephanie

again, with unusual editorial savvy, gone above

Cobb, for producing the index this second time

and beyond the call of professional duty in help—

around.

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# PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

With so many textbooks on the New Testament

reflections on the traditions about Jesus that were

from which to choose, it seems only fair for me to

being circulated and sometimes modified within

begin by indicating some of the distinctive fea—

that world. The discussion of the social history of

tures of this one. While there are several out—

Palestine is reserved for a later chapter on the his—

standing introductory texts, most of them

torical Jesus, since knowing about first-century

approach the New Testament from a theological

Palestinian Judaism is presumably of greatest rele—

or literary perspective. I have no trouble with

vance for understanding a first-century Palestinian

these vantage points per se; they do not, however,

Jew. Reflections on the philosophical schools

happen to be mine. In this book, I am first and

appear (principally) in the discussion of the mis—

foremost interested in questions that pertain to

sionary activities of Paul, for which they are parthe history of early Christianity and to the early

ticularly apropos. Justifications for these and other

Christian writings both as they reflect that history

decisions are made en route.

and as they helped to shape it.

Four other features of the presentation derive

I am interested, for example, in the life of the

more or less from its fundamentally historical ori—

historical Jesus (a matter surprisingly left

entation. First, since the books of the New

untouched in a number of introductory treat—

Testament represent only some of the writings pro—

ments), in the history of the traditions that circu—

duced by the earliest Christians, I have taken

lated about him, in the ways that the authors of

pains to situate them within their broader literary

our New Testament documents agreed and dis—

context. Thus, students are introduced, at least

agreed with one another (which I treat as a histor—

briefly, to other surviving pieces of early Christian

ical question), in the missionary practices of the

literature through the early second century (e.g.,

apostle Paul and others like him, in the ways early

the Apostolic Fathers and some of the Gnostic

Christians differed from their Jewish and pagan

texts from Nag Hammadi).

neighbors, in the rise of Christian anti-Judaism, in

Second, I have taken a rigorously comparative

the social opposition evoked by the earliest

approach to all of these texts. The discussions focus

Christians, in the role of women in the early

not only on who wrote the various books of the

church, and in a wide range of other questions that

New Testament and on what they have to say but

lie more in the province of the historian than in

also on how these authors relate to one another.

that of the theologian or literary critic.

For example, do Mark, John, and Thomas under—

My historical orientation has led me to situate

stand the significance of Jesus in the same way? Do

the early Christian literature more firmly than is

Matthew, Paul, and Barnabas see eye to eye on the

normally done in the social, cultural, and literary

Jewish Law? Do the authors of 1 Corinthians, 1

world of the early Roman Empire. Thus, for exam—

Timothy, and Revelation share the same views of

ple, I do not discuss Greco-Roman religion, the

the end times? Do Jesus, Paul, and Luke all repre—

sociopolitical history of Palestine, and other relat—

sent fundamentally the same religion?

ed issues merely as background (for instance, in a

Third, unlike most authors of introductions to

kind of introductory appendix that is subse—

the New Testament, I not only mention a variety

quently forgotten about, as is commonly done). I

of methods for the study of ancient literature, I

have instead evoked the context of the early

actually model them. Students typically have dif—

Christian writings at critical junctures throughout

ficulty understanding how genre analysis and

the book, as a way of helping beginning students

redaction criticism, to pick just two examples,

to unpack the meaning and significance of these

actually work. I introduce and apply these and sev—

writings. Thus, for example, the discussion of reli—

eral other methods, explaining what I am doing

gion in the Greco-Roman world sets the stage for

along the way, to show not only what we can know

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xxii

# PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

about these ancient Christian writings but also

provide the evidence and mount the arguments that

how we can know what we know.

strike scholars as compelling and allow readers to

Finally, rather than simply state what scholars

decide for themselves whether or not they agree.

have said about various critical issues involved in

Teaching should engage students and reading

the study of early Christian literature and history (an

should stimulate them. Yet most textbooks, in

approach that never makes for the most scintillating

most fields, are so dreadfully boring. I hope that

reading), I have tried to engage the reader by show—

this, in particular, will not be among the faults of

ing why scholars say what they say. In other words, I the present book.

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NOTES ON SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

The bibliographical suggestions at the end of each

Interpretation, and New International Com—

chapter are meant to guide beginning students

mentary series.

who are interested in pursuing one or more of the

For some of the issues that I discuss, there are no

issues raised in this book. To avoid overwhelming

adequate full-length treatments for beginning-level

the student with the enormous quantity of litera—

students to turn to, but there are excellent discus—

ture in the field, for most chapters I have limited

sions of virtually everything having to do with the

myself to seven or eight entries (more for longer

New Testament in Bible dictionaries that are readily

chapters, fewer for shorter ones). All of the entries

available in most college libraries. Students should

are books, rather than articles, and each is briefly

browse through the articles in such one-volume

annotated. Some of the entries are more suitable

works as the Harper’s Bible Dictionary and the Mercer for advanced students, and these are indicated as

Dictionary of the Bible. In particular, they should

such. For most chapters I have included at least

become intimately familiar with the impressive six—

one work that introduces or embraces a markedly

volume Anchor Bible Dictionary, which is destined to

different perspective from the one that I present. I

be a major resource for students at all levels for years

have not included any biblical commentaries in

to come. (Just with respect to Chapter 1 of this text,

the lists, although students should be urged to confor example, the Anchor Bible Dictionary presents full-sult these, either one-volume works such as the

length treatments, with bibliographies, of early

Harper’s Bible Commentary and the Jerome Biblical Christianity, Christology, the Ebionites, Marcion,

Commentary or commentaries on individual

Gnosticism, Nag Hammadi, heresy and orthodoxy,

books, as found in the Anchor Bible, Hermeneia,

and the New Testament canon.)

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while racquetball victim, backgammon foe, and

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confidant.

challenging and lively experience. I am particular—

I would also like to acknowledge my wife, Cindy,

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deal and have always been eager to teach me a

Religious Studies who have always been support—

great deal more. Along the way I have talked with

ive in the extreme.

a slew of scholars about this project, and here must

I am indebted to my two Oxford editors:

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Cynthia Read, who suggested the project in the

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stream and with uncommon skill made the passage

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home extraordinarily smooth.

Seminary, Joel Marcus of the University of

I have dedicated the book to my teacher, David

Glasgow, and Dale Martin of cross-town rival

R. Adams, a great New Testament scholar who

Duke. These learned and insightful New

infected me, and all of his graduate students, with

Testament scholars have read every word of my

a passion for teaching and who, above all else,

manuscript and insisted that I change most of

taught us how to think.

In addition to these personal notes, I would like to

Documents for the Study of the Gospels

acknowledge my gratitude to previous scholars

(Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980). Quotations from

whose labors make such introductory textbooks

Tacitus in Chapter 13 are from Henry Bettenson,

possible.

ed., Documents of the Christian Church, 2d ed.

Most of the quotations of the Bible, including

(New York: Oxford University Press, 1963). The

the Apocrypha, are drawn from the New Revised

reconstruction of the Testimonium Flavium in

Standard Version. Some, however, represent my

Chapter 13 comes from John Meier, A Marginal

own translations. The quotation from Plutarch in

Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, vol. 1, Anchor

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Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday,

Selected Lives and Essays (Roslyn: N.Y.: Walter J.

1991), p. 61. Quotations of the Dead Sea Scrolls

Black, 1951). Quotations from the Gospel of Peter

in Chapter 15 are drawn from Geza Vermes, The

and the Gospel of Thomas in Chapter 12 are taken

Dead Sea Scrolls in English, 2d ed. (New York:

from David R. Cartlidge and David L. Dungan,

Penguin, 1975).

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xxvi

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The correspondence between Paul and Seneca

Hawthorne, “A New English Translation of

in Chapter 18 is taken from Edgar Hennecke, New

Melito’s Paschal Homily,” in Current Issues in

Testament Apocrypha, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher,

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Quotations from Tertullian in Chapter 26 are taken

Fronto in Chapter 19 comes from The Octavius of

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Marcus Minucius Felix, ed. and trans. G. W. Clark

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(Mahway, N.J.: Newman, 1974); the inscription

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from the Lanuvium burial society, also in Chapter

Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1989). In Chapters

19, comes from N. Lewis and M. Rheinhold,

27–28 some of the translations of Polycarp,

Roman Civilization, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia

Ignatius, and the Didache are from Cyril C.

University Press, 1955). The quotations from

Richardson, ed., Early Christian Fathers (New York:

Melito of Sardis in Chapter 25 are from Gerald

Macmillan, 1978); others are my own.

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CREDITS

Fig. 1.1: British Library. Fig. 2.1: Numismatic Museum, Athens/Hellenic Republic Ministry of Culture. Fig.

2.4: Forum, Pompeii/Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 2.5: Louvre/Alinari/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 2.7: Scala/Art Resource, NY. Fig 2.9: Ritmeyer Archaeological Design, England. Fig. 2.10: Bart Ehrman. Fig.

3.3: Archaeological Museum, Piraeus/Foto Marburg/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 4.1: Cathedral Treasury, Aachen/Foto Marburg/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 5.1: Alinari/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 5.3: British Museum. Fig.

7.1: British Museum. Fig 7.2: Foto Marburg/Art Resource, NY. Fig 8.1: Alinari/Art Resource, NY. Fig 8.2: Staatsbibliothek, Munich/Foto Marburg/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 8.3: Hirmer Verlag München. Fig. 9.2: André Held. Fig 9.3: Giraudon/Art Resource, NY. Fig 10.1: Hirmer Verlag München. Fig. 10.2: Giraudon/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 10.4a: Museo Lateranense, Vatican Museums/Alinari/Art Resource, NY.

Fig 10.4b: Alinari/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 11.2: Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, Claremont, CA.

Fig. 11.3: Soprintendenza Archeologica per l’Umbria. Fig. 12.1: Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, Claremont, CA. Figs. 13.1 and 13.2: André Held. Fig. 14.1: Museo Nazionale Romano delle Terme, Rome/Alinari/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 14.2: Corinth excavations, American School of Classical Studies, Athens; photos by I. Ioannidou and L. Bartziotou. Fig. 15.1: British Museum. Fig. 15.3: Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Fig. 15.4: Robert Miller. Fig. 16.2: André Held. Fig. 16.3: Grotte, St. Peter’s Basilica, Vatican City/Alinari/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 17.1: Vatican Museums/Alinari/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 18.1: University of Michigan. Fig. 19.2: Mostra Augustea, Rome/Alinari/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 19.3: C. M. Dixon. Fig. 19.4: Alinari/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 20.1: André Held. Fig. 20.2: Alinari/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 20.3 André Held. Fig. 20.5: Robert Miller. Fig 20.6: Petit Palais, musée des-Beaux Arts de la Ville de Paris. Fig 21.1: Mostra Augustea, Rome/Alinari/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 21.2: Photo by Fred Anderegg. Fig. 22.1: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 23.1: British Library. Fig.23.2: André Held. Fig. 23.3: Alinari/Art Resource, NY. Fig 24.1: Scala/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 24.2: Robert Miller. Fig. 24.3: Catacomb of Priscilla, Rome/Scala/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 25.1: Alinari/Art Resource, NY. Fig. 25.2: British Museum. Fig 26.2: Roger Wood. Fig. 26.3: Münzen & Medaillen AG, Malzgasse 25, CH-4002 Basel (Switzerland). Published in Walter Niggeler Collection, Part II, No. 792. Fig. 27.1: British Library. Fig 28.2: Hirmer Verlag München.

Fig. 28.3: André Held. Fig. 28.4: Robert Turcan. Fig. 29.1: Photo courtesy of Bruce Metzger: Manuscripts of the Greek Bible, Oxford University Press, 1981. Fig. 29.2: Rylands Library, University of Manchester.

Color Insert: The New Testament in Pictures (between pages 146 and 147) Fig. 1: By Permission of the British Library. Cott. Nero.D.IV f. 211. Fig. 2: The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. M. 777, f. 3v. Fig. 3: The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. M. 777, f. 24v. Fig. 4: The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. M. 777, f. 37v. Fig. 5: The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. M.

777, f. 58v. Fig. 6: The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. M. 306, f. 63v. Fig. 7: The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. M. 781, f. 83v. Fig 8: M. 710, f. 10v. Fig. 9: The Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore. Fig. 10: The Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore. Fig. 11: The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. M. 1000, f. 151v.

Fig. 12: The Pierpoint Morgan Library, New York. M. 644, f. 207r. Fig. 13: The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. M. 638. f. 28v. Fig. 14: The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. M. 23, f. 122.

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Augusta

(Augsburg)

Carnuntum

RAETIA

NORICUM

Aquincum

(Budapest)

Aquileia

Pavia

C I A

A

PANNONIA

D

I L

Drobrta

L Y R

Arretium

Dan

Ancona

Salonae

I

ube

Adamklissi

R.

(Split)

C

I

U

DALMATIA M

T

M

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S I A

Perusia

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Rome

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T H R A C I A

M A C E D O N I A

Capua

Doriscus

Brundisium

Thessalonica

E

Tarentum

PIRUS

Pergamum

LESBOS

Thebes

CHIOS

Messana

SAMOS

Corinth

Athens

SICILIA

ACHAEA

Catana

Agrigentum

Sparta

Carthage

Syracuse

Hadrumetum

Thapsus

MELITA (MALTA)

CRETE

BYZACENA

M

E

D

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R

R

A

N

N

E

A

N

Sabratha Oea

Apollonia

Leptis Magna

Ptolemais

A F R I C A

Berenice

(Benghazi)

Barca Cyrene

T R

Altitude in metres

I P

C Y R E N A I C A

O L

over 1000

I T ANIA

L

I

B

Y

A

200 - 1000

0 - 200

0

100

200

300 miles

0

100

200

300

400

500 km

The Roman Empire: Central and Eastern Provinces.

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Tomis (Costanza)

B L A C K S E A

Odessus (Varna)

Trapezus

Sinope

(Trebizond)

Apollonia (Sozopol)

A R M E N I A

Nicomedia

Byzantium

(Izmit)

Ancyra

BITHYNIA-PONTUS

CAPPADOCIA

I A

T

A

L

Stratonicea

A

Nyssa

G

COMMAGENE

M E

Sardis

Samosata

S

A S I A

O

Smyrna

P O

Ephesus

I A

T

Tarsus

Cyrrhus

Zeugma

A

Aphrodisias

T

Tralles

I C

M

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Aspendus

Antioch

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i

Alabanda

s

I L

A

R

C

Aleppo

.

Side

Dura

Xanthus

SYRIA

Europos

E

Apamea

Palmyra

up

Laodicea

hrates R.

RHODES

CYPRUS

Salamis

Citium Berytus

Baalbek

Paphos Curium

Damascus

Tyre

PHOENICIA

Bostra

S

E

A

Gerasa

Joppa

JUDAEA

Jerusalem

Gaza

A

Masada

I

B

Alexandria

Pelusium

A

R

Petra

A

Memphis

SINAI

E G Y P T

Nile R.

RED SEA

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# CHAPTER 1

What Is the New Testament?

The Early Christians and Their Literature

Christianity in the modern world is a richly diverse

Of course, many people today would argue that

phenomenon. Ask any Pentecostal preacher who

such views could not be Christian. What is strik—

has attended a Roman Catholic mass, or Greek

ing to the historian, though, is that people who

Orthodox monk who has happened upon a Baptist

believed these things claimed to be Christian.

tent revival, or Episcopalian nun who has visited a

Moreover, these believers invariably maintained

Jehovah’s Witness prayer meeting. There is, to be

that their ideas were taught by Jesus himself. In

sure, common ground among many Christian

many instances, they could appeal to written proof,

groups, but when you compare the beliefs and prac—

for they all possessed documents allegedly penned

tices of an Appalachian snake handler with those of

by Jesus’ own apostles.

a New England Presbyterian, you may be more

The New Testament also contains books that

struck by the differences than the similarities.

were thought to have been written by Jesus’ own

Is this kind of rich diversity a modern develop—

apostles. These books, however, do not teach that

ment? Many people appear to think so. For them,

there are several gods, or that the creator of the

Christianity was originally a solid unity, but with

world is evil, or that Jesus did not have a real body.

the passing of time (especially since the Protestant

Are there historical grounds for thinking that the

Reformation) this unity became fractured and

New Testament books actually were written by

fragmented. Historians, however, recognize that

Jesus’ apostles and that books supporting contrary

in some ways Christian differences today pale in

views were forgeries? Indeed, how is it that some

comparison with those that existed among believ—

books claiming to be written by the apostles were

ers in the distant past. If we turn the clock back

included in the New Testament, but others were

1,850 years to the middle of the second century,

not? Moreover, even if the books that made it into

we find people calling themselves Christian who

the New Testament agree on certain fundamental

subscribe to beliefs that no modern eye has seen or

points (for example, that there is only one God),

ear heard, Christians who believe that there are 2

is it possible that they might disagree on others

different gods, or 32, or 365, Christians who claim

(such as who Jesus is)? That is to say, if Christians

that the Old Testament is an evil book inspired by

in the second century, a hundred fifty years or so

an evil deity, Christians who say that God did not

after Jesus, held such a wide range of beliefs, is it

create the world and has never had any involve—

not possible that Christians of the first century

ment with it, Christians who maintain that Jesus

(when the books of the New Testament were

did not have a human body, or that he did not

being written) did as well? Did all of the early

have a human soul, or that he was never born, or

Christians agree on the fundamental points of

that he never died.

their religion?

1

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2

THE NEW TESTAMENT: A HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 1.1 The Canon of Scripture

The English term “canon” comes from a Greek word that originally meant “ruler” or

“measuring rod.” A canon was used to make straight lines or to measure distances. When applied to a group of books, it refers to a recognized body of literature. Thus, for example, the canon of Shakespeare refers to all of Shakespeare’s authentic writings.

With reference to the Bible, the term canon denotes the collection of books that are accepted as authoritative by a religious body. Thus, for example, we can speak of the canon of the Jewish Scriptures or the canon of the New Testament.

These are some of the issues that we will con—

that other Christian books were produced at this

sider as we begin to examine the earliest Christian

time. We begin our investigation, then, by exam—

writings. They are not, of course, the only issues.

ining several examples of later forms of

There is an extraordinarily broad range of impor—

Christianity, before seeing how these are relevant

tant and intriguing questions that readers bring to

to the study of the New Testament.

the New Testament—about where it came from,

who its authors were, what their messages were—

and many of these will occupy us at considerable

Jewish-Christian Adoptionists

length in the pages that follow. But the issue of

Consider first the form of religion embraced by a

Christian diversity is a good place for us to begin

group of second-century Jewish Christians known

our investigation. Not only can it provide a useful

to be living in Palestine, east of the Jordan River.

entrée into important questions about the early

These believers maintained that Jesus was a

stages of the Christian religion, starting with the

remarkable man, more righteous in the Jewish Law

teachings of Jesus, it can also enlighten us about

than any other, a man chosen by God to be his

the nature of the New Testament itself, specifical—

son. Jesus received his adoption to sonship at his

ly about how and why these various books came to

baptism; when he emerged from the waters of the

be gathered together into one volume and accept—

Jordan, he saw the heavens open up and the Spirit

ed by Christians as their sacred canon of scripture

of God descend upon him as a dove, while a voice

(see box 1.1).

from heaven proclaimed, “You are my son, today I

have begotten you.”

According to these Christians, Jesus was

empowered by God’s Spirit to do remarkable mir-

THE DIVERSITY

acles and to teach the truth of God. Then, at the

OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY

end of his life, he fulfilled his divine commission

by dying as a willing sacrifice on the cross for the

As I have intimated, Christian diversity is some—

sins of the world, a sacrifice that put an end to all

what easier to document in the second century,

sacrifices. Afterwards God raised him from the

after the books of the New Testament were writ—

dead. Jesus then ascended into heaven, where he

ten, than in the first. This is because, quite sim—

presently reigns.

ply, there are more documents that date to this

There may seem to be little that is remarkable

period. Virtually the only Christian writings that

about these beliefs—until, that is, one probes a bit

can be reliably dated to the first century are found

further into the details. For even though Jesus was

in the New Testament itself, although we know

chosen by God, according to these Christians, he

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# CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS THE NEW TESTAMENT?

3

was not himself divine. He was a righteous man

the mid to late second century, with large numbers

but nothing more than a man. In their view, Jesus

of congregations flourishing especially in Asia

was not born of a virgin, he did not exist prior to

Minor (modern-day Turkey). Their opponents

his birth, and he was not God. He was adopted by

called them “Marcionites” because they subscribed

God to be his son, the savior of the world. Hence

to the form of Christianity advanced by the sec—

the name bestowed upon this group by others: they

ond-century scholar and evangelist Marcion, who

were “adoptionists.” For them, to call Jesus God

himself claimed to have uncovered the true teach—

was a blasphemous lie. For if Jesus were God, and

ings of Christianity in the writings of Paul. In

his Father were also God, there would be two

sharp contrast to the Jewish Christians east of the

Gods. But the Jewish Scriptures emphatically

Jordan, Marcion maintained that Paul was the true

state otherwise: “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God,

apostle, to whom Christ had especially appeared

the Lord is one” (Deut 6:4).

after his resurrection to impart the truth of the

According to these Christians, this one God

gospel. Paul, according to Marcion, had begun as a

chose Israel and gave it his Law (in the Jewish

good Jew intent on obeying the Law to the utmost,

Scriptures). Furthermore, Jesus taught that his fol—

but the revelation of Christ showed him beyond

lowers must continue to obey the entire Law

doubt that the Jewish Law played no part in the

(except the law that required animal sacrifice) in

divine plan of redemption. For him, Christ himself

all its details—and not just the Ten Command—

was the only way of salvation. Marcion argued that

ments! Those who were not born Jews must first

Paul’s writings effectively set the gospel of Christ

become Jews in order to follow Jesus. For men,

over and against the Law of the Jews, and that the

this meant being circumcised; for men and

apostle had urged Christians to abandon the Jewish

women, it meant observing the sabbath and keep—

Law altogether.

ing kosher food laws.

For Marcion and his followers, the differences

On what grounds did these Christians advance

between the religion preached by Jesus (and his

this understanding of the faith? They had a sacred

apostle, Paul) and that found in the Jewish

book written in Hebrew which they claimed con—

Scriptures were plain to see. Whereas the Jewish

tained the teachings of Jesus himself, a book that

God punishes those who disobey, they claimed, the

was similar to what we today know as the Gospel

God of Jesus extends mercy and forgiveness; where—

of Matthew (without the first two chapters).

as the God of the Jews says “an eye for an eye and a

What about the other books of the New

tooth for a tooth,” the God of Jesus says to “turn the

Testament, the other Gospels and Acts, the epis—

other cheek”; and whereas the Old Testament God

tles, and Revelation? Odd as it might seem, these

tells the Israelites to conquer Jericho by slaughter—

Jewish Christians had never heard of some of these

ing its entire population—men, women, and chil—

books, and rejected others of them outright. In

dren—the God of Jesus says to love your enemies.

particular, they considered Paul, one of the most

What do these two Gods have in common?

prominent authors of our New Testament, to be an

According to the Marcionites, nothing. For them,

arch-heretic rather than an apostle. Since, in

there are two separate and unrelated Gods, the God

their opinion, Paul blasphemously taught that

of the Jews and the God of Jesus.

Christ brought an end to the Jewish Law, his writ—

Marcionite Christians maintained that Jesus

ings were to be rejected as heretical. In short,

did not belong to the wrathful and just God of the

these second-century Christians did not have our

Jews, the God who created the world and chose

New Testament canon (see box 1.1).

Israel to be his special people. In fact, Jesus came

to save people from this God. Moreover, since

Jesus had no part in the Creator, he could have

Marcionite Christians

no real ties to the material world that the

The Jewish-Christian adoptionists were by no

Creator-God made. Jesus therefore was not actu—

means unique in not having our New Testament.

ally born and did not have a real flesh-and-blood

Consider another Christian group, this one scat—

body. How, then, did Jesus get hungry and thirsty,

tered throughout much of the Mediterranean in

how did he bleed and die? According to

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THE NEW TESTAMENT: A HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 1.2 The Hebrew Bible and the

Christian Old Testament

The terms “Jewish Scriptures” and “Hebrew Bible” both refer to the collection of books considered sacred in the religion of Judaism, books that were written almost entirely in Hebrew. Many of these writings were regarded as holy even before Jesus’ day, especially the first five books of Moses, known as the Torah or Law.

About a century after Jesus, the collection of books into the Hebrew Scriptures was more or less fixed. Altogether, the collection comprised twenty-four different books. Because of a different way of counting them, they number thirty-nine books in English translation (the twelve minor prophets in English Bibles, for example, count as only one book in the Hebrew Bible).

Christians have long referred to these books as the “Old Testament,” to set them apart from the books of the “New Testament” (the new set of books that reveal God’s will to his people).

Throughout our study, I will use the term “Old Testament” only when referring explicitly to Christian views; otherwise, I will call these books the Jewish Scriptures or Hebrew Bible. (Even within Christianity there are different numbers of books included in the "Old Testament." The Roman Catholic Church, for example, accepts an additional twelve books [or parts of books]— including such works as Tobit, Judith, 1 and 2 Maccabees—which they call "Deuterocanonical"

[meaning that they came into the canon at a later time than the books of the Hebrew Bible].

Protestant Christians usually call these books the "Apocrypha." Since they did not form part of the Hebrew Bible, I will not be including them in this chart or discussing them at any length.) The Hebrew Bible The Christian “Old Testament”

The Torah (5 books)

The Pentateuch (5 books)

Genesis

Genesis

Exodus

Exodus

Leviticus

Leviticus

Numbers

Numbers

Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy

The Prophets (8 books)

Historical Books (12 books)

Former Prophets

Joshua

Joshua

Judges

Judges

Ruth

Samuel (counts as 1 book)

1 and 2 Samuel

Kings (counts as 1 book)

1 and 2 Kings

1 and 2 Chronicles

Later Prophets

Ezra

Isaiah

Nehemiah

Jeremiah

Esther

Ezekiel

The Twelve (count as 1 book)

Poetry and Wisdom Books (5 books)

Hosea

Job

Joel

Psalms

Amos

Proverbs

Obadiah

Ecclesiastes

Jonah

Song of Solomon

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# CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS THE NEW TESTAMENT?

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Micah

Prophetic Books (17 books)

Nahum

Major Prophets

Habakkuk

Isaiah

Zephaniah

Jeremiah

Haggai

Lamentations

Zechariah

Ezekiel

Malachi

Daniel

The Writings (11 books)

Minor Prophets

Job

Hosea

Psalms

Joel

Proverbs

Amos

Ruth

Obadiah

Song of Solomon

Jonah

Ecclesiastes

Micah

Lamentations

Nahum

Esther

Habakkuk

Daniel

Zephaniah

Ezra-Nehemiah (1 book)

Haggai

Chronicles (1 book)

Zechariah

Malachi

Marcionites, it was all an appearance: Jesus only

truncated version of something like our Gospel of

seemed to be human. As the one true God him—

Luke, along with ten of Paul’s letters (all of those

self, come to earth to deliver people from the

found in the New Testament, with the exceptions

vengeful God of the Jews, Jesus was never born,

of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus). Even these were

never got hungry or thirsty or tired, never bled or

not exactly the letters as we have them today,

died. Jesus’ body was a phantasm.

however. Marcion believed that earlier heretics

The contrasts between the Jewish Christians and

had willfully modified these books by inserting

the Marcionites are stark. One group said that Jesus

positive references to the God of the Jews, his cre—

was totally human and not divine, the other said

ation, and his Scriptures; accordingly, he excised

that he was totally divine and not human. One

these passages, giving his followers a form of the

group staunchly maintained that there was only one

Bible strikingly different from that used by

God, the other asserted that there were in fact two.

Christians today: eleven books, all of them short—

One said that the true God created the world, called

ened, and no Old Testament.

Israel to be his people, and gave them the Law, the

other said that the true God had never had any dealings with the world or with Israel. One group urged

Gnostic Christians

that believers must follow the Law, the other argued

The Jewish-Christian adoptionists and the

that they should reject it altogether. Both groups

Marcionites were not the only two Christian

considered themselves to be the true Christians.

groups vying for converts in the second century.

Most significantly for our purposes here, these

In fact, there were many other groups supporting a

groups did not appeal to the same authorities for

wide range of other beliefs on the basis of a wide

their views. On the contrary, whereas the Jewish

range of other authorities as well. Some of the

Christians rejected Paul as a heretic, the

best known are the various sects of Christian

Marcionites followed him as the greatest of the

Gnostics, so named because of their claim that

apostles. Moreover, instead of adhering to a ver—

special “gnosis” (Greek for “knowledge”) is neces—

sion of Matthew’s Gospel, the Marcionites used a

sary for salvation.

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THE NEW TESTAMENT: A HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

We know that Gnostic Christians were located

meant escaping from this material world. Thus a

in major urban areas throughout much of the

god from the divine realm entered into the man

Mediterranean during the second and third cen—

Jesus, and left him prior to his death, so that he

turies, especially in Egypt, Syria, Asia Minor, Rome,

could impart to the imprisoned spirits the knowl—

and Gaul. Gnostics were themselves wildly diverse,

edge (gnosis!) that is necessary for escape.

with different groups believing radically different

This was secret knowledge not divulged to the

things (see Chapter 11). Some Gnostics agreed

masses, not even to the mass of Christians. It was

with Marcion that Jesus was totally divine and not

meant only for the chosen, the elect, the Gnostics

at all human, and for much the same reason that he

themselves. They did not deny that Jesus taught the

did: Jesus represented a different God from the one

crowds publicly, but they believed he reserved the

who created this world. Others, however, claimed

secret teachings that led to salvation only for the elect

that Jesus Christ represented two distinct beings, the

who were able to act upon them. The Gnostics

human Jesus and the divine Christ. These Gnostics

passed on this teaching by word of mouth and

agreed with the Jewish-Christian adoptionists that

claimed that it could be discovered through a careful

Jesus was the most righteous man on earth and that

reading of the writings of the apostles. It lay there

something special had happened at his baptism.

hidden beneath the surface. Thus, for the Gnostic,

They did not think, though, that God adopted him

the literal meaning of these texts was not what mat—

to be his son; instead, they maintained that his bap—

tered; the truth necessary for salvation could be found

tism was the moment at which the divine being, the

only in the secret meaning, a meaning exclusively

Christ, came into the man Jesus, empowering him

available to Gnostic interpreters, those “in the know.”

for his healing and, especially, teaching ministry. At

Since Gnostic Christians were not tied to the

the end of Jesus’ life, immediately before his death,

literal meaning of their texts, they were not as com—

the Christ then departed from him once again to

pulsive as other Christians about collecting a group

return to heaven. This is why Jesus cried out in such

of books and ascribing special authority to them (in

anguish on the cross, “My God, my God, why have

contrast, for example, to the Marcionites). Various

you left me behind?” (cf. Mark 15:34).

Gnostics nonetheless did have their own favorites.

Who, though, was this divine Christ? For many

We know that many of them were especially drawn

Gnostics, he was one of the deities that made up the

to the Gospel of John and that others cherished

divine realm. Unlike the Jewish Christians who

Gospels that most modern people have never heard

were strict monotheists (believing in only one God)

of: the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Mary, the or the Marcionites who were strict ditheists (believ-Gospel of Philip, and the Gospel of Truth. Some of ing in two), Gnostics were polytheists (believing in these books have only recently been discovered by

many). In some of the Gnostic systems that we

archaeologists. Each of them was thought to con—

know about there were 32 different gods; in others

vey the true teachings of Jesus and his apostles.

as many as 365. Moreover, for all of these systems,

How is it that most of these books cannot be

the true God was not the God of the Old

found in our own New Testament? Or for that

Testament. Unlike Marcion, however, Gnostics did

matter, how is it that the versions of Matthew,

not believe that the Old Testament God was simply

Luke, and Paul read by Jewish-Christian adoption—

vengeful and righteous, a God who had high stan—

ists and Marcionites were not included? Why do

dards (the Law) and little patience with those who

the views of these other groups not have equal rep—

did not meet them. For many of them, the creator

resentation in the Christian Scriptures? The

God of the Old Testament was inherently evil, as

answer can be found by examining the story of one

was this material world that he created.

other group of second-century Christians.

Gnostics felt a sense of alienation from this

world and knew that they did not belong here.

They were spiritual beings from the divine realm

“Proto-Orthodox” Christians

who had become entrapped in the realm of matter

The “proto-orthodox” Christians represent the fore—

by the evil God and his subordinates. Salvation

runners (hence the prefix “proto”) of the group that

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# CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS THE NEW TESTAMENT?

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became the dominant form of Christianity in later

was one being instead of two, and that he had

centuries. When this group later acquired more

taught his disciples the truth. They claimed that

converts than any of the others and stifled its oppo—

the apostles had written the teachings of Jesus

sition, it claimed that its views had always been the

down and that, when interpreted in a straightfor—

majority position and that its rivals were, and always

ward and literal fashion, the books that were

had been, “heretics,” who willfully “chose” (the

passed on from the apostles to their followers

Greek root of the word “heresy”) to reject the “true

revealed the truth necessary for salvation.

belief” (the literal meaning of “orthodoxy”).

These views may sound familiar to readers who

We ourselves can use the term “proto-ortho—

have had any involvement with Christianity, for

dox” only in retrospect, since the adherents of this

the side that held these views won the debates

position did not actually know that their views

and determined the shape of Christianity up to

would become dominant, nor did they think of

the present day.

themselves as forerunners of believers to come

The proto-orthodox position, then, attempted

later; like all the other groups of their day, they

to counteract the claims of the groups that they

simply saw themselves as the true Christians. The

opposed. In part, this meant that the proto-ortho—

story of their victory over their opponents is fasci—

dox group had to reject some documents that

nating, but aspects of it are hotly debated among

claimed to be written by apostles but that

modern-day scholars. Some historians think that

advanced beliefs contrary to their own, for exam—

the proto-orthodox beliefs were original to

ple, the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Philip, or the Christianity, others maintain that they developed

Gospel of Thomas, all of which appeared to support

over time. Some scholars claim that the proto—

Gnostic perspectives. Some of the writings used

orthodox had always been in the majority

by the opposing groups, though, were quite popu—

throughout Christendom, others think that other

lar among the proto-orthodox Christians as well.

forms of Christianity were predominant in many

For example, the Gospel of Matthew was well—

parts of the Mediterranean (e.g., Jewish Christians

loved by Jewish Christians, and the Gospel of John

in parts of Palestine, Gnostics in parts of Egypt and

was a favorite of many Gnostics. Indeed, by

Syria, Marcionites in Asia Minor). Fortunately,

accepting and ascribing authority to both of these

we do not need to resolve these thorny problems

Gospels, the proto-orthodox believers were able to

here.

balance the “heretical” claims that could be made

But there are aspects of the proto-orthodox

when only one of them was taken to be the ulti—

struggle for dominance that are directly germane

mate authority.

to our study of the New Testament. To begin with,

In other words, if Jesus appears to be fully

we can consider what these Christians believed in

human in one Gospel and fully divine in another,

contrast to the other groups we have discussed.

by accepting both authorities as Scripture the

Proto-orthodox Christians agreed with the

proto-orthodox were able to claim that both per—

Jewish Christians who said that Jesus was fully

spectives were right, and that an exclusive empha—

human, but disagreed when these people sis on Jesus as only human, or purely divine, was a denied that he was divine. They agreed with

perversion of the truth. The development of the

the Marcionites who said that Jesus was fully

canon of Scripture within proto-orthodox circles

divine, but disagreed when they denied that he

is in large part an attempt to define what true

was human. They agreed with the Gnostics

Christians should believe by eliminating or com—

who said that Jesus Christ taught the way of

promising the views of other groups.

salvation, but disagreed when they said that

Because the proto-orthodox group represented

he was two beings rather than one and when

the party that eventually became dominant in

they claimed that his true teachings had been

Christianity (by at least the fourth century),

secret, accessible only to the elect few. In

Christians of all later generations inherited their

short, proto-orthodox Christians argued that

canon of Scripture, rather than the canons sup—

Jesus Christ was both divine and human, that he

ported by their opponents.

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THE NEW TESTAMENT: A HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

THE NEW TESTAMENT

to know whether any of these books was written

CANON OF SCRIPTURE

by Jesus’ own disciples.

The first four books are “Gospels,” a term that

The purpose of this sketch is not to give a com—

literally means “good news.” The four Gospels of

plete account of Christianity in the second centu—

the New Testament proclaim the good news by

ry but simply to indicate how early Christianity

telling stories about the life and death of Jesus—

was extremely diverse and to show how this diver—

his birth, ministry, miracles, teaching, last days,

sity led to the collection of books into a sacred

crucifixion, and resurrection. These books are tracanon. The Christian Scriptures did not drop

ditionally ascribed to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and

from the sky one day in July the year Jesus died.

John. Proto-orthodox Christians of the second

They were written by individual authors at differ—

century claimed that two of these authors were

ent points of time, in different countries, to dif—

disciples of Jesus: Matthew, the tax collector men—

ferent communities, with different concerns; they

tioned in the First Gospel (Matt 9:9), and John,

were later read by an even wider range of

the beloved disciple who appears in the Fourth

Christians and were eventually collected together

(e.g., John 19:26). The other two were reportedly

into what we now call the New Testament.

written by associates of famous apostles: Mark, the

Before launching into a study of these various

secretary of Peter, and Luke, the traveling com—

books, we should reflect further on how and when

panion of Paul. This second-century tradition

they (and not others) came to be placed in the

does not go back to the Gospels themselves; the

canon. We can begin with some preliminary

titles in our Bibles (e.g., “The Gospel according to

observations concerning the shape of the canon

Matthew” ) were not found in the original texts of

as we now have it.

these books. Instead, their authors chose to

remain anonymous.

The New Testament:

The next book in the New Testament is the

Acts of the Apostles, written by the same author

Some Basic Information

as the Third Gospel (whom modern scholars con—

The New Testament contains twenty-seven books,

tinue to call Luke even though we are not certain

written in Greek, by fifteen or sixteen different

of his identity). This book is a sequel to the

authors, who were addressing other Christian indi—

Gospel in that it describes the history of early

viduals or communities between the years 50 and

Christianity beginning with events immediately

120 C.E. (see box 1.3). As we will see, it is difficult

after Jesus’ death; it is chiefly concerned to show

SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 1.3 The Common Era and Before the Common Era

Most students will be accustomed to dating ancient events as either A.D. (which does not stand for “After Death,” but for “anno domini,” Latin for “year of our Lord”) or B.C. (“Before Christ”). This terminology may make sense for Christians, for whom A.D. 1996 is indeed “the year of our Lord 1996.” It makes less sense, though, for Jews, Muslims, and others for whom Jesus is not the “Lord” or the “Christ.” Scholars have therefore begun to use a different set of abbreviations as more inclusive of others outside the Christian tradition. In this book I will follow the alternative designations of C.E. (“the Common Era,” meaning common to people of all faiths who utilize the traditional Western calendar) and B.C.E. (“Before the Common Era”).

In terms of the older abbreviations, then, C.E. corresponds to A.D. and B.C.E. to B.C.

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# CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS THE NEW TESTAMENT?

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how the religion was disseminated throughout

Other noncanonical writings, however, have

parts of the Roman Empire, among Gentiles as

survived. The best known of these are by authors

well as Jews, principally through the missionary

collectively called the “Apostolic Fathers.” These

labors of the apostle Paul. Thus, whereas the

were Christians living in the early second century,

Gospels portray the beginnings of Christianity

whose writings were considered authoritative in

(through the life and death of Jesus), the book of

some proto-orthodox circles, on a par with the writ—

Acts portrays the spread of Christianity (through

ings of the Gospels or Paul. In fact, some of our

the work of his apostles).

ancient manuscripts of the New Testament include

The next section of the New Testament com—

writings of the Apostolic Fathers as if they belonged

prises twenty-one “epistles,” that is, letters written

to the canon. Other, previously unknown,

by Christian leaders to various communities and

Christian writings have been discovered only with—

individuals. Not all of these epistles are, strictly

in the present century. Some of these writings

speaking, items of personal correspondence. The

clearly stand at odds with those within the New

book of Hebrews, for example, appears to be an

Testament; some of them appear to have been used

early Christian sermon, and the epistle of 1 John is

as sacred scripture by certain groups of Christians.

a kind of Christian tractate. Nonetheless, all

A number of them claim to be written by apostles.

twenty-one of these books are traditionally called

The most spectacular find occurred in the mid—

epistles. Thirteen of them claim to be written by

1940s near the town of Nag Hammadi, Egypt,

the apostle Paul; in some cases, scholars have

where a bedouin digging for fertilizer accidentally

come to question this claim. In any event, most of

uncovered a jar containing thirteen fragmentary

these letters, whether by Paul or others, address

books in leather bindings. The books contain

theological or practical problems that have arisen

anthologies of literature, some fifty-two treatises

in the Christian communities they address. Thus,

altogether, written in the ancient Egyptian lan—

whereas the Gospels describe the beginnings of

guage called Coptic. Whereas the books them—

Christianity and the book of Acts its spread, the

selves were manufactured in the mid–fourth centu—

epistles are more directly focused on Christian

ry C.E. (we know this because some of the bindings

beliefs, practices, and ethics.

were strengthened with pieces of scratch paper that

Finally, the New Testament concludes with the

were dated), the treatises that they contain are

Book of Revelation, the first surviving instance of

much older: some of them are mentioned by name

a Christian apocalypse. This book was written by

by authors living in the second century. Before this

a prophet named John, who describes the course of

discovery, we knew that these books existed, but we

future events leading up to the destruction of this

didn’t know what was in them.

world and the appearance of the world to come.

What kind of books are they? I earlier indicat—

As such, it is principally concerned with the cul—

ed that Gnostic Christians appealed to written

mination of Christianity.

authorities that did not make it into the New

Testament, some of them allegedly written by

apostles. These are some of those books. Included

Other Early Christian Writings

in the collection are epistles, apocalypses, and col—

The books I have just described were not the

lections of secret teachings. Yet more intriguing

only writings of the early Christians, nor were

are the several Gospels that it contains, including

they originally collected into a body of literature

one allegedly written by the apostle Philip and

called the “New Testament.” We know of other

another attributed to Didymus Judas Thomas,

Christian writings that have not survived from

thought by some early Christians to be Jesus’ twin

antiquity. For example, the apostle Paul, in his

brother (see box 12.2).

first letter to the Corinthians, refers to an

These books were used by groups of Christian

earlier writing that he had sent them (1 Cor 5:9)

Gnostics during the struggles of the second, third,

and alludes to a letter that they themselves had

and fourth centuries, but they were rejected

sent him (7:1). Unfortunately, this correspon—

as heretical by proto-orthodox Christians. Why were

dence is lost.

they rejected? The question takes us back to the

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THE NEW TESTAMENT: A HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 1.4 The Layout of the New Testament

Gospels: The Beginnings of Christianity (4 books)

Matthew

Mark

Luke

John

Acts: The Spread of Christianity (1 book)

The Acts of the Apostles

Epistles: The Beliefs, Practices, and Ethics of Christianity (21 books) Pauline Epistles

Romans

1 and 2 Corinthians

Galatians

Ephesians

Philippians

Colossians

1 and 2 Thessalonians

1 and 2 Timothy

Titus

Philemon

General Epistles

Hebrews

James

1 and 2 Peter

1, 2, and 3 John

Jude

Apocalypse: The Culmination of Christianity (1 book)

The Revelation of John

This schematic arrangement is somewhat simplified. All of the New Testament books, for example (not just the epistles), are concerned with Christian beliefs, practices, and ethics, and Paul’s epistles are in some ways more reflective of Christian beginnings than the Gospels.

Nonetheless, this basic orientation to the New Testament writings can at least get us started in our understanding of the early Christian literature.

issues raised earlier concerning how Christians went

sacred canon of Scripture. In this they had a

about deciding which books to include in the New

precedent. For even though most of the other reli—

Testament and when their decisions went into effect.

gions in the Roman Empire did not use written

documents as authorities for their religious beliefs

and practices, Judaism did.

The Development of the Christian Canon

Jesus and his followers were themselves Jews

Proto-orthodox Christians did not invent the idea

who were conversant with the ancient writings

of collecting authoritative writings together into a

that were eventually canonized into the Hebrew

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# CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS THE NEW TESTAMENT?

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Scriptures. Although most scholars now think

Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and John) and other

that a hard and fast canon of Jewish Scripture did

epistles (the “Pastoral” epistles—1 and 2 Timothy

not yet exist in Jesus’ own day, it appears that most

and Titus—and the eight general epistles) as well

Jews did subscribe to the special authority of the

as the books of Acts and Revelation.

Torah (i.e., the first five books of the Hebrew

It appears then that our New Testament

Bible, see box 1.2). Also, many Jews accepted the

emerged out of the conflicts among Christian

authority of the Prophets as well. These

groups, and that the dominance of the proto—

writings include the books of Joshua through 2

orthodox position was what led to the develop—

Kings in our English Bibles, as well as the more

ment of the Christian canon as we have it. It is

familiar prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and

no accident that Gospels that were deemed

the twelve minor prophets. According to our ear—

heretical—for instance, the Gospel of Peter or

liest accounts, Jesus himself quoted from some of

the Gospel of Philip— did not make it into the

these books; we can assume that he accepted them

New Testament. This is not to say, however,

as authoritative.

that the canon of Scripture was firmly set by

Thus Christianity had its beginning in the

the end of the second century. Indeed, it is a

proclamation of a Jewish teacher, who ascribed

striking fact of history that even though the

authority to written documents. Moreover, we

four Gospels were widely considered authorita—

know that Jesus’ followers considered his own

tive by proto-orthodox Christians then—along

teachings to be authoritative. Near the end of the

with Acts, most of the Pauline epistles, and sev—

first century, Christians were citing Jesus’ words

eral of the longer general epistles—the collec—

and calling them “Scripture” (e.g., 1 Tim 5:18). It

tion of our twenty-seven books was not final—

is striking that in some early Christian circles the

ized until much later. For throughout the sec—

correct interpretation of Jesus’ teachings was

ond, third, and fourth centuries proto-orthodox

thought to be the key to eternal life (e.g., see John

Christians continued to debate the acceptabili—

6:68 and Gosp. Thom. 1). Furthermore, some of

ty of some of the other books. The arguments

Jesus’ followers, such as the apostle Paul, under—

centered around ( a) whether the books in ques—

stood themselves to be authoritative spokesper—

tion were ancient (some Christians wanted to

sons for the truth. Other Christians granted them

include The Shepherd of Hermas, for example;

this claim. The book of 2 Peter, for example,

others insisted that it was penned after the age

includes Paul’s own letters among the “Scriptures”

of the apostles); ( b) whether they were written

(2 Pet 3:16).

by apostles (some wanted to include Hebrews

Thus by the beginning of the second century

on the grounds that Paul wrote it; others insist—

some Christians were ascribing authority to the

ed that he did not); and ( c) whether they were

words of Jesus and the writings of his apostles.

widely accepted among proto-orthodox congre—

There were nonetheless heated debates concern—

gations as containing correct Christian teaching which apostles were true to Jesus’ own teaching (many Christians, for example, disputed the

ings (cf. Marcion and the Jewish Christians on

doctrine of the end times found in the book of

Paul), and a number of writings that claimed to be

Revelation).

written by apostles were thought by some

Contrary to what one might expect, it was not

Christians to be forgeries. It is interesting to

until the year 367 C.E., almost two and a half

reflect on how our present New Testament

centuries after the last New Testament book was

emerged from this conflict, for, in fact, the first

written, that any Christian of record named our cur—

person to establish a fixed canon of Scripture

rent twenty-seven books as the authoritative canon

appears to have been none other than Marcion.

of Scripture. The author of this list was Athanasius,

Marcion’s insistence that his sacred books (a form

the powerful bishop of Alexandria, Egypt. Some

of Luke and ten truncated letters of Paul) made up

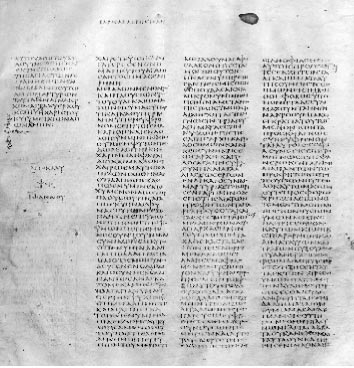
scholars believe that this pronouncement on his

the Christian Bible evidently led other Christians

part, and his accompanying proscription of heretical

to affirm a larger canon, which included other

books, led monks of a nearby monastery to hide the



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THE NEW TESTAMENT: A HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

F P O

Figure 1.1 Codex Sinaiticus, the oldest surviving manuscript of the entire New Testament. This fourth-century manuscript includes The Shepherd of Hermas and the Epistle of Barnabas (the first page of which is pictured here), books that were considered part of the New Testament by some Christians for several centuries.

Gnostic writings discovered 1,600 years later by the

Christians decided to include some books rather

bedouin near Nag Hammadi, Egypt.

than others in the canon, this chapter has highlighted the following points about the early

Christians and their literature.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

1. Early Christianity was extremely diverse. It

FOR OUR STUDY

was not the unified monolith that modern

The question of the canonization of the New

people sometimes assume.

Testament books is important for the study of the

2. This diversity was manifest in a wide range of

New Testament. In explaining how and why later

writings, only some of which have come down

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# CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS THE NEW TESTAMENT?

13

to us in the New Testament. (Jesus himself left

unreflectively assume, nor did it begin in the secus no writings.)

ond century, in the fragmented forms of

3. The New Testament canon was formed by

Christianity discussed earlier in this chapter. The

proto-orthodox Christians who wanted to

diversity of Christianity is already evident in the

show that their views were grounded in the

earliest writings that have survived from the

writings of Jesus’ own apostles.

Christians of antiquity, most of which are pre—

4. Whether these writings actually represented the

served within the canon of the New Testament.

views of Jesus’ own apostles, however, was in some

In this book, we will approach the writings of

instances debated for decades, even centuries.

the New Testament from this historical perspective, looking at each author’s work individually,

Perhaps the most important aspect of the

rather than allowing the shape of the later

canon is that the various books of the New

Christian canon to determine the meaning of all

Testament are typically read as standing in essen—

of its constituent parts.

tial harmony with one another. But do the books

of the New Testament agree in every major way?

Or are they only thought to agree because they

have been placed together, side by side, in an

SOME ADDITIONAL

authoritative collection that is venerated as sacred

REFLECTIONS:

Scripture? Is it possible that when these books are

THE HISTORIAN

read in their original settings rather than their

AND THE BELIEVER

canonical context they stand at real tension with

one another?

Most of the people interested in the New

These are among the most difficult and contro—

Testament, at least in modern American culture,

versial issues that we will address in our study of

are Christians who have been taught that it is the

the New Testament writings. In order to anticipate

inspired word of God. If you yourself belong to

my approach, I might simply point out that histo—

this camp, then you may find the historical per—

rians who have carefully examined the New

spective that I have mapped out in this chapter

Testament have found that its authors do, in fact,

somewhat difficult to accept, in that it may seem

embody remarkably diverse points of view. These

to stand at odds with what you have been taught

scholars have concluded that the most fruitful way

to believe. If so, then it is for you in particular that

to interpret the New Testament authors is to read

I want to provide these brief additional reflections.

them individually rather than collectively. Each

Here is the question: how can a Christian who

author should be allowed to have his own say,\*

is committed to the Bible affirm that its authors

and should not be too quickly reconciled with the

have a wide range of perspectives, and that they

point of view of another. For example, we should

sometimes disagree with one another? I can

not assume that Paul would always say exactly

address the question by stressing that this book is

what Matthew would, or that Matthew would

a historical introduction to the early Christian

agree in every particular with John, and so on.

writings, principally those found in the New

Following this principle, scholars have been struck

Testament, rather than a confessional one. This is

by the rich diversity represented within the pages

an important distinction because the New

of the New Testament. This point cannot be

Testament has always been much more than a

stressed enough. The diversity of Christianity did

book for Christian believers. It is also an impor—

not begin in the modern period, as some people

tant cultural artifact, a collection of writings that

\* Throughout this book I will be using the masculine pronoun to refer to the authors of the early Christian literature, simply because I think all of them were males. For discussion of some of the relevant issues, see Chapter 24 and box 3.1.

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THE NEW TESTAMENT: A HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

stands at the foundation of much of our Western

that Martin Luther King Jr. had a better theology

civilization and heritage. These books came into

than Gandhi, or that God was on the side of the

existence at a distant point in time and have been

Protestants instead of the Catholics, or that Jesus

transmitted through the ages until today. In other

was crucified for the sins of the world, they are

words, in addition to being documents of faith,

telling you this not in their capacity as historians

these books are rooted in history; they were writ—

but in their capacity as believers. Believers are

ten in particular historical contexts and have

interested in knowing about God, about how to

always been read within particular historical con—

behave, about what to believe, about the ultimate

texts. For this reason, they can be studied not only

meaning of life. The historical disciplines cannot

by believers for their theological significance but

supply them with this kind of information.

also by historians (whether or not they happen to

Historians who work within the constraints of this

be believers) for their historical significance.

discipline are limited to describing, to the best of

Historians deal with past events that are matters

their abilities, what probably happened in the past

of the public record. The public record consists of

(as discussed further in Chapter 14).

human actions and world events—things that any—

Many such historians, including a large number

one can see or experience. Historians try to recon—

of those mentioned in the bibliographies scattered

struct what probably happened in the past on the

throughout this book, find historical research to be

basis of data that can be examined and evaluated by

completely compatible with—even crucial for—tra—

every interested observer of every persuasion. Access

ditional theological beliefs; others find it to be

to these data does not depend on presuppositions or

incompatible. This is an issue that you yourself may

beliefs about God. This means that historians, as his—

want to deal with, as you grapple intelligently with

torians, have no privileged access to what happens in

how the historical approach to the New Testament

the supernatural realm; they have access only to what

affects positively, negatively, or not at all your faith

happens in this, our natural world. The historian’s

commitments. I should be clear at the outset,

conclusions should, in theory, be accessible and

though, that as the author of this book, I will neither

acceptable to everyone, whether the person is a

tell you how to resolve this issue nor urge you to

Hindu, a Buddhist, a Muslim, a Jew, a Christian, an

adopt any particular set of theological convictions.

atheist, a pagan, or anything else.

My approach will instead be strictly historical, trying

To illustrate the point: historians can tell you

to understand the writings of the early Christians

the similarities and differences between the world—

from the standpoint of the professional historian

views of Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther

who uses whatever evidence happens to survive in

King Jr., but they cannot use their historical

order to reconstruct what happened in the past.

knowledge to tell you that Gandhi’s belief in God

That is to say, I am not going to convince you

was wrong or that Martin Luther King’s was right.

either to believe or to disbelieve the Gospel of John;

This judgment is not part of the public record and

I will describe how it probably came into existence

depends on theological assumptions and personal

and discuss what its message was. I am not going to

beliefs that are not shared by everyone conducting

persuade you that Jesus really was or was not the Son

the investigation. Historians can describe to you

of God; I will try to establish what he said and did

what happened during the conflicts between

based on the historical data that are available. I am

Catholics and Lutherans in sixteenth-century

not going to discuss whether the Bible is or is not the

Germany; they cannot use their historical knowl—

inspired word of God; I will show how we got this

edge to tell you which side God was on. Likewise,

collection of books and indicate what they say and

historians can explain what probably happened at

reflect on how scholars have interpreted them. This

Jesus’ crucifixion; but they cannot use their histor—

kind of information may or may not be of some use

ical knowledge to tell you that he was crucified for

to the reader who happens to be a believer, but it

the sins of the world.

will certainly be useful to one—believer or not—

Does that mean that historians cannot be

who is interested in history, especially the history of

believers? No, it means that if historians tell you

early Christianity and its literature.

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# CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS THE NEW TESTAMENT?

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SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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agrees with Bauer’s understanding of early Christianity

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# CHAPTER 2

The World of Early Christian Traditions

THE PROBLEM

in the New Testament, we have to start with doc-

OF BEGINNINGS

uments that were written relatively late.

But this is not the only problem with beginning

Where does one begin a study of the New

our study with the traditions about Jesus. What is

Testament? One might be inclined to begin with

even more problematic is that these first-century

the Gospel of Matthew. This, however, is proba—

traditions do not “translate” easily into the twen—

bly not the best choice: even though Matthew is

tieth century, where our commonsense assump—

the first book in the canon, it was not the first to

tions, worldviews, values, and priorities are quite

be written. Indeed, as we will see later, it was

different from those shared by the early followers

probably not even the first Gospel to be written.

of Jesus. Contrary to what many people think, it

The first New Testament book to be written

is very difficult for us today to understand the orig—

was probably 1 Thessalonians, one of the letters

inal meanings of the sayings of Jesus and the sto—

penned by the apostle Paul. For this reason, some

ries about him. This is one reason that modern

teachers begin their courses on the New

people have such deeply rooted disagreements

Testament with the life and writings of Paul.

over how to interpret the New Testament. It

While this choice makes better sense than begin—

comes from a different world. And many of the

ning with Matthew, it has problems of its own.

ideas and attitudes and values that we take for

Paul lived after Jesus and based many of his teach—

granted today as common sense would have made

ings on his belief in Jesus’ death and resurrection.

no sense in that world; that is, they would have

Would it not make better sense, then, to begin

been “nonsense.”

with the life and teachings of Jesus?

In the early Christian world, there was no such

The problem with beginning with Jesus is that

thing as a middle class as we know it, let alone a

we do not have any writings from him, and the

Protestant work ethic, with all of its promises of

Gospels that record his words and deeds were writ—

education and prosperity for those who labor hard.

ten long after the fact, indeed, even after Paul. To

In that world, only a few persons belonged to the

be sure, during Paul’s lifetime Christians were talk—

upper class; nearly everyone else was in the lower.

ing—and some perhaps even writing—about

Few people had any hope for social mobility, slaves

Jesus, telling what he said and did, recounting his

made up perhaps a third of the total population in

conflicts and explaining his fate. Unfortunately,

major urban areas, and many of the poor were

we do not have direct access to these older tradi—

worse off than the enslaved. There were no cures

tions. We know them only insofar as they were

for most diseases. Many babies died, and adult

written down later, especially in the Gospels. This

women had to bear, on average, five children sim—

means, somewhat ironically, that if we want to

ply to keep the population constant. Most people

begin with the earliest and most important figure

were uneducated and ninety percent could not

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# CHAPTER 2

THE WORLD OF EARLY CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS

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read. Travel was slow and dangerous, and long

ONE REMARKABLE LIFE

trips were rare; most people never ventured far

from home during their lives. In the world of early

From the beginning his mother knew that he was

Christianity, everyone, except most Jews, believed

no ordinary person. Prior to his birth, a heavenly

in a multiplicity of gods; they knew that divine

figure appeared to her, announcing that her son

beings of all sorts were constantly involved with

would not be a mere mortal but would himself be

their everyday lives, bringing rain, health, and

divine. This prophecy was confirmed by the

peace—or their opposites.

miraculous character of his birth, a birth accompa—

People living in the ancient world would have

nied by supernatural signs. The boy was already

understood the stories about Jesus in light of these

recognized as a spiritual authority in his youth; his

realities. This applies not only to how they react—

discussions with recognized experts showed his

ed to these stories and integrated them into their

superior knowledge of all things religious. As an

own worldviews but even to how, on the very basic

adult he left home to engage in an itinerant

level, they understood what the stories meant. For

preaching ministry. He went from village to town

you can understand something only in light of

with his message of good news, proclaiming that

what you already know.

people should forgo their concerns for the materi—

Let me illustrate the point through a modern

al things of this life, such as how they should dress

example. When I was in college in the 1970s, I

and what they should eat. They should instead be

drove an Austin Healey Sprite. Today this fact

concerned with their eternal souls.

does not impress most of my students, who have

He gathered around him a number of disciples

never heard of an Austin Healey Sprite. If I want

who were amazed by his teaching and his flawless

to explain to them what it was, I have to do so in

character. They became convinced that he was no

terms that they already know. I usually begin by

ordinary man but was the Son of God. Their faith

telling them that the Sprite was the same car as

received striking confirmation in the miraculous

the MG Midget. What if they have never heard of

things that he did. He could reportedly predict

a Midget? I tell them that it was a 1970s version

the future, heal the sick, cast out demons, and

of the Mazda Miata. This is a car they generally

raise the dead. Not everyone proved friendly,

know. If they don’t, I might tell them that the

however. At the end of his life, his enemies

Sprite was a sports car. What if they don’t know

trumped up charges against him, and he was

what that is? I explain: it’s a small two-seat con—

placed on trial before Roman authorities for

vertible that sits low to the ground and is general—

crimes against the state.

ly considered sporty. What if they don’t know

Even after he departed this realm, however, he

what a convertible is, or a two-seater? What if

did not forsake his devoted followers. Some

they don’t know what a car is? “Well, a car is like

claimed that he had ascended bodily into heaven;

a horseless carriage.” My explanation, though,

others said that he had appeared to them, alive,

assumes that they know what carriages are and

afterwards, that they had talked with him and

what relation horses generally have to them. And

touched him and become convinced that he could

if they don’t?

not be bound by death. A number of his followers

My point is that we can understand something

spread the good news about this man, recounting

only in light of what we already know. Imagine

what they had seen him say and do. Eventually

how you yourself might explain an elephant or a

some of these accounts came to be written down

roller coaster or a kumquat to someone who had

in books that circulated throughout the empire.

never seen one. What, though, has any of this to

But I doubt that you have ever read them. In

do with the New Testament? For one thing, it

fact, I suspect you have never heard the name of

explains why I think that the most sensible place

this miracle-working “Son of God.” The man I

to begin our study is with the life of a famous man

have been referring to is the great neo—

who lived nearly 2,000 years ago in a remote part

Pythagorean teacher and pagan holy man of the

of the Roman empire.

first century C.E., Apollonius of Tyana, a worship-



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THE NEW TESTAMENT: A HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 2.1 Pagan and Gentile

Throughout our discussions I will be using the terms “pagan” and “Gentile.” When historians use the term “pagan,” they do not assign negative connotations to it (as you may when you use it in reference, say, to your roommate or next-door neighbor). When used of the Greco-Roman world, the term simply designates a person who subscribed to any of the polytheistic religions, that is, anyone who was neither a Jew nor a Christian. The term “pagan-ism,” then, refers to the wide range of ancient polytheistic religions outside of Judaism and Christianity. The term “Gentile” designates someone who is not a Jew, whether the person is pagan or Christian. It too carries no negative connotations.

per of the Roman gods, whose life and teachings

Greco-Roman world (see box 2.2). The stories

are recorded in the writings of his later follower

about Jesus were told among people who could

Philostratus, in his book The Life of Apollonius.

make sense of them, and the sense they made of

Apollonius lived at about the time of Jesus.

them in a world populated with divine beings may

Even though they never met, the reports about

have been different from the sense that we make

their lives were in many ways similar. At a later

of them in our foreign world. These stories may

time, Jesus’ followers argued that Jesus was the mir—

have had a commonsensical meaning for people in

acle-working Son of God, and that Apollonius was

antiquity that they do not have for us.

an impostor, a magician, and a fraud. Perhaps not

surprisingly, Apollonius’s followers made just the

opposite claim, asserting that he was the miracle-working Son of God, and that Jesus was a fraud.

What is remarkable is that these were not the

only two persons in the Greco-Roman world who

were thought to have been supernaturally

endowed as teachers and miracle workers. In fact,

we know from the tantalizing but fragmentary

records that have survived that numerous other

persons were also said to have performed miracles,

to have calmed the storm and multiplied the

loaves, to have told the future and healed the sick,

to have cast out demons and raised the dead, to

have been supernaturally born and taken up into

F P O

heaven at the end of their life. Even though Jesus

may be the only miracle-working Son of God that

we know about in our world, he was one of many

talked about in the first century.

Clearly, then, if we want to study the early tra-

Figure 2.1 A Roman coin from around the time of Jesus, with the likeness of Caesar Augustus and a Latin inscription,

ditions told about Jesus, traditions that are our

“Augustus, Son of the Divinized Caesar.” If Julius Caesar, the only access to the man himself, we have to begin

adopted father of Augustus, was a god, what does that make

by situating them in their original context in the

Augustus?

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# CHAPTER 2

THE WORLD OF EARLY CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS

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SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 2.2 The Greco-Roman World

The “Greco-Roman world” is a term that historians use to describe the lands surrounding the Mediterranean from the time of Alexander the Great through the first three or four centuries of the Roman Empire (see box 2.4).

Alexander was arguably the most significant world conqueror in the history of Western civilization. Born in 356 B.C.E., he succeeded to the throne of Macedonia as a twenty-year old when his father, King Philip II, was assassinated. Alexander was single-minded in his desire to conquer the lands of the Eastern Mediterranean. A brilliant military strategist, he quickly and boldly—some would say ruthlessly—overran Greece to the South and drove his armies along the coastal regions of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) to the East, into Palestine (as the land of “Israel” was known in antiquity) and then Egypt. He finally marched into the heart of the Persian Empire, overthrow-ing the Persian monarch Darius, and extending his territories as far away as modern-day India.

Alexander is particularly significant in the history of Western civilization because of his decision to impress a kind of cultural unity upon the conquered lands of the eastern Mediterranean. In his youth he had been trained in Greece by the great philosopher Aristotle and became convinced that Greek culture was superior to all others. As a conqueror he actively promoted the use of the Greek language throughout his domain and built Greek-style cities, with gymnasiums, theaters, and public baths, to serve as administrative and commercial centers. Moreover, he generally encouraged the adoption of Greek culture and religion throughout his cities, especially among the upper classes. Historians have named this cultural process “Hellenization,” after the Greek word for Greece, Hellas.

Upon Alexander’s untimely death at the age of thirty-three (323 B.C.E.), his realm was divided among his leading generals. During their reigns and those of their successors, Hellenism (i.e., Greek culture) continued to flourish in major urban centers around the eastern Mediterranean (less so in rural areas). Throughout this period, as political boundaries shifted and kings and kingdoms came and went, a person could travel from one part of Alexander’s former domain to the other and still communicate with the local inhabitants by speaking the lingua franca of the day, Greek. Moreover, such a person could feel relatively at home in most major cities, amidst Greek customs, institutions, traditions, and religions.

Thus, more than at any time in previous history, the eastern Mediterranean that emerged in Alexander’s wake experienced a form of cultural unity and cosmopolitanism (a “cosmopolite”

is a “citizen of the world,” as opposed to a person who belongs only to one locality).

The Roman empire arose in the context of the Hellenistic world and took full advantage of its unity, promoting the use of the Greek language, accepting aspects of Greek culture, and even taking over features of the Greek religion, to the point that the Greek and Roman gods came to be thought of as the same, only with different names. This complex unity achieved culturally through Hellenization and politically through the conquests of Rome (see box 2.4) are summed up by the term, Greco-Roman world.

We will begin our reflections by discussing ancient

books of the New Testament were being written. We

“pagan” religions (see box 2.1), since it was primarily

will then turn to consider early Judaism, one of the

among pagans that Christians told most of their sto—

distinctive religions of the Greco-Roman world, the

ries and acquired most of their converts when the

religion of the earliest Christians and of Jesus himself.

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THE NEW TESTAMENT: A HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

BLACK SEA

Pella

Troy

Granicus (334)

Gordium

Sardis

Araxes R.

Ephesus

Celaenae

LAKE VAN

Halys R.

Miletus

Tyana

LAKE

Side

Issus (333)

URMIA

Nisibis

Gaugamela (331)

Thapsacus

Tigris R.

Euph

CYPRUS

rates R.

Tyre

Alexandria

(332)

Babylon

(323-death)

Gaza

Pelusium

Ammon

Memphis

Nile R.

Figure 2.2

The Journeys of Alexander the Great (334-323 B.C.E.).

THE ENVIRONMENT OF THE NEW

exhaustive, but it does include a number of popu-

TESTAMENT: RELIGIONS IN THE

lar notions held by many people in our society

(though not by all people, of course, for our world

GRECO-ROMAN WORLD

is fantastically diverse):

Greco-Roman Religiosity: A Basic Sketch

1. Religious organization and hierarchy (e.g., the

Odd as it may seem, to understand the nature and

Christian denominations and their leaders,

function of religion in the Greco-Roman world,

whether a pope, a Methodist bishop, or the

we have to abandon almost all of our own notions

leader of the Southern Baptist convention)

about religion today. What do twentieth-century

2. Doctrinal statements (e.g., the creeds said in

Americans think of when they think about orga—

churches, the basic beliefs endorsed by all

nized religion? The following list is by no means

believers)

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# CHAPTER 2

THE WORLD OF EARLY CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS

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Alexander’s route, 334-323 B.C.E.

LAKE

Persian Royal Road

ARAL

0

100

200

300

400 miles

0

200

400

600 km

N

SOGDIANA

CASPIAN

Oxus R.

SEA

Ai-Khanoum

Drapsaca

Zariaspa

(Bactra:327)

Taxilla (326)

H I N D U K U S H

R.

Artacoana

pess

Ecbatana

a dyH

Alexandria

Susa

Arachoton

(Kandahar:329)

Persepolis (330)

Indus R.

Pattala

3. Ethical commitments (i.e., religiously motivat—

One of the most striking and startling aspects of

ed guidelines for conducting one’s daily inter—

ancient religion is that outside of Judaism, none of

actions with others)

these features applies. In the so-called pagan reli—

4. Beliefs about the afterlife (which for some peo—

gions of the Roman empire, there were no nation—

ple in our time is the reason for being religious)

al or international religious organizations with

elected or appointed leaders who had jurisdiction

5. Sacred written authorities (e.g., the Hebrew

over the various local cults. There were no creedal

Bible or the New Testament or the Koran)

statements or, indeed, any necessary articles of

6. The separation of church and state (an important

faith whatsoever for devotees. Whereas ethics

element in American politics and religion)

were generally as important to people then as they

7. Exclusive commitments (e.g., a member of a

are today, daily ethical demands played virtually

Baptist church cannot also be a Hare Krishna,

no role in the practice of religion itself. Many

just as a practicing Jew cannot be a Mormon).

people evidently did not hold a firm belief in life

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that everybody worshipped the same gods. On the

The

contrary, many gods were localized deities of a cer—

One God

tain place or a certain family. With the conquest

of villages, towns, and countries by other villages,

The great gods

towns, and countries, local gods sometimes spread

Daimonia, local gods, etc.

to other regions, occasionally becoming national

or international. Sometimes conquered peoples

Divine beings, demigods, immortals, heroes

would accept the gods of their conquerors, either

Humans

by substituting them for their own (since the gods

of the victors were, after all, demonstrably more

Figure 2.3 The Divine Pyramid as Understood in Greco-Roman powerful), or by using the new names for their old

Religion.

gods (which is simply another mode of substitu—

tion), or by adding the new gods to those that they

after death; those who did, so far as we can tell, did

already worshipped.

not generally become more religious as a result.

There were of course the “great gods” who were

Pagan religions were never centered on sacred

worshipped throughout different portions of the

writings to guide the individual’s beliefs and prac—

Mediterranean. These included the gods men—

tices. And there was no such thing as separation

tioned by the ancient poets Homer and Hesiod.

of church and state; on the contrary, since the gods

The writings of these ancients—for example,

made the state great, the state responded by

Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey—were not considered to encouraging and sponsoring the worship of the

be some kind of Scriptural authority in the way the

gods. Finally, virtually no one in the pagan world

Bible was for Jews and later for Christians, but they

argued that if you worshipped one god, you could

were good stories that people told and enjoyed

not also worship another: exclusive adherence to

hearing, even if they did sometimes portray the

one cult was practically unknown.

gods in a somewhat unfavorable light as conduct—

How can we fathom a set of religions so differing themselves in wild and capricious ways.

ent from our own? Since we can only understand

How did the average person understand the rela—

something in light of what we already know, we

tionship of the great gods to those of their own local—

can begin by considering a series of contrasts

ity? Recent scholarship has shown that most people

between modern and ancient religions, somewhat

in the Greco-Roman world conceived of the divine

along the lines I have already laid out.

realm as a kind of pyramid of power, with the few but

mightiest god(s) at the top and the more numerous

Polytheism Instead of Monotheism.

Modern

but less powerful deities at the bottom (see figure

religions in the West (Judaism, Christianity, and

2.3). Some of the most highly educated thinkers—

Islam) are monotheistic, advocating belief in one

for example, philosophers and their students—

Divine Being. For most modern Westerners, it is

maintained that at the very peak of the pyramid was

simply common sense to think that there is one

one almighty God, whether understood to be the

God and only one God. For persons in the

Greek Zeus, the Roman Jupiter, or some unknown

ancient world, however, this was nonsense.

and unknowable God, so powerful as to be beyond

Everyone knew that there were many gods, of all

human comprehension. This God was ultimately

sorts and descriptions, of all functions and loca—

responsible for the world and for all that happens in

tions: gods of the field and forest, gods of the rivers

it; ironically, though, he was so powerful that he was

and streams, gods of the household and courtyard,

all but inaccessible to mere mortals.

gods of the crops and weather, gods of healing,

The pyramid’s next tier represented the power—

gods of fertility, gods of war, gods of love.

ful gods worshipped in different localities through—

The belief in many gods came down from pre—

out the empire. Among Greek people, these would

historic times; in the Greco-Roman world, nearly

include Poseidon, Hera, Aphrodite, Artemis,

everybody took their existence for granted. Not

Dionysus, and others of Greek myth and legend; in



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# CHAPTER 2

THE WORLD OF EARLY CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS

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F P O

Figure 2.4 Many inhabitants of the Roman empire offered worship to the genius (5 ruling spirit) of the emperor as god, as seen in this depiction of a sacrifice taken from an altar before the temple of the emperor Vespasian in Pompei. Notice the priest on the right holding a sledge hammer with which to stun the sacrificial bull before another priest slices its throat.

Roman circles these would be identified by their

sorts of nasty things. To be sure, some of them were

Latin names: Neptune, Juno, Venus, Diana, and

dangerous, but for the most part they were relative—

Bacchus. These gods were thought to be incredibly

ly indifferent to human activities and so had to be

powerful and altogether worthy of worship and

persuaded, through cultic acts, to behave in ways

praise. Many of them were associated with signifi—

that would lead to benefit rather than harm.

cant functions of human society. For example,

In addition, most people had their own family

Ares (Latin Mars) was the god of war, Aphrodite

gods—for example, in Roman religion, each house-

(Venus) the goddess of love, and Dionysus

hold worshipped divine beings called Penates who

(Bacchus) the god of wine.

had oversight of the pantry and foodstuffs, as well as

Below this tier was another inhabited by lesser

deities called Lares (sometimes thought of as the

gods, including the local deities who had limited

spirits of the family's ancestors) who protected the

powers (although they were still far beyond any—

house and its inhabitants; and each family had a

thing humans could imagine) but who were in more

personal deity, a kind of guardian angel called a

direct contact with human affairs. Included on this

“genius,” thought to reside in the head of the house—

tier were the daimonia. This Greek term is hard to

hold. Family gods were regularly represented

translate into English. The cognate term “demons”

through household shrines (see figure 2.7) and wor—

carries the wrong connotation altogether, for the

shipped through prayers and simple acts of piety.

daimonia were not evil fallen angels who temporari—

Finally, on the bottom level of the divine pyra—

ly inhabited human bodies, forcing them to do all

mid was a range of divine beings who more or less

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bridged the gap between mortals and the gods.

those who did, most believed that it involved some

Included here were humans who, at their deaths,

kind of vague shadowy existence that was to be

had been divinized (i.e., made immortal, like the

postponed as long as possible at all costs, a nether—

gods). These were typically great men, philoso—

world to which all people were destined, whether

phers or warriors, whose extraordinary deeds won

moral or immoral, faithful or unfaithful. And yet

them special favors from the gods at death as well

nearly everyone in the ancient world believed in

as in life. Also found here were demigods, indi—

the gods and participated in religion.

viduals said to have been born to the union of a

For most ancient persons, religion was not the

god or goddess with a mortal, as found, for

way to guarantee an afterlife; it was a way to secure

instance, in a number of Greek and Roman myths

life in the here and now. For the majority of peo—

and folktales. This final category is of particular

ple in the ancient world, life was constantly lived

interest for us because it included select human

on the edge. There was nothing like modern med—

beings who were widely believed to have been far

ication to prevent and cure disease; a tooth abscess

more than human, including great philosophers

would frequently prove fatal. There were no mod—

like Pythagoras, whose wisdom was thought by

ern surgical methods and only primitive forms of

some to be inexplicable if merely human, powerful

anesthesia; women often died in childbirth, and

athletes like Heracles, whose strength was far

simple operations could be hellish nightmares.

beyond the mere mortal, and great rulers like

There were no modern methods of agriculture and

Alexander of Macedonia, whose power to affect

limited possibilities for irrigation; a minor drought

human lives was nearly divine.

one year could lead to a poor village’s starvation

Some people considered the Roman emperor to

the next. There were no modern modes of trans—

be this kind of divine being. He was not the one

portation: in rural areas, food distribution was lim—

God, or even one of the Olympians. Indeed, from

ited at best. War, famine, disease, poverty—the

the divine perspective he was very much a subor—

eternal blights of the human race—were constant

dinate. But from the human point of view, he was

and perennial concerns of ancient persons. And,

fantastically powerful, himself divine, and for

of course, all the anxieties of personal relations

some inhabitants of the empire worthy of worship

were very much alive as well; they too knew the

and praise. Also included among such beings were

tragic loss of a child or friend, fear for personal

Apollonius of Tyana and other so called sons of

safety, unrequited love.

God, whose supernatural teachings and miracu—

In a world that is helpless against the elements,

lous deeds demonstrated their divine lineage.

the gods play a major role. They supply rain for

Pagans who heard stories about Jesus and his

the crops, fertility for the animals, children for the

miracles would have had no difficulty understand—

family. They bring victory in war and prosperity in

ing what they meant. Among other things they

peace. They heal the sick and comfort the down—

meant that Jesus was himself divine, a divine man

trodden. They provide security and hope and

come to earth.

love. These are things beyond the control of mere

mortals; they can come only from the gods.

Present Life instead of Afterlife.

Many people

in the modern world are motivated in their reli-

Cultic Acts rather than Doctrine.

But how could

gious commitments by a belief in the afterlife.

the powerful and immortal gods be influenced to

Fearing eternal torment or longing for eternal

provide what was needed in this life? The gods were

bliss, they turn to religion as a way of securing hap—

not impressed by anyone’s beliefs about them nor

piness after death.

did they require people to say the proper creed or

This view would have made little sense to most

acknowledge the proper “truths.” Odd as this may

people in the ancient world. Recent studies of

seem to us moderns, doctrine played virtually no

ancient gravestone inscriptions, in fact, suggest that

role in these religions: it scarcely mattered what

whereas some people subscribed to a notion of the

people believed. What mattered was how people

afterlife (as we will see later when we consider the

showed their devotion to the gods. The gods want—

mystery cults), the majority did not. Moreover, of

ed to be worshipped through proper cultic acts.

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SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 2.3 Divine Rulers as Savior Gods

With respect to the homage paid to the Roman emperor as a divine being, the “Savior” of the human race, consider the following inscription set up in honor of Gaius Julius Caesar Germanicus, otherwise known to history as the emperor Caligula, by the city council of Ephesus in Asia Minor, around 38 C.E.

The council and the people (of the Ephesians and other Greek)

cities, which dwell in Asia and the nations (acknowledge) Gaius Julius, the son of Gaius Caesar, as High Priest and Absolute Ruler, ... the God Visible who is born of (the Gods) Ares and Aphrodite, the shared Savior of human life.

The English term “cult” derives from the Latin

retained. That they did work was plain for all to

term for “care.” The ancient concept of cultus deo-

see—in the grandeur and power of Rome itself.

rum thus referred to the “care of the gods” (cf. the

Moreover, it was possible to know for certain

English word “agriculture,” meaning the “care of

whether a particular cultic act had proved accept—

the fields”). How, though, did one “care” for the

able to the gods, for the gods would say so. One of

gods? How did one attend to them so as to secure

the standard religious practices of the Romans that

their favor? For the ancient person the answer was

seems most bizarre to modern persons involved the

simple: through prayer and sacrifice. Local and

art of “extispicy”— the reading of a sacrificial ani—

family deities had their own established cults.

mal’s entrails (Latin exta) by a specially trained

Daily cultic acts might involve pouring out a little

priest (a “haruspex”) to determine whether the

wine before a meal in honor of one of the family

god(s) had accepted the sacrifice. If the entrails

gods or saying a prayer for favor. Periodic festivals

were not perfect—for example, if they were not

would be celebrated in which a group of worship—

healthy, or the right size, or in the proper place—

pers would sacrifice an animal, or have a local

then the rite was to be performed again.

priest do so, while set prayers were spoken. The

The practice of extispicy shows that Roman

inedible parts of the animal would be burned to

religion was not simply a one-way street in which

the god, the rest would be prepared and eaten by

the worshipper tried to placate the gods. The gods

the participants in a picnic-like atmosphere.

had ways of communicating with humans as well.

Throughout the empire, special festival days

They did so through various modes of “divination”

were set aside for the worship of the state gods.

(ways of discerning the divine will). Roman priests

These were the powerful gods who had shown

called augurs, for instance, were trained in inter—

favor to Rome and made it great. People wor—

preting the flights or eating habits of birds (“taking

shipped them to secure their continued favor and

the auspices”) to determine whether the gods were

patronage. Great celebrations in the capital city

in favor of a projected action on the part of the

itself would follow standard rituals by priests

state, such as a military expedition. For private

trained in the sacred traditions; they would per—

direction from the god, there were sacred places

form the required sacrifices and say the established

called “oracles,” where people perplexed about

prayers in precisely the same way year after year.

their own future could come to address a question

The Romans generally assumed that if religious

to a god, whose priestess would enter into a trance,

practices worked they must be right and must be

become filled with the divine spirit, and deliver a



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Figure 2.5 A depiction of the practice of extispicy from an ancient altar. Notice the priest who is stooped over to examine the entrails of the recently sacrificed bull to discern whether the sacrifice has been acceptable to the gods.

response, sometimes written down by an attendant,

the state sponsored and encouraged the worship of

often in poetic verse. Sometimes the gods commu—

the gods. For this reason, state priesthoods in the

nicated by more natural means, for example, by

Roman empire were (to use our modern terminol—

sending a thunderclap or a dream as a sign.

ogy) political appointments. The priests of the

Thus there was close interaction between the

leading priestly “colleges” in Rome were senators

divine and human realms in the ancient world.

and other leading officials. Temples were dedicat—

The gods spoke to humans through dreams and ora—

ed to the gods because of great military victories,

cles and physical signs, and humans served the gods,

the temple staff was supplied by the state, and cel—

securing their favor through prayers and sacrifices.

ebrations were overseen by the government.

The emperor encouraged the cult of the gods,

Church and State Together instead of Separated.

and in some parts of the empire (although not in

In the Greco-Roman world there was no separa—

the city of Rome itself) he himself was recognized

tion between the function of the state and the peras divine. At first, emperors were worshipped only

formance of religion. Quite the contrary, govern—

after they had died and were proclaimed by the

ment and religion both functioned, theoretically,

Senate to have become divinized. Outside of

to secure the same ends of making life prosperous,

Rome, however, even during the New Testament

meaningful, and happy. The gods brought peace

period, living emperors came to be worshipped as

and prosperity and made the state great. In turn,

the divine “Savior” of the empire. These divine

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# CHAPTER 2

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SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 2.4 The Roman Empire

The traditional date for the founding of Rome is 753 B.C.E. It began as a small farming village which grew over time into a city spread over a large area that included the “seven hills of Rome.” For nearly 250 years Rome was ruled by local kings, whose abuses led to their ouster in 510 B.C.E. For nearly half a millenium thereafter, Rome was a republic governed by an aristocratic oligarchy called the Senate, which was made up of the wealthiest and most influential members of its highest class.

As it refined its political and legislative systems, Rome also grew strong militarily, eventually conquering and colonizing the entire Italian peninsula and then, after three protracted wars against the city of Carthage in North Africa, known as the Punic Wars (264-241 B.C.E., 218-202 B.C.E., and 149-146 B.C.E.), acquiring control of the entire Mediterranean region.

The late republic period saw an increasing number of internal struggles for power, many of them violent, as prominent generals and politicians attempted to seize control of the government. When Julius Caesar tried to become a dictator, he was assassinated in 44 B.C.E. The Republic (ruled by the Senate) was not finally transformed into an Empire (ruled by an emperor) until Caesar’s great-nephew and adopted son Octavian, a wealthy aristocrat and Rome’s most successful general, brought a bloody end to the civil wars that had racked the city. Octavian assumed full control in the year 27 B.C.E.

Even after this time, the Senate continued to exist and to oversee aspects of the immense Roman bureaucracy, which included the governance of provinces that eventually stretched from Spain to Syria. Official posts were sometimes delegated to members of the “equestrian”

class as well. These had a lower rank and less wealth than senators, but they were nonetheless members of the landed aristocracy. But with the inauguration of the reign of Octavian, who soon assumed the name Caesar Augustus (roughly meaning “the most revered emperor”) there was one ultimate ruler over Rome, an emperor who wielded virtually supreme power.

Emperors who succeeded Caesar Augustus after his death in 14 C.E. were of varying tempera-ments and abilities. For the period of our study, they include the following: Tiberius (14–37 C.E.) Caligula (37–41 C.E.)

Claudius (41–54 C.E.)

Nero (54–68 C.E.)

Four different emperors in the tumultuous year of 68–69 C.E. including, finally, Vespasian (69–79 C.E.)

Titus (79–81 C.E.)

Domitian (81–96 C.E.)

Nerva (96–98 C.E.)

Trajan (98–117 C.E.)

Hadrian (117–138 C.E.)

men had brought deliverance from the evils that

the Apostle Paul arrived with his word of the

threatened the well-being of the state. Some of

Savior Jesus. By the second century, cities

the emperors discouraged this practice, but offi—

throughout the empire held celebrations in which

cials in the provinces sometimes promoted it (see

sacrifices were made on behalf of the emperor or

box 2.3). Thus, local cults devoted to the emper—

his “genius,” that is, the divine spirit that ruled

or existed throughout much of Asia Minor when

over his family (see figure 2.4).

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The political implications of this kind of worship

the function of religion was to perform cultic acts

may seem clear to us, living so many centuries later.

in order to sway the gods to act on your behalf,

The belief that the gods were directly involved in

what was one to do if the established religion didn’t

the Roman state surely helped to secure the peace of

work? Many people in the Greco-Roman world

the empire. One might rebel against a powerful

(even people actively involved in “religion”) opted

mortal, but who would take up arms against a god?

to go an alternative route, resorting to what was

known even then as “magic.”

Tolerance instead of Intolerance. Because of the

Older scholarship understood magic to be the

illfated experience of the early Christians, who were

superstitious manipulation of divine powers, that

occasionally persecuted by the Roman authorities,

is, the performance of incantations and ritual acts

many people today assume that Romans were by and

in such a way as to compel supernatural forces to

large intolerant when it came to religion. Nothing

grant a person’s desires. It does indeed appear that

could be further from the truth. Certainly, refusing

something like this was widely practiced through—

to perform a sacrifice to the gods on behalf of the

out the Roman world. We not only have ancient

emperor, or refusing to throw some incense on the

literary texts in which such practices are described,

altar to his genius, might cause trouble. This refusal

we also have discovered a number of magical texts,

would be seen as a political statement (again, to use

that is, documents that were used for magical pur—

our modern terms), a vote of no confidence or, even

poses. These include long recipes for potions with

worse, open defiance of the power of the state and

exotic ingredients (the ancient equivalents of the

the even greater power of the gods who made it great.

eye of newt and hair of a bat), mystical incanta—

Moreover, since everyone knew that there were lots

tions with repetitions of meaningless syllables

of gods, all of whom deserved worship, it made little

(analogous to “abracadabra” but sometimes going

sense to refuse to take part in cultic acts.

on for paragraphs), and tablets that invoke curses

Basic tolerance was one of the central aspects of

on an enemy (a kind of ancient voodoo). These

ancient Greco-Roman religion. Unlike some forms

devices were “guaranteed” to produce the desired

of Christianity that eventually arose in its midst, the

results, for example, the death of an enemy or the

empire’s other religions were altogether forebearing

unbridled passion of an alluring neighbor.

of one another (see Chapter 26). There was no reaThe problem for scholars today, though, is decid—

son that everyone should worship the same gods any

ing how these practices differ substantially from what

more than everyone should have the same friends.

we call religion. If Greco-Roman religion involved

All the gods deserved to be worshipped in ways

rituals and fixed prayers that had to be performed in

appropriate to them. Thus when people visited or

certain set ways in order to secure the favor of the

relocated to a new place, they would typically begin

gods, how is that so different from what we term

to worship the gods who were known there; some—

magic? In fact, it appears not to be so different.

times they would continue to worship their own

Ancient religion and ancient magic involved similar

gods as well. The various religious rites were by and

actions and anticipated similar (divine) results.

large tolerated; local practices were honored, and

Ultimately, of course, neither could provide absolute

those who worshipped the state gods did not try to

guarantees. Why, then, did the ancients themselves

drive out their opposition. There was no sense of

refer to some practices as magical?

exclusivity in Greco-Roman religions, no sense that

Anthropological studies of the phenomenon

my gods are real and yours are false, that you must

suggest that when a society at large approves of a

convert to my gods or be punished.

cultic practice (or at least when its elite members

do), it is labeled “religious,” whereas similar practices that are not approved are viewed suspicious-

Magic and Mystery in Greco-Roman Religion

ly and called “magical.” Magic, then, can be seen

Magic was big business in the Roman empire. This

as the dark side of religion; it is mysterious and

should come as no shock, given what we have

secretive and socially marginal. This is why two

already seen about the religions of the period. If

ancient miracle workers producing similar results

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# CHAPTER 2

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N

BLACK SEA

M E D I T E RRANEAN SEA

The Spread of Roman Rule

218 BCE

133 BCE

0

200

400 miles

14 CE

117 CE

0

200

400

600 km

Figure 2.6

The Spread of Roman Rule.

might be perceived differently, the one as a son of

their popularity, we are remarkably ill-informed con—

God (a term of approbation) the other as a magi—

cerning these cults. Indeed, they are called myster—

cian (disapprobation). The former is on the side

ies, in part, because participants could not divulge

of the good and the sanctioned; the latter has used

what happened during their sacred rituals. As a con—

dark powers and unapproved methods.

sequence, our evidence has to be pieced together

This is not to say that ancient Greco-Roman

from isolated comments and fragmentary remains.

society altogether disapproved of secrecy and mys—

From this evidence, though, we can get some

tery in religion. On the contrary, sanctioned forms

idea about what most of the mysteries were like

of mystery existed in certain local cults, and some of

and how they differed from both the state and

these came to enjoy an international reputation.

other local cults. We have seen that most reli—

Modern scholars commonly refer to these forms of

gions in the period were concerned with both

religion as the “mystery cults.” In some respects the

individual and community needs (e.g., rain, fertil—

mystery cults stand out as exceptional in the reli—

ity, victory, peace, prosperity). The mystery cults

gious climate of the Greco-Roman world; quite pos—

were relatively distinct in focusing chiefly on the

sibly, it was precisely their atypical character that

well-being of the individual. Moreover, whereas

made them so sought after. Regrettably, despite

almost all other religions were centered on life in



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the here and now, mystery cults appear to have

enabled the participants to become part of the

placed some emphasis (older scholarship believed

entire transformative process of new life. That is

it was exclusive emphasis) on providing a happy

to say, the enacted myth about the gods was trans—

existence in the life after death. Finally, even

muted into reality for the devotees, who believed

though there was wide tolerance of different reli—

they would live again, happily, after death. For

gions in the Greco-Roman world, and no general

those who had been found worthy to be a follower

sense of exclusive attachment to one deity over

of the mystery’s god or goddess, there was promised

another, within the mysteries we find individuals

not only a more satisfying existence now but also

who are principally devoted to one god or goddess

a more blissful afterlife.

for life. Even these, however, do not appear to

Not just anyone could walk in off the streets to

have claimed that theirs was the only true god or

join one of these mystery cults. Each of them

goddess; instead, theirs was the only one for them.

appears to have emphasized rituals of initiation for

The mysteries, it appears, met personal, indi—

membership. Those who wished to join were typ—

vidual needs and resonated with many persons in

ically put through a period of ceremonial cleansing

the Greco-Roman world who did not find existen-

(involving fastings, prayers, and sometimes ritual

tial fulfillment (to use a modern phrase) in the

washings) and instruction prior to being admitted

local and state cults in which they participated.

to the ranks of the devotees. We have evidence to

Each of the mystery cults was different; each had

suggest that those who experienced the initiation,

its own special location and its own customs and

who could then join in the ceremonies when they

rituals. Many of them evidently centered around

were periodically celebrated, felt at greater peace

a mythology of the death and resurrection of a god

with themselves and the world.

or goddess, a mythology ultimately rooted in

Among the better known mysteries in the

ancient fertility religion, in which the death of

ancient world were those involving the Greek

winter gives way to the new life of spring.

goddesses Demeter and her daughter Kore (some—

Moreover, the periodic ritual of these cults appar—

times called Persephone) at the town of Eleusis in

ently celebrated this mythology in a way that

Greece, the goddess Isis and her husband Osiris

from Egypt, the Greek God Dionysus (also known

as Bacchus), and the Persian God Mithras.

Despite the occasional instance of a devotee being

committed to only one or the other of these mysteries, we know of many instances in which persons were initiated into several of them.

F P O

Furthermore, initiation did not at all preclude

worship of the local and state gods; some of the

Roman emperors were themselves initiates.

Philosophy and Religion

in the Greco-Roman World

There is one final aspect of the Greco-Roman

world to consider before turning our attention to

the place that Judaism occupied within it. I have

already mentioned that Greco-Roman cults did

not overly concern themselves with doctrines

about the gods or with the moral behavior of their

Figure 2.7

Inhabitants of the Greco-Roman world wor—

devotees. This does not mean, however, that

shiped a variety of gods in their homes; here is a shrine that depicts the family’s guardian spirit (=genius), flanked by two there was no room for reflection on the meaning

household gods (=lares), with a snake representing a divinity.

of life, the nature of personal happiness, and the

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SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 2.5 Christianity as a Mystery Cult

Scholars in the earlier part of this century were struck by how similar the ancient descriptions of the mysteries were to what we know about Christianity; for it too was a secretive society whose members worshipped a divine being who died and was raised from the dead, and who could bring peace on earth and eternal life after death. Initiates into the society went through a period of ritual purification (baptism) and instruction, and members, according to this view, periodically celebrated the myths of the cults beginning (in the Lord’s Supper).

Recent scholarship, however, has been less inclined to call Christianity a mystery cult, or to claim that it simply borrowed its characteristic ideas and practices from previously existing religions. In part this is because we do not know very much about what happened during the mystery rituals, especially in the period when Christianity began. For example, did they typically partake of a meal, commemorating the death of their savior god? We simply don’t know.

All the same, the broad parallels between Christianity and these other religions do remain intriguing and worthy of reflection. Maybe the question scholars have asked should be posed differently: would non-Christian outsiders have looked upon Christianity as a kind of mystery cult, analogous to others that they knew?

need for ethical behavior. This kind of thinking,

and couldn’t read anything (see box 3.1).

though, lay largely outside the province of cult and

Nonetheless, philosophical ideas were widely

within the province of philosophy.

known, due in large part to their typical mode of

Philosophy and religion were not thought to be

communication. On street corners and thorough—

irreconcilable entities; indeed, some of the best

fares of major urban areas throughout the empire,

known philosophers were priests in pagan temples.

philosophers of all stripes could be found pro—

They nonetheless represented two different

claiming their views and urging others to adopt

spheres of activity with two different sets of con—

them in their own lives, rather like street preach—

cerns. Greco-Roman philosophy was not con—

ers in some places today.

cerned with placating the gods or petitioning their

Of the important philosophical schools during

involvement in the affairs of the community. It

the first century of the Common Era, three stood

was instead concerned with showing how a person

out as prominent: the Stoics, the Platonists, and

could attain well-being in this world, a world that

the Epicureans. Each of these traditions traced its

is at best filled with meaninglessness and boredom,

roots back over three hundred years, and the dif—

and at worst wracked with pain and misery.

ferences between them ran wide and deep, but for

Professional philosophers were a relatively rare

our study their common features are more impor—

breed in the Greco-Roman world, whose pre—

tant than their differences.

industrial societies had scant resources to support

All three philosophies tried to show how an

large numbers of people who did little but think

individual could achieve personal well-being in the

and teach others to do likewise. Moreover, few

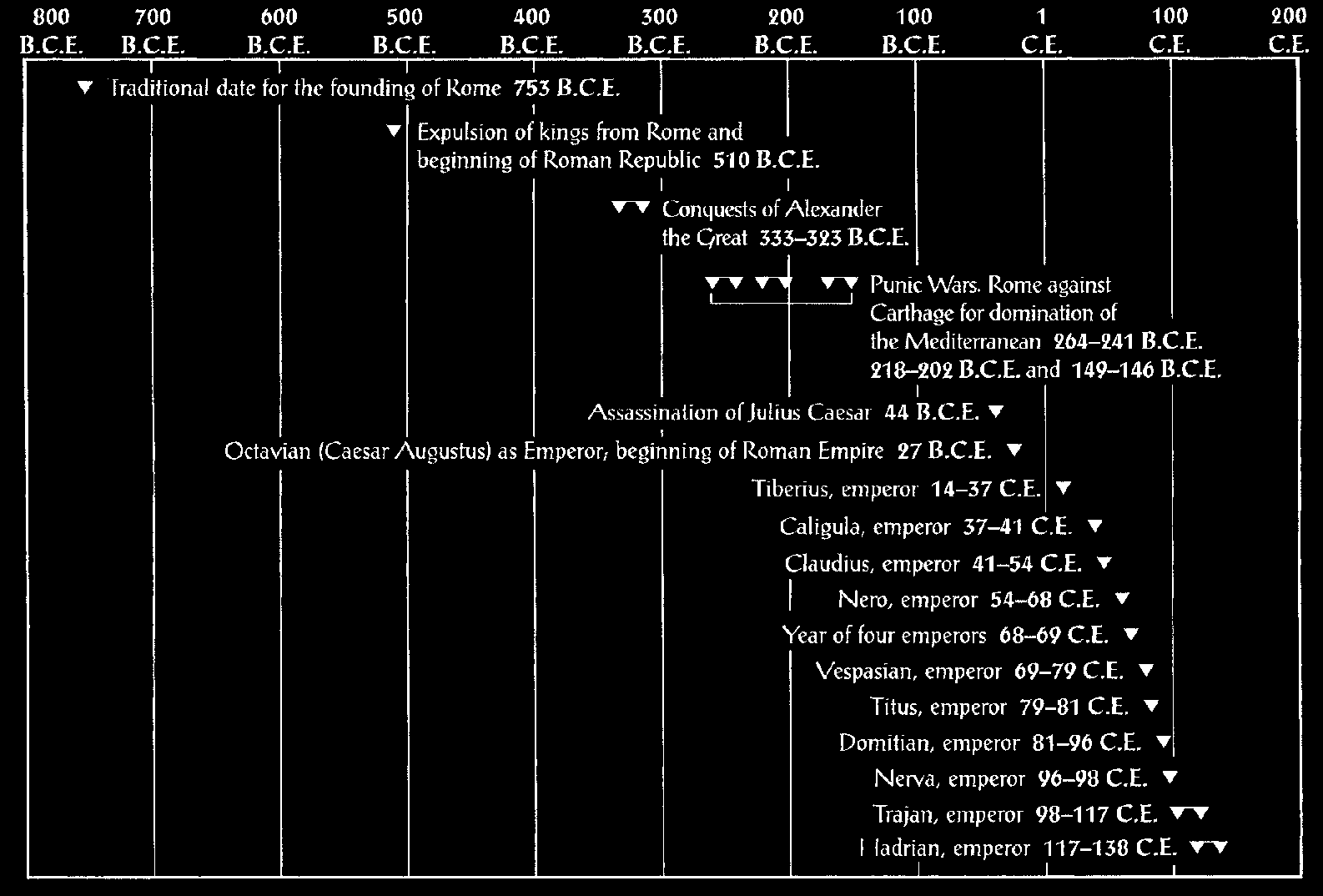
midst of a harsh and sometimes capricious world.

people had the time or ability to read philosophi—

Each group defined well-being in a somewhat dif—

cal treatises; indeed, most people were illiterate

ferent way, but they all generally portrayed it as a



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Figure 2.8

Time Line of Key Events in Hellenistic and Roman Times.

kind of inner peace that comes from living in con—

These emphases explain one further aspect of phi—

formity with nature. For the Stoics, for example,

losophy that contrasted it with religion. As I’ve

this meant living in harmony with the world as it

indicated, cults throughout the Roman world were

was structured by the divine; for the Epicureans it

by and large tolerant of one another; there was

meant realizing that the divine realm has nothing

scarcely any reason to convert others away from

to do with this world and locating personal peace of

one set of gods to another. The same could not be

mind in the simple pleasures of daily existence. For

said, though, of philosophy, for here was an area in

all the philosophies, though, the attainment of

which if one person was right, the others were

well-being involved an exercise of reason, a mental

wrong. For this reason, proponents of various

effort of reconfiguring one’s understanding of the

philosophical schools tended to insist on the

world and the nature of reality. Only an exercise of

validity of their own views and to be somewhat

the mind could provide a person with the tools nec—

intolerant of the views of others (even though

essary to live a full life internally and protect one

they freely borrowed their ideas from one another,

from hardships that strike externally.

making it sometimes difficult to discern their dif—

Thus philosophers put a high premium on both

ferences). In other words, unlike the religions of

education and discipline; or, to put the matter

the Greco-Roman world, the philosophies worked

slightly differently, they were concerned with docto convert people to their points of view. These

trines (what to think) and ethics (how to live).

were, in short, missionary movements.

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JUDAISM AS A

of the animal, for most sacrifices, would be burned

GRECO-ROMAN RELIGION

in honor of the deity. The priest would skin, prepare, and sometimes cook the carcass; the wor—

It is reasonable to think that Judaism is the most

shipper would then take it home to eat with his

important religion of the Greco-Roman world for

family and friends as a feast. Prayers were an

understanding Jesus and emerging Christianity.

important part of the worship of the Jewish God,

Jesus was himself a Jew, as were his earliest follow—

usually addressing personal and communal needs

ers. He was born to Jewish parents and raised in a

(e.g., peace, fertility, prosperity, health.) In many

Jewish culture; he worshipped the Jewish God,

fundamental respects, then, Judaism was compara—

learned the Jewish Scriptures, kept Jewish customs,

ble to other Greco-Roman religions. In other

became a Jewish teacher, and preached to Jewish

important ways, though, it was different.

crowds. He was executed for allegedly claiming to

be the Jewish king. What did it mean to be a Jew

Monotheism: The Belief

in the first century of the Roman empire?

I will postpone discussion of specific aspects of

in the One True God

Judaism in Jesus’ homeland of Palestine to a later

As we have seen, virtually all of the religions in

chapter, where we will take up issues of the rela—

the empire were polytheistic. Before Christianity,

tionship of Jesus to his own environment (see

Judaism alone was committed to the notion that

Chapter 15). There we will consider such things as

there was one and only one true God who was to

the significance of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the politi—

be worshipped and praised. To be sure, the differ—

cal and social upheavals in Palestine during the first

ence between Jews and pagans on this score should

century, and so on. We will also see how the rich

not be blown out of proportion, as if they were

diversity of early Christianity and of Greco-Roman

absolutely dissimilar. We have already observed

religion were matched by that of early Judaism.

that some pagans, chiefly some philosophers and

Some scholars have been so struck by this diversity

their followers, also believed that there was one

that they opt to speak of early Judaisms rather than

chief deity who was ultimately responsible for the

early Judaism. Even with this diversity, however,

world and what happens within it, whether Zeus,

people in the ancient world appear to have meant

Jupiter, or whoever else was thought to occupy the

something in particular when they called somebody

peak of the divine pyramid. The other gods,

a Jew. What might that have been?

including the daimonia and the demigods, were of

Judaism was everywhere understood to be one of

less power and eminence. Jews, too, believed that

the religions of the Roman empire. Notwithstanding

there were immortal beings, far greater in power

the caricatures that one sometimes reads, in which

than humans, who existed somewhere between

Judaism is said to have been absolutely unique and

them and the true God. In the modern world we

unlike other Greco-Roman religions, most people in

might call these beings angels and archangels; for

the ancient world recognized it to be an ancient form

ancient Jews they also included such beings as the

of cultic devotion similar to others in many ways. Of

“cherubim” and “seraphim.”

course there were distinctive features, but every reli—

The key difference between Jews and persons of

gion, not just Judaism, was distinctive.

other religions, then, was not that Jews denied the

Like other Greco-Roman religions, Judaism

existence of a hierarchy of supernatural beings; the

included the belief in a higher realm in which

difference was that Jews as a rule insisted that only

there was a powerful deity who could benefit

the one Creator God, the supreme deity himself,

humans and who showed special favor to those

was to be worshipped. Moreover, this one God was

who worshipped him in ways prescribed from

not the unknown and unknowable deity of some

antiquity. The principal cultic acts of this religion

philosophers, nor was he the Greek Zeus or the

involved animal sacrifice and prayer. Sacrifices

Roman Jupiter. He was the God of the Jews, who

were performed in a sacred temple (located in

was so holy—so far removed from anything that

Jerusalem) by specially appointed priests. Portions

anyone could think or say—that even his name

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was not to be pronounced. Originally, this deity,

distinctive aspect of Judaism: their belief in the

like many others in the Greco-Roman world, was a

pact that God had made with Israel, or, using their

local god who was worshipped in the land of Judea

own term, the covenant.

(or Judah, as it was earlier called). Those who worshipped this God were the people who lived there,

the Judeans, whence we get the term “Jew.”

The Covenant: Israel’s Pact with Its God

About 550 years before Jesus, a large number of

Most Jews were committed to the belief that the

the Judeans were forced to leave their homeland

one true God had entered into a special relation—

because of a military, political, and economic crisis

ship with them in the ancient past. God had cho—

spawned by the invasion of the Babylonians. Many

sen Israel from among all the other nations of the

of those who relocated in places like Babylonia and

earth to be his special people. As part of his agree—

Egypt retained their belief in the God of their

ment with them, he promised that he, the creator

homeland and continued to worship him in the

and sustainer of all things, would protect and

ancient ways, maintaining the various customs fol—

defend them in all their adversities.

lowed in Judea—except, of course, that they could

Jews had ancient stories that told how God had

not worship in the Temple in Jerusalem (neither,

fulfilled this promise. The most important were

though, could the Jerusalemites themselves for the

stories connected with the Exodus of the children

better part of a century, as the building lay in ruin).

of Israel from their slavery in Egypt, stories that

Hence, by the Greco-Roman period being a Jew

eventually came to be embodied in the Jewish

meant worshipping the God of the Judeans, that is,

Scriptures. According to the ancient accounts,

the God of Israel. Jews scattered throughout the

Israel had been maliciously subjected to forced

world, away from Judea, were said to live in the

labor for 400 years. God heard their cries and sent

“Diaspora,” a term that literally means “dispersion.”

a savior, Moses, whose miraculous deeds com—

By the time of Jesus, there were far more Jews in the

pelled the king of Egypt to release them from

Diaspora than in Palestine. By some estimates, Jews

bondage. Thus God delivered his people from

comprised 7 percent of the total population of the

slavery, destroying the powerful Egyptian army in

Roman empire, which is usually set at around 60

the process, and brought them through trial and

million in the first century. Only a fraction of these

tribulation to the Promised Land. After they did

lived in the Jewish homeland. Some scholars cal—

battle with the nations who possessed the land,

culate that in the days of Jesus, twice as many Jews

they entered in and became a great nation.

lived in Egypt as in all of Palestine itself.

In light of God’s actions on their behalf, Jews

Most of the Jews in the Diaspora stopped

maintained that he had chosen them and made a

speaking Hebrew, the ancient tongue of Judea.

covenant with them to be their God. That was his

By the second century before Jesus, many Jews

side of the agreement. In exchange, Jews were to

read (or heard) their Scriptures only in Greek

obey his laws, laws pertaining to how they were to

translation (see box 1.2), the so-called

worship him and behave toward one another. As

Septuagint translation.

we will see, Jews as a rule did not consider this Law

Thus a distinctive feature of Jews around the

of God an onerous burden. Quite the contrary, the

world was that they did not worship a god of their

Law was God’s greatest gift to his people. The

own locality but the one God of their distant

existence of this divinely given Law, and the Jews’

homeland, the God of Israel, and no other.

commitment to follow it, is then a third distinc—

Moreover, they claimed that this God had shown

tive aspect of this religion.

them special favor. For most non-Jews this was

thought to be an audacious claim (even though

Romans, as we have seen, made similar claims

The Law: Israel’s Covenantal Obligations

about their own gods). Jews nonetheless main—

The English word “law” is a rather wooden trans—

tained that the one God, the creator of heaven and

lation of the Hebrew term “Torah,” which is per—

earth, was uniquely their God. Hence, the second

haps better rendered “guidance” or “direction.”

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Ancient Jews sometimes used the word to refer to

ordinary. Jews were not to commit murder or steal

the set of laws that Moses received on Mount

or bear false witness, they were to make restitution

Sinai, as recorded in the books of Exodus,

when they or something they owned did damage to

Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. It was also

a neighbor, and they were to perform sacrifices to

used, though, to refer to these books themselves,

God, following certain set practices. Even though

along with their companion volume Genesis.

other cults did not have written rules and regula—

These are the heart and soul of the Jewish

tions governing ethical behavior, there was nothing

Scriptures; today they are also sometimes called

unusual in people wanting to encourage such activ—

the “Pentateuch” (meaning “the five scrolls”).

ities. Other Jewish laws, however, did strike out—

These books record the Jewish traditions of cre—

siders as peculiar. Jews, for example, were com—

ation and primeval history, including the stories

manded to circumcise their baby boys—an act that

about Adam and Eve, Noah’s ark, and the Tower

they interpreted as the “sign of the covenant,” for it

of Babel, as well as the stories surrounding the

showed that they (or at least the males among

Jewish Patriarchs and Matriarchs: Abraham and

them) were distinct from all other nations as God’s

Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Leah and

chosen people. Even though several other peoples

Rachel, and the twelve fathers of the twelve tribes

(such as Egyptians) also practised circumcision,

of Israel, that is, Judah and his brothers. In addi—

Jews in the empire were occasionally maligned for

tion, they narrate the traditions about Moses, the

it, as the practice seemed to most outsiders to

Exodus from Egypt, and the wanderings in the

involve nothing short of forced mutilation.

wilderness prior to the entry into the Promised

Jews were also commanded not to work on the

Land. In particular, they contain the actual laws

seventh day of the week, the Sabbath, but to keep

that God is said to have delivered to Moses on

it holy. Even though pagans observed periodic fes—

Mount Sinai after the Exodus from Egypt, laws

tivals in honor of their own gods, it was otherwise

that were to govern the worship of the Jews and

unheard of to take a weekly vacation from work.

their actions within their community, including,

For the Jews this was a great good: for one day in

for example, the Ten Commandments.

seven they could relax from their labors with fami—

Christians in the modern period frequently

ly and friends, enjoy a special meal, and join in a

misunderstand the intent and purpose of this

communal service of worship to their God. To

Jewish Law. It is not the case that ancient Jews (or

some pagan observers, however, the custom showed

modern ones, for that matter) generally thought

that Jews were naturally lazy. Other laws that led to

that they had to keep all of the laws in order to

widespread derision involved the Jews’ dietary

earn God’s favor. This was not a religion of works

restrictions. God had for some mysterious reason

in the sense that one had to follow a long list of

commanded Jews not to eat certain kinds of food,

do’s and don’ts in order to find salvation. Quite

including pork and shellfish, common foods among

the contrary, as recent scholars have increasingly

other peoples in the Mediterranean region. This

realized, ancient Jews were committed to follow—

struck many outsiders as bizarre and superstitious.

ing the Law because they had already been shown

Most Jews did not consider these laws (even the

favor by God. The Jews were chosen to be God’s

dietary ones) to be picayune requirements that few

special people, and the Law was given to show

people wanted to follow and that nobody could.

them how to live up to this calling. For this rea—

For comparison, consider the ancient Jewish legal

son, keeping the Law was not a dreaded task that

code in light of our own. We too, for example,

everyone hated; Jews typically considered the Law

have laws against consuming certain edible sub—

a great joy to uphold.

stances (especially certain liquids, powders, and

The Law consisted of rules pertaining to both

tablets). And our own legal system is far more

cultic and communal life regulations on how to

complicated than anything available to the

worship God properly and on how to live with one’s

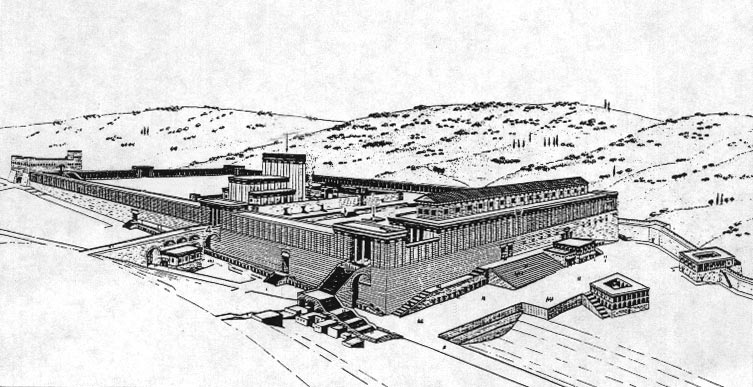
ancient Jew, indeed far more complicated than the

neighbor. In the context of the first century, most

average citizen can possibly understand (just con—

of these laws would not have seemed out of the

sider our tax laws!). By comparison with modern



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Figure 2.9 A pictorial reconstruction of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem.

law, the law embodied in the Jewish Torah was not

come to perform cultic acts in his honor and in

particularly harsh or onerous or complicated. And

hopes of receiving divine benefits as a result. At

for ancient Jews it was not the law of political

the same time, the Jewish Temple was known to be

bureaucrats; it was the law of God. Keeping it was

one of the grandest in the world of antiquity, spo—

a great joy, because doing so showed that the Jews

ken of with praise and admiration even by those

were the elect people of God.

who were not among its devotees. In the days of

Jesus, the Temple complex encompassed an area

roughly 500 yards by 325 yards, large enough, as

Temple and Synagogue:

one modern scholar has pointed out, to enclose

Israel’s Places of Worship

twenty-five football fields (see Sanders 1992).

There were two particularly important institutions

From the outside, its stone walls rose 100 feet from

for Jewish worship in the first century: the Temple

the street, as high as a modern ten-story building.

in Jerusalem, where the animal sacrifices so central

No mortar had been used in its construction;

to the prescriptions of the Torah were to be per—

instead, the stones, some of them 50 yards in

formed, and the local synagogues, where Jews

length, had been carefully cut to fit together neat—

throughout the empire could worship God by

ly. The gates into the temple were 45 feet high by

studying and discussing the Law in the context of

44 feet wide (with two doors, 22 feet wide, in

communal gathering and prayers.

each); one ancient source indicates that 200 men

were required to close them each evening. From

The Jewish Temple.

Jewish practices of animal

all of our ancient descriptions, the Temple com—

sacrifice do not appear to have been so different

plex appears to have been a fantastically beautiful

from those of other ancient religions. Moreover,

set of buildings made with the best materials

the Jewish Temple itself was not unlike other tem—

money could buy, including gold, which overlaid

ples, it was a sacred structure in which the deity

extensive portions of the structures. As you might

was believed to dwell, where worshippers could

imagine, its construction was an immense feat;

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when it was completed in 63 C.E., 18,000 local

gions in the empire. Apart from the details of the

workers were reportedly left unemployed. It was

cultic ceremonies (which, of course, differed to

destroyed just seven years later at the climax of the

some degree in all ancient religions), what made

Jewish war against Rome, never to be built again.

this Temple unlike others was the fact that,

One of the things that made the Jerusalem

according to its adherents, it was the only one to

Temple unique in the Greco-Roman world is that

be built to their God, who dwelt there in holiness

in the opinion of most Jews of the period, it was

apart from any sacred image.

to be the only temple for the God of Israel.

Whereas numerous temples could be devoted to

The Synagogue.

Despite the fact that Jews from

any of the pagan gods, this God would receive

around the world paid an annual tax to support

sacrifices only in the Temple in Jerusalem. Jews

the Temple, most could not worship there on a

from around the world, even those who never set

regular basis. Indeed, many could not afford to

foot inside, paid an annual tax to help defray the

make a pilgrimage there, ever. For this reason,

costs of its upkeep and administration. In no

apparently, centuries before Jesus—scholars de—

small measure, this special reverence for the place

bate when, exactly—Jews in the Diaspora devised

derived from the belief that God himself dwelt in

an alternative mode of worship, one that did not

the Temple, in a special room called the Holy of

involve sacrifice of animals but focused instead on

Holies. The belief that a god might actually be

discussing the sacred traditions of the Torah and

present in a holy place was widespread throughout

praying to the God of Israel. These activities took

antiquity. In most ancient temples, however, the

place in community, as Jews came together on the

deity was present in the cult image, or “idol,” kept

Sabbath in either a home or a separate meeting

in a sacred room. The sacred room in the

place, sometimes a freestanding building, usually

Jerusalem Temple, on the other hand, was com—

under the leadership of the more highly educated

pletely empty. Since the Jewish God was so holy,

and literate of their members. The Scriptures were

unlike all else that is, he explicitly forbade any

read and discussed and set prayers were said.

images to be made of him.

These gatherings were called “synagogues,” from

No one could enter this holiest of rooms except

the Greek word for “gathering together,” a term

the Jewish high priest, and he did so only once a

that eventually came to refer to the building in

year on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur),

which the meetings took place.

when he performed a sacrifice for the sins of the

By the time of Jesus there were synagogues

people. The Holy of Holies was thus the most

wherever there were communities of Jews in the

sacred spot in the Temple and the rest of the build—

empire, both in Palestine and abroad. In many

ing complex was structured so as to emphasize the

respects these were not unlike the gathering places

holiness that emanated from its center. Before the

of like-minded individuals among non-Jews,

Holy of Holies was the sanctuary, into which only

where certain religious activities occurred and

certain priests could go; around it was the court of

prayers were said. Greco-Roman “associations”

the priests, which allowed only priests and their

were commonly organized, for example, for work—

assistants, the Levites. Farther out was the court

ers of the same trade in a locale, who might share

of the Israelites, into which only Jewish men could

a range of common interests. And it was not

go to bring their offerings to the priests. Beyond

unusual to find other associations organized for the

that was the court of (Jewish) women, who were

purpose of periodic social gatherings, where mem—

not allowed any nearer to the inner sanctum

bers would pool their funds to provide ample food

(Jewish men could assemble there as well), and

and drink and, perhaps strangely to the modern

finally beyond that came the court of the Gentiles,

observer, provide, through a reserve, a proper bur—

where even non-Jews could congregate.

ial for their deceased members.

Thus, the idea of a temple and the activities of

Rarely, though, would such organizations,

prayer and sacrifice that transpired there were not

whether trade associations or funeral clubs,

so different from what one could find in other reli—

include men, women, and children; rarely would



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Figure 2.10

The remains of the synagogue in Capernaum; the surviving building represents a structure that was built on the spot where Jesus himself would have visited, several centuries earlier.

they meet together every week; and rarely would

described by a famous Jewish historian living at

they devote themselves principally to the purpos—

the time, Josephus (whom we will meet repeated—

es of prayer and discussion of sacred traditions. To

ly throughout our study). I will not devote a sub—

this extent, Jewish synagogues were distinctive.

stantial discussion to these Jewish groups here,

since we will be considering them at greater length

in Chapter 15, when we discuss their importance

Forms of Early Judaism

for understanding the life of Jesus himself. But I

Even though Judaism as a whole had distinctive

can at least say a brief word about them to give a

characteristics that set it off, in some respects,

sense of the diversity of early Judaism. The four

from other religions of the Greco-Roman world, it

groups that Josephus mentions (there were others

would be a mistake to think that all Jews agreed on

and most Jews didn't belong to any of them) were

every aspect of their religion. Quite the contrary,

the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Essenes, and a

there were wide-ranging disagreements on funda—

group that Josephus calls the “fourth” philosophy.

mental issues, at least as sharp as the disagree—

The Pharisees were widely known as sincere

ments that one sees today in both Judaism (e.g.,

and pious Jews who were intent above all else on

between the “orthodox” and “reformed”) and

keeping the Law that God had given Moses. As

Christianity (e.g., Roman Catholics and Southern

we will see, the later aspersions cast upon them for

Baptists). One way to highlight these differences

being hypocrites is not a fair representation of

is to give a quick overview of some of the “sects”

their own goals and aspirations; to join the

or “parties” of Judaism in the first century, as

Pharisees, Jews didn’t have to agree to be hyp-

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ocrites (there was no “hypocritic oath”). They

ences of their environment, the Essenes formed

did, though, have to strive to keep all of God’s law

monastic-like communities in which they could

as carefully as possible. The problem was that in

preserve their own purity, doing what God wanted

many instances God’s commandments were not

apart from the evil that encompassed the rest of

spelled out in precise detail. Thus, for example,

Judaism and the outside world, anticipating that

God commanded the Israelites not to work on the

God would soon intervene on their behalf to over—

Sabbath, but he did not indicate what, exactly,

throw the forces of evil (including the evil Jewish

“work” entailed. The Pharisees debated issues

leadership in Jerusalem) and to set up his good

such as this, and gave rulings that were passed

reign on earth. As we will see later, even though

down by word of mouth, traditions that explained

the Essenes are never mentioned in the New

how the laws of Moses were to be kept. In the

Testament, we are particularly well informed

Pharisees’ opinion, only those who followed these

about them because they are the ones who pro—

rulings, or “oral laws,” could be assured of having

duced the Dead Sea Scrolls (see pp. 218–21).

kept the “written laws” of Moses. For the most

The sect that Josephus calls the “fourth phi-

part, Pharisees appear to have been held in high

losophy” (to distinguish it from these other three)

honor for such rigorous piety.

comprised several different groups of Jews who

The Sadducees were a group of aristocratic

supported the use of force to overthrow the foreign

Jews; they tended to be wealthy and well connect—

powers that ruled the land God had given to the

ed. They did not subscribe to the oral laws of the

Jews. For them, the land was theirs by divine

Pharisees and had a number of wide-ranging dis—

right, and God wanted them to take it back for his

agreements with them over particular theological

own sake. These groups of Jews, in other words,

and practical issues (e.g., unlike the Pharisees,

favored an armed rebellion against the Roman

they did not believe in a future resurrection of the

authorities. As we will see, one of these groups

dead). The Sadducees held strictly to the written

eventually had its way. A major war broke out in

Law of Moses, as set forth in the Torah; in partic—

66 C.E., about 35 years after Jesus’ death, leading to

ular, they understood the Torah to teach the

a massive slaughter of Jews, the destruction of the

importance of the proper worship of God in the

Temple, and the razing of Jerusalem.

Temple in Jerusalem. It appears that most of the

chief priests who ran the temple and its sacrifices

were aligned with the Sadducees. Moreover, since

The Jewish Context for the

the Sadducees represented the local aristocracy in

Traditions about Jesus

Jerusalem, it was they who had the most direct

Despite the wide-ranging differences among

connection with the Roman authorities who ruled

Jews in the first century, they did appear to share

the land. In particular, it appears that the

certain things in common, as discussed earlier in

Sadducaic “high priest” (the ultimate authority

this chapter. They all agreed that there was one

over the Temple) served as a liaison between the

true God, the God of Israel, who had made a

Jewish people in Judea and the Roman governor.

covenant with his people and given them his law.

The Essenes had serious, and sometimes vio—

This law was to be obeyed for Israel to stay within

lent, disagreements with both the Pharisees and

its special relationship with God, who was to be

the Sadducees. They considered the Pharisees to

worshiped through prayer and sacrifices.

be too lax in their oral laws (they thought that the

I should stress, though, that even in its distinc—

Pharisees worked too hard to find loopholes that

tiveness, Judaism was not altogether unlike other

would allow them not to do what the Law literal—

religions of the empire. As we have seen, for

ly commanded); and they thought the Sadducees

example, even some pagans could accept the

were corrupt leaders who misunderstood (or sim—

notion of monotheism. They also accepted that

ply disobeyed) God’s laws for running the temple

the gods had made special provisions for certain

cult. In fact, they thought the Sadducees had irre—

people (for example, the state gods of Rome), that

versibly defiled the temple and its system of sacri—

they had given certain commandments (such as

fices. In order to escape the corrupting influ—

how to worship them), and that they were to be

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THE NEW TESTAMENT: A HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 2.6

Other Jewish Miracle-Working Sons of God

Jesus was not the only one thought to be a miracle-working son of God, even within Judaism in his own day. His two most famous peers were probably Honi the “circle-drawer”

and Hanina ben Dosa, both of whom are known through the writings of later Jewish rabbis.

Honi was a Galilean teacher who died about a 100 years before Jesus. He was given his nickname because of a tradition that he prayed to God for much-needed rain, and drew a circle around himself on the ground, declaring that he would not leave it until God granted his request. Lucky for him, God complied. Later sources indicate that Honi was a revered teacher and a miracle worker, who called himself the son of God. Like Jesus, he was martyred outside of the walls of Jerusalem around the time of Passover. To punish the Jews who had brought about his death, God sent a powerful windstorm that devastated their crops.

Hanina ben Dosa (5 son of Dosa) was a rabbi in Galilee in the middle of the first century C.E., just after the time of Jesus. He was famous as a righteous and powerful worker of miracles, who (like Honi) could intervene with God to make the rain fall, who had the power to heal the sick, and who could confront demons and force them to do his bidding. Like Jesus, he was reputedly called the Son of God by a voice coming from the heavens.

Both of these miracle-working sons of God are portrayed somewhat differently from Jesus, of course (most of their miracles, for example, were achieved through prayer, rather than through their own power); but they are also different in significant ways from each other (Jesus and Hanina, for example, are both portrayed as exorcists, whereas Honi is not). What is most interesting, though, is that anyone who called Jesus a miracle-working Jewish rabbi, the Son of God, would have been easily understood: other righteous Jews, both before Jesus and afterwards, were portrayed similarly.

honored in certain places (temples) in certain

ing a divine revelation or performing a spectacular

ways, including prescribed prayers and sacrifices.

miracle. Moreover, there are accounts in Judaism of

Thus Judaism should be seen as one of the Greco—

human beings who appeared to be far more than

Roman religions, distinct and yet similar to the

human. For example, Moses was said in the Hebrew

others, just as all religions of that world were dis—

Scriptures to have performed miracles through the

tinct and yet similar to one another.

power of God (e.g., sending the plagues against

There is one further similarity between Judaism

Egypt), the prophet named Elisha reportedly healed

and the pagan religions of its environment, a simi—

the blind and multiplied loaves for the hungry, and

larity of particular importance to the traditions

Elijah overwhelmed his opponents through the

about Jesus that circulated throughout this world.

power of God, supplied food and drink to those in

Just as Judaism shared with other religions the

need, and even raised the dead.

notion that there were other divine beings of lesser

Outside of the Hebrew Scriptures we know of

majesty and power than the one true God, so too it

Jews who were thought to stand in a special relation

maintained that these other divine beings some—

with God. These Jewish holy men, sometimes called

times appeared to people in human form. There are

the sons of God, reportedly could heal the sick and

records of such appearances in the Jewish Scriptures,

calm the storm. Some Jews believed that God spoke

as when angels came and spoke to humans, impart—

directly and intimately to them. The later rabbis

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# CHAPTER 2

THE WORLD OF EARLY CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS

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sometimes told stories of such holy men, some of

2.6). Thus the stories about Jesus, the miracle-work—

whom lived near the time of Jesus, also in Galilee.

ing Son of God, would have made sense not only to

For example, Hanina ben Dosa and Honi the “circle—

pagans, who were familiar with accounts of divine

drawer” were famous among the rabbis for their

men, but to Jews as well, whether in Palestine or the

memorable teachings and miraculous deeds (see box

diaspora.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Anthologies of Texts

Studies of the Greco-Roman World

Barrett, C. K., ed. The New Testament Background: Selected

”Pagan” Religions

Documents. 2d. ed. New York: Harper & Row, 1989.

Howatson, M. C., ed. Oxford Companion to Classical

A standard collection of Jewish and pagan texts rele-

Literature. 2d ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press,

vant to the study of the New Testament.

1989. For quick reference to names, myths, literary

Cartlidge, David R., and David L. Dungan, eds. Documents

works, events, and other aspects of the ancient Greek

for the Study of the Gospels. 2d ed. Philadelphia:

and Roman worlds, this work is an indispensable tool

Fortress, 1994. Presents a valuable selection of ancient

for beginning students.

literary texts that are closely parallel to the New

Lane Fox, Robin. Pagans and Christians. New York: Alfred Testament Gospels, including portions of Philostratus’s

A. Knopf, 1987. A long but fascinating discussion of

Life of Apollonius.

the relationship of pagans and Christians during the

Charlesworth, James H., ed., The Old Testament

first centuries of Christianity, valuable especially for its

Pseudepigrapha. 2 vols. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, brilliant sketch of what it meant to be a pagan in the

1983, 1985. The most complete collection of non—

second and third centuries of the Common Era.

canonical writings of early Judaism from before and

MacMullen, Ramsey. Paganism in the Roman Empire. New

around the time of the New Testament, with full and

Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1981. An authorita—

informative introductions.

tive discussion of the nature of Roman religion, for

Lane, Eugene, and Ramsey MacMullen, eds. Paganism

somewhat more advanced students.

and Christianity: 100–425 C.E.: A Sourcebook.

Turcan, Robert. The Cults of the Roman Empire. Oxford: Philadelphia: Fortress, 1992. A handy anthology of

Blackwell, 1996. A recent and reliable overview of

ancient texts that deal specifically with religion in the

ancient Roman religion by a seasoned expert in the field.

Greco-Roman world.

Lefkowitz, Mary R., and Maureen B. Fant, eds. Women’s

Early Judaism

Lives in Greece and Rome: A Source Book in Translation.

Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982. A

Cohen, Shaye. From the Maccabbees to the Mishnah.

superb collection of ancient texts illuminating all the

Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987. Perhaps the

major aspects of women’s lives in the Greco-Roman

best place for beginning students to turn for a clear

world.

overview of early Judaism.

Meyer, Marvin, ed. The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook.

Kraft, Robert, and George Nicklesburg, eds. Early Judaism

San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987. An anthology of

and its Modern Interpreters. Philadelphia: Fortress

ancient literary texts that discuss the mystery cults,

Atlanta: Scholars, 1986. A collection of significant

with helpful introductions.

essays on major aspects of early Judaism, for more

Shelton, Jo-Ann, ed. As the Romans Did: A Source Book in

advanced students.

Roman Social History. New York: Oxford University

Sanders, E. P. Judaism Practice and Belief, 63 B.C.E.–66

Press, 1988. A very useful anthology of ancient texts

C.E. London: SCM Press; Philadelphia: Trinity Press

dealing with every major aspect of life in the Roman

International, 1992. A full, detailed, and authoritative

world, including religion.

account of what it meant to be a Jew immediately

Vermes, Geza, ed. T he Dead Sea Scrolls in English. 3d ed.

before and during the time of the New Testament.

Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1987. The most accessible

Sandmel, Samuel. Judaism and Christian Beginnings. New York: collection and translation of the Dead Sea Scrolls

Oxford University Press, 1978. An insightful introducto—

available in English, with a clear introduction.

ry sketch of early Judaism by a prominent Jewish scholar.

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THE NEW TESTAMENT: A HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

The Social World of Early Christianity

New Testament, by a scholar who tries to show the

Malherbe, Abraham. Social Aspects of Early Christianity. 2d importance of cultural anthropology for understanding

ed. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983. A clear and interest—

early Christianity.

ing treament of early Christianity from a socio-histor—

Stambaugh, J. E. and D. L. Balch. The New Testament in Its ical, rather than literary or theological, perspective;

Social Environment. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986.

ideal for beginning students.

A nice overview of major aspects of the social world of

Malina, Bruce J. The Social World of Jesus and the Gospels.

early Christianity, including discussions of ancient

London and New York: Routledge, 1996. An impor—

modes of communication and transportation, ancient

tant overview of the social and cultural milieu of the

economies, social classes, education, and urban life.

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# CHAPTER 3

The Traditions of Jesus in Their Greco-Roman Context

We have already touched on one of the ironies

names. Our principal concern at present involves

involved in the historical study of the New

a different issue, namely how and where these

Testament. If we choose to begin our study not

anonymous authors acquired their stories about

with the earliest New Testament author, Paul, but

Jesus. Here we are in the fortunate position of

with the person on whom his religion is in some

having some definite information, for one of these

sense based, Jesus, then we are compelled to begin

authors deals directly with this matter. Luke (we

by examining books that were written after Paul.

do not know his real name) begins his Gospel by

Indeed, some of these books were among the last

mentioning earlier written accounts of Jesus’ life

New Testament books to be produced. To reach

and by indicating that both he and his predeces—

the beginning, we have to start near the end.

sors acquired their information from Christians

At the same time, even though the Gospels

who had told stories about him (Luke 1:1–4).

themselves were written relatively late, they pre—

That is to say, these writings were based to some

serve traditions about Jesus that existed much ear—

extent on oral traditions, stories that had circulat—

lier, many of them circulating among Christians

ed among Christians from the time Jesus died to

long before Paul wrote his letters. Now that we

the moment the Gospel writers put pen to paper.

have discussed several important aspects of the

How much of an interval, exactly, was this?

Greco-Roman environment within which the

No one knows for certain when Jesus died, but

Christian religion was born and grew, we can

scholars agree that it was sometime around 30 C.E.

examine the traditions themselves, as embodied

In addition, most historians think that Mark was

near the end of the first century in the Gospels of

the first of our Gospels to be written, sometime

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and somewhat

between the mid 60s to early 70s. Matthew and

later in the Gospels ascribed to Peter and Thomas.

Luke were probably produced some ten or fifteen

How did these various authors acquire their tradi—

years later, perhaps around 80 or 85. John was

tions about Jesus?

written perhaps ten years after that, in 90 or 95.

These are necessarily rough estimates, but almost

all scholars agree within a few years.

ORAL TRADITIONS

Perhaps the most striking thing about these

BEHIND THE GOSPELS

dates for the historian is the long interval between

Jesus’ death and the earliest accounts of his life.

For the moment, we will leave aside the question

Our first written narratives of Jesus (i.e., the

of who these authors were (see “Some Additional

Gospels) appear to date from thirty-five to sixty—

Reflections” at the end of the chapter), except to

five years after the fact. This may not seem like a

point out that all of the New Testament Gospels

long time, but think about it in modern terms. For

are anonymous; their authors did not sign their

the shortest interval, (the gap between Jesus and

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30–120 C.E. (oral traditions about Jesus)

4 B.C.E.

30 C.E.

50–60

65–70

80–85

95

120

Life of Jesus.

Letters of Paul

Mark

Luke, Matthew

John

Thomas, Peter, etc.

Figure 3.1 Time Line of the Early Christian Movement.

Mark), this would be like having the first written

To be sure, the Christians did not take the

record of Eisenhower’s presidency appear today.

world by storm. As we will see later in Chapter

For the longest interval (between Jesus and John),

26, Roman officials in the provinces appear to

it would be like having stories about a famous

have taken little notice of the Christians until the

preacher from the early years of the Great

second century; strikingly, there is not a single ref—

Depression show up in print for the first time this

erence to Jesus or his followers in pagan literature

week. We should not assume that the Gospel

of any kind during the first century of the

accounts are necessarily unreliable simply because

Common Era. Nonetheless, the Christian religion

they are late, but the dates should give us pause.

quietly and persistently spread, not converting

What was happening over these thirty, forty, fifty,

millions of people, but almost certainly converting

or sixty years between Jesus’ death and the writing

thousands, in numerous locations throughout the

of the Gospels?

entire Mediterranean.

Without a doubt, the most important thing

What did Christians tell people in order to con—

that was happening for early Christianity was the

vert them? Our evidence here is frustratingly

spread of the religion from its inauspicious begin—

sparse: examples of missionary sermons in the

nings as a tiny sect of Jesus’ Jewish followers in

book of Acts and some intimations of Paul’s

Jerusalem—the Gospels indicate that there were

preaching in his own letters (e.g., 1 Thess 1:9–10).

eleven men and several women who remained

We cannot tell how representative these are.

faithful to him after his crucifixion, say a total of

Moreover, there are good reasons for thinking that

fifteen or twenty people altogether—to its status

most of the Christian mission was conducted not

as a world religion enthusiastically supported by

through public preaching, say on a crowded street

Christian believers in major urban areas through—

corner, but privately, as individuals who had come

out the Roman Empire. Missionaries like Paul

to believe that Jesus was the Son of God told oth—

actively propagated the faith, converting Jews and

ers about their newfound faith and tried to con—

Gentiles to faith in Christ as the Son of God, who

vince them to adopt it as well.

was crucified for the sins of the world and then

Since, in the Greco-Roman world, religion was

raised by God from the dead.

a way of securing the favor of the gods, we are prob—

By the end of the first century, this tiny group

ably not too far afield to think that if faith in Jesus

of Jesus’ disciples had so multiplied that there were

were known to produce beneficial, or even mirac—

believing communities in cities of Judea and

ulous, results, then people might be persuaded to

Samaria and Galilee, probably in the region East

convert. If a Christian testified, for example, that

of Jordan; in Syria, Cilicia, and Asia Minor; in

praying to Jesus, or through Jesus to God, had

Macedonia and Achaia (modern day Greece); in

healed her daughter, or that a representative of

Italy; and possibly in Spain. By this time

Jesus had cast out an evil spirit, or that the God of

Christian churches may have sprung up in the

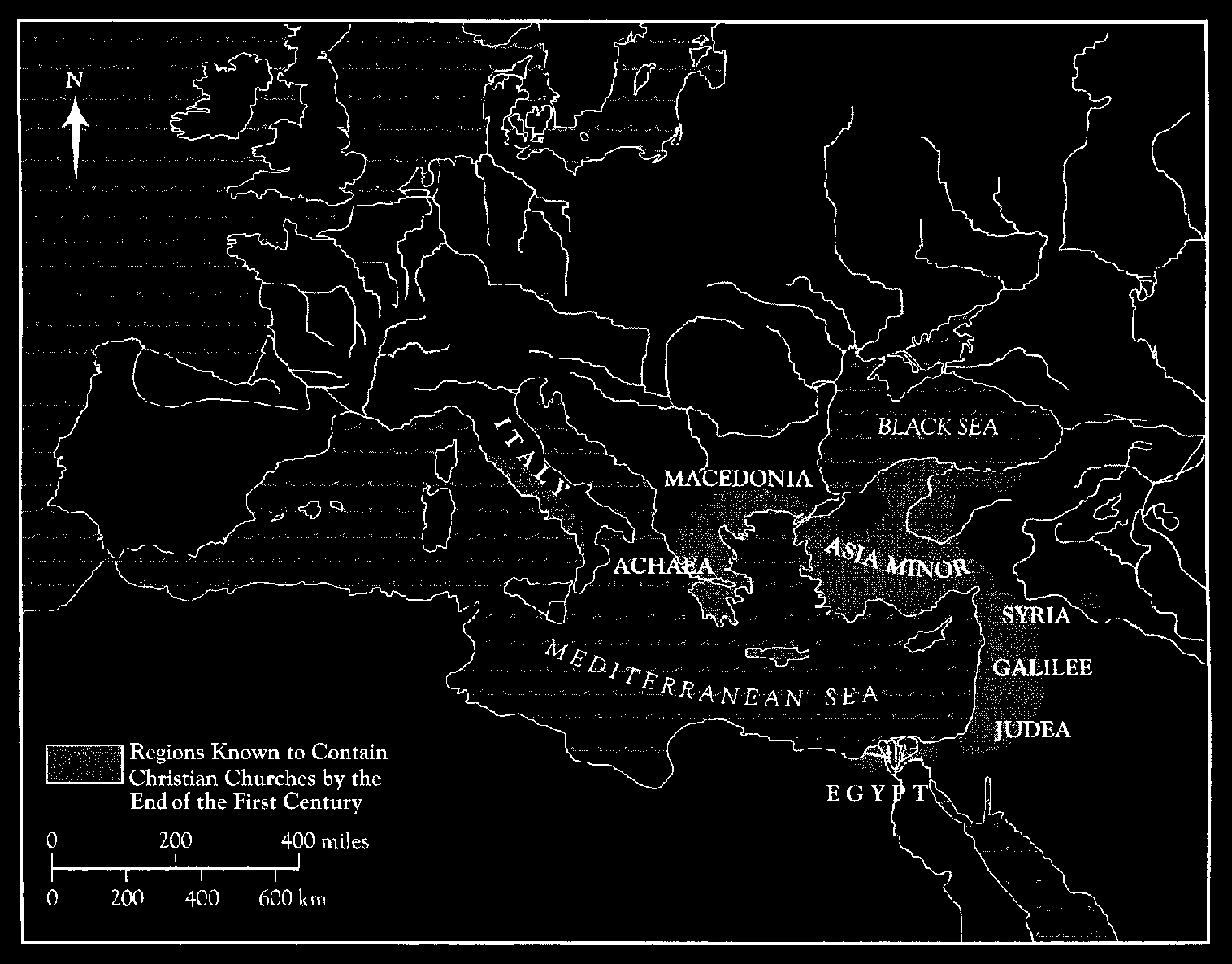
Jesus had miraculously provided food for a starving

Southern Mediterranean, probably in Egypt and

family, this might spark interest in her neighbor or

possibly in North Africa.

coworker. Those with an interest in Jesus would



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# CHAPTER 3

THE TRADITIONS OF JESUS IN THEIR GRECO-ROMAN CONTEXT

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Figure 3.2 Christian Churches in Existence by 100 C.E.

want to learn more about him. Who was he?

doning their own, since Jews maintained that this

When did he live? What did he do? How did he

One alone was the true God. Once the converts

die? The Christian, in turn, would be both com—

did so, they could join the Christian community by

pelled and gratified to tell stories about Jesus to

being baptized and receiving some rudimentary

anyone interested.

instruction. Presumably it was the leaders of the

Such opportunities to tell stories about Jesus

Christian congregation who performed the bap—

must have presented themselves throughout major

tisms and taught the converts. These leaders would

urban areas of the Mediterranean for decades prior

have been the earliest people to adopt the new reli—

to the writing of the Gospels. Otherwise there is

gion in the locality or people with special gifts for

no way to account for the spread of the religion in

leadership, possibly the more highly educated

an age that did not enjoy the benefits of telecom—

among them, who were therefore best suited to giv—

munication. When people had heard enough

ing instruction.

(however much that might have been), they

We do not know exactly what the leaders

might have decided to believe in Jesus. This

would have told new converts, but we can imagine

would have involved, among other things, adopt—

that they would have imparted some of the essening aspects of Jesus’ own religion, which for non—

tials of the faith: information about the one true

Jews meant accepting the Jewish God and aban—

God, his creation, and his son Jesus. To some



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extent, this would have involved telling yet other

next. They were told in different countries, in Egypt,

stories about who Jesus was, about how he came

Judea, Galilee, Syria, and Cilicia, throughout Asia

into the world, about what he taught, what he did,

Minor, Macedonia, Achaia, Italy, and Spain. They

why he suffered, and how he died. Stories about

were told in different contexts, for different reasons,

Jesus were thus being told throughout the

at different times. They were told in a language

Mediterranean for decades, both to win people to

other than Jesus’ own (he spoke Aramaic, while

faith and to edify those who had been brought in.

most of the converts spoke Greek), often by people

They were told in evangelism, in instruction, and

who were not Jews, almost always by people

probably in services of worship. The stories would

who were not eyewitnesses and had never met an

have, necessarily, been passed on by word of

eyewitness.

mouth, since, as we’ve seen, the Gospels had not

Let me illustrate the process with a hypotheti—

yet been written. But who told the stories?

cal example. Suppose I am a Greek-speaking wor—

Unfortunately, we do not know the precise iden—

shipper of the goddess Artemis from Ephesus. I listity of those who were telling the stories about Jesus.

ten to a stranger passing through town, who tells

Was every story told by one of the apostles?

of the wonders of Jesus, of his miracles and super—

Impossible. The mission goes on for years and years

natural wisdom. I become intrigued. When I hear

and years all over the map. Were the stories told by

that this wandering stranger has performed mira—

other eyewitnesses? Equally impossible. They must

cles in Jesus’ name— my neighbor’s son was ill, but

have been told, then, for the most part, by people

two days after the stranger prayed over him, he

who had not been there to see them happen, who

became well—I decide to inquire further. He tells

had heard them from other people, who also had not

of how Jesus performed great miracles and of how,

been there to see them happen. The stories were

even though wrongly accused by the Romans for

passed on by word of mouth from one convert to the

sedition and crucified, he was raised by God from

F P O

Figure 3.3 Stories of the power of the gods to heal the sick were widespread in the Greco-Roman world. Here we see a relief from the temple of the healing god Asclepius in the city of Piraeus, showing the god and his female assistant (on the right) curing a sleeping patient.

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# CHAPTER 3

THE TRADITIONS OF JESUS IN THEIR GRECO-ROMAN CONTEXT

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the dead. Based on everything I’ve heard, I decide

(some 2,500 miles across), with thousands of partic—

to forego my devotion to Artemis. I put my faith in

ipants—from different backgrounds, with different

Jesus, get baptized, and join the local community.

concerns, and in different contexts—some of whom

I take a trip for business to nearby Smyrna.

have to translate the stories into different languages

While there, I tell friends about my new faith and

(see box 3.1).

the stories I’ve learned about my new Lord. Three

The situation, in fact, was even more compli—

of them join me in becoming Christian. They

cated than that. People in the Christian commu—

begin to discuss these things with their neighbors

nities that sprang up around the Mediterranean,

and friends. Mostly they are rejected, but they

like people just about everywhere, encountered

acquire several converts, enough to come together

severe difficulties in living their daily lives and

once a week for worship, to discuss their faith, and

thus sought help and direction from on high. The

to tell more stories. These new converts tell their

traditions about Jesus were part of the bedrock of

own families the stories, converting some of them,

these communities; his actions were a model that

who then take the word yet further afield.

Christians tried to emulate; his words were teach—

And so it goes. As the new converts tell the

ings they obeyed. Given this context, is it con—

stories, the religion grows, and most of the people

ceivable that Christians could have made up a

telling the stories are not eyewitnesses. Indeed

story that proved useful in a particular situation?

they have never laid eyes on an eyewitness or any—

Creating a story is not far removed from changing

one else who has.

one, and presumably people would have good reaThis example does not imply that if we had

sons for doing both.

accounts based on eyewitnesses, they would neces—

Christians would not have to be deceitful or

sarily be accurate. Even the testimonies of

malicious to invent a story about something that

eyewitnesses can, and often do, conflict. But the

Jesus said or did; they would not even have to be

scenario I have painted does help to explain why

conscious of doing so. All sorts of stories about

there are so many differences in the stories about

people are made up without ill intent, and some—

Jesus that have survived from the early years of

times stories are told about persons that we know

Christianity. These stories were circulated year

are not historically accurate: ask any well-known

after year after year, primarily by people who had

person who is widely talked about, a politician,

believed their entire lives that the gods were

religious leader, or university professor.

sometimes present on earth, who knew of miracle

workers who had appeared to benefit the human

race, who had themselves heard fantastic stories

The Nature of the Gospel Traditions

about this Jewish holy man Jesus, and who were try—

It does not appear that the authors of the early

ing to convert others to their faith or to edify those

Gospels were eyewitnesses to the events that they

who had already been converted. Furthermore,

narrate. But they must have gotten their stories

nearly all of these story tellers had no independent

from somewhere. Indeed, one of them acknowl—

knowledge of what really happened. It takes little

edges that he has heard stories about Jesus and read

imagination to realize what happened to the stories.

earlier accounts (Luke 1:1–4). In the opinion of

You are probably familiar with the old birthday

most New Testament scholars, it is possible that in

party game “telephone.” A group of kids sits in a cir—

addition to preserving genuine historical recollec—

cle, the first tells a brief story to the one sitting next

tions about what Jesus actually said and did, these

to her, who tells it to the next, and to the next, and

authors also narrated stories that had been modi—

so on, until it comes back full circle to the one who

fied, or even invented, in the process of retelling.

started it. Invariably, the story has changed so much

The notion that the Gospels contain at least

in the process of retelling that everyone gets a good

some stories that had been changed over the years

laugh. Imagine this same activity taking place, not

is not pure speculation; in fact, we have hard evi—

in a solitary living room with ten kids on one after—

dence of this preserved in the Gospels themselves

noon, but over the expanse of the Roman Empire

(we will examine some of this evidence in a

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moment). We also have reason to think that early

the facts of history. Even though we as twentieth—

Christians were not particularly concerned that sto—

century persons tend to think that something can—

ries about Jesus were being changed. Odd as it may

not be true unless it happened, ancient Christians,

seem to us, most believers appear to have been less

along with a lot of other ancient people, did not

concerned than we are about what we would call

think this way. For them, something could be true

SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 3.1 Orality and Literacy in the Ancient World

Nearly everyone we come in contact with can read and write on at least an elementary level; most can read the editorial page, for instance. Recent studies have shown, however, that things have not always been this way, that widespread literacy is a purely modern phenomenon. Preindustrial societies had neither the incentive nor the means to provide mass education in literacy for their children. They had no real incentive because the means of production didn’t require that everyone read, and they couldn’t afford the expense of providing the necessary training in any case. Such societies were far more dependent on the spoken word than the written.

Even ancient Greece and Rome were largely oral cultures, despite the unreflective assumption held even among some scholars that these societies, which produced so many literary classics, must have been largely literate. We now know that most people in the Greco-Roman world could not read, let alone write. Estimates of the level of literacy vary, but the most recent studies have concluded that in the best of times (e.g., Athens in the days of Socrates), only 10 to 15 percent of the population (the vast majority of them males) could read and write at an elementary level. Moreover, in this world even literary texts were oral phenomena: books were made to be read out loud, often in public, so that a person usually “read” a book by hearing it read by someone else.

Interestingly, even as these societies developed a dependence on texts—for example, by using written tax receipts, contracts, and wills—they did not promote literacy for the masses.

Those who were literate did begin to hire out their services to those who were not, but this did not lead to a substantial increase in the number of literate people in society.

Until recently it has been commonly thought (again, even among scholars) that oral cultures could be counted on to preserve their traditions reliably, that people in such societies were diligent in remembering what they heard and could reproduce it accurately when asked about it. This, however, is another myth that has been exploded by recent studies of literacy.

We have now come to see that people in oral cultures typically do not share the modern concern for preserving traditions intact, and do not repeat them exactly the same way every time. On the contrary, the concern for verbal accuracy has been instilled in us by the phenomenon of mass literacy itself; since anyone now can check to see if a fact has been remembered correctly (by looking it up), we have developed a sense that traditions ought to remain invariable and unchanged. In most oral societies, however, traditions are understood to be malleable; that is, they are supposed to be changed and made relevant to the new situations in which they are cited.

The importance of these new studies should be obvious as we begin to reflect on the fate of the traditions about Jesus as they spread by word of mouth throughout the largely illiterate Greco-Roman world.

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# CHAPTER 3

THE TRADITIONS OF JESUS IN THEIR GRECO-ROMAN CONTEXT

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whether or not it happened. What mattered more

the retelling. Others were made up by Christians,

than historical fact was what we might call religious

possibly well-meaning Christians, at some point

or moral truth.

prior to the writing of the Gospels. But they all are

On one level, even modern people consider

meant to convey the truth, as the storyteller saw it,

“moral truth” to be more important than historical

about Jesus.

fact. That is, they will occasionally concede that

something can be true even if it didn’t happen.

Consider, for example, a story that every second

A Piece of Evidence

grader in the country has heard, the story of George

The evidence that stories about Jesus were

Washington and the cherry tree. As a young lad,

changed (or made up) in the process or retelling

George takes the axe to the tree in his father’s front

can be found in the stories themselves as they have

yard. When his father comes home and asks, “Who

come down to us in the Gospels. In numerous

cut down my cherry tree?” George confesses, “I can—

instances different Gospels tell the same story, but

not tell a lie. I did it.”

the stories differ in significant ways. Sometimes

Historians know that this never happened. In

these differences represent simple shifts in emphasis.

fact, the Christian minister who propagated the

At other times, however, they represent irreconcil—

story (known as “Parson Weems”) later admitted to

able conflicts. What is striking is that whether the

having made it up. Why then do we tell the story?

changes are reconcilable or not, they often point to

For one thing, the story stresses one of the ultimate

an attempt by some early Christian storyteller to

values that we claim as a country. We use the story

convey an important idea about Jesus. Here we will

to teach children that our country is rooted in

look at just one example; dozens could easily be

integrity. Who was George Washington? He was

cited. The point is that many of the earliest

the father of our nation. What kind of man was he?

Christians appear to have been willing to change a

He was an honest man, a man of integrity! Really?

historical fact to make a theological point.

How honest was he? Well, one time when he was

The illustration I have chosen concerns a small

a boy. . . . The point of the story? This country is

detail with profound implications—the day and

founded on honesty. It cannot tell a lie. In other

time of Jesus’ death, which are described differently

words, the story serves as a piece of national propa—

in the Gospels. All four Gospels of the New

ganda. I’m reasonably sure, at least, that it’s not a

Testament indicate that Jesus was crucified some—

story told to schoolchildren in Tehran.

time during Passover week, in Jerusalem, on orders

The account of George Washington and the

of the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, but there is

cherry tree is told for at least one other reason as

a slight discrepancy in the accounts. To understand

well, relating not so much to national image as to

it, you will need some background information.

personal ethics. We tell this story to children

In the days of Jesus, Passover was the most

because we want them to know that they should not

important Jewish festival. It commemorated the

lie under any circumstances. Even if they’ve done

exodus of the children of Israel from their bondage

something bad, something harmful, they should not

in Egypt. The Hebrew Scriptures narrate the com—

try to deceive others about it. It is better to come

memorative event itself (Exod 7–12). According

clean and deal with the consequences than to disto the ancient accounts, God raised up Moses to

tort the truth and make things worse. So we tell the

deliver his people and through him brought ten

story, not because it really happened, but because in

plagues on the land of Egypt to convince the

some sense we think it is true.

Pharaoh to set his people free. The tenth plague

The stories about Jesus in the early church may

was by far the worst: the death of every firstborn

have been similar. To be sure, many of them are

human and animal in the land. In preparation for

accounts of things that really did happen (part of

the onslaught, God instructed Moses to have every

our task will be figuring out which ones did).

family of the Israelites sacrifice a lamb and spread

Others are historical reminiscences that have been

its blood on the lintels and doorposts of their hous—

changed, sometimes a little, sometimes a lot, in

es. In that way, when the angel of death came to

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THE NEW TESTAMENT: A HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

bring destruction, he would see the blood on the

At this special occasion, Jesus takes the symbol—

doors of the Israelites and “pass over” them to go

ic foods of the meal and endows them with addi—

to the homes of the Egyptians.

tional meaning, saying, “This is my body . . . this is

The children of Israel were told to eat a quick

my blood of the covenant” (14:22–24).

meal in preparation for their escape. There was

Afterwards, he goes with his disciples to (the

not time even to allow the bread to rise; they were

Garden of) Gethsemane, where he is betrayed by

therefore to eat it unleavened. The Israelites did

Judas Iscariot and arrested (14:32, 43). He is imme—

as they were told; the angel of death came and

diately put on trial before the Jewish Council, the

went. The Pharaoh pleaded with the children of

Sanhedrin (14:53). He spends the night in jail;

Israel to leave, they fled to the Red Sea, where they

early in the morning the Sanhedrin delivers him

made their final escape through the parted waters.

over to Pilate (15:1). After a short trial, Pilate con—

The Israelites were instructed through Moses to

demns him to death. He is led off to be crucified,

commemorate this event annually. Hundreds of

and is nailed to the cross at 9:00 a.m. (15:25). Thus,

years later, in the days of Jesus, the Passover celebra—

in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is executed the day after

tion brought large numbers of pilgrims to Jerusalem,

the Preparation of the Passover, that is, on the

where they would participate in sacrifices in the

morning after the Passover meal had been eaten.

Temple and eat a sacred meal of symbolic foods,

Our latest canonical account of this event is in

including a lamb, bitter herbs to recall their bitter

the Gospel of John. Many of the details here are

hardship in Egypt, unleavened bread, and several

similar to Mark: the same persons are involved and

cups of wine. The sequence of events was typically

many of the same stories are told. There are dif—

as follows. Lambs would be brought to the Temple,

ferences, though, and some of these are significant.

or purchased there, for sacrifice with the assistance

John’s account of the trial before Pilate, for exam—

of a priest. They would then be prepared for the

ple, is much more elaborate (18:28–19:16). In

Passover meal by being skinned, drained of their

part, this is because in his version the Jewish lead—

blood, and possibly butchered. Each person or fam—

ers refuse to enter Pilate’s place of residence and

ily who brought a lamb would then take it home

send Jesus in to face Pilate alone. As a result,

and prepare the meal. That evening was the

Pilate has to conduct the trial by going back and

Passover feast, which inaugurated the weeklong cel—

forth between the prosecution and the defendant,

ebration called the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

engaging in relatively lengthy conversations with

As you may know, in Jewish reckoning, a new

both before pronouncing his verdict. What is par—

day begins when it gets dark (that is why the

ticularly striking, and significant for our investiga—

Jewish Sabbath begins on Friday evening). So the

tion here, is that we are told exactly when the trial

lambs would be prepared for the Passover meal on

comes to an end with Pilate’s verdict: “Now it was

the afternoon of the day before the meal would

the day of Preparation for the Passover, and it was

actually be eaten. When it got dark, the new day

about 12:00 noon” (John 19:14). Jesus is immedi—

started, and the meal could begin.

ately sent off to be crucified (19:16).

This now takes us to the dating of Jesus’ execu—

The day of Preparation for the Passover? How

tion. The Gospel of Mark, probably our earliest

could this be? This is the day before the Passover

account, clearly indicates when Jesus was put on trial.

meal was eaten, the day the priests began to sacrifice

On the preceding day, according to Mark 14:12, the

the lambs at noon. But in Mark, Jesus had his disci—

disciples ask Jesus where he would have them “pre—

ples prepare the Passover on that day, and then he

pare” the Passover. This is said to happen on the day

ate the meal with them in the evening after it

when the priests “sacrifice the passover lamb,” or the

became dark, only to be arrested afterwards.

day of Preparation for the Passover (the afternoon

If you read John’s account carefully, you will

before the Passover meal). Jesus gives them their

notice other indications that Jesus is said to be

instructions and they make the preparations. That

executed on a different day than he is in Mark.

evening—the start of the next day for them—they

John 18:28, for example, gives the reason that the

celebrate the meal together (14:17–25).

Jewish leaders refuse to enter into Pilate’s place of

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SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 3.2 Differences between Mark and John

on the Time of Jesus' Death

MARK

JOHN

The Jewish Passover meal takes place

The Jewish Passover meal takes place

on a Thursday evening.

on a Friday evening.

Jesus’ Last Supper is a Passover meal; it

Jesus’ Last Supper is not a Passover meal; it

occurs on a Thursday, the evening

occurs on a Thursday, the evening

after the Passover lambs

before the Passover lambs

are slaughtered.

are slaughtered.

After the supper, Jesus is arrested.

After the supper, Jesus is arrested.

He spends the night in jail and is

He spends the night in jail and is

tried by Pilate in the morning.

tried by Pilate in the morning.

Jesus is crucified at 9:00 a.m., the

Jesus is crucified after noon, the

morning after the Passover meal

day before the Passover meal

was eaten.

was eaten.

residence for Jesus’ trial. It is because they do not

being made to eat the Passover meal. In Mark’s

want to become ritually defiled, and thereby pre—

account he is killed the following day, the morn—

vented from eating the Passover meal that

ing after the passover meal had been eaten, some—

evening (recall, according to Mark, they had

time around 9:00 a.m. If we grant that there is a

already eaten the meal the night before!). This

difference, how do we explain it?

difference in dating explains another interesting

Some scholars have argued that John’s account

feature of John’s Gospel. In this account Jesus

is more accurate historically, since it coincides

never instructs his disciples to prepare for the

better with Jewish sources that describe how crim—

Passover, and he evidently does not eat a Passover

inal trials were to be conducted by the Sanhedrin.

meal during his last evening with them (he does

If these scholars are right, then Mark or one of his

not, for example, take the symbolic foods and say,

sources may have changed the day on which Jesus

“This is my body” and “This is my blood”). The

was killed in order to promote the idea that Jesus

reason for these differences should by now be

himself had instituted the Lord’s Supper during

clear: in John’s Gospel, Jesus was already in his

the Passover meal. This is possible, but may not

tomb by the time of this meal.

be the best explanation. The Jewish sources that

We seem to be left with a difference that is dif—

describe the procedures of the Sanhedrin were

ficult to reconcile. Both Mark and John indicate

written nearly 200 years after this event, and thus

the day and hour of Jesus’ death, but they disagree.

are probably not our best guide.

In John’s account, he is executed sometime after

If we concede that the later account (John’s) is

noon on the day on which preparations were

on general principle less likely to be accurate, since

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so many more years and so many more storytellers

author may have had his own points to make, and

would have intervened between the account and

these may not have been the same in every case.

the events it narrates, an intriguing possibility arises

Mark’s point may not have been John’s point in his

to explain why John, or his source, may have

story of Jesus’ crucifixion. It is important then—

changed the detail concerning Jesus’ death. John is

indeed, absolutely crucial—that we allow each

the only Gospel in which Jesus is actually identified

author to have his own say, rather than assume that

as “the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the

they are all trying to say the same thing. We need

world.” Indeed, he is called this at the very start of

to study each account for its own emphases.

the Gospel, by his forerunner, John the Baptist

The second implication concerns the Gospels as

(1:29; cf. 1:36). In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus’ death

historical sources for what happened during the life

represents the salvation of God, just as the sacrifice

of Jesus. If the Gospels have differences in histori—

of the lamb represented salvation for the ancient

cal detail, and each Gospel preserves traditions that

Israelites during the first Passover. Perhaps John (or

have been changed, then it is impossible for the his—

his source) made a change in the day and hour of

torian simply to take these stories at face value and

Jesus’ death precisely to reinforce this theological

uncritically assume that they provide historically

point. In this Gospel, Jesus dies on the same day as

accurate information. We will therefore need to

the Passover lamb, at the same hour (just after

develop some criteria for deciding which features of

noon)—to show that Jesus really is the lamb of God.

the Gospels represent Christianizations of the tradition and which represent the life of Jesus as it can

be historically reconstructed.

Conclusion: The Early Traditions

Over the course of the next five chapters we will

about Jesus

devote our attention to the first aspect of our study,

This analysis gives just one example of how

the literary emphasis of each Gospel. Once we

historical facts may have been changed to convey

understand in greater detail where the Gospels

theological “truths.” We could easily examine

came from and what each one has to say, we will

other examples pertaining to such key events in

then be equipped to address the second issue, asking

the Gospels as Jesus’ birth, his baptism, his mira—

broader historical questions in an attempt to estab—

cles, his teachings, and his resurrection. The main

lish what actually happened in the life of Jesus.

point is that the stories that Christians told and

retold about Jesus were not meant to be objective

history lessons for students interested in key events

SOME ADDITIONAL

of Roman imperial times. They were meant to

REFLECTIONS: THE

convince people that Jesus was the miracle-working Son of God whose death brought salvation to

AUTHORS OF THE GOSPELS

the world, and to edify and instruct those who

already believed. Sometimes the stories were mod—

Proto-orthodox Christians of the second century,

ified to express a theological truth. For the early

some decades after most of the New Testament

Christians who passed along the stories we now

books had been written, claimed that their

have in the Gospels, it was sometimes legitimate

favorite Gospels had been penned by two of Jesus’

and necessary to change a historical fact in order to

disciples—Matthew, the taxcollector, and John,

make a theological point. Moreover these are the

the beloved disciple—and by two friends of the

stories that the Gospel writers inherited.

apostles—Mark, the secretary of Peter, and Luke,

This conclusion has some profound implications

the traveling companion of Paul. Scholars today,

for our investigation of the Gospels. The first con—

however, find it difficult to accept this tradition

cerns the Gospels as pieces of early Christian litera—

for several reasons.

ture. Just as the Gospel writers inherited stories

First of all, none of these Gospels makes any

that try to make a point, they themselves have

such claim about itself. All four authors chose to

attempted to produce coherent accounts of Jesus’

keep their identities anonymous. Would they

life and death to make certain points. Each Gospel

have done so if they had been eyewitnesses? This

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certainly would have been possible, but one

Perhaps an even more important aspect of the

would at least have expected an eyewitness or a

authorship of the Gospels is the evidence that

friend of an eyewitness to authenticate his

they appear to preserve stories that were in circu—

account by appealing to personal knowledge, for

lation for a long period. This observation certain—

example, by narrating the stories in the first perly applies to narratives for which no eyewitnesses

son singular (“On the day that Jesus and I went up

were evidently present. For example, if Pilate and

to Jerusalem. . .”).

Jesus were alone at the trial in John 18:28–19:16,

Moreover, we know something about the back—

and Jesus was immediately executed, who told the

grounds of the people who accompanied Jesus dur—

Fourth Evangelist what Jesus actually said? An

ing most of his ministry. The disciples appear to

early Christian must have come up with words

have been uneducated peasants from Galilee.

that seemed appropriate to the occasion. The

Both Simon Peter and John the son of Zebedee,

same principle applies to the other accounts of the

for example, are said to have been peasant fisher—

Gospels as well. All of them appear to have circu—

men (Mark 1:16–20) who were “uneducated,” that

lated by word of mouth among Christian converts

is, literally, unable to read and write (Acts 4:13).

throughout the Mediterranean world.

Now it is true that the Gospels do not represent

One of our four authors, Luke, explicitly tells us

the most elegant literature from antiquity, but

that he used oral and written sources for his narra—

their authors were at least relatively well educated;

tive (Luke 1:1–4), and he claims that some of

they write, for the most part, correct Greek.

these sources were drawn ultimately from eyewit—

Could two of them have been disciples?

nesses. This circumstance raises another interest—

Again, it is possible. Jesus and his apostles,

ing question. Is it likely that authors who exten—

however, appear to have spoken Aramaic, the

sively used earlier sources for their accounts were

common language of the Jews in Palestine.

themselves eyewitnesses? Suppose, for example,

Whether they could also have spoken Greek as a

that Matthew actually was a disciple who accom—

second language is something that scholars have

panied Jesus and witnessed the things he said and

long debated, but at the very least it is clear that

did. Why then would he take almost all of his sto—

Greek was not their native tongue. The authors of

ries, sometimes word for word, from someone else

the Gospels, on the other hand, are absolutely flu-

(as we will see in Chapter 6)?

ent in Greek. Did the apostles go back to school

In short, it appears that the Gospels have inherit—

after Jesus died, overcome years of illiteracy by

ed traditions from both written and oral sources, as

learning how to read and write at a relatively high

Luke himself acknowledges, and that these sources

level, become skilled in foreign composition, and

drew from traditions that had been circulating for

then later pen the Gospels? Most scholars consid—

years, decades even, among Christian communities

er it somewhat unlikely.

throughout the Mediterranean world.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Dibelius, Martin. From Tradition to Gospel. Trans. B. L.

most part, in the process of being retold; for advanced

Woolf. New York: Scribner, 1934. This groundbreak—

students.

ing study deals with the character of the traditions

about Jesus in circulation orally prior to being written

Harris, William V. Ancient Literacy. Cambridge, Mass: down in the Gospels.

Harvard University Press, 1989. A brilliant analysis by a major classicist who seeks to determine how

Gerhardsson, Birger. Manuscript and Memory: Oral Tradition many people could read and write in the ancient

and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early

world and what their reasons were for doing so; for

Christianity. Lund, Sweden: Gleerup, 1961. One of

advanced students.

the most influential studies to maintain, contrary to

the present chapter, that the traditions about Jesus in

McKnight, Edgar V. What is Form Criticism? Philadelphia: the New Testament Gospels were not changed, for the

Fortress, 1969. A basic introduction to the study of

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how oral traditions about Jesus were modified and

engaged in their mission and the reasons for their

formed prior to the writing of the Gospels.

success.

Macmullen, Ramsey. Christianizing the Roman Empire

Ong, W. J. Orality and Literacy. London: Routledge, 1982. An A.D. 100–400. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University

intriguing discussion of the social and psychological differ—

Press, 1984. A concise and insightful account of

ences between oral and written cultures (between cultures

the spread of Christianity through the Roman

in which traditions are typically heard and those in which

world, including discussion on how Christians

they are typically read); for more advanced students.

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# CHAPTER 4

The Christian Gospels:

A Literary and Historical Introduction

Now that we have learned something about the tra—

tain reasons. Unfortunately, even though these

ditions of Jesus that were circulating throughout the

reasons may have been clear to their authors, and

Roman world during the middle decades of the first

perhaps to their first readers as well, they can only

century, we are in a position to consider the early

be inferred by us, living so many centuries later. It

Christian Gospels that eventually came to embody

will nonetheless be one of our goals to examine

them. There are more Gospels than the ones found

each of the early surviving Gospels to ascertain,

in the New Testament, of course, and in our study

insofar as possible, its own orientation, or “take”

we will take account of such early documents as the

on the life and death of Jesus. Before examining

Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Peter. Since our the Gospels individually, however, we should say a

principal concern, however, is with the earliest

few words about them as a group.

Christian writings, most of our attention will be

focused on the canonical four.

We have already learned significant bits of

THE QUESTION OF GENRE

information about these books. They were written

thirty-five to sixty-five years after Jesus’ death by

Readers bring different sets of expectations to dif—

authors who did not know him, authors living in

ferent kinds of literature. When we read a short

different countries who were writing at different

story, we have a different set of expectations than

times to different communities with different

when we read a newspaper editorial. As educated

problems and concerns. The authors all wrote in

readers, we know how short stories and editorials

Greek and they all used sources for the stories they

“work,” and we expect certain features in the one

narrate. Luke explicitly indicates that his sources

but not the other. The editorial, for example, will

were both written and oral. These sources appear

not contain character development, plot conflict,

to have recounted the words and deeds of Jesus

plot resolution, and so on. So too we expect dif—

that had been circulating among Christian conferent things from a science fiction novel and a

gregations throughout the Mediterranean world.

science textbook, from a clever limerick and a

At a later stage we will consider the question of

salacious Harlequin Romance.

the historical reliability of these stories. Here we

These expectations have a profound effect on

are interested in the Gospels as pieces of early

the way we read literature. Suppose you were to

Christian literature.

read about a breakthrough in genetic research that

The first thing to observe is that just as the oral

could potentially save the human race from some of

traditions functioned to meet certain needs of the

its worst diseases. At present, however, the research

early Christians (e.g., evangelism, instruction, edi—

is highly dangerous. If artificially manipulated gene

fication), so too the Gospels were penned for cer—

specimens were to escape the laboratory, they could

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mutate beyond control and bring worldwide ruin

gested that the Gospels are best seen as a kind of

and despair. If this were in a science fiction novel,

Greco-Roman (as opposed to modern) biography.

you might be intrigued and recommend the book to

a friend. If it were on the front page of the New York

Times, you might be appalled and write your senator.

BIOGRAPHY AS

We know what to expect from a piece of litera-

A GRECO-ROMAN GENRE

ture, in part, because we have become accustomed

to certain literary conventions that characterize

We have numerous examples of Greco-Roman

different kinds of writing. Pieces of writing that

biographies, many of them written by some of the

share a range of conventions are classified togeth—

most famous authors of Roman antiquity, such as

er as a genre. The conventions involve (a) form

Plutarch, Suetonius, and Tacitus. One of the ways

(is the work poetry or prose? long or short? nar—

to understand how this genre worked is to contrast

rative or descriptive?), (b) content (is it about

it with modern biographies, following the princi—

nature or society? a twelfth-century philosopher

ple that we can learn something only in light of

or a twenty-second century space traveler?), and

what we already know. In doing so, we must con-

(c) function (does the work aim to entertain?

stantly bear in mind that literary genres are highly

inform? persuade? a little of each?).

flexible; just think of all the different kinds of nov—

What kind of literature is a Gospel? Or, to put

els or short stories you have read.

it somewhat differently, when ancient persons read

Most modern biographies are full of data—

or heard one of these books, what kinds of expec—

names, dates, places, and events—all of which

tations did they have? Until recently, modern

show a concern for factual accuracy. A modern

scholars generally agreed that the New Testament

biography, of course, can deal with the whole of a

Gospels were unlike anything else in all of litera—

person’s life or with only a segment of it. Typically

ture, that they were an entirely new genre invent—

it is concerned with both public and private life and

ed by the Christians, and represented by only four

with how the subject both reacts to what happens

surviving works. The Gospels were obviously

and is changed by it. In other words, the inner life

about the man Jesus and thus were somewhat like

of the person, his or her psychological development

biographies, but compared to modern biographies

based on events and experiences, is quite often a

they appeared altogether anomalous.

central component and is used to explain why the

In one respect this older view seems reasonable;

character behaves and reacts in certain ways. Thus

as we will see in some detail momentarily, the

modern biographies tend not only to inform but

Gospels do indeed differ from modern biographies.

also to explain. They also entertain, of course, and

Scholars have nonetheless come to reject the idea

often propagandize as well, especially when they

that they are totally unlike anything else. There is

concern political or religious figures.

probably no such thing as a kind of literature that

Most ancient biographies were less concerned

is absolutely unique; if there were, no one would

with giving complete factual data about an indi—

have any idea how to read it or know what to

vidual’s life, or a chosen period of it. Research

make of it. If people in antiquity could read the

methods were necessarily different, with few sur—

Gospels and make sense of them, then we have to

viving documents to go on, and (by our standards)

assume that these books were not in fact com—

inadequate tools for record-keeping and data

pletely foreign to them.

recovery. Biographers often relied heavily on oral

This question of how people in antiquity would

information that had circulated for long periods of

understand a book should itself give us pause.

time. Indeed, many of them expressed a prefer—

While it may be true that the Gospels differ from

ence for oral sources; these at least could be inter—

modern genres like biography, they may not have

rogated! Modern biographers are somewhat more

differed from ancient genres. In fact, scholars of

leery of hearsay. Yet more significantly, most

ancient literature have found significant parallels

ancient biographers were less interested in show—

between the Gospels and several ancient genres.

ing what actually happened in their subjects’ lives

Some of these investigations have plausibly sug—

than in portraying their essential character and

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# CHAPTER 4

## THE CHRISTIAN GOSPELS

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personality traits (see box 4.1). This is a key dif—

For the ancient biographer, character traits

ference between ancient and modern biographies:

were thought to be relatively constant throughout

in the ancient world, prior to the formulation of

a person’s life. A person’s experiences were oppor—

modern notions of human psychology that have

tunities to demonstrate what those traits were,

arisen since the Enlightenment, there was little

rather than occasions for these traits to develop.

sense that the human personality developed in

Therefore, when an ancient biographer employed

light of its experiences and encounters with other

a chronological framework to organize an individ—

people. Thus Greco-Roman biography does not

ual’s life, it was strictly for organizational purposes;

generally deal with the inner life, and especially

it was not to show how the person became who he

does not do so in the sense of what we would call

or she was. Great persons were who they were,

character formation.

and everyone else could try to model themselves

SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 4.1 Plutarch on Biography

Plutarch (46–120 C.E.) is one of the most widely known and best loved pagan authors of the ancient world. Philosopher, historian, and biographer, he produced a voluminous amount of literature near the beginning of the second century. Well known for his seventy-eight essays on moral philosophy and religion—with such titles as “Advice to Married Couples,” “How to Distinguish a Flatterer from a Friend,” “Concerning Superstition,” and “Explanation for the Delays of Divine Justice”—he is perhaps most famous for his fifty biographies of prominent Greek and Roman men.

These biographies, which Plutarch calls “Lives” (Greek bioi), were written not to provide an exhaustive accounting of the major events of an individual’s public career, but to reveal the person’s character as it became manifest in the various situations that he confronted.

Plutarch found that a person’s disposition was often best seen, not in the great deeds that he performed, but in the small details of his life: incidental events, off-the-cuff remarks, and the like. He regarded his biographies as character portraits that would show his readers virtues to embrace and vices to avoid. Plutarch summarizes his approach in the brief and oft-cited introduction to his Life of Alexander the Great: In writing for this book the [life] of Alexander the king...I have before me such an abundance of materials that I shall make no other preface but to beg my readers not to complain of me if I do not relate all [his] celebrated exploits or even any one in full detail, but in most instances abridge the story. I am writing not histories but lives, and a man’s most conspicuous achievements do not always reveal best his strength or his weakness. Often a trifling incident, a word or a jest, shows more of his character than the battles where he slays thousands, his grandest muster-ing of armies, and his sieges of cities. Therefore as portrait painters work to get their likenesses from the face and the look of the eyes, in which the character appears, and pay little attention to other parts of the body, so I must be allowed to dwell especially on things that express the souls of these men, and through them portray their lives, leaving it to others to describe their mighty deeds and battles (Plutarch Alexander, chap. 1).



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on the positive aspects of their characters while

within broader genres of literature. And every

avoiding their pitfalls. Biographies were usually

individual book has distinctive features as well.

meant to highlight those various aspects, not so

Most of the distinctive features of the Gospels

much for the sake of providing history lessons, as

relate directly to their Christian character. They

for giving instruction in proper behavior. Personal

are the only biographies written by Christians

qualities could be conveyed by a variety of stories

about the man they worship as the Son of God

about the person. Many of these stories were

who died for the salvation of the world. As we will

drawn from narratives that an author inherited

see, for example, the New Testament Gospels put

from oral traditions, such as sayings, speeches,

an inordinate amount of emphasis on the death of

anecdotes, and stories about conflicts.

the main character, something highly unusual for

As I have already mentioned, there was consid—

ancient biography. The stress on Jesus’ death,

erable flexibility in how an ancient biography

however, is determined by the distinctive empha—

might portray a person’s life, depending in good

sis of these works and is not out of bounds for the

measure on what kind of public figure he or she was:

genre. Instead, it shows that the Gospels are a

a military person, a political ruler, a philosopher, a

kind of sub-subgenre, that is, one type of ancient

religious leader. The genre could encompass any of

religious biography. Moreover, the Gospels differ

these kinds of figures, and different subgenres devel—

in some ways not only from other Greco-Roman

oped accordingly, each with its own sets of expecta—

biographies, but also from each other.

tions. The role of the miraculous, for example, was

We began with the question of how an ancient

typically pronounced in the life of a religious figure

person might have understood the form of the

(e.g., Philostratus’s biography of Apollonius of

Gospels. It appears that ancient readers, whether

Tyana): miraculous signs might accompany his

birth, he might manifest divine power in his own

miracles and inspired teachings, and he might be

glorified after his death through an ascension into

heaven or through receiving cult from those whose

lives he had touched.

If I were to attempt a definition of the Greco-Roman biography, then, it might be something

like this: ancient biography was a prose narrative

recounting an individual’s life, often within a

chronological framework, employing numerous

subgenres (such as sayings, speeches, anecdotes,

and conflict stories) so as to reflect important

F P O

aspects of his or her character, principally for purposes of instruction (to inform about what kind of

person he or she was), exhortation (to urge others

to act similarly), or propaganda (to show his or her

superiority to rivals).

THE GOSPELS

AS ANCIENT BIOGRAPHIES

Many recent scholars have come to recognize that

the New Testament Gospels are a kind of ancient

Figure 4.1 Picture of the Four Evangelists associated with biography. Of course, the Gospels have distinctive

their traditional symbols (John the Eagle, Luke the Ox,

features of their own, but this is what we would

Mark the Lion, and Matthew the Man) from an eighth-cen—

expect, since numerous subtypes typically develop

tury manuscript of the Gospels.

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# CHAPTER 4

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they actually read the words off the page or heard

deeds. They would not expect to see anything like

someone else do so, would have recognized them

what we might call “character development.”

as biographies of a religious leader. How did this

Instead, they would look for how the character

understanding affect the way ancient persons read

acted and reacted to the various challenges with

these books? Ancient readers and hearers of books

which he was confronted, demonstrating who he

like these would probably expect to find that the

was through his carefully crafted words and

main character was an important religious figure

impressive deeds. Moreover, they would expect to

and that all of the action of the narrative revolved

be able to discern important aspects of his charac—

around him. They might anticipate a miraculous

ter and identity at the outset of the narrative, in

beginning to his life and a miraculous ending.

the opening scenes of the action. We ourselves

They might look forward to descriptions of his

can benefit from reading the Gospels with these

divinely inspired teachings and superhuman

expectations in mind.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Aune, David. The New Testament in its Literary Environment.

Cartlidge, David R. and David L. Dungan, eds. Documents

Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987. A superb introduc-

for the Study of the Gospels. 2d ed. Philadelphia:

tion to the genres of the New Testament writings in

Fortress, 1994. Presents an excellent selection of

relation to other literature of the Greco-Roman world.

ancient literary texts that are closely parallel to the

New Testament Gospels, including selections from

Philostratus’s Life of Apollonius and Philo’s Life of Burridge, Richard. What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Moses.

Greco-Roman Biography. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. A thorough study that emphatically argues that the Gospels are best understood as a

Talbert, Charles. What Is a Gospel? The Genre of the

kind of ancient biography.

Canonical Gospels. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977. One of the earliest recent attempts to situate the Gospels

within the context of Greco-Roman literature.

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# CHAPTER 5

Jesus, the Suffering Son of God:

The Gospel according to Mark

We begin our study of the Gospels with Mark, the

the issues discussed in the previous chapter. Let’s

shortest of the four in the New Testament. We do

assume that we are informed readers of this text,

not know who the author was, only that he was a

conversant with the genre and knowledgeable

Greek-speaking Christian, presumably living out—

about the world within which it was written.

side of Palestine, who had heard a number of sto—

Knowing that Mark is a kind of Greco-Roman

ries about Jesus. Mark (as I will continue to call

biography about Jesus, we can ask, who was Jesus,

him since we do not know his real name) penned

according to this literary portrayal, and what did

an extended account of Jesus’ life beginning with

he do? And how is this message conveyed through

his appearance as an adult to be baptized by John

the shape of the narrative?

and ending with the report of his resurrection. In

addition to stories that he had heard, Mark may

also have used some written sources for portions of

his narrative. If so, these sources no longer sur-

THE BEGINNING OF

vive. Of the full-length Gospels that do survive,

THE GOSPEL: JESUS THE

Mark appears to have been the first written. As

MESSIAH, THE SON OF GOD

we will see, this Gospel was itself used by the

WHO FULFILLS SCRIPTURE

authors of Matthew and Luke for many of their

stories about Jesus (see Chapter 6).

One of the first things that strikes the informed

An introductory textbook such as this cannot

reader of Mark’s Gospel is how thoroughly its

provide an exhaustive analysis of Mark (or the

traditions are rooted in a Jewish worldview. The

other Gospels). My purpose here is simply to pro—

book begins, as do many other ancient biogra—

vide some guidance for your own interpretation of

phies, by naming its subject: “The Beginning of

the book, by supplying you with important keys for

the Gospel of Jesus Christ” (1:1). Readers living

unlocking its meaning. My working assumption,

in the Greco-Roman world would not recognize

throughout our discussions, is that you have

“Christ” as a name; for most of them it was

already familiarized yourself with the contents of

not even a meaningful title. The word

the book by reading it carefully all the way

comes from the verb “anoint” and typically

through a couple of times.

referred to someone who had just had a rubdown

There are a number of ways we could approach

(with oil). “Christ” was a title in Jewish circles,

this investigation. Indeed, we will be taking dif—

however, as the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew

ferent approaches to each of the Gospels that we

word “messiah.” Mark, then, is a book about

examine. We will study Mark, however, in light of

Jesus the messiah.

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# CHAPTER 5

JESUS, THE SUFFERING SON OF GOD

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SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 5.1 The Jewish Messiah

The term “messiah” comes from a Hebrew word that means “anointed one,” the exact equivalent of the Greek term christos (thus “messiah” and “Christ” mean the same thing). In the Hebrew Bible the term is applied to the Jewish King, who was anointed with oil at his inauguration ceremony as a symbolic expression of God’s favor; he was called “the Lord’s anointed” (see 1 Sam 10:1; Ps 2:2).

The term came to refer to a future deliverer of Israel only after the Babylonians overthrew the nation of Judea in 587 B.C.E. and removed the Jewish king from the throne. From that time on, there was no anointed one (messiah) to rule for several centuries (until the Hasmonean rulers, starting in the mid-second century B.C.E.). But some Jews recalled a tradition in which God had told David, his favorite king, that he would always have a descendant on the throne (2 Sam 7:14–16). This is probably the origin of the idea that there would be a future messiah to fulfill God’s promises, a future king like David who would rule the people of God once again as a sovereign nation in the Promised Land.

By the time of the New Testament, different Jews had different understandings of what this future ruler would be like. Some expected a warrior-king like David, others a more supernatural cosmic judge of the earth, and still others (such as the community that produced the Dead Sea Scrolls) a priestly ruler who would provide the authoritative interpretations of God’s law for his people (see Chapter 15). All of these figures are designated “messiah” in the ancient Jewish sources.

In no source prior to the writing of the New Testament, however, is there any reference to a future messiah who is to suffer and die for the sins of the people. This notion appears to be a Christian creation, as we will see more fully in Chapter 17. It may represent a combination of the belief in a future messianic deliverer with the notion that the one who is truly righteous suffers, a notion expressed in such biblical passages as Psalms 22 and 69, and Isaiah 53.

Surprisingly for many Christian readers, the term “messiah” never occurs in these passages.

Jews in the first century could have meant a

Mark begins his Gospel by calling Jesus the mes—

range of things by the title messiah, as scholars

siah. But as we will see—and as everyone who read

have come to realize (see box 5.1). Many of

the book probably already knew—Jesus did not

these meanings, however, can be subsumed under

conform to either of the general conceptions of this

two major rubrics (which are not necessarily

title. He neither overthrew the Romans in battle

mutually exclusive). For some Jews, the messiah

nor arrived on the clouds of heaven in judgment.

was the future king of Israel, who would deliver

Instead, he was unceremoniously executed for trea—

God’s people from their oppressors and establish

son against the state. What in the world could it

a sovereign state in Israel through God’s power.

mean to call him the messiah? This is one of the

For others, he was a cosmic deliverer from heav—

puzzles that Mark’s Gospel will attempt to solve.

en, who would engage in supernatural warfare

The Jewishness of the Gospel becomes yet

with the enemies of the Jews and bring a divine

more evident in the verses that follow. First there

victory over their oppressors. Both notions had

is a tantalizing statement that the story, or at least

been around for some time by the first century;

the first part of it, is a fulfillment of an ancient

both, obviously, were designations of grandeur

prophecy recorded in the Jewish Scriptures (it is

and power.

quoted, of course, in the Greek translation, the



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Septuagint; 1:2–3). Then there is the appearance

Here, then, is a Gospel that begins by describing

of a prophet, John the Baptist, proclaiming a

the forerunner of Jesus, the Son of God, and the

Jewish rite of baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

miraculous proclamation of his own Sonship. Up

John’s dress and diet (1:6) are reminiscent of

to this point a Gentile reader may have recognized

another Jewish prophet, Elijah, also described in

the Jewish character of the account but the desig—

the Hebrew Scriptures (cf. 2 Kings 1:8). This John

nation “Son of God” would no doubt have struck a

not only practices baptism, he also preaches of one

familiar chord. When Jesus was proclaimed the

who is to come who is mightier than he. Mightier

Son of God (by God himself no less), most readers

than a prophet of God? Who could be mightier

in the Greco-Roman world would probably have

than a prophet?

taken this to mean that he was like other sons of

Jesus himself then appears, coming from the

God—divinely inspired teachers or rulers whose

northern part of the land, from the region of

miraculous deeds benefitted the human race. But

Galilee and the village of Nazareth. He is baptized

given the Jewishness of the rest of the beginning,

by John, and upon emerging from the waters, he

perhaps we should inquire what a Jewish reader

sees the heavens split open and the Spirit of God

would make of the title Son of God.

descend upon him like a dove. He then hears a

Even within Jewish circles there were thought to

voice call out from heaven: “You are my beloved

be special persons endowed with divine power to do

Son, in you I am well pleased” (1:11). The procla—

miracles and to deliver inspired teachings (see

mation appears to have serious implications: Jesus

Chapter 2). Two of them we know by name Hanina

is immediately thrust out into the wilderness to

ben Dosa and Honi the “circle-drawer” (see box 2.6).

confront the forces of evil (he is “tempted by

These men, living roughly at the time of Jesus, were

Satan,” 1:13). He returns, victorious through the

understood to have a particularly intimate relation—

power of God (“the angels” have “ministered to

ship with God, and as a result were thought to have

him” 1:13), and begins to make his proclamation

been endowed with special powers. Accounts of

that God’s kingdom is soon to appear (1:14–15).

their fantastic deeds and marvelous teachings are

recorded in later Jewish sources. What made these

persons special was their unique relationship with

the one God of Israel. The notion that mere mortals could have such a relationship was itself quite

ancient, as shown by the Jewish Scriptures themselves, where an individual was sometimes called

“the son of God.” The king of Israel, for example,

was thought to mediate between God and humans

and so stand in a special relationship with God as a

child does to a parent. Even kings with dubious

public records were sometimes called “the son of

God” (e.g., 2 Sam 7:14; Ps 2:7–9). And others

receive the title as well: occasionally the entire

nation of Israel, through whom God worked his will

on earth (Hos 11:1), and sometimes God’s heavenly servants, beings that we might call angels (Job

1:6; 2:1). In all of these instances in Jewish circles,

“the son of God” referred to someone who had a

particularly intimate relationship with God, who

was chosen by God to perform a task, and who

thereby mediated God’s will to people on earth.

Figure 5.1

Picture of Jesus’ Baptism by John and the Descent

Sometimes these sons of God were associated with

of the Dove, from a Vault Mosaic in Ravenna, Italy.

the miraculous.

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# CHAPTER 5

JESUS, THE SUFFERING SON OF GOD

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What, then, does Mark mean by beginning his

1:32–34; and 1:45). Moreover, he attracts the

account with the declaration, by God himself, that

crowds by his inspired and challenging teaching,

Jesus (this one who was to be executed as a crimi—

especially when he tells parables, brief stories of

nal) is his son? We can begin our quest for an

everyday, mundane affairs that he endows with

answer by examining key incidents in the Gospel’s

deep spiritual significance. Interestingly, most of

opening chapter, recalling that ancient biogra—

those who hear his words do not understand what

phies tended to set the character of their subjects

they mean (4:10 –13).

in the early scenes.

Given the incredible following that Jesus

amasses, the amazing teachings that he delivers,

and the miraculous deeds that he performs, one

JESUS THE

would think that he would become immediately

AUTHORITATIVE SON OF GOD

and widely acknowledged for who he is, a man specially endowed by God, the Son of God who pro—

The reader is immediately struck by the way in

vides divine assistance for those in need.

which Jesus is portrayed as supremely authorita—

Ironically, as the careful reader of the Gospel

tive. At the outset of his ministry, he sees fisher—

begins to realize, nothing of the sort is destined to

men plying their trade. He calls to them and with—

happen. Jesus, this authoritative Son of God, is

out further ado they leave their boats and family

almost universally misunderstood by those with

and hapless coworkers to follow him (1:16–20).

whom he comes in closest contact. Even worse,

Jesus is an authoritative leader; when he speaks,

despite his clear concern to help others and to

people obey.

deliver the good news of God, he becomes hated

Jesus enters the synagogue to teach and aston—

and opposed by the religious leaders of his people.

ishes those who hear. Mark tells us why: “He

Both of these characteristics are major aspects of

taught them as one who had authority, and not as

Mark’s portrayal of Jesus. He is the opposed and

the scribes” (1:22). Jesus is an authoritative

misunderstood Son of God.

teacher; when he gives instruction, people hang

onto his every word.

He immediately encounters a man possessed by

JESUS THE

an unclean spirit, who recognizes him as “the Holy

OPPOSED SON OF GOD

One of God” (1:24). Jesus rebukes the spirit and

by his word alone drives it out from the man.

A good deal of Mark’s Gospel shows that despite

Those who witness the deed declare its signifi—

Jesus’ fantastic deeds the leaders of his people

cance: “With authority he commands even the

oppose him from the outset; and their antagonism

unclean spirits, and they obey him” (1:27). Not

escalates until the very end, where it results in the

only does he drive out evil spirits who embody

catastrophe of his execution. Despite this hostili—

opposition to God, he also heals the sick, both rel—

ty between Jesus and the leaders of Israel, Mark

atives of his followers (1:29 –31) and unknown

does not portray Jesus as standing in opposition to

townsfolk (1:32–34). Soon he is seen healing all

the religion of Judaism (at least as Mark sees it).

who come, both the ill and the possessed. Jesus is

Recall that Jesus is said to be the Son of the Jewish

an authoritative healer; when he commands the

God, the Jewish messiah, come in fulfillment of

forces of evil, they listen and obey.

the Jewish Scriptures and preceded by a Jewish

This portrayal of Jesus as an authoritative Son

prophet. He teaches in the Jewish synagogue and

of God sets the stage for the rest of the Gospel.

works among the Jewish people. Later we will find

Throughout his public ministry, Jesus goes about

him teaching in the Temple, observing the Jewish

doing good, healing the sick, casting out demons,

Passover, and discussing fine points of the Jewish

even raising the dead (5:1–43). His fame spreads

Law with Jewish scholars. Indeed, even though

far and wide as rumors of his fantastic abilities

Jesus’ understanding of the Law will come to be

reach the villages and towns of Galilee (1:28;

challenged, Mark maintains that he was himself

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faithful to the Law. Consider the account of the

recorded in 2:1–3:6, a group of conflict stories that

leper in one of the opening stories (1:40 –44).

show a crescendo in the tension between Jesus and

After Jesus heals the man, he instructs him to

the Jewish leaders, the scribes and Pharisees. At

show himself to a Jewish priest and to make an

first these leaders merely question his actions (2:7),

offering on behalf of his cleansing “as Moses com—

they then take offense at some of his associations

manded” (1:44). Jesus is scarcely bent on subvert-

(2:16) and his activities (2:18), then protest the

ing the Jewish religion.

actions of his followers (2:24), and finally take seri—

Why, then, do the Jewish leaders, the scribes and

ous exception to his own actions and decide to find

Pharisees in Galilee and the chief priests in

a way to put him to death (3:6).

Jerusalem—oppose him (see box 5.2)? Do they not

In particular, these authorities take umbrage at

recognize who he is? In fact, they do not recognize

Jesus’ refusal to follow their own practices of purity.

him, as we will see momentarily. Even more seri—

He eats with the unrighteous and with sinners,

ously, they are gravely offended by the things that

those thought to be unclean and to pollute the

he says and does. This is evident in the accounts

pure. For Jesus, these are the ones who need his

SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 5.2 Jewish Scribes, Pharisees,

Herodians, Sadducees, and Chief Priests

Mark’s Gospel names a number of groups of religious authorities among the Jews. I will discuss these various groups more fully when we consider the historical Jesus in Chapter 15.

For the present, it will be enough simply to sketch what each of these groups stood for.

• Jewish scribes in the first century represented the literate elite, those who could read and study the sacred traditions of Israel and, presumably, teach them to others. Recall that most Jews, as well as most other people in the ancient world, were not highly educated by our standards; those who were educated enjoyed a special place of prominence.

• Pharisees, as we have seen in Chapter 2, were Jews who were strongly committed to maintaining the purity laws set forth in the Torah and who developed their own set of more carefully nuanced laws to help them do so. They appear as the chief culprits in the Jewish opposition to Jesus during much of his ministry in Mark’s Gospel (see below).

• The Herodians were a group of Jews that Mark mentions but does not identify (3:6; 12:13; see also Matt 22:16). They are described in no other ancient source. Mark may understand them to be collaborationists, that is, supporters of the Herods, the rulers inter-mittently appointed over Jews in Palestine by the Romans.

• Sadducees, as observed earlier, were Jews of the upper classes who were closely connected with and strong advocates for the Temple cult in Jerusalem. They were largely in charge of the Jewish Sanhedrin, the council of Jews that advised the high priest concerning policy and that served as a kind of liaison with the Roman authorities.

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# CHAPTER 5

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• Chief priests were the upper classes of the Jewish priesthood who operated the Temple and oversaw its sacrifices. They would have been closely connected with the Sadducees (presumably a number of Sadducees were among them) and would have been the real power players in Jesus’ day, the ones with the ear of the Roman governor in Jerusalem and the ones responsible for regulating the lives of the Jewish people in Judea. Their leader, the high priest, was the ultimate authority over civil and religious affairs when there was no king in Judea.

This basic information about Jewish groups should make us curious about certain aspects of Mark’s Gospel. We know from other sources that the Pharisees were not numerous in the days of Jesus; there certainly were not enough to stand at every wheat field to spy out itinerant preachers on the Sabbath (see Chapter 15). Nor, evidently, were they influential in the politics of Palestine at the time, or even concerned that everyone else (i.e., non-Pharisaic Jews) conform to their own rules and regulations for purity. And yet they appear as Jesus’

chief adversaries in Mark’s narrative, constantly hounding him and attacking him for failing to conform to their views. Can this be historically accurate?

Scholars have long known that some decades after Jesus’ death, nearer the end of the first century, the Pharisees did become more prominent in Palestinian life. After the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. they were given authority by the Romans to run the civil affairs of Palestinian Jews. Moreover, we know that Pharisees interacted frequently with Christian churches after the death of Jesus. Indeed, the one Jewish persecutor of the church about whom we are best informed was Paul, a self-proclaimed Pharisee.

Is it possible that the opposition leveled against the church by Pharisees after Jesus’ death affected the ways that Christians told stories about his life? That is to say, because of their own clashes with the Pharisees, could Christians have narrated stories in which Jesus himself disputed with them (usually putting them to shame), even though such disputes would have happened only rarely during his own lifetime?

help (2:15–17). Nor does he follow the Pharisees’

Jesus as getting the better of them in dialogue (see

prescriptions for keeping the seventh day holy

esp. 11:27–12:40). In the end, however, the chief

(2:23–3:6); he puts human needs above the require—

priests triumph, convincing the Roman governor

ment to rest on the Sabbath. In Jesus’ view, the

that Jesus has to die. Why, ultimately, do they do so?

Sabbath was made for the sake of humans and not

The short answer is that they find Jesus threatening

humans for the Sabbath; it is therefore legitimate to

because of his popularity and find his words against

prepare food or heal a person in need on this day

their Temple cult offensive, as shown in his violent

(2:27; 3:4). From the Pharisees’ perspective (as por—

and disruptive actions in the Temple itself (11:18).

trayed by Mark), these are not honest disagree—

But in the larger picture painted by Mark’s Gospel,

ments over matters of policy. They are dangerous

the Jewish authorities do not seek Jesus’ death mere—

perversions of their religion, and Jesus needs to be

ly because they are jealous or because they disagree

silenced. The Pharisees immediately take counsel

with him over legal, theological, or cultic matters.

with their sworn enemies the Herodians (see box

They oppose him because he is God’s unique repre—

5.2) and decide to have him killed (3:6).

sentative on earth—God’s authoritative Son—and

After these opening stories of conflict, Jewish

they, the leaders of Israel, cannot understand who he

authorities are constantly on the attack. In virtual—

is or what he says. In this, however, they are not

ly every instance they are the ones who initiate the

alone, for virtually no one else in Mark’s narrative

dispute, even though Mark consistently portrays

can understand who he is either.

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Sidon

Caesarea Philippi

(Paneas)

A

I

Tyre

R

Y

Political boundaries 6-34 C.E.

S

JUDEA, etc., Political units

F

T E T R A R C H Y

Cities mentioned in the

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New Testament

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(Pegai)

I

Joppa

E

D

Rathamin

(Arimathea ?)

S

R

Lydda

Ephraim

(Aphairema)

E

U Emmaus

(Nicopolis)

Jericho

A

Jerusalem

Bethphage

J

Bethany

Bethlehem

Beth-basi

LAKE

ASPHALTITIS

(DEAD SEA)

Figure 5.2

Palestine in New Testament Times.

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# CHAPTER 5

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JESUS THE

thousands of hungry people on two different occa-

MISUNDERSTOOD SON OF GOD

sions. Now Jesus expresses his own exasperation:

“Do you not yet understand?” (8:21). No, they do

One way to establish misunderstanding as a Markan

not. But they will begin to have an inkling, right

theme is to read carefully through the first half of the

here at the midpoint of the Gospel.

Gospel and ask, who realizes that Jesus is the Son of

God? The answer may come as a bit of a surprise.

Clearly God knows that Jesus is his Son, because he

JESUS THE

himself declares it at the baptism (1:11). And since

ACKNOWLEDGED SON OF GOD

this declaration comes directly to Jesus (“You are my

beloved Son”), the reader can assume that he knows

One of the keys to understanding Mark’s portrayal

it as well. In addition, the evil demons recognize

of Jesus lies in the sequence of stories that begins

Jesus as the Son of God; on several instances they

immediately after Jesus’ exasperated question of

scream it out when they encounter him (3:11, cf.

8:21. The sequence begins with perhaps the most

1:24). Who else knows? Only two other persons:

significant healing story of the Gospel, an account

the author of the Gospel, who recounts these vari—

that Mark appears to have invested with special

ous tales, and you the reader.

symbolic meaning. This is a story of a blind man

Through the first half of this Gospel, no one else

who gradually regains his sight (8:22–26).

recognizes Jesus’ identity, including even those who

It is striking that the healing takes place in

are closest to him. Early on, when he comes to his

stages. Indeed, it is the only miracle in the Gospel

home town, his family tries to snatch him from the

that Jesus does not perform immediately and

public eye because they think that he has gone crazy

effortlessly. When he is asked to heal the blind

(3:21). Jesus’ own townspeople neither understand

man, he takes him by the hand, leads him out of

nor trust him. When he teaches in their synagogue,

the village, spits on his eyes, and asks if he can see.

they take offense at his words and wonder how he

The man replies that he can, but only vaguely:

has the ability to do such miraculous deeds, since he

people appear like walking trees. Jesus then lays

is a mere carpenter whose (unremarkable) family

his hands upon his eyes and looks intently at him,

they know (6:1–6). The Jewish scholars think they

and the man begins to see clearly.

know the source of his power. Refusing to acknowl—

A perceptive reader will recognize the symbol—

edge the divine authority behind Jesus’ words and

ism of the account in light of its immediate context.

deeds—how could one so profane come from God

In the very next story, the disciples themselves, who

(2:7)?—they claim that he is possessed by

until now have been blind to Jesus’ identity

Beelzebul, the prince of the demons, and so does

(cf. 8:21), gradually begin to see who he is, in stages.

miracles through the power of the Devil (3:22).

It starts with a question from Jesus: “Who do people

Perhaps most striking of all, Jesus’ own disciples

say that I am?” (8:27). The disciples reply that

fail to understand who he is, even though he has

some think he is John the Baptist, others Elijah, and

specially chosen them to follow him (3:13–19) and

yet others a prophet raised from the dead. He then

given them private instruction (e.g., 4:10–20).

turns the question on them: “But who do you say

When they watch him calm a violent storm at sea

that I am?” (8:29). Peter, as spokesperson for the

with a word, their question is genuine: “Who then

group, replies, “You are the Christ.”

is this, that even wind and sea obey him?” (4:41).

This is a climactic moment in the narrative.

When they later behold Jesus walking upon the

Up to this point, Jesus has been misunderstood by

water, they continue to be mystified: “For they did

everyone, by family, neighbors, religious leaders,

not understand . . . but their hearts were hardened”

and followers, and now, halfway through the

(6:51–52). When, later still, Jesus warns them “to

account, someone finally realizes who he is, at

beware of the leaven of the scribes and Pharisees”

least in part. (The reader knows that Peter’s con-

(8:15), they mistake his meaning, thinking he is

fession is correct to some extent, since for Mark

angry because they have forgotten to bring bread,

Jesus is the messiah: recall how he identifies him

even though they had seen him miraculously feed

in the very first verse of the narrative as “Jesus the

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Christ.”) Rather than rejecting or repudiating

who has to suffer and die. And this makes no

Peter’s confession, Jesus orders the disciples not to

sense to Peter. He takes Jesus aside and begins to

spread the word: “And he sternly ordered them

rebuke him.

not to tell anyone about him” (8:30; see box 5.3).

But why would Peter reject Jesus’ message of his

Still, Peter’s identification of Jesus as the mes—

approaching “Passion” (a term that comes from the

siah is correct only in part. That is to say, Peter

Greek word for “suffering”)? Evidently he under—

has begun to see who Jesus is, but still perceives

stands the role of the messiah quite differently from

him only dimly. The reader knows this because of

the way Jesus (and Mark) does. The author never

what happens next. Jesus begins to teach that he

delineates Peter’s view for us, but perhaps it is not

“must suffer many things, and be rejected by the

so difficult to figure out. If Peter uses the term

elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be

“messiah” in the way most other first-century Jews

killed, and after three days rise from the dead”

did, then he understands Jesus to be the future

(8:31). Jesus is the messiah, but he is the messiah

deliverer of Israel, a man of grandeur and power

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 5.3 The Messianic Secret in Mark

After Peter’s confession, Jesus instructs his disciples not to tell anyone who he is.

Interestingly, Jesus attempts to keep his identity a secret on a number of other occasions in Mark’s Gospel as well. When he casts out demons, he refuses to let them speak “because they knew him” (1:34; cf. 3:12). When he heals a leper, he commands him to “say nothing to any one” (1:43). When he raises a young girl from the dead, he strictly orders “that no one should know this” (5:43). Indeed, before his discussion with the disciples at the end of chapter 8, he never speaks openly to anyone about his identity. And there, when someone finally recognizes that he is the messiah, he commands silence.

How does one explain this ironic feature of Mark’s Gospel, that Jesus is the Son of God, the messiah, but that he does not want anyone to know? This puzzle has been called the

“messianic secret” since the earlier part of this century, when a German scholar named William Wrede propounded a now famous solution—that the historical Jesus himself never urged secrecy at all because he did not actually see himself as the messiah. After his death, however, Jesus’ followers began to proclaim that he had been the messiah. How could it be that Jesus was thought to be the messiah when he had made no such claim about himself?

Wrede’s explanation was that the early Christian community invented the idea that Jesus tried to keep his identity under wraps. They then fabricated the stories of Jesus’ commands to silence to show that a messianic Jesus did not proclaim himself to be the messiah.

Different scholars evaluate the merits of this solution differently, and we will have occasion to return to it when we take up questions pertaining to the historical Jesus in Chapter 16. In the present chapter we are interested in how the messianic secret functions literarily in the context of Mark’s story of Jesus. Here Jesus is clearly the messiah (cf. 1:1); but just as clearly he is not the great king or cosmic warrior that many Jews may have anticipated. Why then the commands to silence? One explanation is that Jesus in Mark’s Gospel does not want people to have the wrong idea about him, for example, by thinking that he is the kind of messiah they have anticipated. For Mark, the title “messiah” does not signify earthly grandeur and power but just the opposite. As messiah, Jesus was the Son of God who had to suffer and die.

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who will usher in God’s kingdom in a mighty way

his followers as well: “Whoever would come after

(whether as a warrior-king or as a cosmic judge of

me must take up the cross and follow me.” Being

the earth; see box 5.1). But for Mark, this is only a

a disciple means affliction and pain, not power and

partial truth, a dim perception of who Jesus is. For

prestige; it means giving up one’s life in order to

him, Jesus is the messiah who must suffer and die to

gain the world. Those who reject these words will

bring about salvation for the world.

have no part of Christ at the end of the age

Peter’s failure to perceive this truth forces Jesus

(8:34–38).

to turn the rebuke back on him: “Get behind me

The next prediction occurs a chapter later, after

Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine

Jesus’ hidden glory is revealed on the Mount of

things but on human things” (8:33). The idea

Transfiguration to three of the disciples, who even

that the messiah had to suffer may have appeared

then fail to understand what they have seen

totally anomalous to most Jews of the first century,

(9:2–13; especially vv. 6, 10). In nearly the same

including Jesus’ own disciples; but in Mark’s view,

terms as before, Jesus predicts his coming death,

to understand Jesus in any other way is to succumb

and Mark states that the disciples do not know

to the temptations of the devil. Thus Peter has

what he means (9:30–31). Immediately after—

begun to see, but not yet clearly; he is like a blind

wards, they begin to argue over who is the greatest

man who has partially recovered his sight.

among them (9:33–34). Jesus again tells them

Perhaps this is better than being totally blind, but

that being his disciple means a life of lowly servi—

in another sense it is worse, because partial per—

tude rather than grand eminence.

ception can lead to misperception: people seem to

The final prediction occurs in the chapter that

be trees and Jesus appears to be the messiah of pop—

follows (10:33–34). In this instance, the details are

ular expectation. For Mark, however, Jesus is the

somewhat more graphic, but the response of the

suffering Son of God.

disciples is remarkably similar. James and John,

two of his closest followers, request positions of

prominence when Jesus enters into his glorious

JESUS THE

kingdom. Jesus has to tell them, yet again, that fol-

SUFFERING SON OF GOD

lowing him means certain death, and that if they

want to be great they must become the slaves of all.

Throughout the early portions of Mark’s Gospel

This, in fact, is what he has done himself: “For the

the reader is given several indications that Jesus

Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve,

will have to die (e.g., 2:20; 3:6). After Peter’s

and to give his life a ransom for many” (10:45).

confession, however, Jesus begins to be quite

From this point on, the narrative marches inex—

explicit about it. Even though he is the Christ,

orably towards Jesus’ death, as Mark recounts the

the Son of God—or rather because he is—he

familiar stories of the “Passion narrative.” Jesus

must suffer death. Three times Jesus predicts his

triumphally enters Jerusalem to shouts of acclama—

own impending passion in Jerusalem: he is to be

tion from the crowds, who appear to accept the

rejected by the Jewish leaders, killed, and then

disciples’ notion of what it means for Jesus to be

raised from the dead. Strikingly, after each of

the messiah (11:1–10). He enters the Temple and

these “Passion predictions” Mark has placed sto—

drives out those who are in business there, incurries to show that the disciples never do under—

ring yet further opposition from the Jewish leader—

stand what Jesus is talking about.

ship (11:15–19). He teaches in the Temple, and

We have already seen the first prediction in

engages in disputes with his opponents among the

8:31. When Jesus declares that he must be reject—

leaders, who try to trap him and stir up the crowds

ed and killed, Peter, who has just declared Jesus to

against him (11:28–12:40). He launches into a

be the messiah, not understanding fully what this

lengthy description of the imminent destruction of

means, takes him aside to rebuke him (8:32). Jesus

the Temple, when the end of time comes and the

turns the rebuke back on him and begins to teach

cosmic judge, the Son of Man, appears to bring

that suffering is to be not only his lot but that of

judgment to the earth and salvation to the follow-

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SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 5.4 Son of God and Son of Man

The way that most people understand the terms “Son of God” and “Son of Man” today is probably at odds with how they would have been understood by many Jews in the first century. In our way of thinking, a “son of God” would be a god (or God) and a “son of man” would be a man. Thus, “Son of God” refers to Jesus’ divinity and “Son of Man” to his humanity.

But this is just the opposite of what the terms meant for many first-century Jews, for whom

“son of God” commonly referred to a human (e.g., King Solomon; cf. 2 Sam 7:14) and “son of man” to someone divine (cf. Dan 7:13–14).

In the New Testament Gospels, Jesus uses the term “son of man” in three different ways.

On some occasions he uses it simply as a circumlocution for himself; that is, rather than referring directly to himself, Jesus sometimes speaks obliquely of “the son of man” (e.g., Matt 8:20). In a related way, he sometimes uses it to speak of his impending suffering (Mark 8:31).

Finally, he occasionally uses the term with reference to a cosmic figure who is coming to bring the judgment of God at the end of time (Mark 8:38), a judgment that Mark’s Gospel expects to be imminent (9:1; 13:30). For Mark himself, of course, the passages that speak of the coming Son of Man refer to Jesus, the one who is returning soon as the judge of the earth. As we will see later, scholars debate which, if any, of these three uses of the term can be ascribed to the historical Jesus.

ers of Jesus (13:1–36). He assures his hearers that

Jesus is finally questioned directly by the high

this apocalyptic drama will unfold soon, within

priest concerning his identity: “Are you the

their own generation (13:30).

Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?” The reader,

Finally we reach the account of the Passion

of course, already knows the answer: Jesus is the

itself. Jesus is anointed with oil by an unknown

messiah, the Son of God, but not in any way that

woman, evidently the only person in the entire

these Jewish authorities would recognize. Jesus

narrative who knows what is about to happen to

now confesses to his identity and again predicts

him (14:1– 9; she may, however, simply be per—

that the Son of Man, the cosmic judge from heav—

forming a kind deed that Jesus himself explains as

en, will soon arrive on the clouds of heaven

a preparation for his burial). He celebrates his

(14:61–62; see box 5.4). The Sanhedrin charges

Last Supper with his disciples (14:12–26) and

him with blasphemy and finds him worthy of

then goes out with them to (the Garden of)

death (see box 5.5). The next morning they

Gethsemane to pray that he not be required to suf—

deliver him over to Pilate, who tries him on the

fer his imminent ordeal (14:26–42). God, howev—

charge of claiming to be King of the Jews

er, is silent. Jesus is arrested (14:43– 52) and put

(15:1–15). When Jesus refuses to answer his

on trial before the Jewish Council, the Sanhedrin,

accusers, Pilate condemns him to execution for

where he is confronted with witnesses who accuse

treason against Rome. Pilate gives the Jewish

him of opposing the Temple (14:53–65). The

crowds the option of releasing Jesus or a Jewish

false witnesses on the inside are matched by the

insurgent, Barabbas (15:6 –15). They prefer

false disciples on the outside: while Jesus is being

Barabbas. Jesus is flogged, mocked, and beaten.

tried, Peter, as predicted, denies him three times

They take him off and crucify him at 9:00

(14:66 –72).

a.m. (15:25).

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Romans or restore the kingdom to Israel. For

CRUCIFIED SON OF GOD

Mark, of course, these hopes were misplaced. Jesus

was the Son of God, but he was the Son of God

It is clear from Mark’s Gospel that Jesus’ disciples

who had to suffer. Until the very end, when Jesus

never do come to understand who he is. As we

was actually crucified, there is nobody in the

have seen, he is betrayed to the Jewish authorities

Gospel who fully understands this.

by one of them, Judas Iscariot. On the night of his

Mark’s narrative may even intimate that at the

arrest, he is denied three times by another, his

end Jesus himself was in doubt. In Gethsemane he

closest disciple, Peter. All the others scatter,

prays three times not to have to undergo his fate,

unwilling to stand up for him in the hour of his

suggesting perhaps that he thinks there could be

distress. Perhaps Mark wants his readers to under—

another way. When he finally succumbs to his

stand that the disciples were shocked when their

destiny, he appears yet more uncertain, and with

hopes concerning Jesus as messiah were thorough—

good reason. Deserted by his own followers, con—

ly dashed: Jesus did not bring victory over the

demned by his own leaders, rejected by his own

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 5.5 The Charge of Blasphemy according to Mark

Jesus’ trial before the Jewish Sanhedrin in Mark is as poignant as it is difficult to understand. The high priest asks Jesus, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?” Jesus replies, “I am; and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven” (14:61– 62). The high priest immediately cries out “Blasphemy,” and the entire Sanhedrin concurs. But what was the blasphemy?

It was not blasphemous to claim to be the messiah. Other persons before Jesus had done so and others would later. Nearly a century after Jesus’ death, one of the leading rabbis of the day (Rabbi Akiba) proclaimed a Jewish general (Simon bar Kosiba) to be the long awaited messiah, and no charges of blasphemy were brought against him. If the messiah was the future deliverer of Israel, then a person claiming to be the messiah was simply claiming to be the next king.

Nor was it blasphemous to call oneself the Son of God. Recall, other people were also called this, both in the Jewish Scriptures and during Jesus’ own day. Nor, finally, was it blasphemous to predict that the Son of Man was soon to arrive on the clouds of heaven. This, in fact, was prophesied in the book of Daniel, and there were a number of Jewish preachers who proclaimed that his much awaited appearance would soon come.

So what was Jesus’ blasphemy? From a historical point of view, Jesus does not appear to have committed one in Mark’s narrative. But it is possible that Mark thought that Jesus’ committed one, at least in the eyes of the Jewish high priest. Remember that Mark understood Jesus to be the Son of Man. Perhaps Mark projected his own Christian understanding of Jesus back onto the high priest, so that in the narrative, when Jesus spoke about the Son of Man being seated on the throne next to God, the high priest “realized” (as the author of Mark himself believed) that Jesus was referring to himself. If so, then the high priest (in Mark’s narrative, not in real life) would have understood that Jesus was claiming to be divine in some sense. This claim would be a blasphemy. Perhaps this is why the high priest in Mark finds Jesus’ words blasphemous, even though technically speaking, no blasphemy had occurred.

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people, he is publically humiliated, beaten, spat

Day of Atonement. The ultimate sacrifice has

upon, flogged. He is nailed to the cross, and even

been made, voiding the necessity of all others.

there he is mocked by passersby, Jewish leaders,

Jesus, the Son of God, has “given his life as a ran—

and the two criminals who are crucified along with

som for many” (10:45). People now have direct

him. He suffers throughout this entire ordeal in

access to God, who comes to them in the death of

silence, until the very end, when he cries out the

Jesus.

words of Scripture: “My God, My God, why have

The second event cited by Mark is equally signifi—

you forsaken me?” (15:34; cf. Ps. 22:2). He then

cant. No one throughout the Gospel has fully under—

utters a loud cry and dies.

stood that Jesus is the Son of God who has to suffer.

Is this a genuine question of the dying Jesus?

Until now. Strikingly, it is not one of Jesus’ family or

Does he truly feel forsaken in the end even by

followers who understands. It is the Roman centuri—

God? Does he not fully understand the reason for

on who has presided over his crucifixion. This pagan

his death? These are questions on which readers

soldier, seeing Jesus die, proclaims, “Surely this man

of the account may disagree. On one point, how—

was God’s Son” (15:39). This brings the recognition

ever, there can be no disagreement. Even though

of Jesus’ true identity full circle. It was proclaimed at

no one else in the Gospel appears to know the sig—

his baptism at the beginning of the Gospel (from

nificance of Jesus’ death, the reader knows. Mark

heaven); it is now proclaimed at his crucifixion at

reveals it by narrating two events that transpire

the end (on earth). Moreover, it is significant who

immediately after Jesus breathes his last: the cur—

makes the proclamation: a pagan soldier, one who

tain in the Temple is torn in half from top to bot—

had not been Jesus’ follower. This in itself may inti—

tom (15:38), and the Roman centurion confesses

mate what will happen to the proclamation of Jesus

Jesus to be the Son of God (15:39).

through the years until the time when Mark pens his

Without posing the historical question of what

account. The proclamation will not find fertile soil

really happened to the curtain in the Temple

among Jews, either those who had known Jesus or

(there is no reference in any non-Christian source

those who had not. It will be embraced principally

to its being torn or damaged in any way), one

by those outside of Judaism, by Gentiles as represent—

might ask how the reader is supposed to undered by this Roman centurion. Jesus is the Son of God,

stand Mark’s claim that it was ripped asunder.

rejected by his own people but acknowledged by the

Most ancient Jews ascribed a particular holiness to

Gentiles, and it is this confession of the suffering and

the Temple as the one place in which sacrifices

death of the Son of God, Mark reveals, that has

could be offered up to God. This was a sacred

brought salvation to the world. This, however, is not

place to be revered and respected. The most

the end of the story.

sacred area within the holy Temple was the Holy

of Holies, the square room in whose darkness

God’s very presence was thought to dwell. This

JESUS THE

room was so holy that no one could enter, except

VINDICATED SON OF GOD

on one day of the year, the Day of Atonement

(Yom Kippur), when the Jewish high priest could

One of the most fascinating aspects of Mark’s

go behind the thick curtain into the presence of

Gospel is the way in which he chose to conclude it.

God to perform a sacrifice to atone for the sins of

Jesus is buried by a respected leader among the Jews,

the people.

Joseph of Arimathea (indicating, perhaps, that not

Mark indicates that when Jesus died, the curtain

all Jews, or even all prominent Jews, were bound to

separating this holiest of places from the outside

reject him; 15:42–47, cf. 12:28–34). Two women

world was torn in half. The event appears to signi—

see where he is placed. The next day is the

fy, for Mark, that God is no longer removed from

Sabbath. Early in the morning on the day after

his people; his holiness is now available to all. No

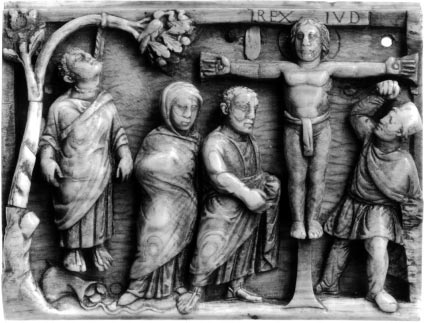
Sabbath, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of

longer do his people need to rely on the Jewish

James, and Salome come to provide a more decent

high priest and his sacrifice for their sins on the

burial for the body, but they discover that the stone



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F P O

Figure 5.3

One of the earliest surviving portrayals of Jesus’ crucifixion, from a miniature ivory panel of the fourth century.

before the tomb has been rolled away. Going

ances to his disciples. Modern scholars are unified,

inside, they find a young man in a white robe who

however, in recognizing this ending as secondary

tells them that Jesus has risen. He instructs them to

(see Chapter 29). Some have proposed, in its stead,

tell the disciples and Peter that Jesus is going ahead

that we assume that the final page of the Gospel

of them to Galilee and that they are to go there to

somehow got lost (which makes the questionable

see him (16:1–7). Then comes the breathtaking

assumption, among other things, that the Gospel

conclusion. The women flee the tomb and tell

was written on separate pages instead of on a scroll).

nobody anything, “for they were afraid” (16:8).

These various explanations for Mark’s ending,

Christian readers from time immemorial have

however, may be unnecessary. Mark devoted con—

been shocked and dismayed by this conclusion.

siderable effort to demonstrating that the disci—

How could it end without the disciples hearing that

ples never could understand what Jesus meant

Jesus has been raised? How could they remain in

when he talked about dying and rising again.

their ignorance? Surely the women must have told

They never do understand, to the very end.

someone. In the early church, some copyists of this

Mark’s readers, however, understand. In fact, they

Gospel were so put off by the ending that they

understand a lot of things—about who Jesus real—

added one of their own, appending twelve addi—

ly is, about how he was thoroughly misunder—

tional verses that describe some of Jesus’ appear—

stood, about how his message was to go to the

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Gentiles, and about what it means for those who

ing to Jesus’ religion, Judaism. They too came to

believe in him to be his disciples.

worship the Jewish God and saw in Jesus the

Jewish messiah, whose death brought about salvation not only for Jews but for the whole world.

It may be that this community continued to

CONCLUSION:

experience open conflict with a local Jewish syna-

MARK AND HIS READERS

gogue that actively rejected these Christian claims

about Jesus. And it may be that this conflict at

Can we decide who the original readers of this

times turned ugly. This would explain why Mark

Gospel probably were? It is impossible, of course,

emphasizes that Jewish leaders, especially

to learn very much about them. Our only evi—

Pharisees, failed to understand Jesus and that foldence comes from the Gospel itself, and conclu—

lowing him involves a high cost. For Mark, fol—

sions drawn on these slim grounds will necessarily

lowing Jesus is not a ticket to glory, it is the path to

be tentative. But there are a few intimations both

suffering; being a disciple does not bring exaltation

about the first readers and about Mark’s overarch—

but humiliation and pain.

ing concerns for them, and I will conclude this dis—

Mark stresses, however, that the suffering

cussion by considering them.

would not last forever. In fact, it would not last

The first readers of this Gospel appear to have

long. Just as Jesus was vindicated, so too will be

been the Christians of Mark’s community, most of

his faithful followers. And the end was near (9:1).

whom would have been illiterate, and thus “read”

This may have been suggested to Mark by current

the Gospel by hearing it read (see box 3.1). They

events: many scholars believe that the Gospel was

evidently resided outside of Palestine and had

written during the early stages of the Jewish War

Greek as their primary language. There are clues

against Rome (66 –70 C.E.), at the conclusion of

in the Gospel that most of them had not convert—

which the Temple itself was destroyed. Does this

ed to Christianity from Judaism, the most striking

war mark the beginning of the end, predicted by

of which comes in 7:3– 4, where Mark has to

Jesus as certain to occur during the lifetime of

explain the Pharisaic custom of washing hands

some of his disciples (see 8:38 –9:1 and all of chap.

before eating for ceremonial cleansing. Pre—

13)? Indeed, for the Markan community, the Son

sumably, if his audience were Jewish, they would

of Man was at the gate, ready to make his appear—

already know this custom, and Mark would not

ance. Those who were ashamed of Jesus’ words

have to explain it. What is even more intriguing

would be put to shame when the Son of Man

is the fact that Mark appears to misunderstand the

arrived; those who accepted his words and became

practice: he claims that it was followed by “all the

his followers would then enter into glory. Just as

Jews.” We know from ancient Jewish writings that

Mark’s Jesus may not have fully understood the

this is simply not true. For this reason, many

meaning of his own crucifixion, so too the

scholars have concluded that Mark himself was

Christian community currently experiencing suf—

not Jewish.

fering may not fathom its full meaning. But ulti—

Many of Mark’s traditions, however, are con—

mately their pain will lead to redemption. This is

cerned with showing the Jewishness of Jesus and

just one of the paradoxical claims of Mark’s

appear to presuppose strictly Jewish beliefs and

Gospel.

practices. How can we explain this? Many of the

Mark’s story of Jesus is replete with such para—

oral traditions found in this Gospel must go back

doxes: the glorious messiah is one who suffers an

to the earliest Jewish followers of Jesus, who

ignominious death; exaltation comes in pain, sal—

embodied their own beliefs and concerns in them.

vation through crucifixion; to gain one’s life one

As the stories were passed along, their Jewish char—

must lose it; the greatest are the most humble; the

acter was preserved. Mark and many people in his

most powerful are the slaves; prosperity is not a

congregation (some of them Jewish?) converted to

blessing but a hindrance; leaving one’s home or

faith in Jesus, which necessarily involved convert—

field or family brings a hundredfold homes and

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# CHAPTER 5

JESUS, THE SUFFERING SON OF GOD

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fields and families; the first will be last and the last

ticular sense for a community that knows that its

first. These lessons provide hope for a community

messiah, the Son of God, was rejected and mocked

that is in the throes of suffering, experiencing the

and killed, only to be vindicated by God, who

social disruptions of persecution. They make par—

raised him from the dead.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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literary technique and theological agenda, for

three Synoptic Gospels.

advanced students.

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# CHAPTER 6

The Synoptic Problem and Its Significance for Interpretation

METHODS FOR

A “redactor” is someone who edits a text;

STUDYING THE GOSPELS

“redaction criticism” is the study of how authors

have created a literary work by modifying or edit—

Now that we have studied one of the early

ing their sources of information. The underlying

Christian Gospels, we can take a step back and

theory behind the method is simple. An author

reflect on what we have done. In analyzing Mark,

will modify a source of information only for a rea—

I began by establishing the genre of the book,

son—why change what a source has to say if it is

arguing that it was a kind of Greco-Roman biogra—

acceptable the way it is? If enough changes point

phy, and then asked how an informed reader might

in the same direction, we may be able to uncover

understand its message. This hypothetical reader

the redactor’s principal concerns and emphases.

was one who knew how the genre of the book

We can subject the Gospels to a redactional

works and who had all of the background informa—

analysis because we are convinced that their authors

tion of the first-century world that the author

used actual sources in constructing their narratives;

appears to presuppose.

that is, they didn’t make up most of their stories

A literary theorist would identify this approach

themselves. Moreover, we are relatively certain that

as one kind of “reader-response criticism.” For our

at least one of these sources still survives. To put the

purposes, however, since the method focuses on a

matter baldly: most scholars believe that Matthew

text’s literary genre within its historical context, I

and Luke used the Gospel of Mark as a source for

will call it the “literary-historical method.” It is by

many of their stories about Jesus. By seeing how

no means self-evident that the literary-historical

they edited these stories, we are able to determine

method is the best way to approach a text from

their distinctive emphases. To justify the method,

antiquity. Indeed, most readers of the New

we must obviously begin by demonstrating that

Testament have never used it! But in many

Matthew and Luke used Mark as a source.

respects it is superior to other ways of reading the

text; it is better, for example, than thinking that

the historical context of what an author says, or

THE SYNOPTIC PROBLEM

the literary genre that the author uses, are of no

importance to the message. At the same time,

Matthew, Mark, and Luke are often called the

there are other ways besides the literary-historical

“Synoptic Gospels.” This is because they have so

to study a text. In this chapter I will establish the

many stories in common that they can be placed

theoretical grounds for using another method that

side by side in columns and “seen together” (the

has enjoyed enormous popularity among scholars

literal meaning of the word “synoptic”). Indeed,

of the Gospels. It has traditionally been called

not only do these Gospels tell many of the same

“redaction criticism.”

stories, they often do so using the very same words.

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# CHAPTER 6

THE SYNOPTIC PROBLEM AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR INTERPRETATION

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This phenomenon is virtually inexplicable unless

the stories are derived from a common literary

Mark

Q

source. To illustrate, consider a modern–day parallel. You have no doubt noticed over the years

that when newspapers, magazines, and books all

describe the same event, they do so differently.

Take any three newspapers from yesterday and

compare their treatment of the same news item.

M

Matthew

Luke

L

At no point will they contain entire paragraphs

that are word for word the same, unless they hap-

Figure 6.1

The Four-Source Hypothesis.

pen to be quoting the same source, for example, an

interview or a speech. These differences occur

because every author wants to emphasize certain

Matthew and Luke. In addition, both of these

things and has his or her own way of writing.

other Gospels had access to another source, called

When you do find that two papers have exactly

Q (from the German word for “source,” Quelle). Q

the same account, you know that they have simply

provided Matthew and Luke with the stories that

reproduced a feature from somewhere else. This

they have in common that are not, however,

happens, for example, when two newspapers pick

found in Mark. Moreover, Matthew had a source

up the same news story from the Associated Press.

(or group of sources) of his own, from which he

We have a similar situation with the Gospels.

drew stories found in neither of the other Gospels.

There are passages shared by Matthew, Mark, and

Scholars have simply labeled this source (or

Luke that are verbatim the same. This can scarce—

sources) M (for Matthew’s special source).

ly be explained unless all three of them drew these

Likewise, Luke had a source (or group of sources)

accounts from a common source. But what was it?

for stories that he alone tells; not surprisingly, this

The question is complicated by the fact that the

is called L (Luke’s special source). Hence, accord—

Synoptics not only agree extensively with one

ing to this hypothesis, four sources lie behind our

another, they also disagree. There are some stories

three Synoptic Gospels: Mark, Q, M, and L (see

found in all three Gospels, others found in only

figure 6.1).

two of the three, and yet others found in only one.

The cornerstone of this hypothesis is the theo—

Moreover, when all three Gospels share the same

ry that Matthew and Luke both used Mark. We

story, they sometimes give it in precisely the same

therefore begin our discussion by considering the

wording and sometimes word it differently. And

arguments that scholars have generally found to be

sometimes two of them will word it the same way

persuasive of “Markan priority.”

and the third will word it differently. The problem

of how to explain the wide-ranging agreements

and disagreements among these three Gospels is

Arguments for Markan Priority

called the “Synoptic Problem.”

For the past century or so, three arguments have

Scholars have propounded a number of theories

proved widely convincing for establishing Mark’s

over the years to solve the Synoptic Problem.

priority to Matthew and Luke:

Many of the theories are extraordinarily complex

and entirely implausible. For an introduction to

Patterns of Agreement.

Since the main reason for

the problem, we do not need to concern ourselves

thinking that the Gospels share a common source is

with all of these solutions. We will instead focus

their verbatim agreements, it makes sense to exam—

on the one that most scholars have come to accept

ine the nature of these agreements in order to decide

as the least problematic. This explanation is

which of the books was used by the other two. If you

sometimes called the “four-source hypothesis.”

were to make a detailed comparison of the word-for—

According to this hypothesis, Mark was the first

word agreements among these Gospels, an interest—

Gospel to be written. It was used by both

ing pattern would emerge. Sometimes all three of

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the Gospels tell a story in precisely the same way.

You may be relieved to recall that we are not going

This can easily be accounted for; it would happen

to worry about the complexities of the problem.

whenever two of the authors borrowed their account

from the earliest one, and neither of them changed

The Sequence of Narrative.

One of the most

it. Sometimes all three Gospels differ. This would

striking aspects of the Synoptic Problem is that

happen whenever the two authors who borrowed

even though Matthew and Luke do not often

the story each changed it, in different ways. Finally,

agree together against Mark in the wording of sto—

sometimes two of the three are exactly alike, but the

ries that all three of them share, they do exten—

third differs. This would occur when both of the

sively agree in the wording of stories that are not

later authors borrowed the story but only one of

found in Mark. For example, both Matthew and

them changed it; in this case one of the redactors

Luke have versions of the Lord’s Prayer and the

would agree with the wording of his source, and the

Beatitudes. Most, but not all, of these other sto—

other would not.

ries are sayings of Jesus. Later we will pursue the

In this final kind of situation, certain patterns

evidence that suggests that Matthew and Luke

of agreement typically occur among the Synoptic

must have gotten these stories from the source

Gospels. Sometimes Matthew and Mark share the

scholars call Q. What is significant at the present

wording of a story when Luke differs, and some—

juncture is that even the stories not found in Mark

times Mark and Luke share the wording when

suggest that Mark was a source for Matthew and

Matthew differs. But it is extremely rare to find

Luke. This conclusion is based on the sequence of

Matthew and Luke sharing the wording of a story

the stories found in these other two Gospels.

also found in Mark when Mark differs. Why

Matthew and Luke often present the stories of

would this be?

their Gospels in the same sequence (Jesus did this,

If Matthew were the source for Mark and Luke,

then he did that, then he said this, and so on).

or if Luke were the source for Matthew and Mark,

What is odd is that when they do preserve the

you would probably not get this pattern. Consider

same sequence, it is almost always with stories that

these examples. If both Matthew and Luke used

are also found in Mark. The other stories that the

Mark, then sometimes they would both reproduce

two Gospels share—that is, those not found in

the same wording. That’s why all three sometimes

Mark—are in virtually every instance located in

agree. Sometimes they would both change the

different places of their narratives.

wording for reasons of their own. That’s why all

But why would that be? The best explanation

three sometimes differ. Sometimes Matthew

is that Matthew and Luke each used Mark as one

would change Mark’s account when Luke left it

of their sources and also had a different source that

the same. That’s why Mark and Luke sometimes

they plugged into the narrative framework of Mark

agree against Matthew. And sometimes Luke

at different places. That is to say, not having any

would change Mark’s account when Matthew left

indication from Mark’s Gospel where traditions

it the same. That’s why Matthew and Mark some—

like the Lord’s Prayer or the Beatitudes would have

times agree against Luke.

fit into the life of Jesus, each author put them in

The reason then that Matthew and Luke rarely

wherever he saw fit. Almost never, though, did

agree against Mark in the wording of stories found

the stories go in at the same places.

in all three is that Mark is the source for these sto—

This curiosity of sequence can scarcely be

ries. Unless Matthew and Luke accidentally hap—

explained if Mark were not one of the sources for

pen to make precisely the same changes in their

Matthew and Luke. Imagine for a moment a dif—

source (which does happen on occasion, but not

ferent scenario, that Matthew were the source for

commonly and not in major ways), they cannot

Mark and Luke. In this hypothetical case, Mark

both differ from the source and agree with one must have decided to remove some of Matthew’s

another. The fact that they rarely do differ from

stories (since his Gospel is much shorter than

Mark while agreeing with one another indicates

Matthew’s). Many of these Matthean stories that

that Mark must have been their source.

Mark omitted, however, were retained by Luke.

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# CHAPTER 6

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But when Luke copied Matthew, why would he

condenser. The conclusion that most scholars

have rearranged precisely these stories? That is to

have reached, therefore, is that Mark’s Gospel is

say, why would Luke have rearranged only those

the first to have been written, and that it was used

stories that Mark did not bother to copy, while

independently by both Matthew and Luke.

keeping the stories that Mark did copy in the same

sequence?

It is almost impossible to think that Luke

The Q Source

worked this way (or Matthew, if Luke were the

Once Mark is established as prior to Matthew and

source for both him and Mark). Therefore, the

Luke, the Q hypothesis naturally suggests itself.

additional stories of Matthew and Luke that occur

Matthew and Luke have stories not found in

in different places in their narrative indicate that

Mark, and in these stories they sometimes agree

Mark was one of their sources, into which they

word for word. Whence do these stories come?

both inserted these other stories.

It is unlikely that one of the authors used Mark,

added several stories of his own, and that his

Characteristics of the Changes. One final argu—

account then served as the source for the other. If

ment that is typically advanced for Markan priori—

this were the case, we would not be able to explain

ty is that the kinds of differences in wording

the phenomenon noted above, that these stories

that one finds among the three Gospels sug—

found in Matthew and Luke but not in Mark are

gest that Matthew and Luke used Mark as a source.

almost always inserted by these other authors into

Some of these arguments, again, get rather techni—

a different sequence of Mark’s narrative. Why

cal; here I will simply explain the issues in general

would an author follow the sequence of one of his

terms.

sources, except for stories that are not found in his

Sometimes Mark uses a Greek style of writing

other one? It is more likely that these stories were

that is somewhat awkward or not aesthetically

drawn from another source that no longer exists,

pleasing, sometimes he uses unusual words or

the source that scholars have designated as Q.

phrases, and sometimes he presents difficult ideas.

Notwithstanding the extravagant claims of

In many instances, however, these problems are

some scholars, we simply do not know the full

not found when Matthew or Luke narrates the

extent or character of Q (see box 6.2). It is proba—

same stories. This difference suggests that Mark

bly best for methodological purposes to define it

was the earliest of the three to be written. That is

strictly as material shared by Matthew and Luke

to say, it would be difficult to understand why

that is not also found in Mark. It is indeed strik—

Mark would introduce awkward grammar or a

ing that almost all of this material comprises say—

strange word or a difficult idea into a passage that

ings of Jesus. But there are at least two narratives

originally posed no problem, but it is easy to see

involved: the full story of Jesus’ three temptations

why Matthew or Luke might have wanted to elimin the wilderness (Matt 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13;

inate such problems. It is more likely, therefore,

Mark has only a brief mention of the Temptation,

that Mark was first and that it was later modified

Mark 1:12–13) and the story of the healing of the

by one or both of the other authors (see box 6.1).

centurion’s servant (Matt 8:5–10; Luke 7:1–10).

A final and related point is that Mark is the

Most scholars think that Q must have been a

shortest of the three Synoptics. If the author had

written document; otherwise it is difficult to

used one of the others as his source, why would he

explain such long stretches of verbatim agreement

have eliminated so many good stories? Did he

between Matthew and Luke. It is not certain,

want to produce a shorter version of the life of

however, that Matthew and Luke had Q in pre—

Jesus? This may sound plausible, but a close exam—

cisely the same form: they may have had it in

ination of the Gospel texts shows that it can’t be

slightly different editions. The same could be true

right: in almost every instance that Mark and

of their other source, the Gospel of Mark.

Matthew tell the same story, Mark’s is longer.

Finally, most scholars are convinced that of the

Mark doesn’t appear, then, to be the work of a

two Gospels that utilized Q, Luke is more likely

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SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 6.1 Ironing Out the Problems:

One Potential Difficulty in Mark's Account

For a simple illustration of a potential difficulty in Mark’s narrative that comes to be straightened out by one of the other Synoptics, consider the opening of the story of the rich young ruler. (Actually, the story is somewhat misnamed: even though the man is rich in all three accounts, only in Matthew is he said to be young, and only in Luke is he said to be a ruler! See Matt 19:20 and Luke 18:18).

Matthew 19:16–17

Mark 10:17–18

Then someone came to him and said.

As he was setting out on a journey, a man

“Teacher, what good deed must I do to

ran up and knelt before him, and asked him,

have eternal life?” And he said to him,

“Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit

“Why do you ask me about what is good?

eternal life?” Jesus said to him, “Why do you

There is only one who is good. If you

call me good? No one is good but God

wish to enter into life, keep the com—

alone. You know the commandments. . . .”

mandments. . . .”

If you were to compare these accounts with what you find in Luke 18:18 –19, you would find that Luke agrees with Mark nearly word for word (apart from the introduction to the scene). This means that Mark, rather than Matthew, must have been Luke’s source, since the only reason for thinking that any of these Gospels is the source for the others is their verbal agreement. But was Matthew the source for Mark or was Mark the source for Matthew?

One of the interesting things about this passage is that the man who approaches Jesus uses the term “good” in both accounts, but in Matthew he uses it to refer to the “deed” he must do, whereas in Mark he uses it to refer to Jesus. As a result, the ensuing dialogue in Mark makes good sense: Jesus wants to know why the man has called him good when only God is good. But the flow of the dialogue in Matthew seems a bit strange: why would Jesus object to the man asking him about what is good, on the grounds that God alone is good?

One way to understand the redaction of the story is to think that Matthew’s dialogue has become convoluted because he has shifted the adjective away from Jesus and onto the deed that must be done. By doing so, he interrupted the flow of the conversation. What would have compelled him to make the change? One possibility is that there was something in Mark’s story that proved disturbing to him. On closer examination you may be able to detect what it was. One way to read (or misread) Mark’s account is to think that Jesus is claiming not to be good (“Why do you call me good? There is no one good but God!”) If Matthew realized that Jesus’ words might be taken in this way, he may have changed the account slightly simply by moving the adjective “good.”

than Matthew to have preserved its original

Mark chapters 1, 2, 4, and 5 into one large col—

sequence. This is chiefly because when Matthew

lection of miracles in Matthew 8 –9. If this

used Mark, he often gathered together in one

propensity for reorganizing similar kinds of stories

place stories scattered throughout his Markan

was also at work in his treatment of Q, it would

source. As a much noted example, Matthew

make sense that Matthew combines various say—

assembled miracle stories dispersed throughout

ings of Jesus scattered in different portions of

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SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 6.2 The Contents of Q

We cannot know the full contents of Q, but this has rarely stopped scholars from trying.

One popular and widespread view, for example, is that Q did not contain a Passion narrative but consisted entirely of sayings of Jesus, and that it was therefore very similar to the Gospel of Thomas, a collection of 114 sayings of Jesus without any stories of his deeds or experiences and no references to his death and resurrection. I will be dealing more fully with this view in Chapter 12, when I discuss the Gospel of Thomas.

Despite the exuberant claims of some scholars, we cannot fully know what Q contained because the document has been lost. We have access to it only through the materials that Matthew and Luke both decided to include in their accounts, and it would be foolish to think that one or both of them included the entire document. Indeed, if only one of them included a passage from Q, then we would have no solid grounds for knowing that it came from Q rather than, say, M or L. It is entirely possible, for example, that Q had a Passion narrative, and that neither Matthew nor Luke chose to use it, or that only one of them chose not to do so (so that some of the verses of Matthew’s or Luke’s Passion narrative not found in Mark actually derive from Q). At the same time, it is equally possible that Q was almost entirely sayings, without a Passion narrative (or nearly any other narrative). Regrettably, we will never know, unless, of course, Q itself should serendipitously turn up!

Among the materials that we can say were found in Q are some of the most memorable passages in the Gospels, including the following (for simplicity, verse references only from Luke are given): —The preaching of John the Baptist (Luke 3:7–9, 16–17)

—The three temptations in the wilderness (Luke 4:1–13)

—The Beatitudes (Luke 6:20–23)

—The command to love your enemies (Luke 6:27–36)

—The command not to judge others (Luke 6:37–42)

—The healing of the centurion’s slave (Luke 7:1–10)

—The question from John the Baptist in prison (Luke 7:18–35)

—The Lord’s Prayer (Luke 11:2–4)

—The need for fearless confession in light of the coming judgment (Luke 12:2–12)

—The command not to worry about food and clothing (Luke 12:22–32)

—The parable of the unfaithful slave (Luke 12:39–48)

—Entering the kingdom through the narrow door (Luke 13:23–30)

—The parable of the great wedding feast (Luke 14:15–24)

Luke. The Beatitudes and the Lord’s Prayer, for

The M and L Sources

example, are in different sections of Luke (chaps.

We are even less informed about the sources des—

6 and 11) but are joined together as part of the

ignated M and L. Since these are sources that pro—

Sermon on the Mount in Matthew (chaps. 5–6).

vide material found in either Matthew or Luke

It would make less sense to think that Luke arbi—

alone, there is nothing to compare them with in

trarily disrupted this kind of unity. Luke’s version

order to decide their basic character. We do not

is therefore probably closer to the original

know, for instance, whether M (or L) was only one

sequence of the stories in Q.

source or a group of sources, whether it was writ-

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ten or oral. It could represent a single document

THE METHODOLOGICAL

available to the author of Matthew (or Luke), or

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE

several documents, or a number of stories that

FOUR-SOURCE HYPOTHESIS

were transmitted orally, or a combination of all of

these things. What is clear is that these stories

As I intimated earlier the Synoptic problem is an

came from somewhere, since it appears unlikely

important one because if we have an author’s source,

that the Gospel authors simply made them up.

we can determine how he has changed it, and know—

Included in these special sources are some of

ing how he changed it can give us some clues as to

the most familiar passages of our New Testament

his overriding emphases. If Matthew, for example

Gospels. For example, the stories from M include

altered a story he found in Mark, we can assume that

the visit of the Magi (Matt 2:1–12), the flight to

his changes tell us something about his own theolo—

Egypt (Matt 2:13–23), Jesus’ instructions on alms—

gy or interests. This is not to say that the changes

giving and prayer (Matt 6:1–8), and his parables of

that Matthew and Luke introduced into the stories

the treasure hidden in the field (Matt 13:44), the

of Mark are the only things that should concern us

pearl of great price (Matt 13:45–46), the dragnet

when trying to interpret their Gospels. Nor is it to

(Matt 13:47–50), the unmerciful servant (Matt

say that redaction criticism, the study of how these

18:23-35), and the ten virgins (Matt 25:1–12).

authors used their sources, is the only appropriate

Among the stories drawn from L are the birth of

way to approach them. Quite the contrary, we could

John the Baptist and the annunciation to Mary

just as well study Matthew (or Luke) following the

(Luke 1:5–80), the shepherds visiting the infant

literary-historical method that we used for Mark;

Jesus, the presentation in the Temple, and Jesus

and if we undertook the study with sufficient care,

as a twelve-year old (Luke 2:1–52), the raising of

we would uncover many of the same points we will

the widow’s son at Nain (Luke 7:11–17), the heal—

find when we apply a redactional approach.

ing of the ten lepers (Luke 17:11–19), Zachaeus in

In some sense though, a redactional analysis

the sycamore tree (Luke 19:1–10), and the para—

provides a kind of shortcut to seeing what really

bles of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:29–37), the

matters to an author. It will by no stretch of the

prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32), Lazarus and the

imagination indicate everything that is important,

rich man (Luke 16:19–31), and the unjust judge

but it will help us to discern an author’s overarch-

(Luke 18:1–8).

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# CHAPTER 6

THE SYNOPTIC PROBLEM AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR INTERPRETATION

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# CHAPTER 7

Jesus, the Jewish Messiah:

The Gospel according to Matthew

The Gospel of Matthew was one of the most high—

them word for word (including the story of his own

ly treasured accounts of Jesus’ life among the early

call to discipleship; 9:9 –13)? And why would he

Christians. This may explain why it was given

never authenticate his account by indicating that

pride of place as the first Gospel in the New

he himself had seen these things take place?

Testament canon. Its popularity continues un—

Proto-orthodox Christians of the early centuries,

abated today, in no small measure because it pre—

of course, needed to “know” who wrote Matthew

serves such cherished and revered teachings of

before they could include it in their canon of apos—

Jesus as the memorable sayings of the Sermon on

tolic writings. Even though critical scholars today

the Mount, including the Beatitudes, the Golden

are not as certain about the author’s precise identi—

Rule, and the Lord’s Prayer—teachings that have

ty, there are a few general things that we can say

inspired Christian readers through the ages and

about him. Since he produced his Gospel in Greek,

convinced them of Jesus’ genius as a teacher of

presumably for a Greek-speaking community, he

religious principles.

was probably located somewhere outside of

We can begin our discussion of Matthew by

Palestine (since most early Christians in Palestine

reflecting on several of the points that we have

would have spoken Aramaic as their native

already learned. We do not know the name of its

tongue). To construct his narrative about Jesus, he

author: the title found in our English versions

made use of a variety of sources available to him,

(“The Gospel according to Matthew”) was added

both written documents and oral reports that he

long after the document’s original composition. It

had heard, possibly from Christian evangelists and

is true that according to an old tradition the

teachers within his own community. Among his

author was none other than Matthew, the tax col—

written sources were Mark’s Gospel and the collec—

lector named in Matthew 9:9. This tradition,

tion of traditions that scholars designate as Q. If

however, arose some decades after the Gospel itself

Mark was produced around 65 or 70 C.E., then

had been published, and scholars today have rea—

Matthew was obviously written later, but it is diffi—

sons to doubt its accuracy. For one thing, the

cult to know how much later. Most scholars are

author never identifies himself as Matthew, either

content to date the book sometime during the latin 9:9 or anywhere else. Also, certain features of

ter part of the first century, possibly, as a rough

this Gospel make it difficult to believe that this

guess, around 80 or 85 C.E.

Matthew could have been the author. Why, for

Matthew, as I will continue to call the author for

example, would someone who had spent so much

the sake of convenience, chose to follow his prede—

time with Jesus rely on another author (Mark) for

cessor Mark by bringing together stories about Jesus

nearly two-thirds of his stories, often repeating

into a connected narrative of his words and deeds

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# CHAPTER 7

JESUS, THE JEWISH MESSIAH

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culminating in his death and resurrection. An

dentials as the messiah: he was “the son of David,

ancient reader would have recognized the book as a

the son of Abraham.” As Matthew’s readers

kind of Greco-Roman biography, and so would

would realize full well, Abraham was thought to

have entertained certain expectations about what

be the father of the Jews. And David was their

to find in it. Such a reader would have expected the

greatest king, whose descendant was to resume

book to describe Jesus’ life according to some kind

his rule, enthroned in Jerusalem and reigning

of chronology, highlighting those sayings, actions,

over a sovereign state of Israel as God’s anointed.

and experiences that revealed his essential charac—

This son of David would be the messiah.

ter. Moreover, he or she would have expected this

Thus Matthew begins his Gospel by indicating

portrayal to be established by the events described

that Jesus was a Jew (from Abraham) in the line of

at the very outset.

the ancient kings (from David). One is immediate—

As was the case with Mark, we will by no

ly impressed by a distinctive feature of this narrative:

stretch of the imagination cover everything of

Jesus is portrayed as thoroughly and ineluctably

interest and importance in this Gospel. One of

Jewish. He was Jewish in Mark’s Gospel as well, of

the most recent scholarly commentaries on

course; but here the emphasis is yet stronger.

Matthew fills three volumes, the first of which

Matthew’s narrative will show that Jesus was the

alone runs nearly 800 pages! Here we will discuss

ultimate fulfillment of the hopes of the Jews.

the entire book in a fraction of that space, and so,

merely scratch the surface. But if you scratch a

surface in the right places, you can at least get an

The Genealogy of Jesus the Messiah

idea of what lies beneath.

The Jewish identity of Jesus is confirmed by what

Once again we could take a variety of approach—

follows. Unlike Mark, Matthew provides a geneal—

es to our task, including the literary-historical

ogy of Jesus, tracing his family line all the way

approach we used for Mark. But I have chosen

back to the father of the Jews, Abraham himself.

instead to utilize the redactional method discussed

Genealogies are not among the most popular readin Chapter 6. By looking at some of the significant

ing for students of the Bible today, but this one is

ways Matthew differs from Mark, we can gain some

remarkable for a number of reasons. It is struc—

key insights into his understanding of Jesus. Given

tured around several key persons in the history of

the importance of beginnings for Greco-Roman

the nation Israel, many of whom are well known

biographies, we can start this comparison by exam—

from stories preserved in the Jewish Scriptures

ining Matthew’s opening chapters.

(e.g., Abraham, Isaac, Jacob; David, Solomon,

Rehoboam; Ahaz, Hezekiah, Manasseh). The text

consistently, almost monotonously, traces fathers

and sons first from Abraham (v. 2) to King David

THE IMPORTANCE OF

(v. 6), then from David to the deportation to

BEGINNINGS: JESUS THE JEWISH

Babylon (v. 12), and then from the deportation to

MESSIAH IN FULFILLMENT

Jacob, the father of Joseph (v. 16). At this point,

OF THE JEWISH SCRIPTURES

however, a problem arises: it turns out that the

genealogy is of Joseph, the husband of Mary, the

Matthew follows his predecessor Mark in begin—

woman to whom Jesus is born. According to

ning his Gospel by identifying Jesus as the Christ.

Matthew, however, Joseph is not Jesus’ father, for

He will therefore have a similar task of explainin this Gospel (unlike Mark, which says not a

ing how Jesus could be the glorious and powerful

word about Jesus’ birth) Jesus’ mother is a virgin.

messiah of the Jews when he was known to have

For this reason, Matthew is forced to shift from his

experienced a public humiliation and ignomin—

description of father and son relationships when

ious death by crucifixion. Far from shrinking

he comes to the conclusion of his genealogy at the

from the task, Matthew approaches it head on, in

end of verse 16: “Matthan was the father of Jacob,

the very opening verse, by emphasizing Jesus’ cre—

and Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of

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THE NEW TESTAMENT: A HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

Mary, of whom was born Jesus, called the Christ.”

Matthew’s own source for the generations from

But what would be the point of tracing Jesus’

Abraham to the deportation to Babylon.

bloodline back to David and Abraham, when in

Unfortunately, when the sequence is checked

fact he is not connected to this line? His only link

against this source, there do appear to be some

to it is through Joseph, a man who is not his father.

problems. The most glaring one comes in verse 8,

To be sure, the matter is perplexing, even

where Joram is said to be the father of Uzziah; for

though the basic point that the author is trying to

we know from 1 Chronicles 3:10–12 that Joram

make is relatively clear. He is trying to show that

was not Uzziah’s father, but his great-great-grand—

Jesus has Jewish roots and, more specifically, that

father. (Read the 1 Chronicles passage for your—

he can legitimately claim to be of the line of David,

self, but bear in mind that Uzziah is called Azariah

as would be necessary for the “son of David,” the

in this book, as can be seen by comparing 2 Kgs

messiah. Thus, even though the genealogy may

14:21 with 2 Chron 26:1.) Why, then, would

appear irrelevant at first glance, in that Jesus doesn’t

Matthew say that he was his father?

belong to the bloodline that it delineates, it is

The answer should be obvious. If Matthew were

clearly meant to make a statement about him;

to include all the generations between Joram and

because Joseph was in some sense Jesus’ “father”

Uzziah (his father Amaziah, grandfather Joash, and

(through adoption?), Jesus is related through him

great-grandfather Ahaziah), he would no longer be

to the greats of Israel’s past.

able to claim that there were fourteen generations

Yet more striking is verse 17, which summarizes

between David and the deportation to Babylon!

the genealogy in such a way as to show its real

This would disrupt the entire notion that at every

motivation. There were fourteen generations

fourteen generations a cataclysmic event happens in

between Abraham and David, fourteen between

the history of the people. And this, in turn, would

David and the deportation to Babylon, and four—

compromise his implicit claim that because of when

teen between the deportation to Babylon and the

he was born, Jesus must be someone special and sig—

messiah, Jesus. This coincidence is amazing. Be—

nificant in the divine plan for Israel (see box 7.1).

tween the father of the Jews and the greatest king

Thus the genealogy cannot be historically

of the Jews were fourteen generations, as there

right. But at this stage, we are less interested in

were between the greatest king of the Jews and the

pursuing the question of what really happened in

greatest catastrophe of the Jews (the destruction of

the life of the historical Jesus than in seeing how

their nation by the Babylonians) and between the

Matthew meant to portray him. Matthew begins

greatest catastrophe of the Jews and the ultimate

right off the bat by informing us, through a geneal—

deliverer of the Jews, the messiah.

ogy that is not found in his predecessor, Mark, that

The genealogy suggests —indeed, it almost

Jesus was intimately connected with the history of

demonstrates—that the entire course of Israel’s

the people of Israel. Indeed, the connection of

history has proceeded according to divine provi—

Jesus with the Jewish people will be a key theme of

dence. Moreover, this history has culminated in

the Gospel. Jesus will be portrayed in no uncer—

Jesus. At every fourteenth generation something

tain terms as the Jewish messiah, come to the

cataclysmic happens in Israel’s history: their great—

Jewish people in fulfillment of their greatest hopes.

est king, their worst disaster, and now their ulti—

As the Jewish Savior sent from the Jewish God, he

mate salvation. Jesus’ birth fourteen generations

will embrace the Jewish Law and require his fol—

removed from the Babylonian deportation shows

lowers to do so as well. He will nonetheless come

that in him God was going to do something signif—

to be rejected by the Jewish leaders, who will mis—

icant, something unprecedented for his people

lead most of the Jewish people into rejecting him.

Israel.

Obviously this portrayal of Jesus is not contra—

But is this sequence of fourteen-fourteen-four—

dictory to Mark’s, since most of Mark’s stories have

teen actually viable? It is not difficult to find out:

made it into Matthew, but the focus of attention,

nearly two-thirds of the names in the genealogy

and therefore the basic portrayal of Jesus, is some—

are known to us from the Jewish Scriptures,

what different. Here the center of attention is

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# CHAPTER 7

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SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 7.1 Matthew's Scheme of Fourteen

Since Matthew apparently had to manipulate Jesus’ genealogy in order to have something of major significance happen every fourteen generations, for example, by leaving out some of the names, we are justified in wondering whether the number fourteen was of particular importance to him. (You’ll notice, incidentally, that the final sequence contains only thirteen names, even though Matthew claims that it contains fourteen!) Is there something significant about the number fourteen itself?

Over the years, interpreters of Matthew have puzzled over this question and put forth a variety of theories to account for it. Let me mention two of the more interesting ones.

First, in ancient Israel, as in a number of other ancient societies in which numbers had symbolic significance, the number seven was of supreme importance as a symbol of perfection or divinity (we’ll see a lot of sevens when we come to study the Book of Revelation). The ancients divided the week into seven days, probably because they believed that there were seven planets. For some ancient Jews there were seven stages in a person’s life and seven parts to the human soul; there were seven heavens, seven compartments of hell, and seven divisions of Paradise; there were seven classes of angels and seven attributes of God; and so on. Consider the words of the famous first-century Jewish philosopher Philo: “I doubt whether anyone could adequately celebrate the properties of the number seven, for they are beyond words” (On the Creation of the World, 30).

If seven is a perfect number, a number associated with the divine, what then is fourteen?

Twice seven! In cultures for which numbers matter, it would have been a doubly perfect number. Did Matthew set up Jesus’ genealogy to show the divine perfection of his descent?

A second theory ties the genealogy yet more closely into Matthew’s own portrayal of Jesus. As I will discuss further in a later context (see Chapter 25), ancient languages typically used the letters of the alphabet to represent numerals, so that one could add up the letters in a name and come up with a numerical value. As we have already seen, Matthew emphasizes Jesus’ messianic character as a descendant of King David. In Hebrew, David’s name is spelled with three letters, equivalent to our letters D, V, and D (ancient Hebrew did not use vowels). Interestingly enough, the D in Hebrew is worth 4 and the V is worth 6, so the numerical value of David’s name is fourteen! Has Matthew emphasized the number fourteen in Jesus’ genealogy in order to stress his Davidic roots as the messiah of the Jews?

located even more squarely on the nature of Jesus’

of the Hebrew Scriptures (1:23). Indeed, so does

relationship to Judaism.

every other event in the narrative: Jesus’ birth in

Bethlehem (2:6), the family’s flight to Egypt

(2:14), Herod’s slaughter of the innocent children

The Birth of the Messiah

of Bethlehem (2:18), and the family’s decision to

This strong focus on Jesus’ Jewish roots is con—

relocate in Nazareth (2:23). These stories occur

firmed in the birth narrative that follows (chaps. 1

only in Matthew.

and 2). What is perhaps most striking about

Matthew’s emphasis on Jesus’ fulfilling of the

Matthew’s account is that it all happens according

Scripture occurs not only in his birth narrative, but

to divine plan. The Holy Spirit is responsible for

throughout the entire book. On eleven separate

Mary’s pregnancy and an angel from heaven allays

occasions (including those just mentioned),

Joseph’s fears. This conception fulfills a prophecy

Matthew uses a phrase that scholars have some-

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times labeled a “fulfillment citation.” The formulae

was intimately familiar with the Jewish Scriptures.

of these citations vary somewhat, but they typically

A male child is miraculously born to Jewish par—

run something like this: “this occurred in order to

ents, but a fierce tyrant in the land (Herod) is set

fulfill what was spoken of by the prophet.” In each

to destroy him. The child is supernaturally pro—

instance, Matthew then cites the passage of

tected from harm in Egypt. Then he leaves Egypt

Scripture that he has in mind, showing that Jesus is

and is said to pass through the waters (of baptism).

the long expected messiah of the Jews. These ful—

He goes into the wilderness to be tested for a long

fillment citations are not drawn from Mark, and

period. Afterwards he goes up on a mountain, and

among all four New Testament Gospels they occur

delivers God’s Law to those who have been fol—

only in Matthew. Even more than his predecessor,

lowing him.

then, Matthew explicitly and emphatically stresses

Sound familiar? It would to most of Matthew’s

that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Jewish Scriptures.

Jewish readers. Matthew has shaped these open—

Jesus fulfills the Scripture in two different ways

ing stories of Jesus to show that Jesus’ life is a ful—

for Matthew, the first of which is easy to grasp.

fillment of the stories of Moses (read Exodus

The Hebrew prophets occasionally made predic—

1–20). The parallels are too obvious to ignore:

tions about the future messiah. According to

Herod is like the Egyptian pharoah, Jesus’ baptism

Matthew, Jesus fulfills these predictions. For

is like the crossing of the Red Sea, the forty days of

example, Jesus is born in Bethlehem because this

testing are like the forty years the children of Israel

is what was predicted by the prophet Micah (2:6),

wandered in the wilderness, and the Sermon on

and his mother is a virgin because this is what was

the Mount is like the Law of Moses delivered on

predicted by the prophet Isaiah (1:23).

Mount Sinai. These parallels tell us something

The second way in which Jesus fulfills the

significant about Matthew’s portrayal of Jesus.

Scripture is a little more complicated. Matthew por—

Certainly he agrees with Mark that Jesus is the suf—

trays certain key events in the Jewish Bible as fore—

fering Son of God, the messiah, but here Jesus is

shadowings of what would happen when the messi—

also the new Moses, come to set his people free

ah came. The meaning of these ancient events was

from their bondage (to sin 1:21) and give them the

not complete until that which was foreshadowed

new Law, his teachings.

came into existence. When it did, the event was

We have seen that among first-century Jews there

“fullfilled,” that is, “filled full of meaning.” In the

was not just one set of expectations concerning

birth narrative, for example, Matthew indicates

their future deliverer. Many hoped for a future king

that Jesus’ family flees to Egypt to escape the wrath

like David, who would lead his people to military

of Herod “in order to fulfill what was spoken by

victory over their oppressors and establish Israel as

the Lord through the prophet, saying, ‘Out of

a sovereign state in the Promised Land. Others

Egypt I have called my son’ ” (2:15). The quota—

anticipated the appearance of a cosmic figure on

tion is from Hos 11:1 and originally referred to the

the clouds of heaven, coming in judgment to the

exodus of the children of Israel from their bondage

earth. Still others looked forward to an authorita—

in Egypt. For Matthew, Jesus fills this event with

tive priest who would guide the community through

meaning. The salvation available to the children

divinely inspired interpretations of the Mosaic Law.

of Israel was partial, looking forward to a future

One other form that the future deliverer sometimes

time when it would be made complete. With Jesus

took is of particular relevance for understanding

the messiah, that has now taken place.

Matthew’s portrayal of Jesus. Some Jews hoped that

Understanding this second way in which Jesus

a prophet like Moses would appear, who not only

fulfills the Scripture for Matthew helps to explain

brought salvation from the hated oppressors of

certain aspects of the opening chapters of

Israel, the Egyptians who had enslaved them for 400

Matthew’s Gospel (chaps. 1-5) that have long

years, but also disclosed the Law of God to his people.

intrigued scholars. Think about the following

Indeed, according to the ancient traditions, Moses

events in rough outline, and ask yourself how they

himself had said that there would be another

might have resonated with a first-century Jew who

prophet like him who would arise among his people

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# CHAPTER 7

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(Deut 18:15–19). The hope for a messianic figure

new Moses. This new Moses does not replace the

like Moses, one chosen by God to bring salvation

old one, however. Quite the contrary, he is the true

and new direction, was very much alive among

and final interpreter of what the earlier Moses

some Jews in the first century.

recorded in his Law. Jesus also gives the divine Law

Unlike later Christians like Marcion (see

in this Gospel, but for Matthew this law does not

Chapter 1), who insisted that a person had to choose

stand at odds with the Law of Moses; it is a fulfill—

between Moses and Jesus, Matthew maintains that

ment of that Law (5:17). Followers of Jesus must fol—

the choice is instead between Moses without Jesus

low the Law of Moses, not abandon it; moreover,

and Moses with Jesus. For him, false religion

they must follow it by understanding it in the way

involves rejecting Jesus, precisely because Jesus is a

prescribed by the new Moses, Jesus the messiah.

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 7.2

The Women in Matthew’s Genealogy

One of the most intriguing features of Matthew’s genealogy is its explicit reference to women among Jesus’ ancestors. Women hardly ever appear in other ancient Jewish genealogies, which invariably traced a person’s lineage from father to son (or vice-versa) all they way back through the family line (see, e.g., 1 Chronicles 1–9). But not only does Matthew end this genealogy by naming Mary, Jesus’ mother, he also includes four other women: Tamar (v.

3), Rahab (v. 5), Ruth (v. 5), and the “wife of Uriah,” that is, Bathsheba (v. 6). Stories about all four of these women are found in the Jewish Scriptures (Tamar: Genesis 38; Rahab: Joshua 2, 6; Ruth: Ruth 1–4; and Bathsheba: 2 Samuel 11–12). But why does Matthew mention them here? Among the numerous theories proposed over the years, two are particularly intriguing.

(1) All four of the women appear to have been Gentiles; that is, non-Israelites (Tamar and Rahab were both Canaanites; Ruth was a Moabite; and Bathsheba was married to Uriah, a Hittite). Could it be that Matthew mentions them to show that God’s plan of salvation had always encompassed not only Jews but also Gentiles (cf., for example, his story of the Magi)? This is an attractive theory, but it has one particular shortcoming: it doesn’t explain how these four women are connected with the final one mentioned, Mary, who was not a Gentile. And so, perhaps a second explanation is to be preferred: (2) All four women were involved with sexual activities that were viewed as scandalous by outsiders but that furthered the purposes of God. Tamar, for example, tricked her fatherin-law into having sex with her by disguising herself as a prostitute; Rahab was a prostitute who lived in Jericho (and who, according to Matthew, later became the mother-in-law of Ruth); Ruth seduced her kinsman Boaz, who then proposed marriage to her (they became the grandparents of King David); and Bathsheba committed adultery with David, and ended up marrying him (and fathering his child Solomon) after he arranged to have her husband killed. Why would allusions to such stories strike Matthew as appropriate for his genealogy of Jesus? Could it have to do with Mary, the mother of Jesus, herself? Recall: she too was thought to have engaged in illicit sexual activity (she became pregnant out of wedlock).

Even Joseph was suspicious, and decided to dissolve their relationship in secret! Matthew, though, saw the matter differently: once again God used a potential sex scandal to further his plans, having Jesus miraculously born from a woman who was still a virgin.

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THE NEW TESTAMENT: A HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

Just as Moses was a prophet who was confront—

distraught. Israel has room for only one king, and

ed and rejected by those who refused to recognize

he himself sits on the throne. He has a reason of

his leadership, like all of the prophets in the

his own, then, to locate the child: not to worship

Jewish Scriptures, according to Matthew, so too

him but to destroy him.

Jesus in Matthew is constantly opposed by the

Herod calls in the Jewish chief priests and the

leaders of his own people. We have already seen

scholars trained in the Scriptures for counsel, and

this basic motif of Jesus’ rejection in Mark. In

here we find the key irony of the account. The

many respects, Matthew emphasizes the antago—

Jewish leaders know perfectly well where the mes—

nism even more, and Jesus engages in a far more

siah is to be born: Bethlehem of Judea. They can

active counterattack, accusing his opponents of

even quote the Scriptures in support and do so

placing a higher value on their own traditions

before Herod, who informs the wise men.

than on the law of God, attacking their wicked

Who, then, goes to worship Jesus? Not those

motives, and above all charging them with

who knew where he was to be born, not the Jewish

hypocrisy, that is, knowing and teaching the right

chief priests or the Jewish Scripture scholars or the

thing to do but failing to do it.

Jewish king. They stay away. It is the Gentiles,

the non-Jews who originally did not have the

Scriptures but who learn the truth from those who

The Rejected King of the Jews

do, who go to worship the king of the Jews. The

We do not have to wait long to find Matthew por—

Jewish authorities, on the other hand, as repre—

traying the Jewish leaders as hypocrites, who know

sented by Herod their king, plot to kill the child.

the truth but do not follow it. They are presented

This story functions in Matthew’s Gospel to set

this way at the outset of the Gospel, while Jesus is

the stage for what will happen subsequently. Jesus

still an infant.

fulfills the Scripture and urges his followers to do so

The story of the visit of the Magi (2:1–12),

as well; he is nonetheless rejected by the leaders of

found only in Matthew, is one of the most inter—

his own people, who plot his death. There are oth—

esting tales of the New Testament. Here we are

ers, however, who will come and worship him. We

less interested in the historical problems that the

find this particular Matthean theme played out not

story raises (e.g., how can a star stand over a par—

only in stories that Matthew has added to his Markan

ticular house?) than in the point of the story in

framework but also in the changes that he has made

Matthew’s Gospel. Ancient readers would have

to stories he inherited from Mark. The theme can be

recognized the Magi as astrologers from the East

seen in the next account of his narrative, where Jesus

(perhaps Assyria), who could read the course of

meets his forerunner, John the Baptist.

human events from the movements of the stars.

These wise men are pagans, of course, whose astral

observation have led them to recognize that a

JESUS AND HIS

spectacular event has transpired on earth, the

FORERUNNER FROM

birth of a child who will be king.

MATTHEW’S PERSPECTIVE

The text never explains why Assyrian scholars

would be interested in the birth of a foreign king.

After the birth narrative, Matthew immediately

Perhaps their worship of him indicates that they

launches into an account of Jesus’ baptism. It is at

understand him to be far greater than a mere mor—

this point that he begins to pick up stories from

tal, king or otherwise. The reader of this account

the Gospel of Mark. As I indicated in Chapter 6,

already realizes this, of course, since the child is

a redactional study of the Gospel examines not

said to have no human father. What the Magi evi—

only what an author has added to his source (e.g.,

dently do not know is where the child is to be

the entire first two chapters) but even more what

born. The star takes them to Jerusalem, the holy

he has changed in the stories that he borrowed.

city of the Jews, the capital of Judea. There they

This method can be used to examine the first story

make their inquiries. Herod, the reigning king of

that Matthew and Mark have in common, Jesus’

the Jews, hears of their presence and is naturally

baptism by John.

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The best way to engage in a redactional study is

John. This message is obviously not entirely unlike

to read the two accounts side by side, making care—

what we found in Mark’s Gospel, but here it reful and detailed notes on where they differ. These

ceives greater emphasis.

differences may provide a clue into Matthew’s

In Mark’s Gospel we do not find (until the pas—

overall agenda, since, as we have seen, he presum—

sion narrative) a person who correctly perceives

ably would not have changed his source unless he

who Jesus is. The same cannot be said of Matthew.

had a reason.

We have already seen several people who recog—

Matthew does change the narrative of Jesus’ bap—

nize Jesus’ identity: his family (Joseph and Mary),

tism in a number of ways, many of them reasonably

the wise men from the East (who come to worship

obvious, some of them fairly significant. To begin

him), and now, in light of the conversation record—

with, his account is much longer than Mark’s. In

ed only in Matthew’s account, John the Baptist.

Matthew’s version, John sees a group of Pharisees

This same notion, that Jesus’ identity was public,

and Sadducees coming to be baptized, and he lam—

not secret, is also evident in the change of the

bastes them in harsh terms not found in Mark:

voice from heaven, which announces to all who

can hear that Jesus is the Son of God.

You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from

These changes in the baptism narrative coin—

the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance.

cide with what happens throughout the entire

Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have

Gospel, for Matthew has strongly curtailed Mark’s

Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able

insistence that Jesus tried to keep his identity

from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.

secret and that the disciples never recognized who

Even now the ax is lying at the root of the tree; every

tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut

he was. According to Matthew, Jesus was openly

down and thrown into the fire. (3:7–10)

proclaimed the messiah during his lifetime and was

worshipped as such. Consider, for example, the

As the story continues, the reader is struck by the

later episode in which Jesus walks on the water. In

fact that John not only stops the Jewish leaders from

Mark the disciples are amazed but totally unable to

being baptized but later tries to stop Jesus as well,

understand what it all means: “And they were

although for a totally different reason. The Pharisees

utterly astounded, for they did not understand . . .

and Sadducees are too wicked to be baptized, but

but their hearts were hardened” (Mark 6:51). In

Jesus is too good. In fact, Jesus is the one who should

Matthew, on the other hand, they know full well

baptize John, the superior baptizing the inferior

what it means and react by falling down in wor-

(3:14–15). Jesus, however, convinces John that it is

ship: “And those in the boat worshiped him, say—

right for him to be baptized, in a dialogue found only

ing, ‘Truly you are the Son of God’ ” (14:33).

in Matthew: “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us

How can we account for such changes? Why is

in this way to fulfill all righteousness” (3:15).

Jesus acknowledged for who he is in this Gospel?

The baptism scene is similar to Mark’s, although

One possibility is that Matthew has altered Mark’s

a couple of interesting changes occur. The most

account precisely in order to emphasize the guilt of

significant of these is probably the voice from

those who reject Jesus, in particular, the Jewish

heaven: now rather than addressing Jesus alone

leaders, who come under more rigorous attack in

(“You are my beloved Son”), it makes an open pro—

this narrative. If Jesus’ identity is public knowl—

nouncement, presumably to the bystanders (“This

edge, then those who above all others should be in

is my beloved Son”; 3:17).

the know, the Jewish authorities, are all the more

Having observed these various differences from

culpable for rejecting, and even persecuting, him.

Mark’s account, we are now in a position to ask the

One final shift in emphasis in Matthew’s

redactional question: what do they tell us about

account of Jesus’ baptism has to do with John’s

Matthew’s portrayal of Jesus? For one thing,

preaching. I have already pointed out that it is

Matthew’s changes highlight the contrasts between

much more detailed than in Mark. What is even

Jesus and the Jewish leaders. The latter are sinister

more striking, though, is the shift in its focus. By

vipers, destined for destruction; Jesus on the other

adding material drawn from the Q source,

hand is superior even to God’s chosen prophet,

Matthew has highlighted the apocalyptic nature



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of John’s proclamation. As we will see in greater

detail in Chapter 16, “apocalypticism” was a popular worldview among Jews in the first century.

Apocalyptic Jews maintained that the world was

controlled by unseen forces of evil but that God

was soon going to intervene in history to overthrow these forces and bring his good kingdom

to earth. Such Jews believed that they were living at the end of time; the new age was soon to

appear. We have already seen elements of this

worldview in the Gospel according to Mark, especially in Jesus’ lengthy discourse in chapter 13, in

which he describes the cosmic upheavals that are

going to transpire when the Son of Man arrives in

judgment. Moreover, even in Mark, Jesus anticipates that this cataclysmic event is very near: his

own generation will not pass away before it takes

place (13:30).

Matthew emphasizes the apocalyptic character

of Jesus’ proclamation even more strongly, as is

already evident in the preaching of Jesus’ forerun-

F P O

ner. John predicts that divine judgment is coming

(“Who warned you to flee from the wrath to

come?”), that indeed it is almost here (“even now

the ax is lying at the root of the trees”). Those

who are not prepared will be destroyed (“Every

tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut

down and thrown into the fire”). Moreover, simply being a Jew is no guarantee of salvation (“Do

not presume to say among yourselves ‘ We have

Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is

able from these stones to raise up children to

Abraham”). Instead, a person must prepare for the

end by living an appropriate life (“Bear fruit worthy of repentance”). These themes proclaimed

Figure 7.1 A portrayal of Mary, Jesus, an angel (upper left side), early on by John will recur on the lips of Jesus

and the three magi bringing gifts, from an ancient ivory produced in the Coptic church of Egypt. Interestingly enough,

throughout this Gospel.

Matthew, the only Gospel to narrate the story, does not indicate that there were three magi—only that there were three gifts.

THE PORTRAYAL

procedure I used with Mark of tracing the develop-

OF JESUS IN MATTHEW:

ment of the narrative and showing how the unfold-

THE SERMON ON THE

ing of the plot gives an indication of the identity of

MOUNT AS A SPRINGBOARD

its main character. Some scholars prefer to use that

approach for all narratives, and as we have seen

Since I am intent on applying a redactional

with Mark, the fruit that it bears can be quite sat—

method of analysis to Matthew’s Gospel, rather

isfying. But there are numerous ways to approach

than a literary-historical one, I will not follow the

texts, and here we are exploring another.

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If we had sufficient time and space, of course, we

The sermon is thus largely about life in the

could proceed through the entire Gospel as we have

kingdom of heaven, which according to the state—

started, asking how the author has added to, subtract—

ment in 4:17 (immediately before the sermon)

ed from, and otherwise changed the one source that

was the main emphasis of Jesus’ teaching:

we are reasonably certain that he had, the Gospel of

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come

Mark. I have opted instead simply to analyze portions

near.” This kingdom of heaven does not refer to

of the Sermon on the Mount, one of the most mem—

the place people go when they die. Rather, it

orable portions of Matthew’s narrative, for by exam—

refers to God’s presence on earth, a kingdom that

ining several of its key passages we can uncover

he will bring at the end of this age by overthrow—

themes that recur throughout the rest of the Gospel.

ing the forces of evil. When God does this, the

weak and oppressed will be exalted, and the high

and mighty will be abased. This appears to be the

Jesus: The New Moses and the New Law

point of the beginning of the sermon, the

The Sermon on the Mount (chaps. 5–7) is the first

Beatitudes (the descriptions of those who are

of five major blocks of Jesus’ teaching in Matthew

blessed) found in 5:3–10:

(the others: chap. 10, Jesus’ instructions to the

apostles; chap. 13, the parables of the kingdom;

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the king—

chap. 18, other teachings on the kingdom and on

dom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for

the church; chaps. 23–27, the “woes” against the

they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for

scribes and Pharisees and the apocalyptic discourse

they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who

describing the end of time). We have seen that

hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be

filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive

Matthew appears to portray Jesus as a new Moses.

mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see

Some scholars have suggested that this collection

God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be

of his teachings into five major blocks of material

called children of God. Blessed are those who are

is meant to recall the five books of the Law of

persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the

Moses.

kingdom of heaven.

As I have already indicated, a good deal of the

material in the Sermon on the Mount comes from

How are we to interpret these Beatitudes?

Q. Since these Q passages are scattered through—

Given the fact that John the Baptist sets the stage

out Luke’s Gospel, rather than gathered together

for Jesus’ teaching by proclaiming that the end

in one place, it appears that the Sermon on the

(that is, the kingdom) is near, and that Jesus him—

Mount may be Matthew’s own creation. By taking

self proclaims that “the kingdom of heaven is at

material dispersed throughout his sources,

hand” (4:17), it seems probable that they refer to

Matthew has formed them into one finely crafted

the coming kingdom. Even so, scholars have long

collection of Jesus’ important teachings.

debated the precise function of these words. Is

One of the overarching messages of the sermon

Jesus setting up the requirements for entrance into

is the connection between Jesus and Moses. If the

the kingdom? Is he saying that people have to

Law of Moses was meant to provide divine guid—

become poor in spirit, for example, in order to

ance for Jews as the children of Israel, the teach—

receive the kingdom? While this is possible, Jesus

ings of Jesus are meant to provide guidance for his

does not appear to be issuing commands so much

followers as children of the kingdom of heaven

as making statements of fact. It would be hard, for

(see the summary statement at the end of the ser—

example, to think that he was telling people that

mon, 7:24–28). As I have already intimated, this

if they didn’t mourn they wouldn’t be allowed into

does not mean that Jesus’ followers are to choose

the kingdom. Perhaps, then, we should see the

between Moses and Jesus; they are to follow Moses

Beatitudes as assurances to those who are present—

by following Jesus. For Matthew, Jesus provides

ly lowly and oppressed, weak and suffering, for

the true understanding of the Jewish Law, and his

when the kingdom of heaven comes, they will

followers must keep it.

receive their reward. Those who now mourn will

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be comforted, those who now hunger for justice

Jesus’ Followers and the Law

will be granted it, and those who are now perse—

An “antithesis” is a contrary statement. In the six

cuted for doing what is right will be vindicated.

antitheses recorded in the Sermon on the Mount,

Taking Jesus’ words in this way, however, cre—

Jesus states a Jewish law and then sets his interates another problem of interpretation. Do the

pretation of that law over and against it. I should

Beatitudes suggest that everyone experiencing

emphasize that Matthew does not portray Jesus as

problems will be exalted in the coming kingdom?

contradicting the Law; for example, he does not

Or are they instead directed just to those who were

say, “You have heard it said, ‘You shall not commit

following Jesus, the ones to whom Jesus was actu—

murder,’ but I say to you that you should.” Instead,

ally speaking (5:1–2)? This issue cannot be

Jesus urges his followers to adhere to the law, but,

resolved until we examine more fully what it

to do so more rigorously than even the religious

means, for Matthew, to follow Jesus.

leaders of Israel. The contrasts of the antitheses,

then, are between the way the law is commonly

Jesus and the Law

interpreted and the way Jesus interprets it. In all

of these antitheses Jesus goes to the heart of the

Contrary to what many Christians have thought

law in question, to its root intention as it were,

throughout the ages, for Matthew following Jesus

and insists that his followers adhere to that, rather

does not mean abandoning the Jewish Law and join—

than the letter of the law as strictly interpreted.

ing a new religion that is opposed to it. Even in

For example, the Law says not to murder (5:21).

Matthew’s day some Christians appear to have

This law functions to preserve the harmony of the

thought that this is what Jesus had in mind—that he

community. The root of disharmony (which leads

sought to overturn the Law of Moses in his preach—

to murder) is anger against another. Therefore, if

ing about the way of God. For Matthew, however,

one wants to fulfill the Law by obeying its root

nothing could be further from the truth. The

intention, he or she must not even become angry

keynote of the sermon is struck soon after the

with another. The Law also says not to commit

Beatitudes in this statement, found only in

adultery (5:27), that is, not to take the wife of

Matthew’s Gospel:

another. This law preserves ownership rights, since

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or

in ancient Israel, as in many ancient societies, the

the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.

wife was seen as the property of her husband (e.g.,

For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away,

see the Tenth Commandment, where wives are

not one letter, not one stroke of a letter will pass from

grouped together with houses, slaves, oxen, and

the law until all is fulfilled. Therefore, whoever

donkeys as property of one’s neighbor that is not to

breaks one of the least of these commandments, and

be coveted; Exod 20:17). The root of adultery, in

teaches others to do the same, will be called least in

this view, is a man’s passionate desire for another

the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and

man’s wife. Therefore, those who want to keep the

teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of

law completely should not passionately desire a

heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness

exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will

person who belongs to another.

never enter the kingdom of heaven. (5:17–20)

The Law says to take an eye for an eye, a tooth

for a tooth (Matt 5:38). This law serves to guaran—

In Matthew, Jesus is not opposed to the Law of

tee justice in the community, so that if a neighbor

Moses. He himself fulfills it, as seen in the important

knocks out your tooth, you cannot lop off his head

events in his birth, life, and death, events that are

in exchange. Contrary to the way in which this law

said to be fulfillments of the prophecy of Scripture.

is commonly understood today, it was originally

Moreover, Jesus in Matthew also requires his follow—

meant to be merciful, not vindictive; the penalty

ers to fulfill the Law, in fact, to fulfill it even better

should fit and not exceed the crime. Since, howev—

than the Jewish leaders, the scribes and the Pharisees.

er, the root of this law is the principle of mercy, Jesus

Matthew indicates what he means in the very next

draws the radical conclusion: instead of inflicting a

passage, the famous “Antitheses” (5:21–48).

penalty on another, his followers should prefer to

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suffer wrong. Therefore, someone who is struck on

that no one could possibly achieve to force people

one cheek should turn the other to be struck as well.

to realize that they are utter sinners in need of

As can be seen from these examples, far from

divine grace for salvation. The point of Jesus’

absolving his followers of the responsibility to

words, then, would be that people cannot keep

keep the Law, Matthew’s Jesus intensifies the Law,

God’s Law even if they want to. The problem with

requiring his followers to keep not just its letter

this interpretation is that Jesus in Matthew does not

but its very spirit. This intensification of the Law,

suggest that it is impossible to control your anger or

however, raises a number of questions. One that

lust, any more than the author of the Torah suggests

has occurred to many readers over the years is

that it is impossible to control your coveting.

whether Jesus can be serious. Is he really saying

At the same time, Matthew is not simply giving

that no one who becomes angry, or who lusts, or

a detailed list of what Jesus’ followers must do and

who returns a blow can enter into the kingdom?

not do in order to enter into the kingdom. On the

Readers of Matthew have frequently tried to get

contrary, his point seems to be that overly scrupu—

around this problem by softening Matthew’s rigor—

lous attention to the detail of the Law is not what

ous statements by importing views not presented in

really matters to God. Even scribes and Pharisees

the text itself. For example, it is commonly sug—

can adhere to laws once they are narrowly enough

gested that Jesus means to set up an ideal standard

prescribed, for example, by not murdering and not

SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 7.3 The Golden Rule

The most familiar form of the golden rule is “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Many people think that Jesus was the first to propound this ethical principle; but in fact, it was given in a variety of forms by moral philosophers from the ancient world. In most of these formulations, it is expressed negatively (stating what should not be done) rather than positively.

The rule was found, for example, among the ancient Greeks many centuries before Jesus.

One of the characters described by the Greek historian Herodotus (fifth century B.C.E.) said,

“I will not myself do that which I consider to be blameworthy in my neighbor,” and the Greek orator Isocrates (fourth century B.C.E.) said, “You should be such in your dealings with others as you expect me to be in my dealings with you.” The saying was present in Eastern cultures as well, most famously on the lips of Confucius (sixth century B.C.E.): “Do not do to others what you would not want others to do to you.”

Nearer to Jesus’ time, the golden rule was endorsed (in various forms of wording) in a number of Jewish writings. For example, in the apocryphal book of Tobit, we read, “And what you hate, do not do to anyone,” and in an ancient Jewish interpretation of the book of Leviticus we find “Don’t do to him (your neighbor) what you yourself hate.”

Perhaps the best known expression of the rule in Jewish circles, though, comes from the most revered rabbi of Jesus’ day, the famous Rabbi Hillel. A pagan approached the rabbi and promised him that he would convert to Judaism if Hillel could recite the entire Torah to him while standing on one leg. Hillel’s terse reply sounds remarkably like the statement of Jesus in Matt 7:12: “What is hateful to you do not do to your neighbor; that is the whole Torah, while the rest is commentary. Go and learn it.”

Jesus, in short, was not the only teacher of his day who taught the golden rule, or who thought that the essence of the Law of Moses could be summed up in the commandment to love.

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committing adultery and not eating forbidden

should not commit murder or take your neighbor’s

foods. God wants more than this kind of strict

wife or mete out unfair punishment. What about

obedience to the letter of the Law.

the laws of Scripture, though, that were widely

recognized as making Jews a separate people from

non-Jews, for example, the laws that required Jews

The Fulfillment of the Law

to circumcise their baby boys, to keep the Sabbath

What then is the real purpose of the Law? We

day holy, and to observe certain dietary restric—

get a hint of Matthew’s answer already in the

tions? We know from other evidence that by the

Sermon on the Mount, in Jesus’ famous expres—

time Matthew wrote his Gospel, these laws were

sion of the golden rule. We know of other

not being followed by many Gentile Christians.

ancient teachers who formulated similar guide—

Indeed, as we will see when we come to the letters

lines of behavior (see box 7.3), but Jesus’ par—

of Paul (which were written before Matthew and

ticular formulation is important: “In everything

the other Gospels), there were many Christians,

do to others as you would have them do to you;

including Paul himself, who insisted that Gentile

for this is the law and the prophets” (7:12).

believers should not keep these laws. What, then,

The final phrase of the saying is the key; the

about Matthew? Does he think that Jesus radical—

entire Law with all of its commandments can be

ized these laws as well as the others? Does

summarized in this simple principle, that you

Matthew’s Jesus expect his followers to keep them?

treat others as you want them to treat you.

For Jesus in Matthew, the true interpretation of

the Law does not require nuanced descriptions of

how precisely to follow each of its command-

JESUS AND THE JEWISH

ments; it involves loving others as much as one’s

CULTIC PRACTICES

self. This principle can be found in other passages

PRESCRIBED BY THE LAW

of Matthew’s Gospel, most strikingly in 22:35– 40,

where in response to a question from a “lawyer”

Matthew never addresses head on the question of

(i.e., an expert in the Jewish Law) Jesus summa—

keeping such distinctively Jewish laws. Several

rizes the entire Torah in terms of two of its require—

points, however, can be raised. The first is that

ments: that “you shall love the Lord your God

Jesus never disavows any of these Scriptural laws

with all your heart, and with all your soul, and

in Matthew or instructs his followers not to keep

with all your mind” (Deut 6:5) and that “you love

them. Moreover, in a number of passages not

your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18). Mark has

found in Mark, Jesus appears to affirm aspects of

this story as well, but Matthew tacks a different

traditional Jewish piety. For instance, he casti—

ending onto it: “On these two commandments

gates the hypocritical ways that the Pharisees

hang all the Law and the Prophets” (22:40). For

give alms, pray, and fast, but he restates the

Matthew, the entire Law is thus at its very core a

importance of engaging in these practices them—

commandment to love: to love God with one’s

selves (6:1– 18). He attacks the scribes and

entire being and to love one’s neighbor as one’s

Pharisees for tithing “mint and dill and cumin”

self. This is the real intent of the Law, and the fol—

while neglecting “the weightier matters of the

lowers of Jesus must adhere to it in order to enter

law,” such as “justice and mercy and faith,” but he

into the kingdom of heaven.

goes on to say that both the tithing practices and

Another question naturally emerges from Jesus’

the weightier matters are to be observed (23:23).

insistence that his followers keep the Law. The

He insists that someone who is estranged from

laws that we have examined so far, for example, in

another should be reconciled before making an

the antitheses and the golden rule, would not

offering in the Temple, but in saying this he

have been seen as distinctively Jewish by many

implies that it is good and right for the person

people in the ancient world. Most other people in

then to make the offering (5:23–24). He asserts

Roman antiquity would have agreed that you

that as the Son of God he is not himself obligat-

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ed to pay the Temple tax, but he pays it anyway,

eous but sinners” (Matt 9:13). Thus, according to

so as not to give offense (17:24–27).

Matthew, the Pharisees are more concerned with

Similar emphases are found in the changes

proper observance of the food laws of the Torah than

Matthew made in stories taken from Mark. For

with helping others; Jesus, on the other hand, is prin—

example, in Mark’s apocalyptic discourse, Jesus

cipally concerned with reaching out to those in need

speaks of the coming disaster and tells his disciples

(for a similar lesson, see Matt 12:1–8).

to “pray that it not be in winter” (because it would

In sum, it appears that Matthew assumes that

then be harder to escape; Mark 13:18). Interest—

Christians in his community (many of them? most of

ingly, Matthew takes over this verse but adds the

them?) will follow traditional forms of Jewish piety

words “or during the Sabbath” (Matt 24:20). Why?

and cultic practices (see box 7.4), but ultimately, for

Apparently because, for Matthew, extensive travel

him, these are of secondary importance. The Law is

on the Sabbath was forbidden to Jesus’ followers, as

to be obeyed to the fullest extent possible (5:17–20),

those who kept the Law. Perhaps more significant—

but in obeying the Law what really matters is human

ly, Matthew has changed Mark’s story of Jesus’ conneed. For this reason, love is the greatest command—

troversy with the Pharisees over their practice of

ment, and everything else is subservient to it. Even

washing hands prior to a meal (Mark 7:1–23; Matt

though a similar view was propounded by other rab—

15:1–20). In both accounts Jesus argues that what

bis of Jesus day (see box 7.3), Jesus’ proclamation

matters is what comes out of people (their behav—

stands at odds with the religion advocated by Jewish

ior), not what goes into them. Mark, however,

leaders as portrayed in the Gospel of Matthew.

interprets this to mean that Jesus “declared all

foods clean,” and thus overturned the Jewish food

laws. Matthew, strikingly, omits the line.

JESUS REJECTED

All of these examples would make it appear

BY THE JEWISH LEADERS

that Jesus in Matthew is not intent on requiring

his followers to abandon traditional forms of

When Jesus’ strong affirmation of the Torah of

Jewish piety as rooted in the Torah. He simply

Moses is set over against his strong opposition to

assumes, for the most part, that they will practice

the Jewish leadership, perhaps the most striking

them as they practice the entire Law (5:17–20).

aspect of Matthew’s Gospel emerges. On the one

At the same time, it appears that Jesus in

hand, Jesus is portrayed as altogether Jewish. He is

Matthew thinks that his opponents are wrong in

the Jewish messiah sent by the Jewish God to the

placing the highest priority on keeping the cultic

Jewish people in fulfillment of the Jewish

requirements of the Law, rather than on emphasizing

Scriptures. He is also the new Moses who gives

the commandment to love that lies at its core. This

the true interpretation of the Mosaic Law. On the

becomes especially clear in stories that Matthew took

other hand, he violently opposes Judaism as it is

over from Mark but modified. One example is

configured in this Gospel among the Jewish lead—

Mark’s account of the call of Levi the tax collector

ership. Somewhat paradoxically, then, in this

(Mark 2:13–17; in Matthew’s account, it is the call of

Gospel Jesus commands his followers to adhere to

Matthew!). When the Pharisees see Jesus eating in

the Jewish religion as it should be (i.e., as he him—

Levi’s home with “tax collectors and sinners,” they

self interprets it), while urging them to reject the

disparage him for mixing with such tainted company.

Jewish authorities, who are portrayed as evil hyp—

Evidently their own emphasis on ritual purity before

ocrites, opposed to God and his people.

God precludes their eating with others who were not

The hypocrisy of the Jewish leaders was hinted

equally pure. In Mark, Jesus replies that it is the sick

at in the story of the Magi, which we have already

who need a physician, not the well, and that he has

considered. It is also found in the Sermon on the

come to call sinners, not the righteous. In Matthew,

Mount, where the “hypocrites” pray, give alms,

Jesus’ reply includes an appeal to the Scriptures: “Go

and fast simply in order to be seen and revered as

and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacri—

holy, not out of true devotion to God (6:1–8).

fice’ [Hos 6:6]. For I have come to call not the right—

These, of course, are stories unique to Matthew.

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SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 7.4 Gentiles in Matthew’s Community

If we had no indication that Christianity spread among non-Jews soon after Jesus’ death, we might simply assume that Matthew’s community was comprised of Jews who continued to adhere to the law even if they disagreed with the Pharisees over how best to do so. Gentiles, however, were joining the Christian church well before Matthew wrote his Gospel; indeed, at this time there were probably more Gentiles who claimed to be followers of Jesus than Jews. Does Matthew think that these Gentile Christians are to keep kosher, to observe the Sabbath, and, if male, to be circumcised? It is an intriguing question because, as we will see later, the apostle Paul was adamant that they should not.

Matthew does not address this issue directly. In this Gospel Jesus does give numerous indications that Gentiles will become his followers and inherit the kingdom of heaven; but nowhere does he indicate whether or not any of these converts will be required to be circumcised or to keep sabbath or to keep Jewish food laws. Consider one of the most dramatic statements concerning the heirs of the kingdom to come from Jesus, a statement in response to a Roman (non-Jewish) centurion’s trust in his powers: “Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (8:8–10).

The point of Matthew’s inclusion of this Q story is clear: many non-Jews will enter into the kingdom, whereas many Jews will be excluded. Whether these Gentiles are expected first to convert to Judaism, however, is something that is not discussed.

The same difficulty occurs in the “Great Commission” at the end of this Gospel. After his resurrection, Jesus appears to his disciples (unlike in Mark) and sends them forth to

“make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you”

(28:19-20). The disciples are sent to convert not only Jews but Gentiles as well (“nation”

and “Gentile” are English translations of the the same Greek word). Moreover, they are not commanded to circumcise these converts but to baptize them; and they are not told to teach them the laws of Torah but the words of Jesus—teachings that sum up these laws in the golden rule and in the love commandment. At the same time, it remains unclear whether or not those who adhere to this teaching have to become Jewish (as was Jesus) and adhere to traditional Jewish piety (as did Jesus).

The ambiguity can also be detected in another story found only in Matthew where Jesus describes the scene of the judgment of the nations (Jews and Gentiles, presumably, or possibly just Gentiles) in 25:31-46. The nations are gathered before the cosmic judge, the Son of Man. Some are sent away to eternal punishment. Why? Not because they failed to observe the distinctive cultic practices of the Jews (circumcision, kosher food laws, Sabbath observance, and the like), but because they did not feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, or visit the prisoner. Others are welcomed into the eternal kingdom. Why? Because they did all these things. For Matthew, entry into the kingdom means living for others, loving others as yourself, treating others as you would have them treat you. Those who do so are true followers of Jesus, whether they are Jews or Gentiles. Would the Gentiles who come to believe in him naturally be expected to adopt Jewish ways? Matthew never explicitly indicates one way or the other.

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# CHAPTER 7

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The same emphasis can be seen in stories that

has drawn from Q, in which the Jewish leaders are

Matthew has taken over from Mark. You can see

likened to those who are invited by a king to a

this for yourself by comparing, for instance, the

grand wedding feast but make various excuses not

stories of Matthew 12 with those of Mark 2:1–3:6.

to come (22:1–14). In a climactic statement that

A crescendo builds in Jesus’ controversies with his

has no parallel in Luke, Jesus describes the king’s

opponents, reaching a climax in chapters 21–23,

wrath against them: “He became enraged, and

where Jesus himself takes the offensive. As in Mark,

sending forth his troops he destroyed those mur—

he “cleanses the Temple” (Matt 21:12–13), rousing

derers and burned their city” (22:7; perhaps a ref—

the ire of the authorities. But in Matthew they

erence to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E.).

become particularly incensed when they see him heal

Others were then invited to come, and these did

the blind and the lame and when they hear young

so willingly (the coming of the Gentiles into the

children proclaim him the Son of David (21:14–15,

kingdom; 22:9–10).

only in Matthew). Jesus responds to their indignation

The vitriolic castigation of the Jewish leaders

by quoting the Psalms: “Out of the mouths of infants

reaches its climax in chapter 23, which contains the

and nursing babes you have prepared praise for your-

“Seven Woes” against the Pharisees. Here Jesus

self” (21:16). Despite having witnessed his miracles,

condemns his enemies, the “scribes and Pharisees,”

the Jewish leaders refuse to believe.

in no uncertain terms: they are concerned only with

More than that, they attack Jesus by disputing

praise and admiration, not with doing what is right

his authority (21:23). In response, Jesus tells a para—

before God; they are hypocrites, blind guides con—

ble (unique to Matthew) of a father with two sons,

cerned with minutia instead of with what really mat—

one of whom said that he would do his father’s bid—

ters; they are whitewashed tombs, clean on the outding and yet did not, the other of whom said that he

side but full of rot and corruption within; they are a

would not but then did (21:28–32). Jesus likens his

brood of vipers, murderers of the righteous prophets

opponents to those who agree to do what their

of God, false leaders who shed innocent blood.

father (God) requires but fail to do so. He ends by

claiming that the most despised of sinners—tax collectors and prostitutes—will enter into the king-

Jesus’ Passion in Matthew

dom of heaven ahead of them (21:32).

According to Matthew, the Jewish authorities are

His assault continues in the parables that follow.

fully responsible for the blood of Jesus as well. Many

The Jewish leaders are like those who have been

of the stories of Matthew’s passion narrative are

given charge of a vineyard, who, instead of delivering

taken over from Mark, and a detailed study of the

the fruit that is produced to the master, try to keep it

ways in which they have been changed can pay rich

all for themselves, beating and killing the messengers

dividends. Many of the changes work to emphasize

that he sends, and finally his own son (21:33–44).

both Jesus’ innocence and the corresponding guilt of

The parable is from Mark and its message is clear.

the Jewish leaders who demand his death. As in

The vineyard represents the people of God, the mes—

Mark, for example, Pilate offers to release a prisoner

sengers are the prophets, and the son is Jesus.

to the Jewish crowds in honor of the Passover feast.

Matthew has changed the ending of the story, howIn Matthew’s account, however, he more clearly

ever, and in a significant way. Jesus now says that the

prefers to release Jesus rather than the notorious

owner of the vineyard (God) will destroy the resist—

Barabbas (27:15–18). In part, Pilate acts on advice

ing farmers (the Jewish leaders) and give the vine—

from his wife, who tells him that she has suffered a

yard over to others (the Gentile leaders of the

bad dream about Jesus, whom she knows to be inno—

Christian church?), who will deliver the fruit that is

cent (27:19, found only in Matthew). The “chief

required (21:41, 43). As in Mark, the chief priests

priests and elders,” however, stir up the crowds to

and Pharisees know that he is speaking against them,

demand Barabbas instead. Pilate insists that Jesus

and they plot to have him arrested (21:45–46).

does not deserve punishment, since he has done

But not before Jesus has his full say. He con—

nothing wrong (27:22), but the people become per—

tinues to teach by telling a parable that Matthew

sistent, and demand his crucifixion (27:23).



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Figure 7.2 A miniature portrayal of several scenes from Jesus’ passion in Matthew’s Gospel: Pilate washing his hands, Jesus carrying his cross, Peter making his denials, and the rooster crowing.

Then comes a well-known and illfated

(an anti-Semitic slogan derived largely from this pas—

account, found only in Matthew. Pilate calls for

sage). Quite the contrary. As we have seen, Jesus

water and washes his hands of the blood of Jesus,

himself is a Jew in this Gospel, as are all of his disci—

proclaiming, “I am innocent of this man’s blood;

ples. He is the Jewish messiah descended from

see to it yourselves” (27:24). The entire crowd

David, the new Moses who urges his followers to ful—

responds in words that have served hateful purpos—

fill the Jewish law. Nowhere in the Gospel does Jesus

es ever since: “His blood be on us and our chil—

condemn Jews for being Jews. Whenever Jesus lam—

dren” (27:25). Here the Jews gathered in

bastes specific opponents in Matthew, they are in

Jerusalem claim responsibility for Jesus’ unjust exe—

every instance Jewish leaders (Pharisees, scribes, chief cution. Over the centuries, this verse has been

priests, and so on). Even in Jesus’ trial before Pilate,

used for all kinds of malicious acts of anti—

where Matthew appears to lay the blame of miscar—

Semitism—as if Jews who were not present at the

ried justice on all the Jewish people who are present,

scene could possibly be held responsible for the

the real culprits are the “chief priests and elders,”

actions of those who were.

who stir up the crowds to say what they do (v. 19).

Matthew, however, does not himself portray all

Thus, the problem for Matthew is never the Jews or

Jews as wicked opponents of God, as “Christ-killers”

the Jewish religion per se; it is the Jewish authorities.

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This Gospel consistently affirms Judaism, at least

ested in seeing Jesus as a thoroughly Jewish

Judaism as it was interpreted by Matthew’s Jesus.

teacher intent on keeping the Law who insisted

that his disciples followed suit? For Jewish

Christians, however, this emphasis seems fairly

MATTHEW AND HIS READERS

natural. Moreover, believing in Jesus did not require

abandoning the ancestral traditions that stem

On the basis of the portrayal of Jesus in this

from Moses. On the contrary, Jesus showed how to

Gospel, we can hypothesize some things about the

understand these traditions and commanded his

context of the author and his audience. Matthew’s

followers to obey them.

insistence that Jesus continued to adhere to tradi—

At the same time, there must have also been a

tional forms of Jewish piety, and that he advanced

good number of Gentiles in Matthew’s congrega—

the true interpretation of the Law of Moses, sug—

tion (see box 7.4). This would explain Jesus’ claim

gests that the author himself and some, perhaps

that many outsiders would enter into the kingdom

most, of his audience were themselves Jewish (see

ahead of Jews (8:8–10), and also the “Great

boxes 7.4 and 7.5). Would non-Jews be this inter—

Commission,” which urged missionary work princi—

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 7.5 Was Matthew a Jew?

Some scholars have come to doubt that Matthew was a Jew despite the heavy emphasis on Jesus’ own Jewishness in this Gospel. One of the more intriguing pieces of evidence that is sometimes cited involves Matthew’s interpretation of passages drawn from the Hebrew Bible, especially Zechariah 9:9, as quoted in Matthew 21:5: “Look your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

Anyone who has studied the Jewish Scriptures extensively recognizes the literary form of this passage. Throughout the Psalms and other books of poetry, Hebrew authors employed a kind of parallelism in which a second line of a couplet simply repeated the ideas of the first line using different words. Here the parallelism is between the “donkey” of the first line and the “colt, the foal of a donkey” in the second.

Matthew, however, appears to have misunderstood the parallelism, or at least to have understood it in a highly unusual way. For he seems to have thought that the prophet was speaking of two different animals, one of them a donkey and the other a colt. So, when Jesus prepares to ride into Jerusalem, his followers actually acquire two animals for him, which he straddles for the trip into town (21:5–7; contrast Mark 11:7)! Some scholars have argued that no educated Jew would have made this kind of mistake about the Zechariah passage (none of the other Gospel writers, it might be pointed out, does so), so this author could not have been Jewish.

Most other scholars, however, have not been convinced, in part because we know all sorts of educated authors from the ancient world (as well as the modern one) who seem to misread texts that derive from their own contexts. This includes ancient Jewish interpreters of their own Hebrew Scriptures, some of whom produce interpretations that are no more bizarre than Matthew’s interpretation of Zechariah (including some late rabbinic sources, which also indicate that Zechariah was referring to two animals!). On these grounds, at least, the identity of Matthew has to be left as an open question.

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pally among “the Gentiles” (28:19–20). In short,

gave him a place of prominence there), penned a

Matthew’s congregation appears to be mixed, com—

Gospel narrative to show that Jesus was in fact the

prising both Jews and Gentiles. Many scholars have

Jewish messiah, who like Moses gave the law of

thought that it makes sense to locate it somewhere

God to his people. More precisely, he was the

near Palestine in a major urban area (where Jews

prophet like Moses who gave the Jewish people

and Gentiles might congregate in large numbers),

the true interpretation of Moses’ Law, and beyond

for instance, in Antioch of Syria, where the second—

that he was a Savior who died for the sins of his

century authors who first quote the book of

people (1:21) and was vindicated by God by being

Matthew happen to have resided.

raised from the dead. Moreover, Matthew went

Perhaps the best way to explain Matthew’s

out of his way to affirm more strongly than his pre—

extensive criticism of the Jewish authorities is to say

decessors Mark and Q that Jesus did not annul the

that his own community continued to experience

ancient Law of Moses but fulfilled it himself and

opposition from non-Christian Jews, especially

insisted that all his followers, both Jews and

influential scribes and rabbis of the local syna—

Gentiles, do so as well. This they could do by

gogue(s), who accused them of abandoning Moses

holding on to Jesus’ teachings and by following the

and the Law, of becoming apostate from the Jewish

principle at the heart of the Torah, given long ago

religion through their ill-advised faith in Jesus.

to Jesus’ forerunner Moses: to love God with their

Matthew, an anonymous Jewish leader of the

entire being and their neighbor as much as them—

Christian community (assuming that his strong

selves, “for on these two commandments hang all

literary skills, indicative of a higher education,

the Law and the Prophets.”

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Brown, Raymond. The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary

Nickle, Keith. The Synoptic Gospels: Conflict and Consensus.

on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke. 2d ed.

Atlanta: John Knox, 1980. A fine introduction to the

Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1993. A massive and

major themes of Matthew’s Gospel.

exhaustive discussion of the birth narratives of

Overman, J. A. Matthew’s Gospel and Formative Judaism:

Matthew and Luke, suitable for those who want to

The Social World of the Matthean Community.

know simply everything about every detail.

Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991. This is the best overall

Carter, Warren. What Are They Saying about Matthew’s

study of the community behind Matthew’s Gospel,

Sermon on the Mount? New York: Paulist, 1994. The

examined from a socio-historical perspective.

best introductory sketch of the scholarly debates con—

Senior, Donald. What Are They Saying about Matthew? New cerning the formation and meaning of Matthew’s

York: Paulist Press, 1983. An overview of scholarly views

Sermon on the Mount.

of Matthew’s Gospel, excellent for beginning students.

Edwards, Richard A. Matthew’s Story of Jesus. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985. A nice introductory overview of the

major themes of Matthew’s Gospel for beginning

students.

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# CHAPTER 8

Jesus, the Savior of the World:

The Gospel according to Luke

I have had two overarching goals in our study of

Gospel according to Luke. Indeed, both of them

the early Christian Gospels to this point. The first

have been used to this end, with some consider—

has been to explain different methods that scholable success. Nonetheless, in staying with my pat—

ars have used in their investigation of these texts;

tern I have opted to introduce yet a third method,

the second has been to apply these methods to

one that could just as well have been used with

uncover the distinctive emphases of each Gospel.

both Mark and Matthew.

My underlying assumption has been that the

This third method has not been discussed as

results of our investigation are no more compelling

extensively by scholars of the Gospels; it is

than the methods that we use to attain them.

nonetheless a useful approach and can be

That is to say, while it is important to know what

explained and justified rather easily. It is most

a text means, it is also important to recognize how

closely aligned with the redactional method that

we know (or think we know) what it means.

we used with Matthew, but it avoids some of its

Moreover, it is useful not only to understand what

pitfalls and has a somewhat different theoretical

our methods involve in theory but also to see how

rationale. For the purposes of our study, I will sim—

they work in practice.

ply call it the “comparative method.”

Thus we applied the literary-historical method

to discuss the Gospel of Mark and the redactional

method to study Matthew. These particular

THE COMPARATIVE METHOD

Gospels do not have to be examined in these par-

AND THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

ticular ways. We could just as easily have used a

literary-historical method to study Matthew and,

Perhaps the best way to explain how the compara—

at least theoretically, a redactional method to

tive method works is to point out two problems that

study Mark (although the latter would have

some recent scholars have found with redaction

proved somewhat difficult since we do not have

criticism. The first objection is that examining how

direct access to any of Mark’s sources). My point

a redactor has changed a source will not necessarily

is that there are a number of approaches that

give a complete account of what he or she consid—

scholars have taken to the Gospels, each with its

ered to be important. This is because the redactor

own benefits and limitations, as they work toward

has actually made two kinds of decisions: not only

the common goal of explaining the important fea—

about what to change but also about what to keep.

tures of each text.

Sometimes it is just as important to know what an

The methods that we have discussed so far, of

author has decided to leave intact as to know what

course, could also be used for our study of the

he or she has decided to alter.

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This is a valid objection to redaction criticism

around us, our experiences and sensations—is

as it is sometimes practiced; seeing the alterations

necessarily relational. We know what we know

that authors have made in their sources can only

only in relation to everything else that we know.

serve as a shortcut to understanding their distinc—

This fundamental principle has been advanced

tive emphases. A complete redactional analysis

by modern theoreticians of language, who point

would need to consider, in detail, both the simi—

out that words mean what they do only in relation

larities and the differences of the texts in question.

to other words. That is to say, we know what one

As we will see, this is true of the comparative

term means because it is not exactly the same as

method as well.

some other term. For instance, we (as English

The second objection to the redactional

speakers) know what the word “cat” signifies, not

method has been raised with even greater vigor.

because the word has some kind of inherent mean—

Redaction criticism, opponents say, is necessarily

ing, but because it is different from other closely

built on assumptions about an author’s sources; if

related terms, such as “bat,” “hat,” and “gnat.”

these assumptions are found to be false, then the

Moving beyond the term to the thing that it sig—

entire method collapses on itself. If, for example,

nifies, we know that the thing sitting on our lap is

Matthew did not use Mark as a source, that is, if

a cat because it is in some ways like, and in other

our proposed four-source hypothesis for the

ways unlike, other things in our experience. For

Synoptics is wrong, then the study of how

example, it is like other things we call animals and

Matthew changed Mark is obviously of little use.

unlike things we call plants. As an animal, it is

Since scholars continue to debate the Synoptic

like a mammal rather than, say, a reptile or a bird.

Problem, and not everyone is convinced about

And as a mammal, it is both similar to and differ—

Markan priority (some scholars continue to think

ent from other mammals, such as walruses, dogs,

Matthew was written first), are we not compelled

and aardvarks.

to give up redaction criticism as a method? For

This principle of knowing something by its

many scholars the answer is a loud and resound—

similarities to and differences from other things

ing yes.

applies not only to individual terms and the

This decision, however, may be a bit too hasty;

things they signify, but also to combinations of

for redaction critics do not simply assume Markan

words into sensible units such as phrases,

priority, they mount arguments in its favor. Even

clauses, sentences, paragraphs, chapters, and

though the arguments may not be absolutely and

books. We understand the meaning of one book,

universally compelling, they continue to be connot in and of itself, but in relationship to every—

vincing to the majority of scholars. Furthermore,

thing else that we know, including every other

even if the arguments for Markan priority were

book that we know.

somehow proven to be wrong, Matthew’s differ—

The relevance of this principle for our study of

ences from Mark may still be of use in determining

the Gospels should be obvious. We can study any

Matthew’s particular emphases. To see how this is

one of the Gospels by comparing it to others, to

so, we can turn to the comparative method, which

see its similarities and differences, and thereby

establishes the meaning of a text by comparing it

come to a more adequate understanding of it. This

to other related texts, without being concerned

approach is not unique to the study of early

over whether any of them happened to be among

Christian literature, of course, any more than any

its sources.

of our other methods is. In fact, some scholars

I have argued that we can learn something new

would argue that since all learning is relational,

only in light of what we already know, since there

people necessarily understand everything they

is nothing in our experience as humans that is

read, whether they are cognizant of it or not, by

completely unlike everything else. If there were,

comparing it to everything else they have read.

we would have no way of sensing, experiencing,

For our study of Luke, we will try to be cog—

understanding, or explaining it. All knowledge—

nizant of what we are doing and so, self-conscious—

not only of literary texts but of people, the world

ly, apply the comparative method. The method



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# CHAPTER 8

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does not require us to think that Luke used Mark

as a source; those who think that he did (as most

scholars do) are of course quite free to limit their

considerations to seeing how he utilized that

source and the others at his disposal (e.g., Q).

This is the approach we took in studying Matthew.

In this chapter, however, we will overlook the

question of sources and focus instead on how Luke

compares and contrasts with other texts that are in

many ways similar, in particular the two Gospels

we are now most thoroughly acquainted with,

Matthew and Mark. These similarities and differences will enlighten us concerning several important features of Luke’s portrayal of Jesus and thus

be useful as an introduction to some of the key

themes of his Gospel.

A COMPARATIVE

OVERVIEW OF THE GOSPEL

We have already learned several basic points about

Luke’s Gospel in relation to Matthew and Mark.

Like them, Luke is a kind of Greco-Roman biography of Jesus. It too is anonymous and appears to

have been written by a Greek-speaking Christian

somewhere outside of Palestine. The author evidently penned his account somewhat later than

the Gospel of Mark, perhaps at about the same

time as the Gospel of Matthew. In the second

century, the book came to be attributed to Luke,

the traveling companion of the apostle Paul (we

will consider the merits of this attribution in the

following chapter).

Figure 8.1 Like many modern-day readers, ancient Christians Perhaps the most obvious difference between

conflated the accounts of Jesus’ birth from Matthew and Luke

this Gospel and all others from antiquity (not just

into a single narrative. This can be seen, for example, in this Matthew and Mark) is that it is the first of a two-depiction of the birth narratives from a panel on a sixth-century volume set. The unknown author provided a con-ivory throne of Archbishop Maximianus, which shows the angel tinuation of the story in volume two, the Acts of

coming to Joseph in his sleep (found only in Matthew) and Mary and Joseph’s journey to Bethlehem (found only in Luke).

the Apostles. The Gospel of Luke provides a

sketch of the life and death of Jesus, and the book

of Acts narrates the birth and life of the Christian

church that emerged afterwards. The author

THE PREFACE

appears to have meant these books to be read

TO LUKE’S GOSPEL

together. For the purposes of our comparative

study, however, we will restrict ourselves in this

Given the importance that I have attached to the

chapter to an analysis of Luke, reserving an inves—

ways each of the other Gospels has begun, we do

tigation of Acts for the chapter that follows.

well to start our comparative study of Luke by con-

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sidering his introduction. Unlike Mark and

Sometimes the preface includes the name of the

Matthew, Luke begins with a formal preface, found

person to whom the work is being dedicated.

in the opening four verses of his account. Readers

All of these features are found in Luke 1:1–4.

conversant with a wide range of Greco-Roman lit—

The author (whom I will continue to call Luke for

erature will have no difficulty understanding the

convenience) indicates that he has had several pre—

significance of this beginning, for it is quite similar

decessors in writing a narrative of the life of Jesus

to other prefaces of the period, particularly among

(v. 1) and that these narratives are ultimately based

works by Greek historians. By beginning his Gospel

on stories that have been passed down by “eyewit—

with a standard “historiographic” preface, written in

nesses and ministers of the word” (v. 2). In other

a much better style of Greek than anything found

words, the author concedes that his Gospel is based

in Mark or Matthew, Luke alerts his reader both to

on oral traditions that were circulating among

his own abilities as a writer and to the scope of his

Christian congregations of the first century and

work. His book is to be taken as a serious piece of

that he has made use of other written sources. As

historical writing, at least according to ancient

we have seen, two of these earlier “narratives of the

readers’ expectations of “history.”

things which have been accomplished among us”

Historiographic prefaces in Greco-Roman liter—

are the Gospel of Mark and the document scholars

ature typically indicate that the author has done

call Q. Some readers have been struck by the tone

extensive research of the historical topics under

of Luke’s reference to these predecessors. He

discussion. They commonly refer to the sources

claims that his narrative, evidently in contrast with

that were at his disposal, and they not infrequent—

theirs, will be orderly (1:3) and that he is writing so

ly suggest that the final product of the author’s

that his reader will now learn the “truth concern—

labors, the volume being read, is far superior to

ing the things about which you have been instruct—

anything previously written on the subject.

ed” (1:4). An intriguing comment this: is Luke

SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 8.1 Apologetic Literature in Early Christianity

Formally speaking, an apology is a reasoned defense of a person’s actions. In the ancient world, there was a genre of literature called apology in which an author would mount either a self-defense or a defense of a social group in the face of accusations. Probably the most famous example is the Apology of Socrates, Plato’s account of the legal defense that the philosopher Socrates made before the Athenian court that condemned him to death.

From the time prior to Christianity, we know of several Jewish apologies; these were treatises penned by Jews justifying their customs and explaining their ways to hostile outsiders.

This literary form was later picked up by some of the more educated Christians in the second century, as we will see in Chapter 26. When Christianity came to be persecuted as a religion, its more literate members had to show why this mistreatment was altogether unjustified and to explain that the Christian faith was intellectually defensible and socially and politically innocuous.

Scholars who maintain that Luke and Acts are apologetic literature use the term in this formal sense. In their opinion, these books were written by a highly educated Christian who wanted to show that the life of Jesus was exemplary, as was the Christian church that emerged in his wake, and that both Jesus and his followers were deserving of better treatment from the hands of the government.

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making a negative, if implicit, evaluation of Mark’s

of his governorship. Other officials are portrayed

Gospel?

in yet less favorable terms in the book of Acts.

Luke dedicates his work to someone he calls “most

Most problematic of all, it is nearly impossible to

excellent Theophilus.” Unfortunately, he never tells

imagine any tangible historical context within

us who this is. Luke does, however, use the title “most

which a Christian would write two such large vol—

excellent” on three other occasions, each of them in

umes (together, they take up approximately one—

reference to a governor of a Roman province (in the

fourth of the entire New Testament) and deliver

second volume of his work; Acts 23:26; 24:3; 26:25).

them over to a Roman official with any real expec—

On these grounds, some scholars have thought that

tation that he would read them, let alone be influ—

Luke’s two volumes were written for a Roman admin—

enced by them.

istrative official. If this is correct, one might wonder

It is much more likely that these books, along

why a Christian would give a non-Christian governor

with all of the other Gospels, were “in-house” liter—

books on the life of Jesus and the beginnings of the

ature, written by Christians for Christians, rather

Christian church. According to one point of view, he

than evangelistic or propagandistic texts. Who in

did so to show someone in power that Jesus and the

the outside world would bother to read them? Who

religion he founded are in no way to be seen as a

on the inside would be foolish enough to think they

threat to the social order, and that there is therefore

would? It is worth noting that the first reference to

no reason to persecute Christians, since neither they

any outsider having any clue as to what was in these

nor their founder have ever opposed the empire or

books does not come for nearly a hundred years

done anything to merit opposition.

after the production of LukeActs (the reference is

Not everyone accepts this view, for reasons that

in an antiChristian writer named Celsus).

I will explain shortly. If it were true, however, it

If Luke’s Theophilus is not a Roman adminis—

would help to make sense of several aspects of

trator, who might he be? The name was fairly

Luke’s portrayal of Jesus. He shows a special con—

common in Greek antiquity. Literally translated,

cern, for example, to relate the history of Jesus to

it means either “lover of God” or “beloved of

the broader historical events transpiring within the

God.” For this reason, some scholars have plausi—

empire (e.g., 2:1–2; 3:1–2). Moreover, his narra—

bly argued that Luke’s addressee is a code name for

tive goes to some lengths to show that Jesus was

the Christians (the “beloved of God”) to whom he

executed by the state only because Pilate’s hand

writes. Just as other historians prefaced their

was forced by the leaders of the Jews. In this

works by dedicating them to a patron who had

Gospel, Pilate declares on three different occasions

provided material support, or to some other person

that he finds no guilt in Jesus (23:4, 14–15, 22),

deemed worthy of honor, so Luke may have dedi—

and after Jesus dies, the centurion responsible for

cated his work to his fellow believers, who were

his execution also proclaims that he was innocent

worthy of the greatest accolades as those whom

(23:47). Could this Gospel, then, along with its

God loves, or “Theophilus.” If this view of the

sequel, Acts, have been written as an “apology,”

matter is correct, then the apologetic aspects of

that is, an informed defense of Christianity in the

the narrative would be directed not to outsiders

face of official opposition of the state (see box 8.1)?

but to those within the church. Luke’s aim may

Even though this view can account for some of

have been to show the Christians themselves that

the features of Luke’s narrative, it cannot explain

their movement has been nonviolent and socially

a large number of others, including most of its

respectable from the very beginning, thus perhaps

prominent themes (as we shall see). Moreover, if

providing them with answers they needed when

Luke’s overarching purpose was to curry the favor

confronted by the objections of outsiders.

of Roman officials, it is odd that he did not portray

There is one final issue to address before leaving

them in a more favorable light. Pilate, for exam—

the preface and jumping into the narrative itself.

ple, is depicted as a weak administrator who bows

Prefaces such as the one in Luke are normally found

to pressure from his own subjects, a portrayal that,

in historiographic works, but ancient historiogra—

in fact, does not square well with the public record

phy was a different genre of literature from biogra-

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phy, as we will see in greater detail in Chapter 9.

ning with a birth narrative, Luke has an obvious

This raises the question of whether Luke is essen—

point of contact with Matthew. Mark, you will

tially comparable to Mark and Matthew as a kind of

recall, begins with Jesus as an adult.

Greco-Roman biography.

There are some very broad and basic similarities

Some scholars have argued that since Luke wrote

between the birth narratives of Matthew and of

two volumes, the entire work has to be considered

Luke. In both, for example, Jesus is born in the city

when deciding about genre. According to this view,

of Bethlehem to a virgin named Mary, who is

since Acts is not about the life and death of Jesus but

betrothed to a man named Joseph. For most read—

about the church that spread throughout the world

ers, however, what is far more striking are the dif—

after his death, the Gospel itself must be something

ferences between these accounts. Indeed, none of

other than a biography. At the same time, the fea—

the specific stories of Luke’s narrative occurs in

tures of the biographical genre that we found in

Matthew, just as none of Matthew’s appears here.

Mark and Matthew are present in Luke as well.

You can see this easily by making a list of everything

Indeed, in some respects, these features are even

that happens in Luke and a separate list of every—

stronger. By beginning his Gospel with the miracu—

thing that happens in Matthew, and comparing the

lous birth of the main character, ending it with his

lists. In one of them you will find the shepherds, in

ascent into heaven, and narrating his spectacular

the other the Magi; one describes the journey to

deeds and inspired teachings in between, Luke has

Bethlehem, the other the flight to Egypt; one

made his first volume more like biographies of other

records an angel’s words to Mary, the other the

religious men than either of the other Synoptics. It

angelic words to Joseph; and so forth. These are

shares more features, for example, with Philostratus’s

two discrete narratives, and the Christmas story

Life of Apollonius of Tyana (see Chapter 2).

recounted by Christians every December is a con—

What, then, can we conclude about this book’s

flation of the two.

genre? It seems that Luke wrote two closely relat—

From a comparative perspective, perhaps the

ed works, one a biography of the founder of

most important feature of these infancy narratives is

Christianity and the other a general history of the

not simply that they differ from one another but that

early Christian movement. In terms of overall

they do so in ways that are extremely hard to recon—

conception and significant themes the two vol—

cile. These differences give us an excellent opportu—

umes are closely related, but their different subject

nity to apply the comparative method of analysis.

matters required the use of different genres, one a

Greco-Roman biography and the other a Greco-Roman history (we will be discussing the genre of

An Illustration of the Comparative Method:

Acts in Chapter 9).

Joseph and Mary’s Hometown

If this is the case, then, the preface to Luke,

One of the telling differences between the two

which would belong more naturally to a history

accounts has to do with the question of Mary and

than a biography, can be seen as an introduction to

Joseph’s hometown. Most people simply assume

the entire two-volume work. It is structured as a

that the couple lived in Nazareth. In the familiar

historiographic preface because the work as a whole

story of Luke’s Gospel, Mary and Joseph leave town

will comprise not only a biography of the founder of

for a trip to register for the census in Bethlehem.

this religion but also a sketch of its early history.

Mary happens to give birth there (2:1–7), and the

couple then returns home just over a month later

(2:39; following the law spelled out in Leviticus 12).

LUKE’S BIRTH NARRATIVE IN

Before examining this account in greater detail,

COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

we should recall what Matthew says about the same

event. Matthew gives no indication at all that

The two lengthy chapters that begin Luke’s

Joseph and Mary made a trip from Galilee in order

account contain stories relating the births of Jesus

to register for a census. On the contrary, Matthew

and his predecessor, John the Baptist. By begin—

intimates that Joseph and Mary originally came

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from Bethlehem. This is suggested, first of all, by

learns in a dream that he can now return home.

the story of the wise men (found only in Matthew),

But where does he plan to go? The answer is quite

who arrive to worship Jesus after making a long

clear. He intends to return to the place whence

journey in which they followed the star that

they came, the town of Bethelehem. Only when he

appeared in the heavens to indicate his birth. They

learns that the ruler of Judea is Archelaus, a poten—

find Jesus in Bethlehem in a “house” (not a stable or

tate worse than his father Herod, does he realize

a cave; Matt 2:11). Unless one had reason to think

that they can’t return there. For this reason Joseph

otherwise—and Matthew gives readers no reason

decides to relocate his family in Galilee, in the

for doing so—one would assume that the house is

town of Nazareth (2:22–23). Thus in Matthew’s

where Jesus and his family normally live.

account, Joseph and Mary appear to have originally

Consider next what Herod does in Matthew’s

lived in Bethlehem, but they relocated to Nazareth

account when he learns from the Magi the time at

when Jesus was a boy and raised him there.

which they had first seen the star. Based on this

In the Gospel of Luke Jesus is also born in

information, he sends forth his troops to slaughter

Bethlehem and raised in Nazareth, but the way this

every boy in Bethlehem who is two years and

comes about is altogether different (see box 8.2). In

under (2:16). In other words, the “slaughter of the

this account Joseph takes his betrothed Mary from

innocents” did not occur immediately after Jesus’

their hometown Nazareth to Bethlehem for a world—

birth, but some months, or perhaps a year and

wide census ordered by Caesar Augustus, while

some months later: otherwise, Herod would have

Quirinius was governor of Syria (2:1–5). Mary goes

been quite safe to slaughter only the newborns.

into labor while in town, so Jesus’ birthplace is

According to Matthew’s account, Joseph and

Bethlehem. After about a month (Luke 2:22–23,

Mary are still in Bethlehem at this time, presum—

39; see Lev 12:4–6), the family returns to their home

ably because that is simply where they live.

in Nazareth, where Jesus is raised (2:39–40). As you

Perhaps most telling of all, some time after they

might realize, the family’s direct return north in

had fled to Egypt to escape Herod’s wrath, Joseph

Luke does not seem to allow time for Matthew’s wise

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 8.2 Historical Problems with Luke’s Birth Narrative

In addition to the difficulties raised by a detailed comparison of the two birth narratives found in the New Testament, serious historical problems are raised by the familiar stories found in Luke alone. Contrary to what Luke indicates, historians have long known from several ancient inscriptions, the Roman historian Tacitus, and the Jewish historian Josephus that Quirinius was not the governor of Syria until 6 C.E., fully ten years after Herod the Great died.

If Jesus was born during the reign of Herod, then Quirinius was not the Syrian governor.

We also have no record of a worldwide census under Augustus, or under any emperor at any time. Moreover, a census in which everyone was to return to their ancestral home would have been more than a bureaucratic nightmare; it would have been well nigh impossible. In Luke, Joseph is said to return to Bethlehem because his ancestor David came from there; but David lived a thousand years before Joseph. Can it be possible that everyone in the empire was to return to the place their ancestors lived a thousand years earlier? If such a census were required in our day, where would you go? Imagine the massive migrations involved.

Then imagine that no other ancient author considered it important enough to mention, even in passing!

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SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 8.3 The Virgin Birth in Matthew and Luke

Both Matthew and Luke make it quite clear that Jesus’ mother was a virgin, but they appear to understand the significance of Jesus’ virgin birth differently. In Matthew, Jesus’

birth is said to fulfill the prediction of the Hebrew prophet Isaiah, who foretold that “a virgin shall conceive and bear a son” (1:23). Luke neither quotes this Isaiah passage nor indicates that Jesus’ birth fulfills Scripture. What the event means for Luke is suggested in the story of the Annunciation (1:28–38, a passage found only in Luke), where the angel Gabriel assures Mary that her son “will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.” Mary is disturbed by this pronouncement: how can she bear a son if she has never had sexual relations (1:34)? The angel’s reply is striking: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will over-shadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God” (1:35).

Why, then, is Jesus born of a virgin in Luke? Evidently, because Jesus really is God’s son (“therefore . . . he will be called the Son of God”). In other words, his father is not a human but God himself.

As we will see later, Luke is generally thought to have been writing to a Christian community that was largely Gentile. It may be that he has molded his portrayal of Jesus for these converts from other Greco-Roman religions. He presents the story of Jesus’ birth in a way that would make sense to a pagan reader who was conversant with tales of other divine beings who walked the face of the earth, other heroes and demigods who were born of the union of a mortal with a god.

men to visit them in their home in Bethlehem a year

emphasize, unlike in Matthew, that the beginning

or so later, or for their subsequent flight to Egypt.

of Jesus’ story is closely associated with the Temple

Of course, it might be possible to reconcile these

in Jerusalem. For Luke, the message of God’s sal—

two narratives if we worked hard enough at it, and

vation comes first to the Jews, to the capital of

certainly Matthew and Luke do not explicitly con—

Judea, to the most sacred location of the most

tradict each other. But the two narratives are quite

sacred city. Luke’s Gospel (and the subsequent

different from one another, and interestingly, the

narrative in the book of Acts) is oriented toward

differences are highlighted by their one overarch—

showing how this salvation comes largely to be

ing similarity (see box 8.3). Both authors indicate

rejected in the city of God by the people of God,

that Jesus was born in Bethlehem but raised in

the Jews themselves. This rejection leads to its

Nazareth, even though this happens in strikingly

dissemination elsewhere, principally among the

different ways in their two narratives. (For other

non-Jews, the Gentiles.

accounts of Jesus as a child, see Chapter 12.)

This Lukan orientation is established at the

outset of the narrative by the focus on the Temple

in passages unique to the Third Gospel. It is here

The Salvation of the Jews:

that the birth of Jesus’ forerunner John is

Luke’s Orientation to the Temple

announced to Zechariah, the priest, faithfully

For understanding Luke’s overall narrative, per—

ministering to God in the sanctuary (1:8–23).

haps the single most significant feature of these

The parents of John are upright before God as

opening chapters is the way they repeatedly

strict observers of traditional Jewish piety. To Jews

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such as these, God first announces—in the

bottom. The third is to worship Satan, a temp—

Temple—the coming of his salvation.

tation both more subtle and more terrible than

Jesus himself comes to be born in nearby

the others: Satan promises him the lordship of

Bethlehem during the fortuitous journey of his

the earth in exchange, a lordship that will other—

mother with her betrothed to enroll for the census

wise require his death on the cross.

(2:1–20). He is circumcised on the eighth day, in

The crescendo effect of Matthew’s account is

accordance with the Jewish Law (2:21). Some days

muted in Luke, where the second and third

later he is brought into the Temple to be conse—

temptations are reversed. But the switch has a

crated to God (2:22). While in the Temple, he is

recognized as the long awaited messiah by a right—

thematic payoff, for in Luke’s sequence the

eous and devout holy man, Simeon (2:25–36), and

temptations end with Jesus in the holy city

an elderly Jewish prophetess, Anna, who spends

Jerusalem, at the holy sanctuary, the Temple.

day and night in the Temple, praying and fasting

For Luke, this is where God’s salvation comes

(2:36–38). In the Temple, his parents offer a sacri—

and where the real cosmic battle is waged

fice and do all that the Law commands (2:25, 39).

over God’s people, the Jews, many of whom

In the very next account, the only story of Jesus

will succumb to Satan and reject the message

as a youth in the entire New Testament, his par—

of Jesus.

ents bring him to Jerusalem as a twelve-year-old

2. Whereas in the other Gospels Jesus’ final trip

boy for the Passover feast. When they leave, he

to Jerusalem is narrated in rather quick order

remains behind without telling them. After a

(e.g., in Mark, it happens only in chap. 10), in

three-day search, they finally track him down in

Luke it takes up a major portion of the Gospel.

the Temple where he is engaged in discussion with

Jesus leaves for Jerusalem in chapter 9 and

Jewish authorities. When his mother upbraids

does not arrive until chapter 19, spending the

him for causing them distress, Jesus replies, “Did

interim period, on the way, healing and teach—

you not know that I had to be in my Father’s

ing. Why such an extensive account of Jesus

house?” (i.e., in the Temple; 2:49).

going to Jerusalem? Perhaps to highlight the

Thus, unlike both Mark and Matthew, Luke

significance of the event: God’s salvation

stresses Jesus’ early association with the Temple in

comes to the heart of Judaism, only to be

Jerusalem. It is there, in the heart of Judaism, that

rejected there.

God’s message of salvation comes. This emphasis

3. The Gospel not only begins in the Temple of

on Jerusalem and its Temple can be found in other

Jerusalem, it also ends there. Unlike in Mark,

important passages of Luke, as revealed through a

where the women are instructed to tell the dis—

comparative analysis. The following paragraphs

give just three outstanding examples.

ciples to go to Galilee to see Jesus, and unlike

in Matthew, where they actually do go and

encounter him there, in Luke they are told not

1. In both Matthew and Luke, Jesus experiences

to go outside Jerusalem; they remain there for

three temptations by the Devil in the wilderness

some weeks after seeing Jesus on the day of his

(Matt 4:1–11, Luke 4:1–13). The accounts are

resurrection (24:49). Finally, after their last

almost verbally identical. The sequence of temp—

encounter with the resurrected Lord, they

tations, however, differs. In Matthew’s account

watch him take his leave from just outside the

they appear to become increasingly difficult.

city and return, not to their homeland,

The first is to turn stones into bread, a tempta—

Galilee, but to the Temple, where they spend

tion difficult to resist, since Jesus has been fasting

their days worshipping God (24:50 –52).

for forty days. The second is to leap from the top

of the Temple, evidently a temptation for Jesus to

For Luke, the message of God comes to his peo—

prove to the crowds below that he is the messiah

ple in their most sacred city, Jerusalem, in the most

by being swooped up by the angels before he hits

sacred of all sites, the Temple, but this message is

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not meant only for the Jews. In Luke’s view, it is a

is God’s own son (3:22). The genealogy ends by

message of salvation for all people. This can be seen

implicitly making the same declaration but in a

by applying a comparative analysis to another pas—

radically different way. Here Jesus’ lineage is

sage of Luke’s early chapters, his genealogy of Jesus.

traced not just to David or to Abraham or even to

Adam, the first human being. The genealogy goes

all the way back to God, the “father” of Adam—

making Jesus the Son of God by direct descent!

The Salvation of the Gentiles:

The third significant difference between these

Luke’s Orientation to the Whole World

two genealogies is closely related. Luke’s genealo—

We spent some time examining Matthew’s genealogy does not so much stress Jesus’ Jewishness, as one

gy of Jesus (actually, his genealogy of Joseph, the hus—

descended from the father of the Jews, or his mes—

band of Jesus’ mother). Luke too has a genealogy

siahship, as the Son of David. Jesus’ human lin-

(3:23–38). One of the most obvious differences

eage goes far beyond both of these figures who are

between them is that they are, in fact, different

so important for the history of Judaism, back to the

genealogies! Both of them do trace Jesus’ lineage

man responsible for the human race itself, Adam.

through Joseph, even though in neither Gospel is

Thus, if Matthew’s genealogy was important in

Joseph Jesus’ father, and in both of them Joseph is a

showing that Jesus belonged to the Jews, Luke’s

descendant of King David. What is striking, though,

is important in showing that he belongs to all

is that Joseph’s ties to David are traced through dif—

people, both Jews and Gentiles.

ferent lines in the two accounts. In Matthew, Joseph

Here we have an important indication that for

is a direct descendant (from father to son) of David’s

Luke the message of salvation that begins in the

son Solomon; in Luke he is descended through a dif—

heart of Judaism is a message for all the nations of

ferent line, from David’s other son Nathan. The dis—

earth. In fact, as we will see, Luke devotes virtu—

crepancy can best be seen by moving backwards

ally his entire second volume to showing how this

through the genealogy, beginning from Joseph. Who

message came to be rejected by Jews, and so went

was Joseph’s father? Was it Jacob (as in Matthew) or

forth to the Gentiles. Indeed, a careful reader of

Heli (as in Luke?) Was his paternal grandfather

Luke’s work does not need to wait for volume two

Matthan or Matthat? Was his paternal great-grand—

to get this message. It is embodied here in the

father Eleazar or Levi? His great-great-grandfather

Gospel itself, as the comparative method of analy—

Eliud or Melchi? And so forth. One of the fascinat—

sis can clearly demonstrate.

ing aspects of scholarship is to see how readers have

attempted to explain these differences over the years.

Some have claimed, for instance, that one of the

genealogies is Joseph’s and the other is Mary’s. The

FROM JEW TO GENTILE: LUKE’S

problem, of course, is that both of them explicitly

PORTRAYAL OF JESUS THE

trace the ancestry of Joseph (Matt 1:16; Luke 3:23).

REJECTED PROPHET

A second difference is perhaps even more obvious to a first-time reader of Luke. Unlike

We have already seen that both Mark and Matthew

Matthew’s genealogy, Luke’s does not occur where

establish essential aspects of their portrayals of Jesus

you might expect, in the narrative of Jesus’ birth,

by the way they describe the beginning of his public

but after his baptism (3:23–38). Why would Luke

ministry. Mark, for example, uses his early narratives

wait until Jesus is a grown man of “about thirty” to

to show that Jesus was an authoritative leader,

describe his genealogy (3:23)? Possibly the best

teacher, and healer; Matthew uses his to portray

way to answer this question is to consider an

Jesus as the new Moses bringing the authoritative

important connection between Jesus’ baptism and

interpretation of God’s Law. In Luke, Jesus’ ministry

his genealogy in Luke. Both passages conclude by

begins with a sermon in the synagogue that infuri—

showing that Jesus is the Son of God. The baptism

ates his fellow Jews, who then make an attempt on

ends with the declaration from heaven that Jesus

his life. It is not an auspicious beginning.



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After reading the Scripture, Jesus sits and

begins to proclaim that the predictions of the

prophet have now come to fulfillment—by implication, in him. Those in the synagogue are

incredulous; they know, after all, who Jesus is (or

think they do; they call him “Joseph’s son” in v.

22). Jesus understands their reaction: they want

F P O

him to prove himself by doing miracles for them

like he has done in Capernaum. This may strike

the reader as a somewhat peculiar request, since in

this Gospel, unlike Mark and Matthew, Jesus has

not yet gone to Capernaum or done any miracles.

In any event, Jesus responds by launching into an

extended sermon, not found in the other Gospels, in

which he recounts two familiar stories from the

Jewish Scriptures about prophets who were sent by

God, not to Jews but to Gentiles. He tells how

Elijah was sent to assist a widow in the city of

Zarephath during an extended drought and how

Elisha was sent to heal not the lepers of Israel but

Naaman, the leper king of Syria (4:25–27). In both

instances God sent his prophet, not to help his people the Israelites, but to pronounce judgment against

them for having turned against him. These prophets

Figure 8.2 Picture of Saint Luke from a tenth-century manuscript of the Gospels. Notice the five books of Moses resting on ministered to Gentiles outside of the people of God.

his lap and the Old Testament prophets that he lifts up—graphic These are the stories that Jesus uses to explain

portrayals of Luke’s view that the life and death of Jesus were a ful-how he fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah. His message

fillment of the Law and the prophets (see Luke 24:26–27).

is clear: he too is a prophet of God who will not

receive a warm welcome among his own people in

Israel, who like their ancestors have rejected God

In order to begin Jesus’ ministry in this way,

along with his prophets. Because of this rejection,

Luke narrates a story that does not occur until

Jesus’ message will be taken to the Gentiles.

nearly halfway through both Mark’s and

Jesus’ sermon is not a smashing success; in fact, it

Matthew’s account of the ministry (Mark 6:1–6;

is very nearly a smashing failure. The Jews in the

Matt 13:53–58; Luke 4:16 –30). This is the famous

synagogue rise up in anger and try to throw him off

narrative of Jesus’ sermon in his hometown of

a cliff. Jesus escapes, leaves town, and takes his

Nazareth, a story that is much longer and more

message elsewhere (4:28–30). For Luke, this reac—

detailed in Luke than in the other Gospels and

tion marks the beginning of the fulfillment of the

that, as the opening account, sets the stage for

sermon that Jesus has just preached. The prophet of

Luke’s overall portrayal of Jesus. As a visitor to the

God is opposed by his own people, and they will

synagogue, in Luke, Jesus is given the opportunity

eventually call for his death. As a prophet, he

to read and comment on the Scripture. He reads

knows that this is to happen. Indeed, it has all been

from the book of Isaiah, in which the prophet

predicted in the Jewish Scriptures. Rejecting him,

claims to be anointed with the spirit of God in

the people have rejected the God that he repre—

order “to bring good news to the poor . . . to prosents. This compels the prophet to take his message

claim release to the captives and recovery of sight

elsewhere. Eventually, the message will go not sim—

to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proply to another city of Israel, but to another people,

claim the year of the Lord’s favor” (4:18–19).

indeed to all other peoples, the nations of the earth.

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LUKE’S

appears to be closely modeled on the account of

DISTINCTIVE EMPHASES

the birth of the prophet Samuel, as narrated in the

Jewish Scriptures (1 Sam 1–2). In both instances,

THROUGHOUT HIS GOSPEL

a devout Jewish woman miraculously conceives, to

The passages that we have examined from the out—

the joy and amazement of her family, and she

set of Luke’s narrative intimate many of the key

responds in song, praising the God of Israel, who

themes that you will find throughout the rest of

exalts those who are humble and humbles those

the Gospel, themes relating to Luke’s understand—

who are exalted (compare the song of Hannah in

ing of Jesus and to the way his salvation affects the

1 Sam 2:1–10 with the “Magnificat” of Mary in

entire world. As we will see, many of these themes

Luke 1:46–55). Anyone conversant with the

continue to play a significant role in the second

Jewish Scriptures would recognize these allusions

volume of Luke’s work, the Acts of the Apostles.

and conclude that Jesus is born like a prophet.

Moreover, when Jesus begins his public ministry,

he explicitly claims to be anointed as a prophet who

Jesus the Prophet

will proclaim God’s message to his people. Recall

Our comparative analysis has begun to show that

his opening sermon in Nazareth, the fullest text of

Luke understood Jesus to be a prophet sent by God

which is found in Luke. And not only does Jesus

to his people. For ancient Jews, a prophet was not

preach as a prophet in this Gospel, he also does mira crystal ball gazer, a person who made inspired

acles as a prophet. Among our surviving Gospels,

predictions about events far in the future. He was

Luke alone relates the story in which Jesus raises the

a spokesperson for God, a messenger sent from

only son of a widow from Nain from the dead

God to his people. Often the message was quite

(7:11–17). The story is clearly reminiscent of a mir—

straightforward, involving a call to the people of

acle of the prophet Elijah, who in the Jewish

God to mend their ways and return to God by liv—

Scriptures raises the only son of the widow from

ing in accordance with his will. Throughout the

Zerephath from the dead (1 Kings 17:17–24). The

Hebrew Scriptures, of course, prophets make pre—

similarity of the events is not lost on Jesus’ compan—

dictions; usually (but not always) these are dire. If

ions. When they see what he has done, they pro—

the people of God do not repent and begin to live

claim “A great prophet has arisen among us” (7:16).

in accordance with God’s Law, he will punish

them through plague, famine, or military disaster.

Prophets tend to see into the future only insofar as

Jesus as a Prophet in Death. Not only is Luke’s

it affects those who reject or accept their message.

Jesus born as a prophet, and not only does he preach

as a prophet and heal as a prophet, he also is said to

Jesus as a Prophet in Life. Mark and Matthew, of

die as a prophet. There was a long-standing tradi—

course, also understand Jesus to be a prophet. In both

tion among Jews that their greatest prophets, both

Gospels he speaks God’s word and predicts the com—

those about whom stories were told in the

ing destruction of Jerusalem and his own death at the

Scriptures (e.g., Elijah and Elisha) and those who

hands of his enemies. But Luke places an even

penned scriptural books themselves (e.g., Jeremiah,

greater emphasis on Jesus’ prophetic role as the

Ezekiel, and Amos), were violently opposed and

spokesperson for God who comes to be rejected by

sometimes even martyred by their own people. In

his own people. This emphasis can be seen not only

Luke’s account, Jesus places himself in this prophet—

in the inaugural story of Jesus’ ministry, the sermon in

ic line. In a passage that is again unique to Luke,

Nazareth, but also in a number of other stories that

Jesus laments for Jerusalem, anticipating that he

occur in Luke but in neither of the other Gospels.

will suffer there the fate of a prophet:

In fact, the prophetic character of Jesus is seen

Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures

even before the rejection scene in Nazareth, for in

today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my

this Gospel Jesus is born as a prophet. Scholars

work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must

have long noted that the birth narrative of Luke 2

be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to

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# CHAPTER 8

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SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 8.4 Jesus’ Bloody Sweat in Luke

One of the most striking things about Luke’s account of Jesus’ Passion is that Jesus does not appear to experience any deep anguish over his coming fate. This becomes clear in a comparative study of what Jesus does prior to his betrayal and arrest (Luke 22:39 –46; Mark 14:32–42). In Mark’s account, Jesus is said to become “distressed and agitated” (14:33).

Luke’s version says nothing of the sort. In Mark, Jesus tells his disciples that his soul is sor-rowful unto death (14:34), words not found in Luke. In Mark, Jesus leaves his disciples and falls to his face on the ground to pray (14:35). In Luke, he simply takes to his knees. In Mark, Jesus prays fervently three times for God to “remove this cup from me” (14:36, 39, 41).

In Luke, he asks only once, and prefaces his prayer with “if you are willing.” Thus in comparison with Mark, Luke’s Jesus does not appear to be in gut-wrenching distress over his coming fate. But consider the famous verses found in the middle of the scene, Luke 22:43–44, where an angel from heaven comes to give Jesus much needed support and where his sweat is said to have become “like great drops of blood falling to the ground”? Don’t these verses show Luke’s Jesus in profound agony?

They do indeed. But the question is whether these verses were originally penned by Luke or were added by later scribes who felt somewhat uneasy over the fact that Jesus in this version does not seem distraught by his coming fate. If you are using the New Revised Standard Version (or any of a number of other modern translations as well), you will notice that the verses are placed in double brackets. These show that the translators are fairly confident that the verses did not originally form part of Luke’s Gospel but were added by well-meaning scribes at a later time. One reason for thinking so is the fact that these verses about Jesus’ bloody sweat are absent from our oldest and many of our best manuscripts of the New Testament.

In Chapter 29 we will be considering in greater detail the ways early Christian scribes changed their texts. At that time, I will say a few things about how we are able to decide what the original words of the New Testament were, given the fact that we no longer have the originals, but only copies made centuries after the originals had been lost. For now, I need simply point out that this famous passage describing Jesus’ bloody sweat may not have originally been part of Luke’s Gospel, so that without exception, Jesus remains calm and in control of his destiny, assured of God’s ongoing concern and able to face his fate with confidence and equanimity.

be killed outside of Jerusalem. Jerusalem, Jerusalem,

In Mark’s Passion narrative, as we have seen,

the city that kills the prophets and stones those who

Jesus appears somewhat uncertain of the need for his

are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your

own death up until the very end. He does, of course,

children together as a hen gathers her brood under her

predict that he is soon to die and at one point he

wings, but you were not willing. (13:32–34)

even explains why it is necessary (“as a ransom for

many”; 10:45), but when the moment arrives, he

Jesus’ knowledge that he must die as a prophet

appears torn with uncertainty (see Chapter 5).

may explain some of the unique features of Luke’s

There is no trace of uncertainty, however, in Luke’s

Passion narrative. These features can be highlight—

account. Here Jesus the prophet knows full well that

ed by comparing Luke’s account with the one we

he has to die, and shows no misgivings or doubts, as

have studied so far in the greatest depth, Mark’s.

can be seen by making a detailed comparison of the

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two accounts of what Jesus does prior to his arrest in

played out in the rest of the narrative. While

the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:32–42; Luke

being nailed to the cross, rather than being silent,

22:39–46; see box 8.4).

Jesus asks forgiveness for those who are wrongfully

The same contrast appears in the accounts of

treating him: “Father forgive them, for they do

Jesus’ crucifixion. We have seen that in Mark’s

not know what they are doing” (23:34). While on

Gospel Jesus is silent throughout the entire pro—

the cross, Jesus engages in an intelligent conversa—

ceeding. (Is he in total shock?) His only words

tion with one of the criminals crucified beside

come at the very end, after everyone (his disciples,

him. Here (unlike in Mark) only one of the crim—

the Jewish leaders, the crowds, the Roman author—

inals mocks Jesus; the other tells his companion to

ities, the passersby, and even the two other crimi—

hold his tongue, since Jesus has done nothing to

nals on their crosses) has either betrayed, denied,

deserve his fate. He then turns to Jesus and asks,

condemned, mocked, or forsaken him. Then he

“Jesus, remember me when you come into your

cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsak—

kingdom” (23:42). Jesus’ reply is stunningly con—

en me?” and dies.

fident: “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me

Luke paints a very different portrayal of Jesus in

in Paradise.”

the throes of death. For one thing, Jesus is not

Jesus is soon to die, but as a prophet he knows

silent on the way to crucifixion. Instead, when he

that he has to die, and he knows what will hap—

sees a group of women weeping for him, he turns

pen to him once he does: he will awaken in par—

and says to them, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not

adise. And this criminal who has professed faith

weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your

in him will awaken beside him. Most striking of

children” (23:28). Jesus does not appear to be disall is the way in which the scene ends. Whereas

traught about what is happening to him; he is

in Mark Jesus appears to die in despair, forsaken

more concerned for the fate of these women. This

not only by friends, companions, and fellow Jews,

note of confidence and concern for others is

but even by God himself—in Luke’s Gospel he

SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 8.5 Jesus as a Righteous Martyr

By the time Luke wrote his Gospel, there was already a long-standing tradition of Jewish martyrs who willingly, indeed sometimes eagerly, faced suffering and death for the sake of the law of God. A number of surviving documents, some of which date two hundred years or so before Luke’s Gospel, portray Jewish martyrs like the prophet Daniel and the stalwart defenders of Judaism during the Maccabean revolt (which I will discuss further in Chapter 15), who suffer excruciating torments and death with their heads held high, confident that their deaths will be vindicated by God. The perspective in these accounts is bold and defi-ant; tyrants can torture and maim, they can attack and kill, but they cannot touch the soul.

And after death, God rewards those who are righteous.

Some of these accounts are preserved for us in the Jewish writings of the Apocrypha (e.g., 1 and 4 Maccabees; see further box 17.2). It may be that Luke modeled his understanding of Jesus’ death on some such accounts, for in his Gospel Jesus dies in full assurance of God’s favor. Why would Luke want to portray Jesus in this way? It is possible that he does so to show Jesus as a model martyr, as one whom the Christians themselves should emulate when confronted with the animosity of ruling authorities.

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dies in full assurance of God’s special care and

but most think that for Luke the tearing of the cur—

favor. Here he does not cry out in anguish, “My

tain does not show that Jesus’ death brings access

God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

to God, since here, it is torn before he dies, but

Instead, he offers up a final prayer, indicative of

rather that God has entered into judgment with

his full confidence in God’s love and providential

his people as symbolized by this destruction with—

care: “Father, into your hands I commend my

in the Temple. In this Gospel, Jesus himself pro—

spirit” (23:46).

claims to his enemies among the Jewish authori—

These differences are significant and should

ties that “this is your hour and the power of dark—

not be downplayed, as if Mark and Luke were por—

ness” (22:53). The torn curtain accompanies the

traying Jesus in precisely the same way. When

eerie darkness over the land as a sign of God’s

modern readers act as if they were, for example, by

judgment upon his people, who have rejected his

thinking that Jesus said all of these things on the

gift of “light to those who sit in darkness and in

cross, some of them recorded by Mark and others

the shadow of death” (1:79).

by Luke, they take neither account seriously, but

Moreover, in Luke the centurion does not make

rather create their own account, in which Jesus is

a profession of faith in the Son of God who had to

portrayed as all things at one and the same time.

die (“Truly this man was God’s Son,” Mark 15:39;

But Mark has one way of portraying Jesus and

Matt 27:54); here his words coincide with Luke’s

Luke another, and readers who combine their two

own understanding of Jesus’ death: “Certainly this

portraits form a different Gospel, one that is nei—

man was innocent” (Luke 23:47). For Luke, Jesus

ther Mark nor Luke.

dies the death of a righteous martyr who has suf—

In Mark Jesus is in real agony at the end. In

fered from miscarried justice; his death will be vin—

Luke he dies in calm assurance. Each author

dicated by God at the resurrection. What both of

wanted to emphasize something significant about

these differences suggest is that Luke does not

Jesus’ death. We have already seen Mark’s empha—

share Mark’s view that Jesus’ death brought about

sis. Luke’s is somewhat different. Luke emphasizes

atonement for sin. An earlier statement in Mark

that Jesus died as a righteous, blameless martyr of

corroborates his perspective; Jesus’ own comment

God. As a prophet he knew that this had to hap—

that “the Son of Man came not to be served, but

pen (see box 8.5).

to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many”

(10:45; Matt 20:28). It is striking and significant

that this saying is not found in Luke.

Jesus’ Death in Luke

Jesus, then, must die because he is a prophet who

One other important aspect of Luke’s portrayal of

comes to be rejected by God’s people. His death

Jesus in his death emerges when we consider the

does not appear to bring salvation in and of itself,

events that transpire at the close of the scene. As

and yet the death of Jesus must relate to salvation

we saw in Mark’s Gospel, the view that Jesus’

for Luke. But how? This is a puzzle we will take up

death was an atoning sacrifice was suggested by

further when we study the second volume of his

the tearing of the curtain in the Temple immedi—

work, the Acts of the Apostles. For now I can point

ately after he expired and the confession of the

out that the salvation that Jesus preaches in Luke is

centurion that “this man was the Son of God.”

similar to the salvation preached by the prophets of

Oddly, Luke includes both events but narrates

the Hebrew Scriptures. The people of God need to

them in ways that differ significantly from the

repent of their sins and return to God. When they

accounts in Mark (and in Matthew).

do so, he will forgive them, and grant them salva—

In Luke’s Gospel the curtain is torn in half, not

tion. For Luke, the biggest sin of all was killing

after Jesus breaths his last, but earlier, when dark—

God’s prophet. As we will see in our study of Acts,

ness comes upon the land as the light of the sun

when people realize what they have done in this

fails (due to an eclipse? 23:45). Scholars have

grotesque miscarriage of justice, they are driven to

long debated the significance of this difference,

their knees in repentance. And when they turn to



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F P O

Figure 8.3 The Last Supper, as portrayed in a sixth-century manuscript called the “Rossano Gospels.”

God in recognition of their guilt, he responds by

vation in Jesus comes to all people. Even more than

forgiving their sins. Thus, what brings a right rela—

in Matthew and Mark, however, this is a special

tionship with God for Luke is not Jesus’ death per se

emphasis in Luke, as we have seen already in his

but the repentance that his death prompts.

genealogy. For Luke, salvation comes to the Jewish

people in fulfillment of the Jewish Scriptures, but

since they reject it, the message goes to the

The Gentile Mission

Gentiles. This too, as we will see in our study of

We have already seen that Luke places considerable

Acts, happens in fulfillment of the Scriptures.

emphasis on Jesus’ significance for the Gentile as

One of the unmistakable indications that Luke

well as the Jew. This emphasis is not unique, of

is especially concerned for the Gentile mission is

course. Mark himself may have been a Gentile, and

the fact that he is the only Gospel writer who

almost certainly a large portion of his audience was.

includes a sequel recounting the spread of the reli—

Matthew also appears to have written to a mixed

gion throughout the empire, particularly among

congregation of Jews and Gentiles, even though he

non-Jews. This concern is also found elsewhere in

was himself probably Jewish. For both authors, sal—

the Gospel. As we have seen, after Jesus’ death the

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SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 8.6 The Institution of the Lord’s Supper in Luke

We have already seen that some of the ancient manuscripts of the New Testament differ from one another in significant ways (see box 8.4, and the more complete discussion in Chapter 29). One of the places that this matters is in Luke’s account of the Last Supper (22:14–23). One peculiarity of this passage is that in some manuscripts, including those on which most of our English translations are based, Jesus does more than give his disciples the bread and the cup of wine, as he does in Mark. In these manuscripts, and most translations, he gives his disciples the cup, and then the bread, and then the cup again.

Of still greater interest is what Jesus actually says in these verses. In verse 19, he speaks of his body “which is given for you,” and in verse 20 he calls the (second) cup the “the new covenant in my blood.” Nowhere else in Luke’s Gospel does Jesus claim that his death is a sacrifice that brings salvation. In fact, Luke is missing all such claims that are present in both Mark and Matthew (e.g., Mark 10:45; Matt 20:28). What, though, are we to make of these particular verses, which do make such a claim?

Some of our ancient manuscripts do not include this portion of the passage. Indeed, the early Christian writers who quote Luke’s account of the Last Supper did not know that the verses exist. Thus, they may well have been added to this Gospel later by well-meaning scribes who wanted to stress the proto-orthodox understanding of salvation through Jesus’

broken body and shed blood. This finding is significant, for apart from these verses, Luke nowhere expresses Mark’s view that Jesus’ death was a sacrifice that brought an atonement for sin.

disciples are not told to go to Galilee (contrast

emphasis on terms like the “will” and the “plan” of

24:6, 49 with the instructions to the women in

God (e.g., see, 4:43; 13:33; 22:37; 24:7, 26, 44).

Mark 16:7). They remain in Jerusalem, where they

encounter the resurrected Jesus (contrast chap. 24

with Matt 27:10, 16–20). On this occasion, Jesus

The Delay of the End of Time

explains that everything that happened to him was

Luke’s idea of the divine plan relates to one other

in fulfillment of the Scriptures; indeed, so is the

distinctive aspect of his Gospel. In Mark and

Gentile mission that is yet to take place, for

Matthew, as we saw, Jesus predicts the imminent

“repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be pro—

end of the world. In Luke all of these predictions

claimed in his name to all nations [same word as

about the end are worded differently. In Luke,

“Gentiles”], beginning from Jerusalem” (24:47).

Jesus does not envisage the end of the age happening immediately. How could he? First the

Christian church had to be spread among the

The Divine Plan

Gentiles, and this would take time.

Thus the Gentile mission was all part of God’s plan,

Consider the differences between the apocalyp—

in place, according to Luke, since time immemori—

tic predictions of Mark and those of Luke. In Mark

al. As we will see, the spread of the Christian

9:1, Jesus claims that some of his disciples will not

church in the book of Acts occurs under the pow—

taste death “until they see that the kingdom of God

erful direction of the Holy Spirit. This is the reason

has come with power.” Luke has the same story, but

it proves so successful: since God is behind it, it

here the disciples are told simply that some of them

cannot be stopped. The divine plan is at work in

will not taste death until “they see the kingdom of

the Gospel as well, where Luke places a careful

God” (9:27; note that they are not promised to see

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its “coming in power,” i.e., with the coming of the

emphasizes Jesus’ concern for the social ills of

Son of Man). For Luke, the disciples already see the

his day.

kingdom of God, because for him the kingdom of

Luke contains many of the beatitudes found in

God is already present in Jesus’ ministry. This

Matthew, but they are worded differently, and the

becomes clear in several stories found only in Luke:

differences clearly illustrate Luke’s social agenda.

the kingdom of God is said to have “come near” in

Whereas Jesus in Matthew says, “Blessed are the

the ministry of Jesus’ disciples (10:9, 11), it is said to

poor in spirit” (5:3), in Luke he says, “Blessed are

have already “come to you” in Jesus’ own ministry

you who are poor” (6:20). Luke’s concern here is

(11:20), and it is said already to be “among you” in

for literal, material poverty. Whereas Matthew’s

the person of Jesus himself (17:21). To be sure,

Jesus says, “Blessed are those who hunger and

even in Luke there is to be a final cataclysmic end

thirst for righteousness” (5:6), in Luke he says,

to history at the end of this age (21:7–32), but this

“Blessed are you who are hungry now” (6:21)

will not come during the disciples’ lifetime.

Moreover, in Luke Jesus not only blesses the poor

Luke’s emphasis on the delay of the end also

and oppressed; he also castigates the rich and the

explains the difference in Jesus’ reply when inter—

oppressor: “Woe to you who are rich. . . . Woe to

rogated by the high priest. Whereas in Mark Jesus

you who are full now. . . . Woe to you who are

stated that the high priest would “see the Son of

laughing now” (6:24–26).

Man seated at the right hand of the Power, and

Luke’s social agenda is also evident in the atten—

coming with the clouds of heaven” (14:62), in

tion that Jesus pays to women among his followers

Luke his response is simply that “from now on the

here (see further the discussion in Chapter 24). As

Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the

we will later see, the negative attitudes toward

power of God” (22:69). Luke appears to know full

women that exist today were rooted early in Western

well that this high priest would not live to see the

culture. From a feminist perspective, things were

Son of Man coming in his glory to bring the end

much worse at the beginning of the Christian era

of the age; in his version of the story, Jesus never

than they are now. In Luke’s Gospel, on the other

predicts that he will.

hand, Jesus associates with women, has women

Other differences in Luke’s account point in

among his followers, and urges his women followers

the same direction. For example, only in Luke is

to abandon their traditional roles as caretakers so

Jesus said to have delivered the parable of the

they can heed his words as his disciples (e.g., see

pounds, precisely in order to disabuse those who

8:1–3 and 10:38–42, stories unique to Luke).

thought that “the kingdom of God was to appear

immediately” (19:11–27; contrast the parable of

the talents in Matt 25:14–30). One final Lukan

emphasis also relates closely to the delay of the

CONCLUSION: LUKE IN

end: Jesus’ social concerns.

COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

We are in a position now to wrap up our reflec-

The Social Implications of the Gospel

tions on the Gospel according to Luke. Here as in

Throughout the history of religion, people com—

Matthew and Mark we have a kind of Greco—

mitted to the belief that the end is near have

Roman biography, in which the things Jesus says,

occasionally withdrawn from society and shown

does, and experiences reveal who he is to the

little concern for its ongoing problems. Why

attentive reader. Had we chosen, we could have

commit oneself to fighting poverty and oppres—

examined this Gospel without recourse to these

sion if the world is going to end next week? In

other biographies of Jesus, following the literary—

Luke’s Gospel, Jesus knows that the end is not

historical method that we used to study Mark.

imminent, and this may explain one other way

Alternatively, we could have analyzed it strictly in

in which his Gospel stands out as unique. More

light of how the author modified his sources, as we

than either of the other Synoptics, Luke

did for Matthew. Instead we explored this text in

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light of similar biographies of Jesus, irrespective of

God himself and would be completed before the

whether Luke used any of them as sources. Has

end of the age could come. Since the end was not

this approach proved useful?

to be imminent in Jesus’ own day, the mission

Our comparative analysis has shown that Luke

involved not only preaching the news of God’s sal—

has a number of distinctive emphases. Luke stress—

vation but also working to right the ills of society

es that the salvation that came in Jesus was first

in a world beset by poverty and oppression.

directed to the heart of Judaism, but Jesus as a

We might ask what these distinctive emphases

Jewish prophet was rejected by his own people.

can tell us about the author of this book and his

The message was then to be sent into the whole

audience. The question might be premature, how—

world for the salvation of all people, Jew and

ever, for the Gospel of Luke is the first volume of

Gentile, a message of forgiveness of sins to all who

a two-volume work, which ultimately must be read

would repent. The worldwide mission envisioned

as a unit if we are to understand the full message of

by Jesus was planned from time immemorial by

its author.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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Esler, Philip F. Community and Gospel in LukeActs: The

on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke. Garden Social and Political Motivations of Lucan Theology.

City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977. A massive and exhaustive

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987. A

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study of LukeActs from the perspective of the social

Luke, suitable for those who want to know simply

sciences, which shows the relationship between the

everything about every detail.

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sociopolitical context of the author and his community; for advanced students.

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Gethsemane to the Grave. 2 vols. London: Doubleday,

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John Knox, 1983. A clearly written discussion of the

aspects and for all of their verses.

background of LukeActs and its overarching themes;

ideal for beginning students.

Cadbury, H. J. The Making of LukeActs. 2d ed. London: SPCK, 1968. A classic study that shows how the

Maddox, R. The Purpose of LukeActs. Edinburgh: T & T

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Clark, 1982. An intelligent and incisive discussion of

sources at his disposal to produce a unified narrative;

the prominent themes and major emphases of Luke

for advanced students.

and Acts.

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redaction-critical perspective argues that Luke modi—

ly views of Luke’s Gospel, for beginning students.

fied the traditions he received particularly in light of

the delay of the end of time; for advanced students only.

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# CHAPTER 9

Luke’s Second Volume: The Acts of the Apostles

For people interested in knowing what happened to

tured quite differently, however. The book of Acts

Jesus’ followers after his death and resurrection, the

is concerned with the historical development of

Acts of the Apostles has always been the first place

the Christian church. Moreover, the narrative is

to turn. This is our earliest account of the Christian

set within a chronological framework that begins

church, an account that speaks of massive conver—

with the origin of the movement. In these re—

sions to the faith, of miraculous deeds performed by

spects the Acts of the Apostles is closely related to

the apostles, of opposition and persecution by non—

other histories produced in antiquity.

believers, of the inner workings of the apostolic band

Historians in the Greco-Roman world produced

and their interactions with significant newcomers

a number of different kinds of literature. Some

like Paul, and above all of the dramatic spread of the

ancient histories focused on important leaders or

Christian church from its inauspicious beginnings

episodes in the life of a particular city or region.

among the few followers of Jesus in Jerusalem to the

Others were broader in scope, covering significant

heart of the empire, the city of Rome.

events in the history of a nation. Sometimes these

Although the book of Acts is the second volume

histories were arranged according to topic. More

of a two-volume work, it is not the same kind of

commonly, they were set forth in a chronological

book as the first volume. The Gospel of Luke por—

sequence. Chronological narratives could be limit—

trays the life of Jesus, the rejected Jewish prophet,

ed to a single, but complicated, event (as in

from his miraculous conception to his miraculous

Thucydides’s account of the Peloponnesian War) or

resurrection. The portrayal is comparable in many

to a series of interrelated events (as in Polybius’s

ways to the Gospels of Mark and Matthew and is

account of the rise of Rome to dominance over the

best classified, in terms of genre, as a Greco-Roman

Mediterranean). Sometimes they covered the most

biography. The book of Acts, however, is quite dif—

ancient events in the memory of a nation, as a way

ferent. Here there is no solitary figure as a main

of showing how the people became who they were.

character; instead, the book sketches the history of

The book of Acts is most like this final kind of

Christianity from the time of Jesus’ resurrection to

history, one that traces the key events of a people

the Roman house arrest of the apostle Paul.

from the point of their origin down to near the present time, to show how their character as a people

was established. Scholars sometimes call this genre

THE GENRE OF ACTS

general history. One well-known example, pro-

AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

duced at approximately the same time as Acts, was

written by the Jewish historian Josephus. His twen—

Some scholars have argued that since the two vol—

ty-volume work, The Antiquities of the Jews, sketch—

umes were written as a set, they must be classified

es the significant events of Judaism all the way from

together, in the same genre. The books are struc—

Adam and Eve down to his own day.

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# CHAPTER 9

## LUKE’S SECOND VOLUME

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Unlike biographies, ancient histories have a

craft, like the Greek historian Thucydides (fifth

number of leading characters, sometimes, as in

century B.C.E.), admitted that speeches could

Josephus, a large number of them. Like biogra—

never be reconstructed as they were really given:

phies, though, they tend to utilize a wide range of

no one took notes or memorized long oratories on

subgenres, such as travel narratives, anecdotes,

the spot. Historians quite consciously made up the

private letters, dialogues, and public speeches. On

speeches found in their accounts themselves, com—

the whole, histories from Greco-Roman antiquity

posing discourses that seemed to fit both the char—

were creative literary exercises rather than simple

acter of the speaker and the occasion.

regurgitations of names and dates; historians were

Not only in presenting the speeches of their

necessarily inventive in the ways they collected

protagonists but also in relating the events of the

and conveyed the information that they set forth.

narrative itself, ancient historians were somewhat

All histories, however, whether from the ancient

less ambitious than their modern counterparts.

world or the modern, cannot be seen, ultimately, as

They strove not for absolute objectivity but for

objective accounts of what happened in the past.

verisimilitude. They worked to produce a narra—

Because so many things happen in the course of histive account that rang true, that made sense in

tory (actually, billions of things, every minute of

light of what they had uncovered through their

every day), historians are compelled to pick and

interrogation of oral sources and their perusal of

choose what to mention and what to describe as sig—

written records.

nificant. They do so according to their own values,

We will see that many of these aspects of

beliefs, and priorities. Thus, we can almost always

ancient histories apply to the book of Acts as a

assume that a historian has narrated events in a way

general history. Before pursuing our study of the

that encapsulates his or her understanding of the

book, however, we should return to the issue of

meaning of those events.

genre. Is it plausible that the two volumes of

This aspect of limited objectivity is particularly

Luke’s work represent two distinct genres?

obvious in the case of historians living in antiquity.

To understand why the author would have cho—

Theirs was a world of few written records but abun—

sen two different literary genres for these closely

dant oral tradition. Indeed, many ancient histori—

related books, we need to recognize the constraints

ans expressed a preference for hearing an account

under which he was operating. The design of Luke’s

from an oral source rather than finding it in a writ—

work was different from anything that had yet been

ten record. This approach stands somewhat at odds

produced, so far as we know, by the burgeoning

with the modern distrust of “mere hearsay,” but

Christian church. In it Luke set out to sketch the

there is some logic behind it: unlike written docu—

history of the early Christian movement. This

ments, oral sources can be interrogated to clarify

movement, though, could not be explained apart

ambiguities. Still, one can imagine the difficulties

from the history of its founder, Jesus.

of determining what really happened on the basis of

Since the first part of the history of this move—

oral accounts. Moreover, when it came to the writ—

ment was concerned with the life and teachings of

ten record, ancient historians obviously had no

Jesus, the subject matter itself, not to mention the

access to modern techniques of data retrieval. For

models available to the author (e.g., the Gospel of

these reasons, they generally had little concern for,

Mark), more or less determined the genre of the

and less chance of, getting everything “right,” at

first volume. It was to be a biography. The second

least in terms of the high level of historical accuracy

volume was to sketch the development of the

expected by modern readers.

movement after the death of Jesus. The biographi—

Nowhere can this be seen more clearly than in

cal genre was much less applicable here, as there

the case of sayings and speeches that are recorded

were more characters and events to consider. Thus,

in the ancient histories. On average, speeches take

Luke wrote a general history of the movement for

up nearly a quarter of the entire narrative in a typ—

his second volume, providing a chronologically

ical Greco-Roman history. What is striking is that

arranged account of the spread of Christianity after

ancient historians who reflected on the art of their

the death of its founder, Jesus.

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SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 9.1 The Book of Acts: An Ancient Novel?

Some recent studies of the genre of Acts have concluded that it is more like an ancient novel than a general history. Novels in the Greco-Roman world—such as Chaereas and Callirhoe by Chariton and Leucippe and Cleitophon by Achilles Tatius—were fictionalized narratives written almost exclusively for entertainment. They normally told the tale of lovers who were separated by misfortune and experienced numerous trials in their attempt to become reunited. One of the themes that permeates these books is the persecution and oppression of the main characters, who are (usually) innocent of any wrongdoing. Among the subgenres typically employed in the novels are travel narratives, shipwreck scenes, dialogues, speeches, and private letters—all of which are found in the book of Acts.

Other scholars are not persuaded by this thesis. Acts is not about estranged lovers; indeed, there is no romance of any kind here (in contrast to every surviving Greek or Roman novel). Moreover, this book does not focus from beginning to end on the exploits of the chief protagonist(s) in the ways the novels do: the main character (Paul) does not come on the scene until a third of the way through the narrative. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Luke does not appear to have written this book as a fictionalized narrative chiefly for entertainment. There may indeed be fictional elements in the account, as we will see; but judging from the preface to volume one, from the subject matter of the narrative (the spread of the Christian church), and from the main characters themselves (who are, after all, historical persons), we can more plausibly conclude that Luke meant to write a history of early Christianity, not a novel. Moreover, all of the ancient Christian authors who refer to the book appear to have understood it in this way.

There are, however, a number of novelistic touches in the book, and we would be remiss not to recognize them. The narrative is entertaining in places, and it does indeed embody a number of the storytelling techniques common among ancient writers of fiction, including the various subgenres and themes mentioned above.

What can we say now, in general terms, about the

THE THEMATIC

significance of the genre of Acts and the relationship

APPROACH TO ACTS

of the book to the Gospel of Luke? When we read

the book of Acts as a general history, we should

For each of the Gospels examined so far I have

expect to find a narration of events that the author

explained and used a different method of analysis:

considers significant for understanding the early

a literary-historical method with Mark, a redac—

Christian movement. Furthermore, if we are inter—

tional method with Matthew, and a comparative

ested in reading his book as an ancient reader would,

method with Luke. Theoretically, each of these

we should not evaluate it strictly in terms of factual

methods could be used with the book of Acts as

accuracy. In addition, we should be looking for

well, even though it is the only general history

themes and points of view that parallel those found

preserved within the New Testament. A literary—

in volume one, the Gospel of Luke. Finally, since

historical approach would explore the develop—

this book is also a chronologically arranged narrative,

ment of the characters and plot of the story in

even though of a different kind from the Gospel, we

light of the expectations of its audience, based on

might expect our ancient author to set the tone for

their knowledge of the genre and the background

the rest of the account at the very outset.

information that the author appears to presuppose.

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# CHAPTER 9

## LUKE’S SECOND VOLUME

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A redactional method would determine the

opening summary statement was common in mult—

sources available to the author and ascertain how

ivolume works of history in antiquity, as a transi—

he has modified them—a somewhat complicated

tion from what had already been discussed. The

business with Acts since none of its sources sur—

dedication to Theophilus and the accurate sum—

vives (although this has not stopped scholars from

mary of the first volume, as well as the similar

trying). A comparative method would consider

themes and consistent writing style of Luke and

the message of Acts in light of other early

Acts, have convinced virtually all scholars that

Christian writings, such as the letters of the apos—

the same author produced these two books.

tle Paul, one of the main characters of Acts’ nar—

The story of Acts begins with Jesus’ appear—

rative. Here, however, we will explore the possi—

ances over a course of forty days after his resurrec—

bilities of yet a fourth approach, one that might be

tion. During this time, he convinces his former

labeled the “thematic method.”

disciples that he has come back to life and he

Every author has major ideas that he or she tries

teaches them about the kingdom (v. 3). In keep—

to communicate in writing. A thematic approach

ing with Luke’s emphasis in volume one on

attempts to isolate these ideas, or themes, and

Jerusalem as the place to which salvation came,

through them to understand the author’s over—

the disciples are told to remain in Jerusalem until

arching emphases. Themes can be isolated in a

they receive the power of the Holy Spirit (v. 4;

number of ways—as we will see, the other methods

contrast the resurrection narratives of Mark and

can be useful in this regard—but the focus of

Matthew). In Acts the message of God’s redemp—

attention is not on how the narrative plot unfolds

tion goes forth from the holy city because it is

(as in the literary-historical method) or on how

rejected there. Just as Jesus the prophet was reject—

the work compares and contrasts with another (as

ed by his own people in Jerusalem, so too his apos—

in the redactional and comparative). The focus is

tles will be rejected in Jerusalem. The spreading of

on the themes themselves and the ways they are

the message was anticipated in the sermon of Jesus

developed throughout the work.

in Luke 4: because Jews will reject the message, it

As with all methods, the thematic approach is

will be taken outside, to the Gentiles. The book

best explained by showing it at work. In this intro—

of Acts is largely about this movement of the

duction to Acts, we will focus on two portions of

gospel from Jew to Gentile, from Jerusalem to the

the narrative that provide special promise for

ends of the earth.

understanding Luke’s main emphases: the opening

This theme is announced in these opening

scene, which relates the work back to what has

verses. The disciples inquire whether this is the

already transpired in the Gospel of Luke and antic—

time that the Kingdom will be brought to Israel (v.

ipates what will take place in the narrative to fol—

6). They expect that now is the time in which

low, and the speeches of the main characters, which

their apocalyptic hopes will be realized, when God

are scattered throughout the text and appear to rep—

will intervene in history and establish his glorious

resent compositions of the author himself.

kingdom for his people. We saw in the Gospel

that Luke rejected the idea that the end was to

come during the lifetime of Jesus’ disciples. Here

FROM GOSPEL TO ACTS:

as well Jesus tells his disciples not to be concerned

THE OPENING TRANSITION

about when the end will come. Instead, they are

to work in the present to spread the gospel

The first and most obvious thing to notice in the

through the power of the Holy Spirit:

opening verses of Acts is that, like the Gospel of

It is not for you to know the times or periods that the

Luke, this book is dedicated to “Theophilus,” who

Father has set by his own authority. But you will

is reminded of the basic content of the first vol—

receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon

ume of the work, namely, “all that Jesus did and

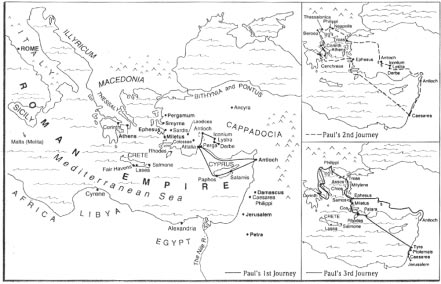
you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and

taught from the beginning until the day when he

in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the

was taken up to heaven” (1:1–2). This kind of

earth. (1:7–8)



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This injunction to engage in the Christian mis—

Macedonia, and Achaia (which roughly correspond

sion foreshadows what is to take place throughout

to modern-day Turkey and Greece; chaps. 13–20).

the rest of the book; indeed, the spread of the church

Eventually, he makes a fateful journey to

provides the organizing motif for the entire narrative.

Jerusalem (chap. 21), where he is arrested by

In broad terms, it happens as follows. As anticipat—

Jewish leaders, put on trial, allowed to make sev—

ed, the Holy Spirit comes upon the apostles in the

eral speeches in his own defense, and finally sent

next chapter, on the day of Pentecost. The Spirit

to stand before Caesar in Rome (chaps. 22–27).

works miracles on their behalf and empowers them

The book ends with Paul under house arrest in

to proclaim the gospel of Christ. Thousands upon

Rome, preaching the good news to all who will

thousands of Jews convert as a result (chaps. 3–7),

hear (chap. 28). This appears to fulfill Luke’s

but opposition arises among the Jewish leadership, as

anticipation that the gospel would go to the “ends

it did in the case of Jesus himself in the Gospel.

of the earth,” for the message of Christ has now

Christians scatter from the city, taking the gospel

spread far and wide, and is proclaimed in the very

with them, first to Judea and Samaria (chap. 8). The

heart of the empire, in the capital city itself.

most significant convert in these early years is a for—

The geographical spread of the Christian

mer opponent of the church, Saul, also known as

church is not Luke’s only concern in Acts. In

Paul (chap. 9). Largely, though not exclusively,

some ways, he is even more dedicated to showing

through Paul’s work, the gospel is taken outside of

how the gospel came to cross ethnic boundaries.

Palestine and spreads throughout several of the

Indeed, he goes to great lengths to explain, and

provinces of the Empire. Over the course of three

justify, how the Christian gospel ceased being a

missionary journeys (see fig. 9.1), Paul establishes

message only to Jews. To be sure, the earliest con—

churches in major cities in Cilicia, Asia Minor,

verts were Jews, as were Jesus himself and his clos-

F P O

Figure 9.1 Paul’s Missionary Journeys According to the Book of Acts.

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SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 9.2 Luke’s Mysterious Two Men

Who are the mysterious “two men in white robes” who appear to the disciples in Acts 1:10 –11 to tell them that Jesus will return from heaven in the way that he has ascended? A careful reader will recall having seen two such persons before, at the conclusion of Luke’s Gospel where “two men in dazzling clothes”

appear to the women in Jesus’ empty tomb and tell them that he has risen from the dead (24:4; contrast Mark 16:5 and Matt 28:5). Are they also the “two men” who appear yet earlier still, “in glory” on the Mount of Transfiguration (Luke 9:30 –31)? It is striking that Luke uses similar terms to describe these figures in all three passages. What is more, he tells us who they are in their first appearance (9:30). They are Moses, the greatest lawgiver of the Jews, and Elijah, the greatest Hebrew prophet (so great that he was taken directly into heaven without dying; see 2 Kgs 2:9–12).

A number of interpreters have recognized the symbolic significance of these two figures in LukeActs as embodiments of the Law and the Prophets (i.e., the Hebrew Scriptures). Thus, for Luke, the Scriptures themselves, as personified in Moses and Elijah, provide testimony to the climactic moments of Jesus’ existence: his mission on earth that leads to his death (Luke 9:31), his resurrection from the dead (Luke 24:4), and his ascension into heaven and return in glory (Acts 1:11). In other words, Luke uses these mysterious two men to show that every aspect of Christ’s work of salvation occurs in fulfillment of God’s plan, as set forth in the Jewish Scriptures.

est disciples, but many Jews rejected this gospel.

Judaism. The author of Acts does not think so.

According to Luke, God therefore opened up the

As we will see, he devotes a good portion of his

faith to the non-Jew. This first happens in chap—

history to explaining why.

ter 8 with the conversion of a number of

But if Gentiles coming into the church do not

Samaritans, people who lived in Samaria who

need to become Jewish, then hasn’t the religion

were considered to be “half-Jews” by many who

itself ceased being Jewish? And haven’t its repre—

lived in Judea. Soon thereafter, the apostle Peter

sentatives, such as Paul, made an irreparable break

learns through a vision that God means for the

with their Jewish past? Again, the author of Acts

Gentiles also to hear and accept the message of

does not think so. And again, he devotes a good

salvation in Christ (chaps. 10 –11). Much of the

portion of his account to explaining why.

rest of the book shows how the gospel meets con—

Before examining these explanations in the

tinual opposition among Jews in every province to

themes set forth in the speeches in Acts, we

which it goes but finds ready acceptance among

should complete our investigation of the opening

Gentiles, especially those associated with the

passage. It ends with Jesus physically ascending

Jewish synagogues. The main character involved

into heaven. Two men in white robes suddenly

in spreading this gospel is Paul.

appear to the apostles as they watch him depart

This emphasis on the Gentile mission of the

(see box 9.2). They tell the apostles not to stand

church naturally raises some pressing questions.

by gaping into heaven; for just as Jesus departed

If the message of salvation that came to the Jews

from them, so he will return (vv. 10–11).

goes to the Gentiles, do these Gentiles first have

These words of comfort to the apostles may sug—

to become Jews? To put the matter somewhat

gest that for Luke, even though the end of the age

differently, if (as Luke’s Gospel itself indicates)

was not to come in the lifetime of Jesus’ disciples,

Jesus was a Jew, sent from the Jewish God as a

it was still destined to come soon. Indeed, Luke

Jewish prophet to the Jewish people, in fulfill—

may have anticipated that it would come in his

ment of the Jewish Scriptures, then isn’t this

own lifetime; Jesus had yet to return on the clouds

religion Jewish? Surely for a person to become a

of heaven in judgment to set up his kingdom on

follower of Jesus he or she must first adopt

earth. For Luke himself the end still is at hand,

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and the gospel needs to be proclaimed with yet

These parallels are not simply interesting coinci—

greater urgency, as Jew and Gentile join together

dences. One author has produced both books, and

in their faith in the Christ of God.

he uses the parallel accounts to make a major point:

Thus we can see many of the major themes of

the apostles continue to do Jesus’ work and thereby

Luke’s Gospel repeated at the outset of Acts, and we

prolong his mission through the power of the same

can anticipate their recurrence throughout the nar—

Spirit. Thus they engage in similar activities, expe—

rative. These themes include the focus on Jerusalem,

rience similar receptions, and suffer similar fates.

the proclamation of the gospel beginning with the

The author’s literary artistry is not limited,

Jews but moving to the Gentiles, the necessary delay

however, to creating parallels between Luke and

of the end while this worldwide proclamation takes

Acts. Just as interesting are the parallels between

place, and, perhaps most importantly, the divine

the main characters in the narrative of Acts itself,

guidance of the Christian mission by the Holy Spirit.

particularly between Peter, the main character of

For Luke, it is God who directs the movement of the

chapters 1–12, and Paul, the main character of

Christian church from start to end.

chapters 13–28.

Before turning to an examination of some of

Several examples of these parallels stand out.

the speeches in which Luke’s main themes recur,

Both Peter and Paul preach sermons to Jewish

we should look at a few of the other ways that

crowds, and what they have to say is in many

Luke develops them in some of the more artistic

respects remarkably similar (e.g., see the speeches

aspects of his narrative.

in chaps. 3 and 13). Both perform amazing miracles; both, for example, cure the sick without having any direct contact with them. Thus Peter’s

shadow can bring healing (5:15), as can Paul’s

LUKE’S ARTISTRY

handkerchiefs (19:12). Both are violently

AS A STORYTELLER

opposed by leaders among the Jews but vindicated

by God; they are imprisoned for their proclama—

Readers of the New Testament have long noticed

tion yet delivered from their chains by divine

many clear similarities between what happens to

intervention (12:1–11; 16:19 –34). Perhaps most

Jesus in the Gospel of Luke and to Christian believ—

importantly of all, both become absolutely con—

ers in the book of Acts. These parallels show that

vinced, on the grounds of divine revelation and

Luke was no mere chronicler of events, set on pro—

the success of their proclamation, that God has

viding an objective account of the early years of the

decided to admit Gentiles into the church without

Christian movement. He compiled this history with

their first becoming Jews (chaps. 10 –11, 15).

a clear purpose, part of which was to show that the

These parallels reinforce our earlier impression

hand of God was behind the mission of the church

that throughout this narrative Luke is intent on

as much as it was behind the mission of Jesus. Thus,

showing that God is at work in the Christian misfor example, at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry in

sion. Those who are faithful to God give similar

Luke, he is baptized and receives the Holy Spirit;

speeches with similar results; they perform similar

when new believers are baptized in the book of Acts,

miracles, receive similar revelations, and experi—

they also receive the Spirit. The Spirit empowers

ence similar fates. Luke’s artistry, then, serves a

Jesus to do miracles and to preach in Luke; so too it

clear thematic purpose. Nowhere can this be seen

empowers the apostles to do miracles and to preach

more clearly than in the speeches that Luke has

in Acts. In Luke, Jesus heals the sick, casts out

devised for his leading characters.

demons, and raises the dead; in Acts, the apostles

Ancient historians typically wrote the speeches

heal the sick, cast out demons, and raise the dead.

of their main characters themselves, choosing

The Jewish authorities in Jerusalem confront Jesus

words that they judged to be appropriate to their

in Luke; the same authorities confront the apostles

character and suitable for the occasion. Since

in Acts. Jesus is imprisoned, condemned, and exe—

Luke appears to stand in line with the Greek his—

cuted in Luke; some of his followers are imprisoned,

torians, we can assume that he too wrote the

condemned, and executed in Acts.

speeches of his main characters. This would help



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F P O

Figure 9.2 Peter, Jesus, and Paul, the three most important characters of LukeActs, from a catacomb painting in Rome.

explain why the same themes recur in these

Speeches to Christian Believers

speeches no matter who delivers them.

Peter’s Opening Speech. The first speech in the

book is delivered by Peter, right at the outset of the

THEMES IN

narrative. After seeing Jesus ascend into heaven,

THE SPEECHES IN ACTS

the eleven disciples return to Jerusalem and devote

themselves to prayer with Jesus’ female followers

As with most general histories, speeches figure

and family. The first concrete action that the group

prominently in the book of Acts. Indeed, they

takes is to elect a new member of “the Twelve” to

take up nearly one-quarter of the entire narrative,

replace Judas Iscariot, who after betraying Jesus suf—

about average for histories of the period. To iso—

fered an ignominious death (see box 9.3). Peter

late some of the important Lukan themes in the

arises and delivers a speech on how they ought to

book, we will examine several examples of differ—

proceed in their new circumstances (1:15–22). The

ent kinds of speeches.

speech anticipates many of the central themes of

One of the ways to classify the speeches in Acts is

the book, including the important issue of how this

to consider the different kinds of audiences to which

new religious movement relates to its Jewish roots.

they are delivered, on the assumption that speakers

Before delving into Peter’s view of this relationship

will stress different things in different contexts.

(at least, as Luke portrays it), we should consider

Some of the speeches are delivered by Christian lead—

the broader context.

ers to other Christians as a means of instruction or

To most Jews in the book of Acts, the Christian

exhortation, others are addressed by Christians to

claims about Jesus are altogether unacceptable,

potential converts in the context of evangelism, and

and throughout the narrative the principal insti—

yet others are given by Christians to legal or religious

gators of persecution against the Christians are

authorities, as apologies (see box 8.1).

Jews. From a historical perspective, this opposi-

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THE NEW TESTAMENT: A HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 9.3 The Death of Judas

Only two passages of the New Testament describe the death of Judas: Acts 1:18 –19 and Matt 27:3 –10. It is interesting to compare their similarities and differences. In Matthew, Judas tries to return the thirty pieces of silver that he has been paid to betray Jesus. When the priests refuse to take them, he throws them down in the Temple and goes out and hangs himself. The priests are unable to use the silver for the Temple treasury, since it is “blood money,” that is, money tainted with the blood of Jesus’ execution, so they decide to use it to purchase a piece of property as a place to bury strangers. From that time on, since the place was bought with blood money, it was appropriately called the “Field of Blood.”

In Acts Judas’s death is again associated with the Field of Blood but for an entirely different reason. In Peter’s speech we learn that Judas himself purchased the field, after which he died a bloody death. He does not appear to have hanged himself, however; Peter says that he fell headlong and burst in the middle so that his intestines “gushed out.” It is hard to know what Luke, the author of Peter’s speech, has in mind as the cause of death (was it a suicide? Did Judas fall on a sword? did he jump off a cliff? did he spontaneously swell up and burst?). In any event, Luke clearly thinks the Field of Blood obtained its name from Judas’s blood being spilled on it.

These two accounts are difficult to reconcile, but in some respects it is their similarities that are of greatest interest. Why do they both connect the name of this Field of Blood with the death of Judas? Is it possible that there actually was a field in Jerusalem made up of red clay and called the Field of Blood because of its color? A slight piece of evidence for this conclusion derives from Matthew, who indicates that it was a “potter’s field” (27:10), that is, a field from which clay was extracted for pottery. It is difficult to decide whether Judas actually killed himself there, whether he was at some point its owner, or whether his blood money was used to purchase it. At the least, we can say that later Christians came to associate this clay lot with the disciple who had betrayed his master and then experienced an ignominious death.

tion is understandable. Christians claimed that

fillment of Scripture as well. This theme is played

Jesus was the messiah; but the messiah, in the

out in the narrative of Acts and is anticipated

expectations of most Jews, was to be a figure of

already by the opening words of Peter’s first

power and grandeur who brought in the millenni—

speech. Peter argues that the death of Judas, and

al age of peace. Jesus, on the other hand, was a

the need to replace him with someone else, was

crucified criminal. In the opinion of most Jews

predicted by David in the Psalms.

(both historically and in the narrative of Acts),

Peter cites two Psalm texts to support his view

those who proclaim Jesus as the messiah have not

(1:20). Since he is addressing a friendly audience,

only lost touch with their Jewish roots, they have

he evidently does not need to provide a rationale

also violated the clear teaching of Scripture.

for the way he interprets these passages. But if you

Luke has a different perspective. We have

read these quotations in their original contexts

already seen that some of Luke’s predecessors and

(Psalm 69 and Psalm 109), you will probably find

contemporaries (e.g., Mark and Matthew) claimed

it hard to understand how anyone could think that

that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Jewish

they predict what was going to happen hundreds

Scriptures. Luke takes this view a step further.

of years later to one of the messiah’s followers. In

The entire Christian movement after Jesus is a ful—

Luke’s account, though, Peter interprets them in

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# CHAPTER 9

## LUKE’S SECOND VOLUME

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precisely this way. This in itself can tell us some—

Twelve to be a witness of Jesus’ resurrection. This

thing about what was happening at the time of

is to be a person who had accompanied the other

Luke, the author of Peter’s speech. In Luke’s own

disciples throughout the whole of Jesus’ ministry,

day, Christians were evidently combing the Jewish

from his baptism by John to his ascension

Scriptures to find indications of what had been

(1:21–22). The first requirement is itself some—

fulfilled in their midst, not only in the life of Jesus

what odd, in that Jesus does not call his disciples

but also in the life of their own communities (see

until well after his baptism in Luke (see Luke 5);

Chapter 17). From Luke’s perspective, the history

in any event, the new member of the apostolic

of Christianity fulfills the Scriptures.

band was to have been with Jesus from the outset

This basic approach to the Jewish Scriptures was

of his ministry.

not unique to early Christianity (see Chapter 15,

What is more perplexing is that the speech inti—

especially on the Dead Sea Scrolls). In any event,

mates that the election of this new apostle is crucial

since Luke understood not only Jesus but also the

for the propagation of the Christian gospel that is to

entire Christian movement to be a fulfillment of

take place in the subsequent narrative. In fact, this

the Jewish Scriptures, he did not see it as standing

is not the case at all. After Matthias is elected to be

in opposition to Judaism. Rather, it was in direct

an apostle, he is never mentioned again in the book

continuity with it. Why, then, would Christianity

of Acts. Why, then, does Luke compose a speech

be rejected by leaders among the Jews? Luke’s read—

urging his election? To put the question into a

er is left to infer that those who opposed Jesus’ fol—

broader context I should point out that Matthias is

lowers were necessarily opposed to their own religion

not the only apostle who fails to appear in the rest

and, as a consequence, to their own God. This is a

of the narrative. Most of the Twelve do not. Why

strong statement, even if made only by implication.

would a book entitled “The Acts of the Apostles”

Perhaps more obviously, as a corollary, Luke’s

not discuss the acts of the apostles?

view that Christianity is a fulfillment of Scripture

As already seen, the titles of our New

indicates that God himself was behind the

Testament books were not original but were added

Christian movement. This indeed is perhaps the

by later Christian scribes. In this case, at least, the

overarching theme of the entire narrative. This

title is not at all apt. For the book is not about the

movement comes from God (see especially

deeds of the apostles per se but about the spread of

5:33 –39). God’s involvement is clearly seen in

the Christian religion through the labors of only a

one other way in this early scene, although not

few of them, and about the reactions that it pro—

directly in Peter’s speech itself. How do the disci—

voked among those who refused to accept it.

ples elect a new member to join the Twelve? They

Indeed, there are only two main characters in the

pray and cast lots. This was an ancient method of

book (along with numerous minor characters),

determining the divine will for an action. A jar

one of whom, the chief protagonist for most of the

containing two or more stones or bones was shak—

narrative, is Paul, who was not one of the Twelve.

en until one of them fell out. Since the process

Why is it so important for Luke to begin his

could not be rigged, the lot that fell was under—

account with the election of a twelfth apostle, if

stood to be God’s choice. Evidently, the procedure

neither he nor most of his companions figure

worked to Luke’s satisfaction: Matthias becomes

prominently in the narrative, whereas one who is

the twelfth apostle.

not among their number ends up being the central

This takes us back to Peter’s speech and the

character? Perhaps the answer relates to another

final theme for us to consider. The speech is

of Luke’s prominent themes: the notion of conti—

meant to persuade the believers to engage in a par—

nuity in early Christianity. We have already seen

ticular course of action. This is a typical feature of

one form of continuity in our discussion of Luke’s

speeches to believers in this book, but what is curi—

Gospel, namely, the continuity between Jesus and

ous in the context of the wider narrative is the par—

Judaism; we have uncovered a second form in our

ticular course of action that Peter urges. Peter per—

study of Acts to this point, the continuity between

suades the assembly to elect a new member of the

Judaism and Christianity. But there is yet a third

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form at work in Luke’s narrative—a continuity

forces Paul and Barnabas to proclaim their faith to

between Jesus and his church. This continuity is

the Gentiles, many of whom come to faith.

assured by the Twelve, who start out as Jesus’ orig—

When they arrive back in Antioch, Paul and

inal disciples and provide the transition as the

Barnabas are confronted by Christians from Judea

leaders of the Christian community in Jerusalem.

who insist that Gentile men must be circumcised to

The thematic point for Luke is that Christianity is

experience salvation. This leads to a major contro—

not something that begins, strictly speaking, after

versy. Paul, Barnabas, and several others are appoint—

Jesus’ death. It is something that is intimately

ed to go to Jerusalem to discuss the matter with the

connected with his life. Those who were closest to

apostles. At this conference, Peter and James, the

Jesus in his lifetime were responsible for the origi—

brother of Jesus, give their opinions in speeches

nal dissemination of this religion after his death.

delivered to the assembled body of believers.

Indeed, even though the twelve apostles rarely

Many of the themes that we have already isolat—

appear individually (with the chief exception of

ed in Acts can be found here as well (15:7–21): God

Peter and the partial exception of John), they play

has been totally in charge of the Christian mission,

a prominent role in the founding of the church at

including the conversion of the Gentiles (vv. 7–8);

the outset of the narrative. They are present en

he makes no distinction between Jew and Gentile in

masse when Peter preaches his first evangelistic ser—

that all are saved on equal grounds (vv. 9–11); and

mon, converting several thousand Jews (2:14); they

the salvation of the Gentiles represents a fulfillment

are the teachers of the newfound community of

of Scripture (vv. 15–19). Once the apostles, along

faith, a community unified around their instruction

with the other leaders of the Jerusalem church, have

(2:42); they perform miracles, convincing others to

heard these speeches, they are unified in their judg—

believe (2:43; 5:12); they edify believers by testify—

ment and write a letter to the Gentile churches

ing to the resurrection of Jesus (4:33); and they

explaining their decision. The net result is that not

organize and run that early community, distributing

just the Jerusalem church but all of the churches in

funds that are raised and taking care of those in

the empire (e.g., those founded by Paul and

need (4:35–36). Moreover, they make all of the key

Barnabas) stand under the leadership of the apostles,

decisions affecting the church throughout the

the original eyewitnesses of Jesus, who are them—

world. This final theme comes to prominence in

selves totally unified in their teaching.

the series of speeches delivered to believers assembled for the famous Jerusalem Council in chapter

In Sum: Speeches to Believers in Acts. What can

15, another critical juncture of the narrative.

we say in conclusion about the important themes

found in the speeches of Christians to other believ-

The Speeches at the Jerusalem Council. The

ers in Acts? Above all, they tell us something

narrative backdrop of these speeches is as follows.

about Luke’s view of the nature of the early

After Paul is converted by a vision of Jesus on the

Christian church. Strictly speaking, the church for

road to Damascus (chap. 9), the apostle Peter

Luke is not a new thing. On the one hand, it rep—

learns through a vision and an encounter with a

resents the fulfillment of the Jewish Scriptures; on

group of believing Gentiles that God makes no

the other hand, it stands in direct continuity with

distinction between Jew and Gentile, that

Jesus through the twelve apostles. These apostles

Gentiles can belong to the people of God without

may not have been directly involved in the spread

first becoming Jews (chaps. 10 –11). Soon there—

of this religion after the opening scenes of the nar—

after, Paul and his companion Barnabas are set

rative—it is chiefly Paul, who is not one of their

apart by the church in Antioch as missionaries to

number, who takes the gospel abroad—but they are

other lands; they engage in an evangelistic cam—

the ones who bear ultimate responsibility for this

paign (Paul’s “first missionary journey”), chiefly in

mission. They began the process in Jerusalem and

Asia Minor. Some Jews convert, but many others

continue to guide and direct the church along the

resist; Paul comes to be opposed, sometimes with

paths ordained by God. Moreover, these apostles

violence, by leaders of the Jewish synagogues

are in complete agreement on every important issue

(chaps. 13 –14). This Jewish opposition in turn

confronting the church. The church begins with a

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# CHAPTER 9

## LUKE’S SECOND VOLUME

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golden age of peace and unity under the leadership

(2:22–36). Here we come to one of the most

of the apostles.

interesting aspects of the theology of Luke, the

author of the speech. Jesus is portrayed here as a

mighty man who did fantastic miracles, who was

Evangelistic Speeches:

lawlessly executed by evil people but vindicated by

Peter’s Speech on the Day of Pentecost

God, who raised him from the dead in fulfillment

We can now turn to consider several of the speech—

of the Scriptures. After this brief narration of

es delivered by Christians to potential converts.

Jesus’ story, Peter moves quickly to the climax of

Each speech, of course, has unique elements of its

his speech: “God has made him both Lord and

own, but certain basic themes recur throughout

Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified” (v. 36).

them all. Our thematic approach will isolate these

The point is quite clear. Jesus was the innocent

recurring motifs in the first evangelistic speech of

victim of miscarried justice and the people who

the narrative, the one delivered by Peter on the Day

hear the sermon are themselves to blame, but God

of Pentecost in chapter 2 (see also the speeches in

reversed their evil action by raising Jesus. The

3:12–26; 4:8–12, 23–30; 7:1–53; and 13:16–41).

message has its desired effect: cut to the quick, the

The Pentecost speech immediately follows the

crowds ask what they should do, that is, how they

coming of the Holy Spirit, an event predicted by

might make amends for their evil deed. Peter’s

Jesus in both Luke and Acts. After the election of

gives an immediate response: they must repent of

Matthias, the followers of Jesus are gathered

their sins and be baptized in the name of Jesus.

together in one place when they suddenly hear a

Those who do so will find forgiveness (vv. 38 –39).

sound like strong wind and see tongues like fire

As you can see, the way Peter describes Jesus and

alighting on one another’s heads. They begin to

the salvation he brings corresponds with the views

speak in foreign languages that none of them has

that we found in the Gospel according to Luke.

previously learned. A large number of Jews from

Jesus’ death does not bring an atonement (contrast

around the world has gathered in Jerusalem for the

Mark’s Gospel). It is a miscarriage of justice. Nor

feast of Pentecost (the annual Jewish agricultural

does Jesus’ resurrection, in itself, bring salvation. It

feast that took place fifty days after Passover).

instead demonstrates Jesus’ vindication by God.

Crowds descend upon the spirit-filled apostles and

How then do Jesus’ death and resurrection affect a

their colleagues; the foreigners are shocked to hear

person’s standing before God, according to this

“Galileans” speaking to them in their own native

evangelistic speech in Acts? When people recog—

languages. Some of the bystanders begin to mock

nize how maliciously Jesus was treated, they realize

the apostolic band as a group of drunk and rowdy

their own guilt before God—even if they were not

revelers.

present at Jesus’ trial. They have committed sins,

This development provides Peter with an occa—

and the death of Jesus is a symbol of the worst sin

sion to make a speech and an audience to hear it.

imaginable, the execution of the prophet chosen by

He declares that what has happened is nothing

God. The news of Jesus’ death and vindication dri—

less than a fulfillment of the plan of God as foreves people to their knees in repentance. When

told by the prophet Joel:

they turn from their sins and join the community of

Christian believers (through baptism), they are for—

In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will

given and granted salvation.

pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and

Thus salvation for Luke does not come through

your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men

the death of Jesus per se; it comes through repen—

shall see visions, and your old men shall dream

dreams. (2:17, quoting Joel 2:28)

tance and the forgiveness of sins. This theme is

played out in all of the missionary sermons of Acts.

Peter is particularly emphatic that the Spirit

As the Christian preachers emphasize time and

that has come among the believers has been sent

again, Jews have a history of disobedience to God,

by none other than Jesus. The sermon quickly

a history that has climaxed in their execution of

shifts to who Jesus is and to the way in which he

God’s Son Jesus. They must realize how wrong

can affect a person’s standing before God

they have been and turn to God to make it right.



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Paul’s conversion does nothing to abate the

Jewish opposition to the faith. If anything, it intensifies it. In virtually every city and town that he

enters, after experiencing some initial success among

Jews in the synagogues, he is violently opposed by

Jewish authorities, who drive him out. After making three missionary journeys to Asia Minor,

Macedonia, and Achaia, he makes a final fateful trip

to Jerusalem (compare Jesus in the Gospel). There

he is arrested by the authorities at the instigation of

the unbelieving Jews and forced to stand trial, on a

number of occasions, for his faith.

Paul’s arrest and trials take up a substantial portion of the narrative in Acts (chaps. 21–28; comparable to the space devoted to Jesus’ last days in

Luke). Much of this final third of the book is devoted to speeches in which Paul defends himself against

accusations by Jewish leaders that he has violated

the Torah and is a menace to the Empire. By considering some of the themes of these “apologetic”

speeches we will see yet further aspects of Luke’s

overall conception of the early Christian church.

Apologetic Speeches:

Paul’s Final Appeal to Jews in Rome

Before we examine the themes of the apologetic

speeches we should review the basic narrative.

Paul is arrested in Jerusalem while making an offering in the Temple, which was meant to show that

Figure 9.3 Portrayal of one of Jesus’ apostles, preaching the Gospel, with scroll in hand, from a fifth-century ivory panel

he was in no way opposed to the Law of Moses

now found in the Louvre (Paris).

(chap. 21). He is taken into Roman custody and

allowed to make a defense to the Jewish crowds

(chap. 22). He is then made to stand trial before

Most of the Jews in the book continue to man—

the Jewish Sanhedrin (chap. 23). When the

ifest an attitude of disobedience, from Luke’s per—

Roman tribune learns of a plot to assassinate him,

spective. They not only resist the message of sal—

he has him removed to Caesarea to await trial

vation, they actively reject it, by opposing the

before the governor Felix (chap. 23). He there

Christian mission and persecuting the Christian

makes his defense, but Felix, hoping for a bribe,

missionaries. The persecution begins in Jerusalem

leaves him in prison for two years (chap. 24). Felix

but continues everywhere the message is pro—

is replaced as governor by Porcius Festus, who also

claimed. It leads to the first martyrdom in early

puts Paul on trial. Rather than heeding Paul’s plea

Christianity, that of Stephen, following a lengthy

of innocence Festus chooses to ingratiate himself

missionary speech (chaps. 7–8). Before long, the

with the Jewish leaders by offering to let Paul stand

opposition is headed by Saul of Tarsus (Paul), who

trial before them in Jerusalem. Realizing the slim

participates in Stephen’s death but, as we have

odds of a fair hearing there, Paul demands his rights

seen, soon converts to Christianity and becomes

as a Roman citizen to stand before the emperor

its leading missionary.

himself (chap. 25). Before departing for Rome,

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# CHAPTER 9

## LUKE’S SECOND VOLUME

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Paul has opportunity to speak before the visiting

Christian movement is portrayed as fully Jewish in

king of the Jews, Herod Agrippa II (chap. 26).

the opening chapters of Acts (where Christians

Every time Paul defends himself in these chap—

spend their days in the Temple), so Paul is shown

ters, the ruling authorities have ample opportuni—

to be devoted to his ancestral traditions even after

ty to recognize his innocence. But either because

his conversion. He is a Jewish Christian who does

of a desire for a bribe (Felix), or as a favor to the

nothing at any time contrary to the Law of Moses.

Jewish leaders (Festus), or because of Paul’s appeal

To be sure, he is accused of violating the Law—

to Caesar (Festus and Agrippa), nothing is done to

when he is arrested in chapter 21, he is charged

release him. He is instead sent to Rome to stand

with bringing Gentiles into an area of the Temple

trial before Caesar. On the way, he experiences a

reserved for Jews—but Luke goes out of his way to

number of harrowing adventures at sea, including

show that the charge is categorically false. Paul’s

shipwreck (chap. 27). He miraculously survives,

companions in the Temple were Jews. They were

however, and makes it to Rome, where the book

fulfilling their sacred vows as prescribed in the

ends with him under house arrest for two years. As

Torah. Paul himself was there to pay for these

he awaits trial, he preaches to all who would hear

vows and to perform a sacrifice of cleansing. Thus

and defends himself against all charges (chap. 28).

Paul is portrayed here as incontrovertibly Jewish.

As was the case with the speeches to believers

This portrayal of Paul is consistent throughout

and to potential converts, each of the apologetic

the entire narrative of Acts. Never does Paul

speeches in Acts has its own orientation and empha—

renounce his faith in the God of Israel, never does

sis. Here again, a number of themes recur through—

he violate any of the dictates of Torah, never does he

out. One of the shortest speeches of the entire book

spurn Jewish customs or practices. His sole “faults”

is delivered to the local Jewish leaders in Rome, who

are his decisions to believe in Jesus and to take his

appear before Paul in the final chapter:

message to the Gentiles. For Paul himself, however,

neither his newfound faith nor his Gentile mission

Brothers, though I had done nothing against our peo—

compromise his Jewish religion; quite the contrary,

ple or the customs of our ancestors, yet I was arrested

these represent fulfillments of Judaism.

in Jerusalem and handed over to the Romans. When

Throughout his speeches in Acts, Paul stresses

they had examined me, the Romans wanted to

that his new faith is rooted in Jesus’ resurrection

release me, because there was no reason for the death

from the dead (the “hope of Israel,” 28:20).

penalty in my case. But when the Jews objected, I

Moreover, he insists that belief in the resurrection

was compelled to appeal to the emperor—even

is the cornerstone of the Jewish religion. For him,

though I had no charge to bring against my nation.

For this reason therefore I have asked to see you and

failure to believe in Jesus’ resurrection results from

speak with you, since it is for the sake of the hope of

a failure to believe that God raises the dead. And

Israel that I am bound with this chain. (28:17–20)

failure to believe that God raises the dead is to

doubt the Scripture and deny the central affirma—

Here are sounded the characteristic themes of

tion of Judaism. For this reason, according to

Paul’s apology: (a) he has done nothing against the

Paul’s speeches, faith in Jesus’ resurrection is an

Jewish people or Jewish customs, but on the con—

affirmation of Judaism, not a rejection of it.

trary continues to subscribe in every way to the

This does not mean that Paul (as portrayed by

religion of Judaism; (b) he was found to be inno—

Luke) maintained that Gentiles have to become Jews

cent by the Roman authorities; and (c) his current

in order to belong to the people of God. In fact,

problems are entirely the fault of recalcitrant

Gentiles are allowed to remain Gentiles and are not

Jewish leaders. The final theme we have already

compelled to practice circumcision or to keep kosher

seen throughout the book of Acts. What might

food laws. For Luke this is far from a rejection of

we say about the other two?

Judaism; throughout this book, Jews like Paul remain

Just as Jesus is portrayed as fully Jewish in the

Jewish, even after coming to faith in Christ.

Gospel of Luke (see, for example, the early empha—

Thus, part of Paul’s defense in Acts is to show

sis on the Temple and Jerusalem), and the earliest

that he has not compromised his Judaism one iota

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by becoming a believer in Jesus. The other part

oppose him and create disturbances. As we have

relates to his standing before the Roman Empire.

seen, in most instances it is Jews who are at fault

His opponents claim that he is a dangerous person

(interestingly, Luke never portrays these rabble

who must be destroyed. As you might expect,

rousers as being punished; for him, it is only the

Luke has a different opinion. Indeed, his narra—

innocent who suffer!). On occasion there are

tive shows that Paul was innocent of any wrong—

pagans to blame (e.g., see the riot in Ephesus in

doing, just as Jesus was in the Gospel. As Paul

chap. 17). In no case is Paul himself responsible

himself proclaims in his apologetic speeches, he

for any wrongdoing, as even the governors before

has violated no laws and caused no problems for

whom he appears attest. Nonetheless, just as

the ruling authorities. Problems erupt only

Pilate condemned Jesus to death after declaring

because those who hear Paul’s proclamation

him innocent, so the Roman administrators of

SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 9.4

Christianity before Paul

As we have seen, the author of LukeActs gives an extraordinarily high assessment of Paul and his role in the spread of early Christianity: he is clearly the most important figure in this two-volume work apart from Jesus. Some interpreters have pressed the matter even farther, though, claiming that Christianity as we know it would never have come into existence apart from Paul, that along with Jesus he should be thought of as the “second founder”

of Christianity. This view is found not only among some scholars, but also in the wider reading public, among people (and there seem to be a lot of them) who think that Paul transformed Jesus’ simple religion of faith in God and love of neighbor into a complicated religion of sin and redemption through Christ’s shed blood. Is this view accurate?

Interestingly enough, it is not accurate even according to Luke—who, of all the authors of the New Testament, holds Paul in the highest regard! For according to the book of Acts, all of the major Christian beliefs (for example, in the importance of Jesus’ death for salvation) and practices (for example, baptism and the “Lord’s supper”) were in place long before Paul arrived on the scene. According to Luke, Paul himself was not even responsible for the idea that Gentiles could become members of the people of God through faith in Christ, without having first to adopt the ways of Judaism (see Acts 10). Paul was instrumental in spreading this religion, for Acts, but not for creating it.

And strikingly enough, as we’ll see starting in Chapter 18, Paul himself appears to have agreed. Nowhere does Paul take credit for formulating new doctrines or instituting new practices for the Christian church. Instead, he talks about the central beliefs that he inherited from those who came before him—including the belief in Jesus’ death and resurrection for salvation from sin in fulfillment of the Jewish Scriptures, the core teaching of Paul’s entire ministry (see, for example, 1 Cor 15:3–5). It is true, as we’ll see, that Paul claims that he received his gospel message of salvation for the Gentiles straight from God through a revelation (a vision of Jesus? See Gal 1:11–12), but he also insists, even in this case, that the views he developed were in complete continuity with those who were apostles before him.

It may be far too much to claim for Paul, then, that he created, or even co-founded, the religion that we call Christianity. The followers of Jesus had been formulating their distinctive beliefs and practices well before Paul arrived on the scene, several years after Jesus’

death.

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# CHAPTER 9

## LUKE’S SECOND VOLUME

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Acts treat Paul as if he is guilty, knowing full well

• the complete unity and harmony of the

that he is not.

church as guided by the apostles, who agree

In one sense, as a prominent spokesperson of the

on every issue and resolve every problem

emerging Christian church, Paul represents the entire

through the direction of the Spirit

Christian movement for Luke. Here is one who

• ultimately, the hand of God directing the

remained faithful to his Jewish roots and in full com—

course of Christian history behind the scenes,

pliance with the laws of the state. The narrative of

from Jesus’ own life and death to the life and

his trials and defenses shows that the disturbances

ministry of the apostles that he left behind

that erupted during the early years of the Christian

movement could not be laid on the Christians themselves. They are innocent of all wrongdoing, whether

judged by the Torah or by rulers of the empire.

THE AUTHOR OF LUKE-ACTS

AND HIS AUDIENCE

IN SUM: PROMINENT

LukeActs was written anonymously, but the

question of authorship is more complicated here

THEMES OF LUKE-ACTS

than with Matthew and Mark, for those narra—

We have now spent considerable time examining

tives give no concrete clues concerning the iden—

the principal emphases of the two-volume work

tity of their authors. With LukeActs there may

that scholars call LukeActs, exploring the Gospel

be clues. To evaluate them we must address three

through the comparative method and the book of

interrelated questions: What is the evidence that

Acts through the thematic approach. In doing so,

LukeActs was written by someone named Luke?

we have isolated a number of important motifs

Is this evidence convincing? Why does the

that run through the two works:

author’s identity matter?

• an emphasis on the Jewish origins of

Christianity, its fulfillment of the Jewish

The Identity of the Author

Scriptures, and its continuity with Judaism

Whereas the other authors that we have studied

• the portrayal of Jesus as a Jewish prophet,

utilize the third person throughout their entire

rejected by his own people

narratives, the author of LukeActs occasionally

• the consequent movement of the religion

speaks in the first person. This does not happen in

from the Jews to the Gentiles, with its con—

the Gospel of Luke, but it does occur in four pas—

comitant geographical shift from the holy

sages that describe Paul’s journeys in Acts

city of Jerusalem to the ends of the earth

(16:10 –17, 20:5–16, 21:1–18, 27:1–28:16). In

these accounts, the author speaks not of what

• the proclamation to Jew and Gentile alike

“they” (Paul and his companions) were doing but

of salvation through the repentance of sins

of what “we” were doing.

and the forgiveness of God

The natural implication of these passages, at

• the stress that Gentiles who accept this

least in the judgment of many readers, is that the

offer of salvation need not adopt all the

author is describing events in which he himself

ways of Judaism

participated. One reason that this might matter

has to do with the historical value of Acts as an

• the delay of the time of the end to make

account of the life and teachings of the apostle

this Christian mission a possibility

Paul. If one of Paul’s own companions wrote the

• the rightness of this religion in both the

book, then surely, according to some scholars at

divine sense (it came from God in fulfill—

least, it preserves an accurate description of the

ment of the Scriptures) and the human one

things that Paul said and did. At the same time,

(it did nothing to violate Jewish custom or

as always happens in the seesaw of scholarly

Imperial law)

debate, there are other scholars who take a differ-

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THE NEW TESTAMENT: A HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

ent position. These argue that despite these “we”

Now, then, what concrete arguments can be

passages the author of Acts was not one of Paul’s

made from the other direction? Is there any evi—

companions and that, even if he were, his account

dence against identifying the author of these books

would not necessarily be accurate.

as Luke, Paul’s Gentile traveling companion? The

Before setting out the pros and cons of each view,

first thing to point out is that of the three Pauline

we need to look a bit further into the evidence itself.

passages that mention “Luke,” two of them occur

Specifically, how does one get from the presence of

in books that are widely thought not to have been

these “we” passages in Acts to the conclusion that

written by Paul himself. As we will see in Chapter

the author of these books was a companion of Paul

23, the vast majority of scholars do not think that

named Luke? Most scholars agree that the stress on

Paul himself actually wrote 2 Timothy, and the

the Gentile mission in Acts, in which Gentiles don’t

authorship of Colossians is hotly debated. This

have to become Jews in order to be Christians, sug—

means that there is only one certain reference to

gests that the author was himself a Gentile (although

Luke in Paul’s writings, Philemon 24, which nei—

Paul himself had a similar view, and he was certainly

ther calls him a Gentile nor identifies him as a

a Jew). The question then arises, do we know of any

physician. There would be no more reason for

Gentile companions of the apostle Paul from his own

thinking that this person wrote LukeActs than

writings? In fact, three such persons are mentioned

anyone else Paul mentions in any of his letters.

in the letter to the Colossians, which is attributed to

Were the books written by one of Paul’s com—

Paul: Epaphras, Demas, and Luke the beloved physi—

panions, even if we don’t know the name of this percian. We know that they are Gentiles because the

son? The most important thing to say is that even

author names them in Col. 4:14 after he has men—

if they were, this would provide no guarantee of

tioned other companions who were “of the circumci—

their historical accuracy. We have no way of know—

sion” in 4:11. The same three are mentioned by

ing how long this alleged companion of Paul was

name, along with Mark and Aristarchus, in Paul’s let—

with him, whether he knew him well, or, if he did

ter to Philemon (vv. 23–24). Of these three, Demas

know him well, whether he presented him accu—

is mentioned elsewhere as having abandoned Paul at

rately and fairly. Actually, this final statement is not

some point (2 Tim 2:10); he would not, therefore, be

altogether true—for there is one way of determining

a likely candidate as the author of Acts. Epaphras is

whether the portrayal of Paul in Acts is accurate

described as the founder of the church of Colossae, a

and fair: we can compare what Acts says about Paul

community that is never mentioned in Acts, as one

with what Paul says about Paul. Unfortunately,

might expect it to have been, had its founder been

when we do so (as we will see in Chapter 18), a

the author. That leaves Luke. As a medical doctor

number of significant differences emerge—both dis—

he would have been literate, and he is mentioned as

crepancies of detail, such as where Paul was at cer—

a close companion of Paul again in 2 Tim 4:11.

tain times and with whom, and broader discrepan—

Could it be that this Gentile physician penned the

cies in the actual teachings of Paul.

lengthiest corpus of the New Testament?

Even if one of Paul’s companions did write the

For a long time, scholars were convinced that

book, then, there is no guarantee that what he says

corroborating evidence could be found in the

about Paul is what Paul would have said about

vocabulary used throughout LukeActs. It ap—

himself. For this we need to turn to Paul’s own let—

peared at first glance that the two books used an

ters. What, though, can we say about the so-called

inordinate number of medical terms (compared to

“we” passages of Acts? One curious feature of

the other writings of the New Testament), indicat—

these accounts is how abruptly they begin and end.

ing, perhaps, that the author was a physician. As it

The author never says, “Then I joined up with

turns out, this impression is altogether false. When

Paul in Philippi, and from there we set out for

scholars actually went to the trouble of comparing

Thessalonica,” or anything like it. Instead, he

the medical terminology with that found in works

begins using the first-person pronoun without

by other Greek authors of the period, they discov—

advance warning, in midstride as it were, and ends

ered that “Luke” uses such terms no more frequent—

using it similiarly. Look for yourself at the first

ly than other educated writers of his day.

occurrence of its use by reading 16:10 –17 careful-

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# CHAPTER 9

## LUKE’S SECOND VOLUME

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ly. Someone might make sense of the abrupt way

to bow to the unreasonable demands of those who

the author begins to speak of what “we” did by

oppose them. It is possible that these narratives

assuming that he joined Paul immediately before

were meant to bolster the confidence and courage

his journey over to Philippi. But how could one

of Luke’s readers, who themselves confronted hos—

explain that the author left Paul’s company

tility in the world around them.

between the time the possessed slave girl began

Why does Luke emphasize that the end was not

following them around (v. 17) and the time Paul

supposed to have come in the lifetime of Jesus’ dis—

cast out the evil spirit (v. 18, or perhaps v. 19)?

ciples? Obviously because it had not come, and per—

If it is hard to explain these “we” passages as

haps many or most of Jesus’ disciples were already

personal reminiscences by the author of Acts, is

dead. For Luke, though, this clearly was according

there some other explanation for their presence in

to plan. The divine purpose of the Christian

the book? There are, in fact, plenty of other expla—

church was to spread the gospel through the lands

nations, but here I will mention only one that is

of the Gentiles. This, of course, requires time; time

commonly proposed, as a way to help you to begin

itself, therefore, could not come to a screeching

thinking about the problem on your own. We

halt. By the time Luke was writing, however, the

know that Luke used sources for his Gospel narra—

gospel had already been preached to the “ends of

tive; he tells us so explicitly. Did he not use

the earth,” for the book of Acts concludes in Rome,

sources for the book of Acts as well? Yes, certain—

in the heart of the empire, where the gospel was

ly he must have. Is it possible that one of his

brought by Paul. What more needed be done before

sources was a fragmentary travel diary of some sort,

the end? Perhaps nothing, for Luke. He and his

a travelogue that one of Paul’s companions had

congregation may have expected to be the last gen—

kept, and that Luke simply incorporated it into his

eration before the end.

document without changing it, just as, in places,

Luke could provide no absolute assurance of

he incorporated Mark and Q in his Gospel? This

this, however, so he emphasizes to his readers that

must at least be a possibility and would explain the

their ultimate concern should not be with the

abruptness with which he begins and ends his use

future but with the present. Thus they should act

of the first-person pronoun. Perhaps he used the

on the social implications of Jesus’ message in the

source that he had and wrote a story “around” it.

Gospel (by helping the poor and the oppressed)

and continue spreading the good news in Acts.

This author wants to stress that the delay of the

The Author and His Themes in Context

end cannot be used to nullify the truth of the

In some ways, the entire discussion of authorship is

Christian message. It is likely that some nonbe—

irrelevant to the task that we started out to accom—

lievers in the author’s locality were using the delay

plish. Knowing the name of the author of this

precisely to this end, by pointing out that Jesus’

book, or even knowing that he was a companion of

failure to return in judgment was a sure sign that

one of its main characters, does not help us very

the Christians had been wrong all along. In oppo—

much in trying to understand what he wanted to

sition to such a view, Luke stresses that God did

emphasize about the history of the early Christian

not mean for the end to come right away. More

church. Conversely, though, discerning the dis—

importantly, he indicates that despite the delay of

tinctive emphases of the narrative can tell us some—

the end there is good reason to believe that God

thing about the author and about his audience.

was and still is behind the Christian mission.

A good place to begin is with some of the obser—

Otherwise, from Luke’s perspective, it would be

vations we made in our discussion of the first vol—

impossible to explain the miraculous success of the

ume, the Gospel of Luke. We might ask, for exam—

Christian mission throughout the world. The hand

ple, why the author of Luke modified Mark’s

of God was behind this mission, and there was

account of Jesus’ demeanor in the face of death.

nothing that any human could ever do to stop it.

Jesus in Luke is portrayed as a kind of ideal martyr

Finally, we should look at two of Luke’s themes

for the faith. Throughout the book of Acts as well,

that might appear at first glance to be at odds with

Christian leaders face opposition boldly, refusing

one another: his emphasis on the Jewish roots of

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Christianity and his concern for the Gentile mis—

Christians in the Roman world were confront—

sion. Why would Luke focus on Jesus’ fulfillment of

ed with a basic problem. Everyone knew that Jesus

the Jewish scriptures if he was writing for Gentiles

was crucified under Pontius Pilate when Tiberius

who did not have to become Jews to be Jesus’ fol—

was emperor. Even by the second century, Jesus

lowers? Why would he stress that Christianity itself

was considered “recent.” If something recent is

was predicted in Jewish texts, if most of the con—

automatically suspect, then a religion based on

verts to the religion were not Jewish? Why, in

Jesus is in peril. To deal with this problem, the

short, would Luke situate this increasingly Gentile

second century apologists appealed to the Jewish

movement so squarely in the context of Judaism?

roots of the religion, as already stressed, for exam—

One possible answer to these questions lies out—

ple, by the Gospel of Luke and (perhaps for a dif—

side of our investigation of the books per se, in the

ferent reason) by the Gospel of Matthew.

world in which they were written and read. Even

According to these later authors, Christianity was

into the late second century of the Common Era,

not a new thing but an old thing. It was predict—

when Christianity had become a distinct religion,

ed by the prophets and anticipated by Moses. As

separated from Judaism, the intellectual defenders of

the apologists pointed out, Moses wrote 800 years

Christianity—the “apologists,” as they were known

before the greatest Greek philosopher, Plato, and

(see box 8.1)—continued to stress the claims made

400 years before the oldest Greek poets, Homer

by Luke, that Christianity was not something new

and Hesiod. If Jesus was predicted by the Jewish

but something old, older even than the Jewish

prophets and Moses, then the religion he estab—

prophets, as old as the author of the Torah and

lished is very old indeed.

Moses himself. They stressed this claim because of a

It is at least possible that Luke, a Gentile living

common notion shared by most persons of the

in a largely pagan environment, wanted to stress

ancient world (whether pagan, Jewish, or Christian)

the Jewish roots of Christianity for precisely such

that anything new—an idea, a philosophy, a reli—

reasons. The religion founded on Jesus is ancient;

gion—was automatically suspect. Unlike in the

it is a fulfillment of the Jewish Scriptures. It is, in

modern age, where creative ideas and new tech—

fact the true expression of faith in the God of

nologies are widely recognized as good (the newer

Israel, whose people the Jews have long disobeyed

the better!), in the ancient world older was better.

him and have now done so once too often. Now

There was a strong regard for antiquity in antiquity.

they have rejected the great prophet of God, God’s

This was particularly the case when it came to reli—

own Son, whose message of salvation has as a congion. If a religion was new, it could scarcely be true.

sequence gone forth to the Gentiles.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

In addition to the works listed at the end of Chapter 8, see

Parsons, Mikeal Carl, and Richard I. Pervo. Rethinking the the following studies.

Unity of Luke and Acts. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993.

An interesting study by two prominent New

Hengel, Martin. Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity.

Testament literary critics who reopen the question of

Trans. J. Bowden. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980. A

whether LukeActs should be read as a single work.

detailed study, for advanced students, that argues (in

contrast to the present chapter) that the book of Acts

for the most part presents a historically reliable account.

Powell, M. A. What Are They Saying about Acts? New York: Paulist, 1991. An overview of modern scholarship on

the book of Acts, for beginning students.

Keck, Leander E. and J. Louis Martyn, eds. Studies in LukeActs. Nashville: Abingdon, 1966. A superb collection of significant essays on Luke and Acts. Especially

Reardon, B. P., ed. Collected Ancient Greek Novels.

important is P. Vielhauer, “Paulinisms of Acts,” pp.

Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989. A very

35–50, a classic study that mounts convincing argu—

nice collection of all the ancient Greek novels, useful

ments that the portrayal of Paul in Acts does not coin—

for comparison with the book of Acts for those who

cide with Paul’s portrayal of himself.

think that Acts contains novelistic features.

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# CHAPTER 10

Jesus, the Man Sent from Heaven:

The Gospel according to John

The Gospel of John has always been one of the

will proceed. Historians are responsible not only

most popular and beloved books of the New

for interpreting their ancient sources but also for

Testament. It is here that Jesus makes some of his

justifying these interpretations. This is why I have

most familiar and yet extraordinary declarations

deliberately introduced and utilized different

about himself, where he says that he is “the bread

methods for analyzing each of the books we have

of life,” “the light of the world,” “the good shep—

studied: the literary-historical method for Mark,

herd who lays down his life for his sheep,” and “the

the redactional method for Matthew, the compar—

way, the truth, and the life.” This is the Gospel

ative method for Luke, and the thematic method

that identifies Jesus as the Word of God “through

for Acts. As I have indicated, there is no reason for

whom all things were made.” It is here that he

historians to restrict themselves to any one of

makes the astonishing claim that “before

these approaches: each could be applied to any

Abraham was, I am,” where he confesses that “I

one of these books.

and the Father are one,” and where he tells

To illustrate this point, we will apply all four

Nicodemus that “you must be born again.” And it

methods to the Gospel of John. This exercise will

is in this Gospel that Jesus performs many of his

show how a variety of approaches can enrich the

most memorable acts: turning the water into wine,

process of interpretation. It will also provide us

raising his friend Lazarus from the dead, and wash—

with the data we need to understand yet a fifth

ing his disciples’ feet.

method that scholars have used in their study of

These sayings and deeds, and indeed many

the early Christian literature, one that might be

more, are found only in the Fourth Gospel, mak—

called the “socio-historical method.” In a nut—

ing it a source of perpetual fascination for scholars

shell, the socio-historical method seeks to under—

of the New Testament. Why are such stories found

stand how a literary text reflects the social world

in John but nowhere else? Why is Jesus portrayed

and historical circumstances of the author who

so differently here than in the other Gospels?

produced it. We have already explored this issue

Why, for example, does he talk so much about his

with each of the other Gospels, but only in pass—

own identity in John but scarcely at all in the

ing. In this chapter we will learn how to pursue

Synoptic Gospels? And why does this Gospel

the matter with greater rigor and in fuller detail.

identify Jesus as God’s equal, when none of the

Since one of the prerequisites for applying this

earlier Gospels does?

method is a detailed knowledge of the text itself,

These questions will be at the forefront of our

we can begin by examining the Fourth Gospel

investigation in this chapter. Before beginning our

from the literary-historical, thematic, compara—

study, however, I should say a word about how we

tive, and redactional perspectives.

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THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

he or she realized that this book is a biography of

FROM A LITERARY-

Jesus, would be inclined to read the rest of the story

in light of what is stated about him in the mystical

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

reflection at the outset. This is no biography of a

Despite its wide-ranging differences from the

mere mortal. Its subject is one who was with God in

Synoptics, the Gospel of John clearly belongs in

eternity past, who was himself divine, who created

the same Greco-Roman genre. It too would be per—

the universe, who was God’s self-revelation to the

ceived by an ancient reader as a biography of a

world, who came to earth to bring light out of dark—

religious leader: it is a prose narrative that portrays

ness and truth out of error. He is a divine being who

an individual’s life within a chronological frame—

became human to dwell here and reveal the truth

work, focusing on his inspired teachings and

about God. This Gospel will present a view of Jesus

miraculous deeds and leading up to his death and

that is far and away the most exalted among our

divine vindication.

New Testament narratives.

As was the case with the other Gospels, the

A more complete literary-historical analysis

portrayal of Jesus is established at the very outset

would examine some of the critical incidents that

of the narrative, by the introductory passage

occur early on in the narrative and perhaps focus

known as the Johannine Prologue (1:1–18). This

on key events that transpire throughout. Here I

prologue, however, is quite unlike anything we

would like simply to introduce the possibilities of

have seen in our study of the Gospels to this stage.

this method for the Fourth Gospel, rather than

Rather than introducing the main character of the

utilize it at length, and so will summarize the major

book by name, it provides a kind of mystical reflec—

developments of the plot and indicate something

tion on the “Word” of God, a being from eternity

about how the narrative itself is structured.

past who was with God and yet was God (v. 1),

After the prologue, the Gospel readily divides

who created the universe (v. 3), who provided life

itself into two major blocks of material. The first

and light to all humans (vv. 4–5), and who entered

twelve chapters narrate events in Jesus’ public

into the world that he had made, only to be reject—

ministry, which appears to extend over a two-or

ed by his own people (vv. 9–11). John the Baptist

three-year period (since there are three different

testified to this Word (vv. 6–8), but only a few

Passover feasts mentioned). This section begins

received it; those who did so became children of

with John the Baptist and several of his disciples,

God, having received a gift far greater even than

who recognize Jesus as one who was specially sent

that bestowed by the servant of God, Moses him—

from God. Most of this first section (chaps. 1–12)

self (vv. 12–14; 16 –18).

is devoted to recording Jesus’ own declarations of

It is not until the end of the prologue that we

who he is (the one sent from heaven to reveal

learn who this “Word” of God was. When the

God) and the miraculous “signs” that he does to

Word became a human being, his name was Jesus

demonstrate that what he says about himself is

Christ (v. 17). Up to this point, that is, through

true. Altogether, Jesus performs seven such signs

the first eighteen verses of the book, the ancient

(in chaps. 2, 4, 5, 6, 9, and 11), most of them

reader may not have realized that he or she was

directly tied to his proclamations (see box 10.1).

reading an introduction to a biography. Rather,

Thus, for example, he multiplies the loaves of

the prologue appears to be a philosophical or mys—

bread and claims that he is the “bread of life”

tical meditation. Beginning with 1:19, however,

(6:22–40), he gives sight to the blind and says that

the book takes on a biographical tone that contin—

he is “the light of the world” (9:1–12), and he rais—

ues to the very end.

es the dead and calls himself “the resurrection and

What can we make of the prologue, then, from

the life” (11:17–44).

the literary-historical perspective? Since ancient

Also included in these stories of Jesus’ public

biographies typically established the character traits

ministry are several discourses not directly tied to

of the protagonist at the outset of the narrative, it is

the signs. In these speeches Jesus explains his

perhaps best to assume that an ancient reader, once

identity at greater length, for instance to

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# CHAPTER 10

JESUS, THE MAN SENT FROM HEAVEN

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SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 10.1 Jesus’ Signs in the Fourth Gospel

The following are the seven miraculous signs that Jesus performs in the Fourth Gospel:

• Turning water into wine (2:1–11)

• Healing the Capernaum official’s son (4:46–54)

• Healing the paralytic by the pool of Bethzatha (5:2–9)

• Feeding the 5,000 (6:1–14)

• Walking on water (6:16–21)

• Healing the man born blind (9:1–12)

• Raising Lazarus from the dead (11:1–44)

Jesus performs no other public miracles in John; but notice the statement near the end of the book: “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (20:30–31) Nicodemus in chapter 3 and to the Samaritan washes his disciples’ feet (13:1–20), and announces

woman at the well in chapter 4. Closely connect—

that he will soon be betrayed (13:21–30), he launched to these self-revelations are stories of Jesus’

es into his longest discourse of the Gospel, com—

rejection by his enemies, “the Jews” (see box

monly known as the “Farewell Discourse.” Here

10.2), and his denunciatory responses in which he

Jesus states that he is soon to leave the disciples to

castigates those who fail to recognize him as the

return to the Father; they are not to be dismayed,

one sent from God (see chaps. 5, 8, and 10).

however, for he will send them another comforter,

The plot of the Fourth Gospel unfolds, then,

the Holy Spirit, who will assist and instruct them.

like this. Jesus proclaims that he is the one sent

When Jesus leaves, his disciples will be hated by

from heaven to reveal the truth about God, and he

nonbelievers in the world, but they are to continue

does signs to demonstrate that he is who he says he

doing his commandments, confident of his presence

is. Some people accept his message, but most,

among them in the Spirit.

especially the Jewish leaders, reject it. He con—

This speech consumes more than three chap—

demns their failure to believe, and at the end of

ters. In chapter 17, Jesus offers a final prayer to his

the first section, in chapter 12, decides to do no

Father for his disciples, that they may remain faith—

more work among them. From this point on, Jesus

ful even after he has gone. The rest of the book,

removes himself from the public eye, delivering no

chapters 18–21, presents Jesus’ Passion and resur—

more self-proclamations to Jewish outsiders and

rection in stories more or less similar to those found

performing no more signs to establish his identity.

in the Synoptics. As he predicted, Jesus is betrayed

Indeed, starting with chapter 13, there is not

by his own disciple Judas; he is interrogated by the

much time left before Jesus is to return to his heav—

high priest, denied by his disciple Peter, and put on

enly home. Whereas the first twelve chapters stretch

trial before the Roman governor Pilate. At the

over two or three years, chapters 13–19 take place

instigation of his enemies among the Jews, he is

within a single twenty-four hour period. These

condemned to crucifixion. He dies and is buried by

chapters begin by recounting the events and discus—

Joseph of Arimathea, but on the first day of the

sions at Jesus’ final meal with his disciples. After he

week, he is raised from the dead. Chapters 20–21

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THE NEW TESTAMENT: A HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 10.2 “The Jews” in the Fourth Gospel

You will notice in reading through the Fourth Gospel that the phrase “the Jews” is almost always used as a negative term of abuse. The Jews are portrayed as the enemies of Jesus who are consequently opposed to God and aligned with the Devil and the forces of evil (see especially 8:31–59). Vitriolic statements of this kind may sound anti-Semitic to our ears—as indeed, they should. As we will see in Chapter 25, hateful acts of violence have been perpe-trated over the years by those who have taken such charges as divine sanctions for oppression and persecution. But we will also see that our modern notion of anti-Semitism may not be appropriate for understanding the meaning of such comments in the early Christian literature.

Despite these harsh statements about Jews in the Gospel of John, even here Jesus and his followers are portrayed as Jews who subscribe to the authority of Moses and participate in the Jewish cult and the Jewish festivals. If Jesus and his followers are Jews, how can all Jews be lumped together and branded as the enemies of God? I will try to answer this question later in the chapter when we consider the Gospel from a socio-historical perspective and see that the “enemies” of this author are not all Jews everywhere, but “the Jews” of the local synagogue who have opposed his Christian community. At this stage, it is enough to note that “the Jews” is a technical term of disapprobation throughout this narrative; thus, when I refer to John’s own comments, I will place the term in quotation marks.

narrate various appearances to his followers, whom

Gospel. Nonetheless, certain other aspects of the

he convinces that he is both alive and divine.

prologue’s description recur throughout the narrative. For example, just as the Word is said to be “in

the beginning” with God, so Jesus later speaks of

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN FROM

possessing the glory of the Father “before the world

A THEMATIC PERSPECTIVE

was made” (17:5); just as the Word is said to be

“God,” so Jesus says “I and the Father are one”

Whereas the literary-historical approach to the

(10:30); just as in the Word “was life,” so Jesus

Gospels focuses on the conventions of the bio—

claims to be “the resurrection and the life” (11:25);

graphical genre, and so determines how a book por—

just as this life is said to be the “light that enlight—

trays its main character through the unfolding of

ens all people,” so Jesus says that he is “the light of

the plot as he interacts with those around him, the

the world” (9:5); just as the Word is said to have

thematic approach isolates prominent themes at

come from heaven into this world, so Jesus main—

key points of the narrative and traces their pres—

tains that he has been “sent” from God (e.g., 17:21,

ence throughout, more or less overlooking ques—

25); and just as the Word is said to be rejected by

tions of plot and character interaction. If we were

his own people, so Jesus is rejected by “the Jews”

to examine John from a strictly thematic point of

(chap. 12), and later unjustly executed (chap. 19).

view, we might follow the pattern we established

A full analysis, of course, would look at each of

for the book of Acts and look at some of the salient

these themes at length. It would also consider

motifs established at the outset in the prologue,

other ideas found elsewhere, for example, in Jesus’

and in some of the speeches of the main character.

discourses. These include (a) his first public

From a thematic point of view, it is interesting

speech in chapter 3, where he indicates to

to note that although the prologue identifies Jesus

Nicodemus that only through a birth from “above”

as the Word of God who has become human, he is

can one enter into the kingdom of God and that

never explicitly called this anywhere else in the

only the one who comes from above (i.e., he him-

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# CHAPTER 10

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self, Jesus) can reveal what is necessary for this

said to be born in Bethlehem, to a virgin named

heavenly birth; (b) his final public speech in chap—

Mary. In all three, his public ministry begins with

ter 12, where he proclaims that those who have

his baptism by John, followed by a period of temp—

seen him have seen the Father who sent him,

tation in the wilderness by the Devil. When he

whereas those who reject him have rejected God;

returns, he begins to proclaim the coming king—

and (c) his prayer in chapter 17, which more or

dom of God. This proclamation is typically made

less functions as his final speech in the presence of

through parables; in fact, according to Mark’s

his disciples, where he affirms that he has come

Gospel (4:33–34), this is the only way that Jesus

from God and is now soon to return to him.

taught the crowds. In addition to teaching, of

If we were to follow this line of inquiry further,

course, Jesus also performs miracles. In Mark, his

one of the interesting observations that we could

first miracle involves the exorcism of a demon.

make is that, contrary to what you might expect,

Throughout the first part of his ministry, then,

some of the themes of the Fourth Gospel are not

Jesus engages in exorcisms (and other miracles)

developed consistently. Instead, they appear to be

and teaching, principally in parables. Halfway

understood differently at different points of the nar—

through these Gospels, he goes up onto a high

rative. Rather than pursue this issue here, though, we

mountain and is transfigured before his disciples; it

will save it for our discussion of the socio-historical

is there that he reveals to them his glory.

method, which uses divergent thematic emphases of

Otherwise, it remains hidden. Indeed, he does not

a text to understand the social history lying behind it.

speak openly of his identity in these books (even

in Matthew, where it is occasionally recognized),

and he commands the demons and others who

know of it to keep silent. At the end, he has a last

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN FROM

meal with his disciples, in which he institutes the

A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Lord’s Supper, distributing the bread (“This is my

body . . . ”) and then the cup (“This is the cup of

One of the most striking features of the Fourth

the new covenant in my blood . . . ”). He after—

Gospel is the way in which some of the distinc—

wards goes out to pray in the Garden of

tively Johannine themes stand in such stark con—

Gethsemane, where he asks God to allow him to

trast to those in the other early Christian writings

forgo his coming Passion. He is then arrested by

that we have examined so far. Even to the casual

the authorities and made to stand trial before the

reader, the Fourth Gospel may seem somewhat dif—

Jewish authorities of the Sanhedrin, who find him

ferent from the other three within the canon.

guilty of blasphemy before delivering him over to

Nowhere in the other Gospels is Jesus said to be

the Romans for trial and execution.

the Word of God, the creator of the universe, the

These stories make up the backbone of the

equal of God, or the one sent from heaven and

Synoptic accounts of Jesus. What most casual

soon to return. Nowhere else does Jesus claim that

readers of the New Testament do not realize is that

to see him is to see the Father, that to hear him is

none of them is found in John.

to hear the Father, and that to reject him is to

Read the text carefully for yourself. There is no

reject the Father. Exactly how different is the

word about Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem here or about

Fourth Gospel from the others? The comparative

his mother being a virgin (in John, as in Mark,

approach seeks to answer this question.

Jesus appears for the first time as an adult). Jesus is

not explicitly said to be baptized by John. He does

not go into the wilderness to be tempted by the

Comparison of Contents

Devil. He does not proclaim the kingdom of God

Despite the important and significant differences

that is coming and he never tells a parable. Jesus

among the Synoptic Gospels, they are much more

never casts out a demon in this Gospel. He does

similar to one another than any one of them is to

not go up onto the Mount of Transfiguration to

John. Suppose we were to list the most significant

reveal his glory to his disciples in a private setting,

accounts of the Synoptics. In two of them Jesus is

nor does he make any effort to keep his identity



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(or similar) stories are found in John and the

Synoptics, including, for example, the feeding of

the 5,000, the walking on the water, and many of

the events of the Passion narrative: Jesus’ anointing, his entry into Jerusalem, his betrayal and

arrest, the denial by Peter, the Roman trial, and the

crucifixion. But most of the events of the

Synoptics, except for the Passion narrative, are not

found in John, just as, by and large, the words and

F P O

deeds recorded in John occur only in John. Only

here, for example, do we hear of some of Jesus’ most

impressive miracles: the turning of water into wine

(chap. 2), the healing of the lame man by the pool

of Bethzatha (chap. 5), the restoration of sight to

the man born blind (chap. 9), and the raising of

Lazarus from the dead (chap. 11). Only here do we

get the long discourses, including the dialogues

with Nicodemus in chapter 3, with the Samaritan

woman in chapter 4, with his opponents among

the Jews in chapters 5 and 8, with his disciples in

chapters 13–17. Just in terms of content, then,

John is quite different from the Synoptics.

Comparison of Emphases

The differences between John and the Synoptics

are perhaps even more striking in stories that they

have in common. You can see the differences yourself simply by taking any story of the Synoptics that

is also told in John and comparing the two

Figure 10.1 Portrayal of Jesus washing the disciples’ feet, one of accounts carefully (as we did for the trial of Jesus in

the stories of the Fourth Gospel that does not occur in the

Synoptics, from the sixth-century manuscript, the “Rossano

Chapter 3). A thorough and detailed study of this

Gospels.”

phenomenon throughout the entire Gospel would

reveal several fundamental differences. Here we

secret or command others to silence. Jesus does not

will look at two differences that affect a large num—

institute the Lord’s Supper in this Gospel, nor does

ber of the stories of Jesus’ deeds and words.

he go to Gethsemane to pray to be released from

First, the deeds. Jesus does not do as many mir—

his fate. In this Gospel, he is not put on trial before

acles in John as he does in the Synoptics, but the

the Sanhedrin or found guilty of committing blas—

ones he does are, for the most part, far more spec—

phemy.

tacular. Indeed, unlike in the Synoptics, Jesus does

If John does not have these stories about Jesus,

nothing to hide his abilities; he performs miracles

what stories does he have? The majority of John’s

openly in order to demonstrate who he is. To illus—

stories are unique to John; they are found nowhere

trate the point, we can compare two stories that

else. To be sure, many of the same characters

have several striking resemblances: the Synoptic

appear in this Gospel: Jesus, some of his family, his

account of the raising of Jairus’s daughter (Mark

male disciples, several female followers, John the

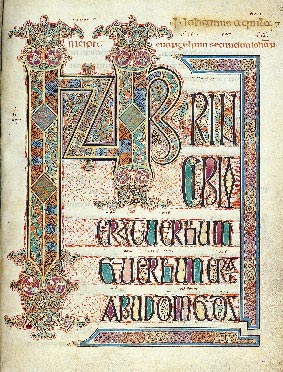
5:21–43) and John’s account of the raising of

Baptist, the Jewish leaders, Caiaphas, Pontius

Lazarus (John 11:1–44). Read them for yourself. In

Pilate, and Barabbas. Moreover, some of the same

both, a person is ill and a relative goes to Jesus for



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The New Testament in Pictures:

Illuminated Manuscripts of the Middle Ages

# INTRODUCTION

## Scribes who produced Christian man-

uscripts in the Middle Ages sometimes

used the opportunity to adorn them—

or have them adorned—artistically.

These illuminations, or “miniatures,” as

they are sometimes called, are not only

serious works of medieval art of interest

to art historians, they also provide us

with clues as to how the sacred texts of

the New Testament were being understood and interpreted by Christians living in later times.

Thousands of these manuscript illuminations still survive, ranging widely

in both subject matter and artistic quality. The following selection can reveal

some of this range and help modern

readers of the New Testament see how it

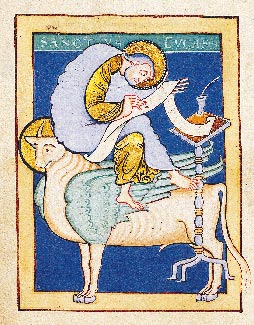
was read at other times and places.

Figure 1: Frontispiece of the Gospel of John. Some medieval Christians spared no expense in making elaborate and ornate copies of their sacred Scriptures. In such texts, the first page of a book would sometimes celebrate its exalted subject matter through artistic design. Possibly no medieval manuscript is more famous than the magnificent (Latin) Lindisfarne Gospels, a major artistic achievement produced in England around the year 698 C.E. and housed now in the British Museum in London. This plate shows the first page of the Gospel of John, in which the opening words, “In principio erat verbum . . .” (“In the beginning was the Word . . .”), are spelled out through an intricate interweaving of design that includes geometrical figures, birds, and vines.





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Figures 2–5: The Four Evangelists. It was common for medieval artists to depict Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John writing (or holding) their Gospel accounts of Jesus. Because it was recognized that each of the Gospels provided a distinctive portrayal of Jesus, each evangelist came to be associated with a symbolic animal thought to be appropriate to his account (see Ezek 1:5 and Rev 4:6). Artistic portrayals of the evangelists therefore sometimes included a picture of the animal (as here), or actually portrayed the evangelist himself as the animal 



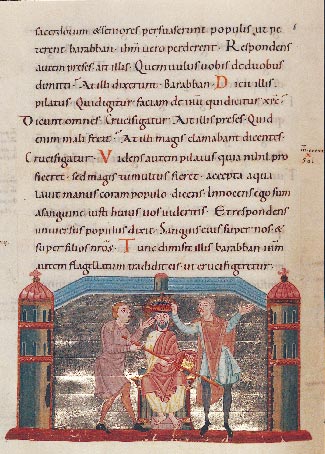
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(see Figure 8): Matthew as a man (emphasizing Jesus’ humanity), Mark as a lion (emphasizing Jesus’ royalty), Luke as an ox (emphasizing Jesus’ servility), and John as an eagle (emphasizing Jesus’ divinity). These miniatures from a twelfth-century manuscript (now housed in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York) are unusual in portraying the Gospel writers as sitting on their symbolic beasts while producing their accounts.



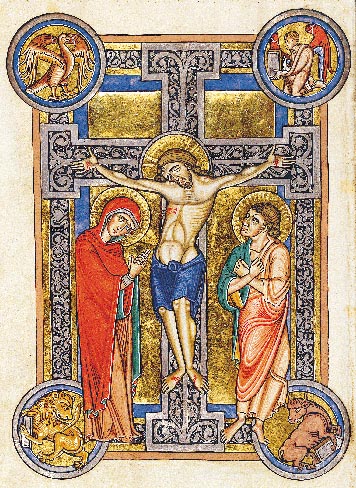
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Figure 6: Nativity Scene. Medieval artists decorated not only books of Scripture, but also other texts of religious importance—including prayer books and missals (i.e., books that contained the words of the Roman Catholic mass)—such as the fifteenth-century manuscript shown here. This illustration of Jesus’ nativity is interesting for revealing legendary understandings of the event. Notice, for example, that there are three magi; this is the traditional number, even though Matthew, the only Gospel that mentions them, does not say how many magi there were—only that the magi brought three gifts. Moreover, Joseph appears here as an older man—a view that developed later in Christianity to explain both why he and Mary never had sexual relations and how Jesus could have “brothers” if Mary remained a virgin (a belief that developed in the Catholic Church): Jesus’ “brothers” were Joseph’s children from a previous marriage. To the left of the image are angels worshiping the Christ-child, and below is none other than King David, attesting to this his descendent, the Son of David, the Messiah.



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Figure 7: Jesus Crowned with Thorns. Somewhat less artistically advanced than other miniatures represented here is this simple depiction of Christ being crowned with thorns from an eleventh-century Latin Gospel manuscript produced in Salzburg. It nonetheless is a striking image: the artist has managed to capture the real irony of the scene as found in the Gospel of Matthew (27:27-31). For when the soldiers mock Jesus, crowning him with thorns, placing a robe on his back, and putting a scepter in his hand, they don’t realize that—for the Gospel writer —he really is in fact what they ridicule him as being: the King of All. This portrayal makes Jesus look truly regal while his mockers appear subservient to him. The Latin text above the miniature is Matthew’s account of Jesus’ trial before Pilate.



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Figure 8: The Crucifixion of Jesus. One of the most common images in medieval art was of the crucified Jesus. This particular representation comes from a thirteenth-century missal. Jesus is here shown to be nailed through the palms and the feet (with spurts of blood coming out) to a highly elaborate cross, with his mother Mary on the left and his “Beloved Disciple” John on the right (drawn from John 19:26, which does not identify the beloved disciple as John). In the four corners are the images of the four evangelists who attest to the crucifixion (working from the top left, clockwise): John the eagle, Matthew the man, Luke the ox, and Mark the lion (see Figures 2–5).



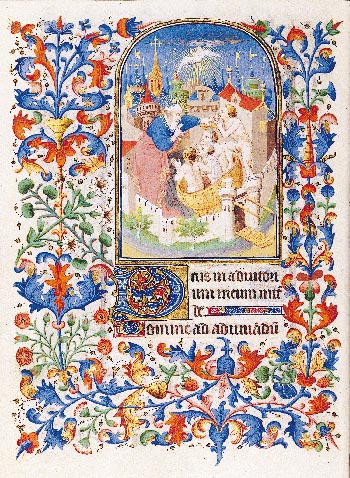
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Figure 9: The Crucifixion of Jesus. A very different portrayal of the crucifixion from a fifteenth-century missal. To give a sense of how the book appeared when opened, this is a full two-page spread. On the right-hand side are standard prayers in Latin, surrounded by a lavish floral decoration. The miniature on the left portrays Jesus being crucified on a realistic-looking cross (contrast Figure 8), again nailed through the hands and feet. But the two robbers are portrayed as well. Note that they are not nailed but tied to their crosses (a common image throughout the Middle Ages that has come down even till today, used to stress that it was Jesus who suffered the most, even though all three would have been nailed). Beneath him are the women who had accompanied him from Galilee, portrayed as grieving, and the soldiers who had crucified him, who appear angry—except for the centurion, whose famous words (Mark 15:39) are preserved in Latin: vere filius dei erat este (“Truly this man was the Son of God”).



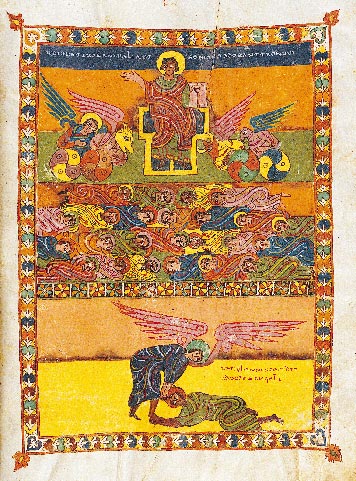
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Figure 10: The Last Judgment. An elaborate portrayal of Jesus as the coming judge at the last judgment, from a Christian breviary (a kind of prayer-book) made in France in the early fifteenth century. Among the many intriguing aspects of this depiction are the angels surrounding Christ in the heavenly realm, the trumpeters descending face-first from heaven to sound the final call, the dead rising up out of their graves, and the souls doomed to the torments of hell down below. Christ himself, of course, is at the center as the ultimate judge of all the earth, who reigns over all with the cross in his hand and his wounds still fully visible.



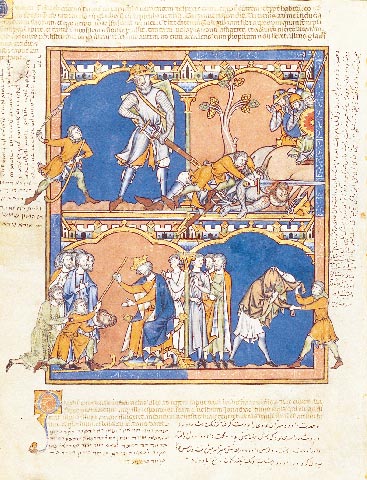
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Figure 11: Paul Baptizing the Converted. Artists in the Medieval and later periods adorned their literary texts not just with pictures of Jesus, of course, but also with portrayals of Paul and others of the apostles. This lavishly ornate page is drawn from a “Book of Hours” (a kind of prayer book for monks, who had set prayers to be given at certain hours of the day) produced in the Netherlands, circa 1420. Here the apostle Paul is shown to be baptizing Christian converts who are brought then within the walls of the city of God, into the “ark” of salvation. This is an allusion to Noah’s ark—like Noah and his family, baptized Christians are saved through water. Over the entire scene hovers the Holy Spirit, whose rays of illumination make the knowledge of God possible.



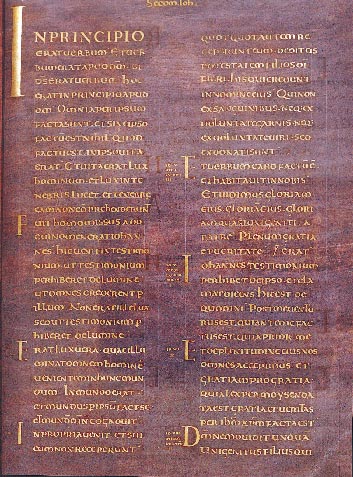
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Figure 12: Scene from the Book of Revelation. This intriguing miniature, from a medieval commentary on the book of Revelation written by Beatus of Liebana, was produced in the mid-tenth century in a remote monastery in Spain. Depicted here is the scene described in Rev 4:1–11, with God seated on his throne, holding a scroll, surrounded by four beasts (lion, ox, human, eagle—also, for medieval artists, representative of the four evangelists; see Figures 2–5), who are “full of eyes” (4:6). Below the throne are the twenty-four elders (twelve Patriarchs of Israel and twelve apostles?) who worship God eternally. In the bottom register, an angel raises the prophet John, prostrate before his vision of the heavenly realm.



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Figure 13: Scenes from the Christian “Old Testament.” Christian artists depicted narratives from the Old Testament as well as the New. Here is an intriguing set of four scenes from the life of David, found in a thirteenth-century picture book of Old Testament illustrations produced in Paris. Clockwise from the upper left, David is shown slaying the giant Goliath with a sling, then cutting off his head, then presenting his head to King Saul, and then, turning from war to love, helping his companion, Jonathan, who is said to have loved him more than his own soul (1 Sam 18:1, 3), remove his robe. Above and below the miniature is Latin text added about a century after the picture itself was produced; the Persian comments in the margins were added about three centuries still after that.



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Figure 14: Page from the Gospel of John. Some manuscripts without artistic decorations could be as lavishly produced as those that had them. Nowhere is this more evident than in this extravagantly expensive “purple”

manuscript of the tenth century. Produced in the Abbey of St. Maximim in Trier Germany, the carefully prepared vellum (finely produced animal skin) was died a lush purple; the text was then written by a highly trained scribe using gold ink. With a volume like this, the manuscript itself is a serious work of art. The page shown here is from the first page of the Gospel of John (compare the same text, artistically portrayed quite differently, in Figure 1).



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# CHAPTER 10

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help. Jesus is delayed from coming right away, so

the wilderness (drawn from Q; Matt 4:1–11, Luke

that by the time he arrives the person has already

4:1–13). As you will recall, at one point Jesus is

died and is being mourned. Jesus speaks of the per—

tempted to jump off the pinnacle of the Temple. A

son as “sleeping” (a euphemism for death). Those

thoughtful reader may wonder why this would be

present think that he has come too late and that

alluring. One can understand why fasting for forty

now he can do nothing, but Jesus approaches the

days might make Jesus tempted to turn stones into

one who has died, speaks some words, and raises the

bread, but why would anyone be tempted to jump

person from the dead. Both accounts end with Jesus’

off a ten-story precipice? The text itself provides an

instructions to care for the person’s well-being.

explanation: if Jesus jumps, the angels of God will

Although the two stories are similar in kind,

swoop down and catch him before he hits bottom.

they differ in the details of how the miracle is por—

One must assume that the crowds of faithful Jews

trayed. First of all, in the story in Mark, Jesus is

down below would see this supernatural interven—

delayed inadvertently; he has an encounter with

tion on Jesus’ behalf—this is in the Jerusalem

someone in the crowd, and in the meantime, the

Temple—and so become convinced of who he was.

young girl dies. In John’s Gospel, on the other

Thus, in the Synoptic temptation narrative, when

hand, Jesus intentionally stays away until Lazarus

Jesus is tempted to prove his identity by doing a

dies (v. 6). Why would he want Lazarus to die?

miracle, he resists the temptation as Satanic.

The text of Jesus’ words tells us in no uncertain

Neither of these stories—the request for a sign

terms: “Lazarus is dead; and for your sake I am glad

or the account of the temptation—is found in the

that I was not there, so that you may believe” (v.

Fourth Gospel. For in this Gospel, far from spurn—

15). In John’s Gospel, Lazarus has to die so that

ing the use of miracles to reveal his identity, Jesus

Jesus can raise him from the dead and convince

performs them for precisely this purpose. Thus, the

others of who he is. As Jesus himself puts it: “This

Fourth Gospel does not actually call Jesus’ spec—

illness . . . is for the glory of God, so that the Son

tacular deeds “miracles,” which is a Greek word

of God may be glorified by means of it” (v. 4).

that means something like “demonstration of

There is another significant difference between

power” (and is related to our English word “dyna—

the accounts. In Mark, Jesus heals the girl in pri—

mite”); instead it calls them “signs,” for they are

vate, taking only her parents and three of his disci—

signs of who Jesus is.

ples with him. In John, Jesus makes the healing a

What, then, is the function of the miraculous

public spectacle, with crowds looking on. We have

deeds in the Fourth Gospel? Unlike in the

already discussed why Mark may have wanted to

Synoptics, they are done publicly in order to con—

portray Jesus as performing his miracles in secret,

vince people of Jesus’ identity so that they may

but why the publicity in John? A complete study of

come to believe in him. This purpose is made plain

John would show why: unlike the Synoptics, the

Fourth Gospel uses Jesus’ miracles to convince people of who he is. Indeed, as Jesus states in this

Gospel, “Unless you see signs and wonders, you will

not believe” (4:48; see box 10.3).

It is striking that in the Synoptic Gospels Jesus

refuses to do miracles in order to prove his identi-

F P O

ty. When the scribes and Pharisees approach him

and ask him to do a “sign” (Matt 11:38), he blunt—

ly refuses, maligning them as sinful and adulterous

for wanting a sign when his own preaching, superior to that of Jonah and Solomon (both of whom

converted the disbelieving by their proclamations),

Figure 10.2 Portrayal of Jesus raising of Lazarus, while his sis-should suffice. A similar lesson is conveyed

ter Mary pleads for Jesus to help, from the lid of a small fifth-through the Synoptic story of Jesus’ temptation in

century silver ornamental box.

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THE NEW TESTAMENT: A HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 10.3 Signs and Faith in the Fourth Gospel

A number of scholars think that Jesus’ statement to the Capernaum official in John 4:48,

“Unless you see signs and wonders, you will not believe,” is meant as a reproach and shows that Jesus was put off because this man needed proof before he would believe, whereas true faith requires no proof. Supporting evidence might be found in John 20:28, where the resurrected Jesus appears to rebuke doubting Thomas on similar grounds: “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Some scholars take this way of reading the Gospel a step further. They maintain that the author of the “signs source” from which the author derived his stories of Jesus’ miraculous deeds (a source we will be discussing later in this chapter; see also box 10.1) had a rudimentary understanding of the relationship between Jesus’ miraculous deeds and faith: Jesus’ deeds prove that he is the Son of God. The author of the Fourth Gospel, however, had a more nuanced view of the matter (according to this view). For him, the miracles were not unambiguous proofs, they were literally significant only for those who were open to the truth about Jesus as the one who reveals God. This is why some people could benefit from Jesus’ miracles and yet still not understand what they signified (e.g., see, 2:23–25; 3:2–10; 6:26; and 11:45–48).

Other scholars take a different position altogether. For them, Jesus’ miraculous deeds in the Fourth Gospel are not irrefutable proofs of his identity but are nonetheless clear and necessary indicators (“signs”) of who he is. In other words, the author of the Fourth Gospel believed that no one could come to understand Jesus as the one sent from God without first seeing what he had done. In this way of reading the Gospel, Jesus’ statement in 4:48 is not a reproach but a statement of fact: no one will believe without seeing Jesus’ signs, for these are the deeds that reveal who he is. This does not mean that everyone who sees these deeds necessarily comes to faith, but everyone who comes to faith has necessarily seen these deeds.

What though about those who were not there to see them? Evidently, for the author of John, such people can come to faith by hearing or reading about these signs. This is why he penned his account in the first place, as seen in the conclusion that he took over from his signs source (and thereby affirmed): “Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe” (20:30–31).

by the words of the Fourth Evangelist himself, in

noticed that Jesus scarcely ever speaks about him—

his concluding comment on the significance of

self. There his message is about the coming king—

Jesus’ great deeds: “Jesus did many other signs in

dom of God and about what people must do to

the presence of his disciples, which are not written

prepare for it. His regular mode of instruction is

in this book. But these are written so that you may

the parable. In John, however, Jesus does not speak

come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son

in parables. nor does he proclaim the imminent

of God, and that through believing you may have

appearance of the kingdom. He instead focuses his

life in his name” (20:30–31).

words on identifying himself as the one sent from

John’s unique understanding of Jesus’ miracles

God (see box 10.4).

is matched by his distinctive portrayal of Jesus’

In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus has come down from

teachings. In the Synoptic Gospels, you will have

the Father and is soon to return to him. His message

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# CHAPTER 10

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SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 10.4 Jesus and the “I Am” Sayings in John

Readers have often noticed that Jesus speaks about himself far more in John than in the Synoptics. Jesus refers to himself using the phrase “I am” only two times in both Mark and Luke (Mark 6:50; 14:62; Luke 22:27; 24:39), and only five times in Matthew (11:29; 14:27; 18:20; 27:43; 28:20). Contrast this with the Gospel of John, where Jesus uses the verb to refer to himself a total of forty-six times! Among Jesus’ important self-identifications in this Gospel are seven “I am” sayings in which he speaks of himself symbolically: “I am the bread of life” (6:35, 51), “I am the light of the world” (8:12), “I am the gate ”(for the sheep; 10:7, 9), “I am the good shepherd” (10:11, 14), “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25), “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (14:6), and “I am the true vine” (15:1). All of these images show that Jesus is uniquely important as the way to God and eternal life.

In several other places in the Fourth Gospel Jesus simply says of himself “I am.” The most striking occurrence is in 8:58. Jesus’ opponents have objected to his reference to the father of the Jews, Abraham; in order to show that he is himself greater than Abraham, Jesus replies, “Very truly I tell you, before Abraham was, I am” (cf. 8:24, 28; 13:19). It appears that Jesus is not simply claiming to be very old here (Abraham lived some 1,800 years earlier); by calling himself “I am” he may actually be taking the name of God. In the Jewish Scriptures, when Moses is sent by God to assist the Israelites, he asks God his name. God replies “I am who I am... Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I am has sent me to you’ ” (Exod 3:14).

If God’s name as revealed to Moses was “I am,” and Jesus in John calls himself “I am,” is he claiming to be God? His hearers appear to understand it in this way. They immediately pick up stones to execute him for blasphemy.

alone can bring eternal life. He himself is equal

explain these different portrayals of Jesus. One of

with God. He existed before he came into the

the ways they have done so is to use the socio-his—

world. He reveals God’s glory. Only those who

torical method. Before looking at how this method

receive his message can partake of the world that is

works, however, we should see what important fea—

above, only they are in the light, and only they can

tures of the Fourth Gospel can be uncovered

enter into the truth. Jesus himself is the only way to

through a redactional approach.

God: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No

one comes to the Father except through me” (14:6).

Whereas Jesus scarcely ever talks about himself in

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN FROM

the Synoptics, that is virtually all he talks about in

A REDACTIONAL PERSPECTIVE

John, and there is a close relationship here between

what he says and what he does. He says that he is the

As we have seen in our earlier discussions, redac—

one sent from God to bring life to the world, and he

tion criticism works to understand how an author

does signs to show that what he says is true.

has utilized his or her sources. Scholars have suc—

In short, John is markedly different from the

cessfully used this method with the Gospels of

Synoptics in both content and emphasis and with

Matthew and Luke, where they have posited two

respect to both Jesus’ words and his deeds. As I

sources with reasonable certainty (Mark and Q).

indicated at the outset, historians must try to

The rationale for using this method is somewhat

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more tenuous in the case of the Fourth Gospel,

On the contrary, given the sizable differences

since this author’s sources are more difficult to

between them, it appears unlikely that he did.

reconstruct. Still, John must have derived his sto—

How then can we account for the similar stories

ries about Jesus from somewhere (since he evi—

that John and the Synoptics tell on occasion? The

dently didn’t make them all up).

simplest explanation is that they would have been

One perennial question is whether John had

independently drawn from the oral traditions cir—

access to and made use of the Synoptic Gospels. The

culating about Jesus. In different regions of the

question is somewhat thorny, and we cannot delve

world, both where there were written accounts

into all of its complexities here. Instead, I will sim—

about Jesus and where there were not, some of the

ply indicate why many scholars continue to be per—

same stories would naturally have been told. The

suaded that he did not utilize the Synoptics.

story of Jesus’ Passion is one example. It appears

As we have seen, the principal grounds for

that Christians in many places told of how Jesus

assuming that one document served as a source for

was betrayed by one of his own disciples, denied by

another is their wide-ranging similarities; when they

another, and abandoned by all the rest, and of how

tell the same stories and do so in the same way, they

he was confronted by the Jewish religious leaders,

must be literarily related to one another. Thus

turned over to Pontius Pilate, and crucified for

Matthew, Mark, and Luke must have sources in

claiming to be king of the Jews. The similarities

common because they agree with one another on a

between John and the Synoptics in such stories

number of occasions, often word for word. This is

may simply derive from related oral traditions in

not the case for the Fourth Gospel. Most of John’s

circulation in their respective communities.

stories outside of the Passion narrative are found

only in John, whereas most of the stories in the

Synoptics are not found in John. If this author had

Evidence of Sources in John

used the Synoptics as sources, why would he have

Just because John does not appear to have used the

omitted so many of their stories? Or—to put the

Synoptic Gospels as sources, however, does not

burden of proof in its proper place—why should

mean that he did not use other written documents.

someone think that John used the Synoptics as

Indeed, scholars have typically pointed to three

sources when they do not have extensive verbatim

pieces of evidence to suggest that he did.

agreements, even in the stories that they happen to

share?

Differences in Writing Style.

Every author has

When thinking about the relationship of the

a distinctive style of writing. When you are famil—

New Testament writings to one another, we must

iar enough with the way someone writes, you are

constantly bear in mind that in the ancient world

able to recognize his or her work when you see it.

books were not published as they are today. In

For example, if someone were to insert a page of

the modern world, books are mass-produced and

James Joyce into a story by Mark Twain, a careful

sold all over the world, with the distribution of

reader would immediately recognize the differ—

copies taking weeks at the most. In the ancient

ence. Apart from the change of subject matter, the

world, books were copied one at a time and dis—

style itself would be a dead giveaway.

tribution was haphazard at best. In-house litera—

Nothing quite so radical occurs with the

ture was not advertised, and circulation was ran—

changes of style in the Fourth Gospel, but there

dom and uncontrolled. Suppose, for example,

are passages that appear to come from different

that the Gospel of Luke was produced in Asia

writers. We have already looked briefly, for exam—

Minor; Christians in Alexandria may not have

ple, at the prologue. Scholars have long recognized

heard about it until years later. Or if Matthew

the poetic character of this passage, which makes

was produced in Syria, the Christians of Corinth

it quite unlike the rest of the narrative. Indeed, it

may not have known of it for decades. Thus there

appears to be almost hymnic in quality, as if it were

is no guarantee that simply because John was

composed to be sung in praise of Christ. Notice,

penned some ten or fifteen years after the

for instance, how the various statements about

Synoptics, its author would have known them.

“the Word” are linked together by key terms, so

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that the end of one statement corresponds to the

The Presence of Literary Seams.

The two pre—

beginning of the next. This pattern is even easier

ceding arguments for sources in John may not

to see when the passage is read in the original

seem all that persuasive by themselves. The third

Greek, as a literal translation can show: “In the

kind of evidence, however, should give us pause.

beginning was the Word, and the Word was with

Inconsistencies in John’s narrative, sometimes

God, and God was the Word . . . in him was life,

called literary seams, provide the strongest evi—

and the life was the light of humans, and the light

dence that the author of John used several written

shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not

sources when producing his account.

extinguished it.”

Authors who compose their books by splicing

Interestingly, this careful poetic pattern is bro—

several sources together don’t always neatly cover

ken up in the two places where the subject matter

up their handiwork but sometimes leave literary

shifts away from the Word to a discussion of John

seams. The Fourth Evangelist was not a sloppy lit—

the Baptist (vv. 6–8, 15). It may be that the origi—

erary seamster, but he did leave a few traces of his

nal hymn did not include these verses. You will

work, which become evident as you study his final

notice that when they are taken out, the passage

product with care. Here are several illustrations.

flows quite smoothly without a break.

Is it possible that this hymn was written by someone other than the author of the Fourth Gospel,

1. In chapter 2, Jesus performs his “first sign”

who borrowed it for the beginning of his biographi-

(2:11) in Cana of Galilee by changing the

cal account of Jesus? Most scholars find this view

water into wine. In chapter 4, he does his “sec—

entirely plausible. Recall that the central theme of

ond sign” (4:54) after returning to Galilee

the prologue, that Jesus is the Word made flesh,

from Judea, healing the Capernaum official’s

occurs nowhere else in the entire Gospel. This may

son. The problem emerges when you read what

indicate that whoever composed these opening

happens between the first and second signs, for

verses did not produce the rest of the narrative.

John 2:23 indicates that while Jesus was in

Thus we may be dealing with different authors.

Jerusalem many people believed in him

“because they saw the signs that he was doing.”

How can this be? How can he do the first sign,

Repetitions .

There are several passages in this

and then other signs, and then the second

Gospel that appear redundant, where similar

sign? This is an example of a literary seam; in

accounts are repeated in slightly different words.

a moment I will explain how it indicates that

These passages may derive from different sources.

the author used sources.

For example, chapters 14 and 16 (parts of the

2. In John 2:23, Jesus is in Jerusalem, the capital

Farewell Discourse) are remarkably alike in their

of Judea. While there, he engages in a discus—

key themes. In both chapters Jesus says that he is

sion with Nicodemus that lasts until 3:21.

leaving the world but that the disciples should not

Then the text says, “After this Jesus and his

grieve because the Holy Spirit will come in his

disciples went into the land of Judea” (3:22).

stead; the disciples will be hated by the world, but

But they are already in the land of Judea, in

they will be instructed and encouraged by the

Spirit present among them. Why would this mes—

fact, in its capital. Here, then is another literary

sage be given twice in the same speech? It may

seam. (Some modern translations have gotten

have been repeated for emphasis, but the repeti—

around this problem by mistranslating verse 22

tion seems less emphatic than simply redundant.

to say that they went into the “countryside of

Another explanation might be that the author

Judea,” but this is not the meaning of the

had access to two different accounts of Jesus’ last

Greek word for “land.”)

words to his disciples, which were similar in their

3. In John 5:1, Jesus goes to Jerusalem, where he

general themes but somewhat different in their

spends the entire chapter healing and teach—

wording. When he composed his Gospel, he

ing. The author’s comment after this discourse,

included them both.

however, is somewhat puzzling: “After this,

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Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of

taken the two accounts and spliced them together,

Galilee” (6:1). How could he go to the other

inserting account B into account A, between what

side of the sea if he is not already on one of its

is now the end of chapter 14 and the beginning of

sides? In fact, he is nowhere near the Sea of

chapter 18, this would explain all the problems we

Galilee; he is in Jerusalem of Judea.

have discussed. There is a repetition between chap—

4. At Jesus’ last meal with his disciples, Peter asks,

ters 14 and 16 because the author used two

“Lord, where are you going?” (13:36). A few

accounts of the same event and joined them togeth—

verses later, Thomas says to Jesus, “Lord, we do

er. Moreover, Jesus states that “no one asks me,

not know where you are going” (14:5). Oddly

‘Where are you going?’ ” because in account B,

enough, several minutes later, Jesus states, “But

(chaps. 15–17) no one had asked him where he was

going; the questions of Peter and Thomas were orig—

now I am going to him who sent me; yet none

inally found in the other account (A). Finally, in

of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’ ” (16:5)!

account A Jesus had said, “Arise, let us go,” and he

5. At the end of chapter 14, after delivering a

and his disciples immediately got up and went. In

speech of nearly a chapter and a half, Jesus says

the final version of John they do not get up and go

to his disciples, “Rise, let us be on our way”

for three chapters because account B was interposed

(14:31). The reader might expect them to get up

between two verses (14:31 and 18:1) that stood

and go, but instead Jesus launches into another

together in account A.

discourse: “I am the true vine, and my Father is

the vinegrower . . . “ (15:1). This discourse is not

just a few words spoken on the way out the door.

Character of the Sources in John

The speech goes on for all of chapter 15, all of

Thus the theory of written sources behind the

chapter 16, and leads into the prayer that takes

Fourth Gospel explains many of the literary prob—

up all of chapter 17. Jesus and the disciples do

lems of the narrative. These sources obviously no

not leave until 18:1. Why would Jesus say, “Rise,

longer survive, but we can make some inferences

let us go,” and then not leave for three chapters?

about them.

Readers have devised various ways of explaining these kinds of literary problems over the years,

The Signs Source.

Some of the seams that we

but the simplest explanation is probably that the

have observed appear to suggest that the author

author decided to weave different written sources

incorporated a source that described the signs of

into his narrative. To show how this theory works,

Jesus, written to persuade people that he was the

we can consider the Farewell Discourse. Recall the

messiah, the Son of God. There are seven signs in

various problems in this portion of the Gospel:

the Gospel; it is possible that these were all origi—

there appears to be a repetition of material

nal to the source. You may recall that seven is the

between chapters 14 and 16, and there are at least

perfect number, the number of God; is it an acci—

two literary “seams” here, one involving the ques—

dent that there were seven signs?

tion of where Jesus is going (13:36; 14:5; 16:5) and

The source may have described the signs that

the other involving Jesus’ injunction for them all

Jesus did in sequence and enumerated each one

to get up and leave (14:31; 18:1).

(“This is the first sign that Jesus did,” “This is the sec—

The theory of sources can solve these problems.

ond sign,” and so on). If so, the evangelist kept the

Suppose for the sake of argument that the author

first two enumerations (2:11 and 4:54) but for some

had two different accounts (A and B) of what hap—

unknown reason eliminated the others. Keeping the

pened at Jesus’ last meal with his disciples. Suppose

first two, however, left a seam in his narrative, since

further that account A told the stories that are now

Jesus does other signs between them (2:23).

located in chapters 13, 14, and 18, and account B

The signs source may well have concluded after

told the stories found in chapters 15, 16, and 17 (see

its most impressive sign, the raising of Lazarus, with

fig. 10.3). If the author of the Fourth Gospel had

the words that are now found in 20:30–31: “Now

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Source A

Source A

(chapters 13–14)

(chapter 18)

Source B

(chapters 15–17)

Figure 10.3 Sources in the Farewell Discourse.

Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his dis—

hymn to Christ. Something similar can be said of

ciples, which are not written in this book. But these

the last chapter, in which Jesus makes a final

are written so that you may come to believe that

appearance to several of his disciples after his res—

Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that

urrection (he had already appeared to them in

through believing you may have life in his name.”

chapter 20). An earlier edition of the Gospel

The book of signs, then, would have been some

appears to have ended with the words I have just

kind of missionary tractate designed to convince

quoted from 20:30–31, which certainly sound like

Jews of Jesus’ identity through his miraculous deeds.

the ending of a book. The final chapter was added

At some point the events it describes would have

later to record one other incident of significance

been combined with sayings of Jesus that related

to the author (see box 10.5). It is here that Jesus

closely to the things he did. Thus, in John, Jesus not

indicates that Peter will be martyred for his faith

only feeds the 5,000 but also claims to be the bread

and where he is mistakenly understood to say that

of life, he not only heals the blind but also claims to

the unnamed “beloved disciple” will not die prior

be the light of the world, he not only raises the dead

to his own return.

but also claims to be the resurrection and the life.

Discourse Sources.

Jesus’ lengthy speeches in

this Gospel appear to have come from a source;

THE SOCIO-

indeed, as we have seen, there must have been

HISTORICAL METHOD

more than one of them. This, at least, is the best

explanation for the literary problems in the

Now that we have examined the Fourth Gospel in

Farewell Discourse (chaps. 13–17). The other say—

light of all of the other methods of analysis that we

ings may derive from the same or similar sources.

have learned, we are in a position to explore yet

another approach that scholars have taken in

studying the New Testament narratives. The socio-

Passion Source.

Most scholars are persuaded that

historical method asks an entirely different set of

John’s Passion narrative (chaps. 18–20) derives from

questions from those we have already addressed,

a source that was similar in many ways to the narra—

but it bases these questions, and their answers, on

tive that is found in Mark. It is difficult to know,

the kinds of information that we have just uncov—

however, whether the source was written or oral.

ered in our study. We have seen that the author of

the Fourth Gospel created a Greco-Roman biogra-

Other Sources.

We have already seen that the

phy of Jesus based on a number of written and oral

prologue to the Gospel appears to have been

sources that were available to him. We have exam—

derived from a source, possibly an early Christian

ined some of the important themes in his final

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SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 10.5 The Death of the Beloved Disciple

in the Johannine Community

John 21:21–3 preserves an interesting conversation between the resurrected Jesus and Peter. When Peter asks him about the unnamed “beloved disciple,” Jesus responds, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me.” The author goes on to explain that some people misunderstood Jesus’ words as a promise that this disciple would not die before Jesus returned from heaven at the end of the age, but that, in fact, Jesus had not explicitly said this. Why would the author of this story want to correct this misunderstanding?

In the opinion of some scholars, it was because some members of the Johannine community had expected that their beloved leader, this unnamed disciple, would not die before the coming of the end. When he did, they were thrown into confusion. Had the Lord gone back on his promise? This author constructs the story to explain that Jesus never had said “that he would not die” (21:23). If this interpretation is correct, then the Gospel would have been published in its final form, with the addition of chapter 21, only after the death of the beloved disciple, and probably after the martyrdom of Peter as well (see 21:18–19).

product and have seen how these themes differ

depending on the perspective of the author, as

from those found in other early Gospels.

derived from his personal experiences.

I have hinted, though, that the themes found in

Investigators using the socio-historical ap—

the Fourth Gospel are not always internally con—

proach to a text are interested in knowing how the

sistent, that is to say, there appear to be several dif—

historical experiences of an author and his or her

ferent perspectives embodied here, rather than

social group (e.g., a family, a church, army, nation,

only one. This should come as no surprise given

or any other group of persons who are united

what we have seen about the sources of this book.

together under some conditions) affected the pre—

The author utilized earlier accounts written by

sentation of the material. They focus on the rela—

other authors, and no doubt each author had his or

tionship between a literary text and the social his—

her own perspective on Jesus and the meaning of

tory of its author and his or her community.

what he said and did. By adopting a variety of

The theory behind the method can be stated

sources, the author necessarily incorporated a

simply: the social history of a community will

range of views about Jesus.

affect the way it preserves its traditions. Let me

Different people have different ways of looking

illustrate the theory with a modern example,

at the world and of interpreting important events,

before applying it to the traditions about Jesus pre—

and not only because they have different personal—

served in the Fourth Gospel. On any given

ities and different brains. People also look at the

Sunday, thanks to the use of a standardized lec—

world differently because they have experienced it

tionary in many Christian denominations, church

differently. The average New Yorker and the aver—

congregations around the globe read the same pas—

age Muscovite had very different perceptions of

sage of Scripture and hear sermons based on these

the cold war, in no small measure because their

passages. Even within the same city, different

experiences of it were so different. Accounts of

churches hear different kinds of sermons, despite

World War II written by American, German, and

the fact that the Scriptural passages are the same.

Russian soldiers might contain similar informa—

These differences relate not only to the personali—

tion, but each would be slanted differently,

ty and training of the preachers but also to the life

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experiences of the audiences that they are address—

least possible that the social experiences of the

ing. To take an obvious example, someone in a

authors who produced these sources contributed to

black church in Soweto, South Africa, in the

their distinctive understandings. If so, then it is

1980s, when apartheid was official policy, would

also possible, in theory, for us to analyze the

have heard a very different kind of sermon from

sources of the Fourth Gospel in order to trace the

someone in a white upper-class church in subur—

social history of the community of the authors

ban America. For preachers attempt to relate a

who produced them.

biblical text to the experiences of their communities, to show how it continues to speak to them in

their struggles, whatever these might be.

Theoretically, it would be possible to listen to a

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

set of sermons from an unknown church and

FROM A SOCIO-

reconstruct aspects of the congregation’s social

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

context on the basis of what was heard. For

instance, if a sermon offers divine solace to those

To begin we should examine the different themat—

who suffer under the oppressive policies of a pow—

ic emphases in the stories of John, which ultimate—

erful minority, one might reasonably assume that

ly may derive from different sources. We know that

the congregation has experienced such policies

one of the distinctive features of this Gospel is the

and requires such solace. If a sermon on the same

exalted view of Jesus, which is emphasized in so

text challenges the complacency of those who feel

many of its narratives. But you may have noticed in

secure and who have no care for the downtrodden,

your own reading of the Gospel that not every story

one might conclude, depending on what else is

shares this exalted perspective. In fact, a number of

said, that it was delivered to a relatively affluent

John’s stories portray Jesus, not as an elevated

congregation as a call for them to heed their

divine being come from heaven, but as a very

Christian duties. Thus there is a close interrela—

human character. To use the jargon employed by

tionship between an author’s social experiences

historians of Christian doctrine, portions of this

and the text (in this case, the sermon) that he or

narrative evidence a “high” christology, in which

she produces.

Jesus is portrayed as fully divine, and others show a

What if we do not have direct access to these

“low” christology, in which he is portrayed as

social experiences, but only to the text? Then if we

human, and nothing more.

want to learn something about the underlying

In the modern world, many Christians sub—

social history we have no recourse but to use the

scribe to both a high and a low christology, in

text itself, reasoning backwards from what it says

which Jesus is thought to be both fully divine and

to the social experiences that it appears to presup—

fully human. Did both of these perspectives devel—

pose. This is obviously a tricky business, but it can

op simultaneously, so that the earliest Christians

yield some interesting results if done carefully. As

already thought of Jesus as God and man? In the

with all of the other methods we have examined,

Synoptic Gospels, even though Jesus is portrayed

it is much easier to show how the method works in

somewhat as a Hellenistic divine man, like

practice than to explain it in the abstract. When

Apollonius of Tyana, for example, there was no

applied to the Fourth Gospel, the method works

sense there that he had existed in eternity past,

like this: We have reason to think that there were

that he was the creator of the universe, or that he

several sources lying behind this author’s account.

was equal to the one true God. Scholars have long

These sources must have come from different peri—

recognized that the notion of Jesus’ divinity may

ods in the community’s history, since all the

have developed over a period of time; as

authors would presumably not be writing at pre—

Christians began to reflect more and more on who

cisely the same moment. Moreover, in some

Jesus was, they began to ascribe greater and greater

important aspects these sources have different

honors to him. Indeed, in the Fourth Gospel we

ways of understanding their subject matter. It is at

are able to trace the development of christology





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F P O

F P O

Figure 10.4 Two portrayals of Jesus as the Good Shepherd (see John 10), one from an ancient Christian sarcophagus and the other from a fifth-century mosaic in Ravenna, Italy.

within one particular community, from its early

follow him call him “rabbi” (v. 38), and one of

reflections of Jesus as a human chosen by God to

them, Andrew, calls him the “messiah” (v. 41).

fulfill the task of salvation to its later conclusion

Each of these terms makes sense as an identifica—

that Jesus was himself divine and the full equal

tion of Jesus within a Jewish context. As we have

with God. This development appears to have been

seen, the “lamb of God” refers to the Passover

intimately related to the social experiences of the

lamb that was sacrificed in commemoration of the

community that told the stories.

exodus from Egypt; for John, Jesus is the lamb

because his death brings about the salvation celebrated in the Passover meal (see Chapter 3). The

Divergent Christologies

term “rabbi” was a common designation for a

in the Johannine Community

Jewish teacher, and the term “messiah” referred to

An interesting example of an account that

the future deliverer of the people of Israel.

embodies a low christology comes in the story of

None of these terms suggests that the author of

the first disciples in 1:35–42. We are probably jus—

this story understood Jesus to be divine in any way.

tified in supposing that the story was in circula—

Neither passover lambs nor rabbis were divine, and

tion prior to the writing of the Fourth Gospel, and

the messiah was a human chosen by God, not God

that the author of this Gospel heard it (or read it)

himself. Moreover, these are terms that would make

and incorporated it into his narrative after the

sense to a Jewish, rather than to a Gentile, audience.

prologue, which he derived from a different

What might this tell us about the social context

source. In what social context would the story

within which a story like this was told? Here is an

have been told originally?

account of two Jews who come to Jesus and discov—

You will notice that Jesus is called three differ—

er that he is the one they have been waiting for, the

ent things in this account: John the Baptist calls

messiah. It appears to be the kind of story that would

him “the lamb of God” (v. 36), the disciples who

have originally been told by Jews to other Jews, to

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show them that Jesus is to be recognized as the

ans would argue that the history of the commu—

Jewish messiah (and a rabbi, and the lamb of God).

nity affected the ways that people told the stories

One other feature of this story should be noted.

about Jesus and that critical events in this histo—

On three occasions the author explains the terms

ry led to changes in the community’s under—

that he uses; he interprets “rabbi” as “teacher” (v.

standing of Jesus and his relationship to the peo—

38), “messiah” as “Christ” (v. 41), and “Cephas” as

ple to whom he came. Scholars who have

“Peter” (v. 42). These interpretations are neces—

developed this idea have traced the community’s

sary because the three terms are not Greek, the

history through three stages.

language of the Fourth Gospel, but Aramaic. Why

would some of the key terms of the story be in

Aramaic, and why would the author have to trans-

The History of the Johannine Community

late them? Perhaps the most likely explanation is

that the story was originally told in Aramaic;

Stage One: In the Synagogue.

The oldest stories

when it was eventually translated into Greek, sev—

of the Fourth Gospel appear to indicate that the

eral of its important terms were left in the original

Johannine community originated as a group of Jews

language, as sometimes happens, for example,

who came to believe that Jesus was the messiah and

with a punch line when an anecdote is told to a

who nonetheless continued to maintain their

bilingual audience. The author of the Fourth

Jewish identity and to worship in their Jewish syn—

Gospel, who incorporated the story into his

agogue. We do not know where exactly this com—

account, realized that his readers (or at least some

munity was originally located, it may have been

of them) did not know Aramaic, and so he trans—

someplace in Palestine where Aramaic was spoken.

lated the terms for them.

The evidence for these historical conclusions

If this reconstruction of events is correct, then

comes from our only source of information, the

the story would be very old by the time it came to

Gospel of John itself. Some of John’s stories

the author of the Fourth Gospel. It would have

emphasize Jesus’ Jewishness and narrate how

originally been told among Aramaic-speaking

some Jews came to identify him as the Jewish

Christians converted from Judaism, presumably

messiah. Since this identification of the messiah

those living in Palestine, perhaps not too distant

would have been of no interest to pagans (it’s a

in time from Jesus himself. The story is about how

reference to the deliverer of Israel), it makes

Jesus fulfills the expectations of Jews, and it is

sense that the stories would have been told with—

designed to show how Jews might come to believe

in Jewish communities. Since the stories presup—

in him as the messiah. There is nothing in this

pose knowledge of Jesus’ own mother tongue,

story, however, to suggest that he is divine.

Aramaic, they appear to be among the most

There are other stories, however, in which Jesus

ancient accounts of the Gospel.

is portrayed as divine, and in which this is the sin—

The Johannine community of Jewish believers

gle most important thing to know about him. His

may have owed its existence to a follower of Jesus

divinity, for example, is one of the leading points

whom they later called “the beloved disciple.” This

of the prologue. In addition, the prologue, along

enigmatic figure appears several times in the course

with many other stories in the Gospel, gives no

of the Gospel and appears to have enjoyed a posi—

indication of being originally composed in

tion of prominence among those who told the sto—

Aramaic. Thus, the prologue might not be as old

ries (e.g., see John 13:23; 19:26–27; 20:2–8).

as the story of the call of the first disciples.

It appears that these Jewish converts attempted

Moreover, the prologue, and other stories like it,

to proselytize other members of their Jewish syna—

do not have the kind of friendly disposition toward

gogue. Evidence for this hypothesis is found not

the Jews that we find here in the account of the

only in such stories as the call of the disciples,

call of the disciples (e.g., see 1:11).

which presumably would have been told in order to

How does one explain these thematic differ—

show how some Jews had recognized Jesus as their

ences among the stories of John? Social histori—

messiah, but also, perhaps, in the signs source. You

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may recall the theory that this source ended with

and, on the other, to heightened efforts at evange—

the words now found in 20:30–31: “Jesus did many

lism on the part of the Christian Jews. Eventually,

other signs in the presence of his disciples, which

these believers in Jesus became something more

are not written in this book. But these are written

than a headache. Perhaps because of their persistent

so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the

badgering of the skeptical and their refusal to keep

Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believ—

their views to themselves, or perhaps for some other

ing you may have life in his name.” The purpose of

unknown reason, this group of believers in Jesus was

the signs source, in other words, was missionary. It

forced to leave the Jewish community.

recorded the miraculous deeds of Jesus to convince

There is some evidence within the Gospel of

Jews that Jesus was the messiah. Originally, then,

John itself that the Jewish Christians within the

the signs were not designed to show that Jesus was

synagogue were at some point forced to leave.

God; they indicated that he was empowered by God

Several scholars have found the most compelling

as his representative. Jesus was still understood to be

piece of evidence in the healing story of John 9. In

a special human being at the stage of the communi—

this account, Jesus heals a man who had been born

ty’s history in which the stories were first told, but

blind. The Jewish authorities take umbrage at this

he was not yet thought of as divine.

action because it occurred on the Sabbath. They

interrogate the man who has been healed, trying to

learn how he gained his sight. When he identifies

Stage Two: Excluded from the Synagogue.

It is

Jesus as the one who healed him, they refuse to

impossible to say how long the Jews of this com—

believe it and call in his parents to uncover the

munity remained in their synagogue without caus—

truth. His parents, however, refuse to answer their

ing a major disturbance. What does become clear

questions, insisting that since he is of age they

from several of the stories of the Fourth Gospel is

should ask the man himself. Then the author

that a significant disruption eventually took place

explains why the man’s parents refuse to cooperate,

in which the Jews who believed in Jesus were

in one of the most intriguing verses of the entire

excluded from the synagogue. There is no indica—

Gospel: “His parents said this because they were

tion of exactly what led to this exclusion, but it is

afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed

not difficult to paint a plausible scenario. First-cen—

that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah

tury Jews by and large rejected any idea that Jesus

would be put out of the synagogue” (9:22).

could be the messiah. For most of them, the messi—

This verse is significant from a socio-histori—

ah was to be a figure of grandeur and power, for

cal perspective because we know that there was

example, a heavenly being sent to rule the earth or

no official policy against accepting Jesus (or any—

a great warrior-king who would overthrow the

one else) as messiah during his lifetime. On the

oppressive forces of Rome and renew David’s king—

other hand, some Jewish synagogues evidently

dom in Jerusalem. Jesus was clearly nothing of the

did begin to exclude members who believed in

sort. On the contrary, he was an itinerant preacher

Jesus’ messiahship towards the end of the first

who was executed for treason against the state.

century. So the story of Jesus healing the blind

So long as the Jews who believed in Jesus kept a

man reflects the experience of the later commu—

low profile, keeping their notions to themselves,

nity that stood behind the Fourth Gospel. These

there was probably no problem with their worship—

believers in Jesus had been expelled from the

ping in the synagogue. From its earliest days, how—

Jewish community, the community, presumably,

ever, Christianity was a missionary religion, dedicat—

of their families and friends and neighbors, in

ed to converting others to faith in Jesus. In the

which they had worshipped God and had fellow—

Johannine community, as in most other Jewish com—

ship with one another.

munities, the Christians were no doubt rejected by

This expulsion from their synagogue had seri—

the majority of the Jews and probably mocked and

ous implications for the Christian community’s

marginalized. This may have led, on the one hand,

social life and for the way it began to understand

to increased antagonism from non-Christian Jews

its world and its stories about its messiah, Jesus.

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Stage Three: Against the Synagogue.

Sociologists

not perceive it. Jesus was from above, and those

have studied a number of religious communities

who recognized only the things of this earth could

that have been excluded from larger social groups

not perceive him (3:31–36).

and forced to carry on their communal activities

Thus, it appears that the christological focus of

on their own. The findings of these various studies

this community shifted radically after its exclusion

are of some interest for understanding how the

from the synagogue. Jesus, to be sure, was still

views of the Johannine community appear to have

thought of as a rabbi, as the lamb of God, and as

developed with the passing of time.

the messiah, but he was much more than that. For

Religious groups (sometimes called “sects”) that

these excluded Christians, Jesus was unique in

split off from larger communities often feel perse—

knowing about God; he was the one who brought

cuted, many times with considerable justification,

the truth of God to his people. How did he know

and build ideological walls around themselves for

this truth? The community came to think that

protection. A kind of fortress mentality develops, in

Jesus knew God because he had himself come from

which the small splinter group begins to think that

God. He was the man sent from heaven, come to

it has been excluded because those of the larger

deliver the message of God to his people before

society are willfully ignorant of the truth, or are evil,

returning to his Father. Only those who ultimate—

or demonically possessed. There can arise a kind of

ly belonged to God could receive this truth; only

“us versus them” mentality, in which only those on

those who were born “from above” could enter

the inside are “in the know” and stand “in the

into God’s kingdom (3:3).

light.” On the outside, in the large community that

The social context of exclusion from the syna—

has excluded them, there is only falsehood and

gogue thus led these Johannine Christians to see

error; to dwell there is to dwell in the darkness.

Jesus as something more than a man representing

The later traditions embodied in the Gospel of

God or as one sent to deliver God’s message. He

John appear to be rooted in such dualities of truth

came to be understood as the embodiment of that

versus error, light versus darkness, the children of

message itself. Jesus was himself God’s Word. As

God versus the children of the devil, the followers

his Word, he had existed with God from the

of Jesus versus “the Jews.” This latter phrase has

beginning and was himself God, in a sense. He was

puzzled readers of the Gospel over the years. How

God’s equal, existent from eternity past, who

can the enemies of Jesus so consistently be called

became human to communicate God’s truth to his

“the Jews”? Weren’t Jesus and his own followers

own. Those who saw him saw the Father, those

Jews? How then can “the Jews” be condemned?

who heard him heard the Father, and those who

The answer appears to lie in the experiences of

rejected him rejected the Father.

the Christian community at the time. Even

In the later stages of the Johannine community

though its members had originally been drawn

a number of memorable stories, and redactions of

from the Jewish community, most Jews in the local

earlier stories, came to be told, such as the stories

synagogue had by and large rejected their message.

in which Jesus claims, “Before Abraham was, I am”

The synagogue therefore became the enemy and

(8:58) and “I and the Father are one” (10:30).

took on a demonic hue in their eyes. Why had its

Also, at some point in its later history, someone

members so thoroughly and vigorously rejected

within this Christian community composed a

the message of Jesus? In the view of the Johannine

hymn to Christ as the Word of God become flesh:

Christians, it must have been because they were

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was

alienated from the truth and could not understand

with God, and the Word was God. All things came

it even if they heard it. Jesus was the representa—

into being through him, and without him not even

tive of God, and the enemies of God could not

one thing came into being. In him was life, and the

possibly accept his representative. Indeed, the

life was the light of all people. And the Word

message of Jesus was so thoroughly divine, so com—

became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen

pletely focused on things of heaven, that those

his glory” (1:1–14). The author of the Fourth

whose minds were set on things of this world could

Gospel eventually attached this moving hymn to

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SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 10.6 John’s De-Apocalypticized Gospel

We have already seen that Luke’s Gospel tones down the apocalyptic character of Jesus’

proclamation, as it is found, for example, in the Gospel of Mark. In John’s Gospel, the apocalyptic message is toned down even more. For John, eternal life is not a future event. As the author puts it early on in the narrative, using the present tense: “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life” (3:36). Eternal life in this Gospel does not come at the end of time, when the Son of Man arrives on the clouds of heaven and brings in the kingdom. Eternal life is here and now, for all who believe in Jesus. That is why Jesus does not deliver an “apocalyptic discourse” in this Gospel (cf. Mark 13) or speak about the coming Son of Man or the imminent kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God is entered by those who have faith in Jesus, in the present (cf. 3:3).

That a person’s standing before God is determined not by the future resurrection, but the present relationship with Jesus is illustrated by John’s account of the dialogue between Jesus and Martha in the story of Lazarus. Jesus informs Martha that her brother will rise again (11:23). She thinks he is referring to the resurrection at the end of time, and agrees with him (11:24), but he corrects her. He is referring to possibilities in the present, not the future. “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die” (11:25–26).

In Chapter 15 we will see that Jewish apocalyptists maintained a dualistic view of the world, in which this age belonged to the forces of evil whereas the age to come belonged to God. In John’s Gospel this dualism does not have a temporal dimension (this age and the future age) but a spatial one (this world and the world that is above). Those who are from the world that is above belong to God, those from below belong to the Devil. How does one belong to the world that is above? By believing in the one who has come from that world, Jesus (3:31). Thus, in this Gospel Jesus’ proclamation is no longer an apocalyptic appeal to repent in the face of a coming judgment; it is an appeal to believe in the one sent from heaven so as to have eternal life in the here and now. John, in short, presents a de-apocalypticized version of Jesus’ teaching.

(For a remnant of the older apocalyptic view, found even here, see 5:28–29.) his narrative, providing a prologue that explained

couple of comments made in the text itself: (a) the

his understanding of Jesus, as narrated in the vari—

reference to an eyewitness who beheld the water

ous stories that he had inherited from his tradition.

and blood coming from Jesus’ side at his crucifixion (19:35) and (b) the allusion to the beloved

disciple as the one who bore witness and wrote

THE AUTHOR

about these things (21:24).

OF THE FOURTH GOSPEL

There are serious questions, however, about

whether these verses should be taken to indicate

Like Mark, Matthew, Luke, and Acts, the Gospel

that the beloved disciple authored the Gospel. For

of John was written anonymously. Since the second

example, 19:35 says nothing about who actually

century, however, it has been customarily attrib—

wrote down the traditions, but only indicates that

uted to John the son of Zebedee, commonly

the disciple who witnessed Jesus’ death spoke the

thought to be the mysterious “beloved disciple.”

truth (“He who saw this has testified so that you

The idea that one of Jesus’ own followers

also may believe. His testimony is true, and he

authored the book has traditionally been based on a

knows that he tells the truth”). Furthermore,

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21:24 indicates that, whoever this disciple may

could probably be read either way. For what it is

have been, it was someone other than the author

worth, the book of Acts suggests that John, the

of the final form of the book. Notice how the verse

son of Zebedee, was uneducated and unable to

differentiates between the “disciple who is testify—

read and write (the literal meaning of the Greek

ing to these things and has written them” and the

phrase “uneducated and ordinary”; Acts 4:13).

author who is describing them: “we [i.e., someone

In any event, it should be clear from our analysis

other than the disciple himself] know that his tes—

that the Fourth Gospel was probably not the literary

timony is true.”

product of a single author. Obviously, one person

Some of the traditions of this Gospel, then,

was responsible for the final product, but that per—

may ultimately go back to the preaching of one of

son, whoever he or she was, constructed the Gospel

the original followers of Jesus, but that is not the

out of a number of preexisting sources that had cir—

same thing as saying that he himself wrote the

culated within the community over a period of

Gospel. Could this unnamed disciple have been

years. The author appears to have been a native

John the son of Zebedee? One of the puzzling fea—

speaker of Greek living outside of Palestine. Since

tures of this Gospel is that John is never men—

some of the traditions presuppose a Palestinian ori—

tioned by name here. Those who think that he

gin (given the Aramaic words), it may be that the

wrote the Gospel claim that he made no explicit

community relocated to a Greek-speaking area and

reference to himself out of modesty. Not surpris—

acquired a large number of converts there at some

ingly, those who think he did not write it argue

point of its history. Whether the author accompa—

just the opposite, that he is not named because he

nied the community from the beginning or was a rel—

was an insignificant figure in Jesus’ story for the

ative latecomer is an issue that can probably never

members of this community. Indeed, the evidence

be resolved.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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and incisive discussion of the major themes of the

unique features of John’s Gospel for beginning students.

Fourth Gospel, for beginning students.

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# CHAPTER 11

From John’s Jesus to the Gnostic Christ:

The Johannine Epistles and Beyond

Three other books in the New Testament stem

piece of private or public correspondence sent

from the same community as the Fourth Gospel.

through the ancient equivalent of the mail.

The Johannine epistles are located near the end of

Usually this involved having someone agree to

the New Testament among the other “general

hand deliver the letter, either a person sent spe—

epistles.” These epistles are called “general” or

cially for the task or someone known to be travel-

“catholic,” from a Greek word that means “univering in the right direction.

sal,” in part because they were traditionally

Letters were a common form of written com—

thought to address general problems experienced

munication in the ancient world, and people

by Christians everywhere, as opposed to the

wrote a number of different kinds, as can be seen

Pauline epistles, which were directed to particular

in the thousands of samples that have survived

situations. As will become increasingly clear, how—

from antiquity. Some letters were collected and

ever, this classification is not particularly apt: each

published by famous authors like Cicero, Seneca,

of the general epistles also deals with specific prob—

and Pliny the Younger. Others were written by pri—

lems of specific communities.

vate and otherwise unknown individuals and dis—

Nowhere is this more evident than with 1, 2,

carded by their recipients, only to be discovered in

and 3 John. These books are particularly impor—

modern times by archaeologists who make a living

tant for our study of early Christianity because

out of digging through ancient trash heaps buried

they address members of the Johannine communi—

in the sands of Egypt.

ty some time after the Gospel was produced. Just as

In the modern world, different kinds of letters

we can use that earlier writing to reconstruct the

require different kinds of writing conventions. A

history of the community from its early days down

cover letter that you send with your resume to a

to the penning of the Gospel, so also we can use

prospective employer will look very different from

the epistles to determine some of the key events

a letter that you send home from school or a note

that transpired subsequently.

that you dash off to a boyfriend or girlfriend.

Likewise, in the ancient world, private letters to

friends differed from open letters to be read by

THE QUESTIONS

everyone; letters of recommendation differed from

OF GENRE AND AUTHOR

literary letters discussing important topics for educated audiences; and public letters persuading a

As we have already seen, well over half of the New

community to engage in a certain course of action

Testament writings (seventeen out of twenty-seven

differed from private letters to governmental offi—

books) are epistles. An epistle is a letter, that is, a

cials that petitioned for a particular cause.

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Private letters in the ancient world, unlike

an expression of hope of being able to see one

modern ones, generally began by identifying the

another face to face, greetings to others in the

person writing the letter, either by name or, in rare

family or community, a farewell, and sometimes a

cases, by some other descriptive term (see 3 John

final prayer and well-wishing (see box 11.1).

1). This identification was followed by an indica—

The letters of the Johannine community that

tion, usually by name, of the person being

have made it into the New Testament are not

addressed. Normally the author included some

nearly so difficult to read as the Gospels. The epis—

form of greeting and well-wishing at the outset,

tles of 2 John and 3 John take up only a page each,

perhaps a prayer on the recipients’ behalf and an

about average for most letters from the ancient

expression of thankfulness to the gods for them. In

world. These, in fact, are the two shortest books of

interpreting ancient letters, these introductory

the entire New Testament. One of the first things

conventions cannot be taken too literally as

that may strike you as you read these two letters is

expressing the author’s real feelings, any more

that they make full use of the standard conven—

than modern conventions (as, for example, when

tions of letters that I have just mentioned. There

I addressed the IRS agent in charge of my income

is therefore little doubt that these two books are

tax audit as “Dear” Mr. Sanders).

actually letters, that is, hand-delivered pieces of

After these introductory items would come the

correspondence. The letter of 2 John is written by

body of the letter, in which the subject of the let—

someone who identifies himself as “the elder” to a

ter and the author’s concerns were expressed.

mysterious person called “the elect lady.” In the

Finally, the letter might conclude with some words

course of his letter, however, the author stops

of encouragement or consolation or admonition,

speaking to this “lady” and begins to address a

SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 11.1 A Letter from Greco-Roman Egypt

Private letters in the Greco-Roman world were written for many of the same reasons they are written today. Consider the following letter that a young man, Aurelius Dius, sent to his father, Aurelius Horion. Away at school, he wrote to assure his father that he was doing his homework and living responsibly. One might wonder why he greets so many people back home, many of whom he calls “mother” and “father,” evidently out of love and respect. Is the boy homesick? The letter comes from Egypt and was written some time during the third century of the Common Era.

Aurelius Dius, to Aurelius Horion, my sweetest Father. Many greetings! I say a prayer to the gods of this region every day for you. Do not be worried about our studies, father. We are working hard and getting plenty of sleep, so that everything will go well with us. Greet my mother Tamiae and my sisters Tnepherous and Philous; also greet my brother Patermouthis and my sister Thermouthis; greet also my brother Heracleis and my brother Kollouchis; and greet my father Melanus and my mother Timpesouris and her son. Greetings to all of you from Gaia, and from my father Horion and Thermouthis.

I pray that you enjoy good health, father. ( Oxyrhynchus Papyri 10, no. 1296, author’s translation)

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group of people (“you” plural, starting in v. 6).

munity at a somewhat later time, a person who

This shift has led most scholars to assume that the

knew the teachings found in the Gospel and who

term “elect lady” refers to a Christian community,

addressed problems that had arisen in the commu—

a group of people who are considered to be the

nity after the Gospel had been circulated.

chosen of God. If this assumption is correct, then

On the one hand, the author of 1, 2, and 3

2 John is a letter in which a Christian leader (the

John seems to understand the Christian faith in

elder) is addressing problems in a local church of a

terms quite similar to those found in the Fourth

different community.

Gospel, for a number of themes that are impor—

The letter of 3 John appears to have the same

tant in the Gospel appear here in the epistles as

author. The writing style and many of the themes

well (see box 11.2). Yet the writing styles are not

are the same, and again the author identifies him—

the same, and the problems in the community

self as “the elder.” In this instance, however, he

appear to be quite different. As one salient exam—

addresses not an entire community but an individ—

ple, the problem of the community’s relationship

ual named Gaius, lending his support to Gaius’s

to the Jewish synagogue, one of the primary conside in a dispute that has arisen in the church.

cerns of the Fourth Gospel, is completely missing

Whereas both of these writings appear to be

from these epistles. Perhaps with the passing of

genuine letters, 1 John does not share their literary

time, the pain of this earlier crisis faded and new

conventions. Notice that the author does not

problems arose; then a new author, intimately

introduce himself or address his recipients directly

familiar with his community’s Gospel and influ—

at the outset, nor does he offer a greeting, prayer,

enced by the ways it understood the faith, wrote

or thanksgiving on their behalf. Moreover, at the

to address these problems. This would explain

end there are no closing greetings, well-wishings,

both the similarities of the epistles to the Gospel

final prayers, or even a farewell. On the other

and the differences.

hand, the author does speak to his audience as

those to whom he is “writing” (1:4; 2:12–14). 1

John is therefore less like an actual letter and more

like a persuasive essay written to a community, a

THE NEW TESTAMENT

treatise intended to convince its recipients to

EPISTOLARY LITERATURE AND

engage in a certain course of action. There are

THE CONTEXTUAL METHOD

other actual letters from antiquity that served as

persuasive essays; this particular one appears to

With the Johannine epistles we come to the first

have been sent without the conventions typically

New Testament writings of our study that are not,

found in epistles. Possibly it was sent with a sepa—

strictly speaking, narratives. The Gospels each narrate cover letter that no longer survives. For the

rate accounts of Jesus’ words, deeds, and experi—

sake of convenience, I will continue to call this

ences, and the book of Acts recounts the words,

book of 1 John an epistle, even though technical—

deeds, and experiences of several of his apostles.

ly speaking it is not.

The epistles, on the other hand, are writings of

It is reasonably clear that the author who wrote

Christian leaders to individuals or churches to

the letters of 2 and 3 John also produced this essay.

address problems that have arisen in their commu—

Much of the vocabulary and many of the themes

nities. Indeed, it is safe to say that all of the New

are the same, as is the writing style and the histor—

Testament epistles are written in response to situa—

ical situation that the book appears to presuppose.

tions that the authors felt a need to address. Given

Was this author also the one who produced the

the “occasional” nature of these letter (meaning

final version of the Gospel of John near the end of

they were written for certain occasions), how

the first century? Scholars have debated the issue

should we go about studying them? The question,

extensively. Today, the majority of scholars believe

of course, relates not only to the Johannine epistles

that this writer was not the author of the Gospel;

but to all the others as well, including those

rather, he was someone living in the same com—

appearing under the name of the apostle Paul.

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# CHAPTER 11

FROM JOHN’S JESUS TO THE GNOSTIC CHRIST

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SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 11.2 The Gospel and Epistles of John:

Some Thematic Similarities

The Johannine epistles share a number of their distinctive themes with the Fourth Gospel, often expressing them in exactly the same words. It seems reasonable to assume, therefore, that all four books derive from the same community, which had developed characteristic ways of understanding its religious traditions.

Among the shared themes are the following:

• The images of light and darkness (1 John 1:5–7; 2:9–11; cf. John 8:12; 12:46)

• The new and old commandments (1 John 2:7; cf. John 13:34)

• Abiding in Christ (1 John 2:27–28; cf. John 15:4, 6)

• The command to love one another within the community (1 John 3:11; cf. John 13:34–35)

• Being hated by the world (1 John 3:13; cf. John 15:18–19; 17:13–16)

• Christ “laying down his life” for others (1 John 3:16; cf. John 10:11, 15, 17–18; 15:12–13)

• Christ as the one sent by God into the world out of love (1 John 4:9; cf. John 3:16) It would be possible to apply some of the meth-document’s historical context is absolutely vital

ods we have already examined in relationship to

for its interpretation. According to this view,

the Gospels and Acts in our study of the epistles,

words convey meaning only within a context;

but here we will explore an approach that scholars

thus, when you change the context of words, you

have used extensively with this kind of occasional

change what they mean.

literature: contextual analysis. The method is par—

This is because, as we have seen, words and

ticularly useful to historians who are interested in

phrases do not have any inherent meaning but

knowing not only what this literature says or

mean what they do only in relationship to other

teaches but also the specific historical circum—

words and phrases, so that words and phrases can

stances that led to its production. As you will see,

be made to mean a wide variety of things (practi—

this approach is closely related to the socio-histor—

cally anything, according to some theorists). Let

ical method described in Chapter 10. That

me illustrate the point through a brief example.

method focuses on the social history of the com—

Suppose you were to hear the phrase “I love this

munity as it can be traced over a period of time,

course.” It would obviously mean something alto—

and the text is used to provide evidence for recon—

gether different on the lips of your roommate

structing that history. In the contextual method,

when he is about to break 80 on the eighteenth

the principal concern is the literary text itself; the

hole at the country club than it would coming

social history of the community that is presup—

from your precocious younger sister at her first

posed by the text is used to explain some of its

posh restaurant in the midst of the second course

important features.

of a five-course meal. And it would mean some—

The concern to understand the socio-historical

thing quite different still if spoken by your buddy

context within which an occasional writing was

at his favorite race-car track or by the woman sit—

produced is rooted in a theoretical view of lanting behind you in your New Testament class after

guage shared by many scholars, that knowing a

hearing yet another scintillating lecture.

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THE NEW TESTAMENT: A HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

You might think, though, that the phrase in all

structed the context of what you heard and made

of these cases means basically the same thing.

sense of the words in light of it. Now in some cases

Somebody appreciates something called a

you may be wrong, but if you listen carefully

“course.” But suppose you are in the middle of the

enough, and if the speaker gives you enough to go

most boring lecture by your most boring professor,

on (and does not simply grunt in agreement every

wondering why you are there instead of outside

now and then), you can in many instances under—

catching some rays, when you hear a guy in the

stand the full conversation based on your recon—

back row whisper the same words, “I love this

struction of the words coming from the other end

course,” and then snicker? You know full well what

of the line.

the words mean; they mean just the opposite of

Something like this happens when we apply

what they meant for the woman in the scintillat—

the contextual method to a New Testament writing lecture. Thus, words mean what they do only

ing. On the basis of the conversation that we do

in light of their context. If you change the con—

hear, we try to reconstruct the conversation that

text, you change what the words mean. This is

we do not, and thereby come to a better under—

true of all words in every language.

standing of what the author is trying to say. For

One practical implication of this insight is that

some of the books of the New Testament, includ—

if we are to understand a person’s words we have to

ing the Johannine epistles, this method can

understand the context within which they are spo—

prove to be quite enlightening. To be sure, there

ken. This principle applies not only to oral com—

are some serious limitations to this approach,

munication but written communication as well.

some of which have been overlooked by scholars

With ancient literature, however, only in rare

for whom it is the method of choice. But the

instances do we have solid evidence for the histor—

nature of these limitations cannot be fully appre—

ical context within which words were spoken or

ciated in the abstract; they will make sense as we

written. Thus, we have to work hard at recon—

apply the method to specific texts, such as the

structing the situation that lies behind a text if we

Johannine epistles.

want to understand the context within which it

was produced. Only then can we use these contexts to help us interpret the texts.

Unfortunately, in many instances the only way

THE JOHANNINE EPISTLES

we can know about the precise historical context of

FROM A CONTEXTUAL

a writing is through clues provided by the writing

PERSPECTIVE

itself. Doesn’t this procedure, then, involve a kind

of circular reasoning: to interpret a writing we have

I will be treating these letters as a group of works

to understand the context, but we cannot under—

produced by the same author at roughly the same

stand the context until we interpret the writing?

time. The first is an open letter or persuasive trea—

The procedure probably is circular on some

tise written to a community (1 John), the second

level, but it does not have to be completely so, for

a personal letter to the same community (2 John),

some ways of understanding the context within

and the third a personal letter to an individual

which a writing is produced will make better sense

within it (3 John). There are clues within the let—

of the writing than others. Consider this analogy.

ters themselves concerning the historical context

Have you ever listened to someone talk on the

that prompted the author to produce them. The

phone and, on the basis of what he or she said, fig—

first step in the contextual method of interpreta—

ured out what the other person was saying as well?

tion is to examine these clues and use them to

What you did was to reconstruct the words you did

reconstruct the situation.

not hear on the basis of the words that you did,

The most important event in the recent histo—

and understood the words you heard in light of

ry of this community is that it has experienced a

those you did not. To put it differently, you recon—

serious rift. The author of 1 John indicates that a

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faction from within the community has split off

limitations of human flesh. For these people, Jesus

from the rest of the group and left in a huff:

only seemed to experience these limitations. Jesus

was not really a human; he merely appeared to be.

They went out from us, but they did not belong to us;

These Christians came to be known by their

for if they had belonged to us, they would have

opponents as “docetists,” a term that derives from

remained with us. But by going out they made it

the Greek verb for “appear” or “seem.” They were

plain that none of them belongs to us. (1 John 2:19)

opposed by Christian leaders like Ignatius who

took umbrage at the idea that Jesus and the

Why did this Christian community split, with

things he did, including his death on the cross,

some members leaving, presumably to start their

were all a show. For Ignatius, Jesus was a real

own congregation? In the next few verses the

man, with a real body, who shed real blood, and

author designates those who left as “liars” and

died a real death.

“antichrists,” a word which literally means, “those

It may be that the secessionists from the

who are opposed to Christ.” He then contrasts

Johannine community had developed a docetic

them with those who have remained, who “know

kind of christology. In the words of the author,

the truth.” What do these antichrists believe that

they “denied that Jesus Christ had come in the

makes them so heinous to this author? He indi—

flesh.” If they were, in fact, early docetists, then a

cates that they have “denied that Jesus is the

number of other things that the author says in

Christ” (2:22). The author’s language may appear

these letters make considerable sense. Take, for

to suggest that those who have seceded from the

instance, the opening words of 1 John. Readers

community, a group that some scholars have

who do not realize that the essay is being written

labeled the “secessionists,” are Jews who failed to

because a group of docetic Christians have seced—

acknowledge that Jesus is the messiah. But they

ed from the community may not understand why

used to belong to the community, that is, they

the author begins his work the way he does, with a

were Christians. In what sense, then, could they

prologue that in many ways is reminiscent of the

deny that Jesus is the Christ?

Prologue to the Fourth Gospel (with which he was

There are two other places where the author

probably familiar):

discusses these “antichrists.” In 1 John 4:2–3 the

author claims that unlike those who belong to

We declare to you what was from the beginning,

God, the antichrists refuse to confess that “Jesus

what we have heard, what we have seen with our

Christ has come in the flesh.” A similar statement

eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our

hands, concerning the word of life—this life was

occurs in 2 John 7, where the antichrists are called

revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and

“deceivers who have gone out into the world” and

declare to you the eternal life that was with the

are said to deny that “Jesus Christ has come in the

Father, and was revealed to us. (1:1–2)

flesh.” These descriptions suggest the secessionists

may have held a point of view that we know about

Once a reader knows the historical context of

from other sources from about the same period,

the epistle, however, this opening statement

such as the writings of Ignatius (which we will be

makes considerable sense. The author is opposing

discussing at greater length in Chapter 26).

Christians who maintain that Jesus is a phantas—

Ignatius opposed a group of Christians who, like

mal being without flesh and blood by reminding

Marcion a few years later (see Chapter 1), main—

his audience of their own traditions about this

tained that Jesus was not himself a flesh-and-blood

Word of God made manifest: he could be seen,

human being but was completely and only divine.

touched, and handled; that is, he had a real human

For these persons, God could not have a real bod—

body. And he shed real blood. Thus, the author

ily existence; God is God—invisible, immortal,

stresses the importance of Jesus’ blood for the for—

all-knowing, all-powerful, and unchanging. If

giveness of sins (1:7) and of the (real) sacrifice for

Jesus was God, he could not have experienced the

sins that he made (2:2; 4:10).

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What led a group of Johannine Christians to

to the doctrinal one. If the secessionists underval—

split from the community because of their belief

ued the fleshly existence of Jesus, perhaps they

that Jesus was not a real flesh-and-blood human

undervalued the importance of their own fleshly

being? We have seen that after the community was

existence as well. In other words, if what really

excluded from the synagogue, it developed a kind

mattered to them was the spirit rather than the

of fortress mentality that had a profound effect on

flesh, then perhaps they were unconcerned not

its christology. Christ came to be seen less and less

only about Jesus’ real body but also about their

as a human rabbi or messiah and more and more as

own. Thus, they may well have appeared totally

a divine being of equal standing with God, who

uninterested in keeping the commandments that

came to reveal the truth of God to his people only

God had given and in manifesting love among the

to be rejected by those who dwelt in darkness.

brothers and sisters of the community. This would

Those who believed in him claimed to understand

explain why the author stresses in his letters the

his divine teachings and considered themselves to

need to continue to practice God’s command—

be children of God. By the time the Fourth Gospel

ments and to love one another, unlike those who

was completed, some members of the Johannine

have left the community.

community had come to believe that Jesus was on

a par with God.

It appears that Christians in this community

REFLECTIONS ON THE

did not stop developing their understandings of

CONTEXTUAL METHOD

Jesus with the completion of the writing of the

Gospel. Some of them took their christology a

At this stage you may have recognized one of the

step further. Not only was Jesus equal with God,

difficulties in this kind of contextual analysis. It is

he was God himself, totally and completely.

very hard for the historian to know for a fact that

Moreover, if he was God, he could not be flesh

the Johannine secessionists actually taught that it

because God was not composed of flesh; Jesus

was unimportant to love one another and to keep

therefore merely appeared to be a human.

God’s commandments. The problem is that the

This view proved to be too much for some of

only source we have for the secessionists’ views is

the other members of the community; battle lines

the author of the Johannine epistles, and he was

were drawn and a split resulted. The Johannine

their enemy.

epistles were written by an author who thought

As we know from other kinds of literature,

that the secessionists had gone too far. For this

ancient and modern, it is a very tricky business to

author, Christ was indeed a flesh-and-blood

learn what people say and do on the basis of what

human being; he was the savior “come in the

their enemies say about them. Imagine trying to

flesh,” whose blood brought about salvation from

reconstruct the beliefs and practices of a modern

sin. Those who rejected this view, for him, had

politician on the basis of what the opposing cam—

rejected the community’s confession that the man

paign says! Sometimes enemies misunderstand

Jesus was the Christ; in his view, they were

their opponents’ views, or distort them, or misrep—

antichrists.

resent them, or draw implications from them that

The charges that the author levels against the

the other party does not.

secessionists do not pertain exclusively to their

What, then, do we actually know about the

ideas about Christ. He also makes moral accusa—

Johannine secessionists? Do we know for a fact

tions. He insinuates that his opponents do not

that they were docetists who taught others to dis—

practice the commandments of God (2:4), that

obey the commandments and live in sin? No, what

they fail to love the brothers and sisters in the

we know is that this is how the author of 1 John

community (2:9–11; 4:20), and that they practice

portrayed them. Some scholars are inclined to

sin while claiming to have no contact with it

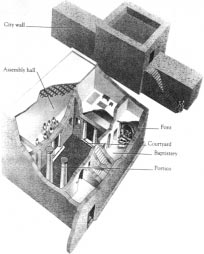
accept this portrayal as accurate; others are more

(1:6–10). It is possible that, in the mind of the

cautious and say that we only know how the

author at least, these moral charges related closely

author himself perceived the secessionists. Others



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love to other members of the community, and

were therefore antichrists and liars; and they continued to be a threat to the community’s well-being by deceiving others.

If this is the context, as seen through the eyes

of the “elder,” what more can we say about the

historical occasion of 1, 2, and 3 John? The

author was a leader of a community at some distance from the one he addresses in these letters.

That he was not in the immediate vicinity is

demonstrated by his closing remarks in 2 and 3

F P O

John, where he indicates that he will visit soon so

as not to be forced to rely on the written word to

communicate his views (2 John 12; 3 John

13–14). He appears to have seen himself as having authority over the Christians to whom he

writes; that is why he can exhort them to believe

and act in the ways that he commands.

1 John would have been a treatise to those in

this neighboring church who have not joined the

secessionists, written as a kind of open letter to

persuade them to remain faithful to the author’s

position and to see it as standing in true conformi-

Figure 11.1 Cross-sectional drawing of the earliest Christian ty with the tradition that they inherited when

church building discovered, a converted house in the eastern

they joined the community. 2 John would have

Syrian city of Dura.

been a personal letter to the church urging, in

shorter fashion, much the same advice; and 3 John

are still more cautious and say that we do not even

would have been a private letter to an individual

know how the author perceived them, only how

in this community giving instruction about a par—

he described them. The issue is not easily resolved,

ticular aspect of the problem that has arisen.

and it is one you need to be alert to as you yourself

Scholars have expressed different opinions con—

engage in contextual studies of the New

cerning what had happened to create the need for

Testament writings.

this final letter, the one most closely related to pri—

With these caveats in mind, let me summarize

vate letters in antiquity. It appears clear, in any

what we can probably say about the historical con—

event, that Gaius, the recipient of the letter, is in

text of the Johannine letters and then show how

conflict with another leader in the congregation,

these letters can be seen as a response to the situ—

Diotrephes, and that this conflict has to do with

ation at hand. There is little to suggest that the

whether the author of these letters and the repre—

author of these letters was intentionally duplici—

sentatives he sends to the church should be

tous in his assessment of his opponents, even

received as authorities. The author sees

though we can never know this for certain.

Diotrephes as an opponent and Gaius and

Whether or not his perceptions were correct,

Demetrius (perhaps the carrier of the letter? v. 12)

then, we can at least say how he perceived the sit—

as allies. It could be that Diotrephes has supported

uation. From his point of view, a group of former

the views of the secessionists and is trying to con—

members of the community had split to form their

vert the rest of the church, or it could be that he

own group; they taught that Jesus was not a real

simply does not like the “elder” who writes this

human being, but only divine; they saw no need to

letter, or appreciate his barging in to force his

keep the commandments and did not manifest

opinions upon the church that meets in his home

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(see box 11.3). Other options are possible, some of

for salvation. These groups were not unified among

which may occur to you as you yourself engage in

themselves: there were lots of different gnostic

the contextual analysis of these letters.

groups and they taught lots of different things. In

their basic view of the world and their central theological convictions, however, these groups appear

to have stood in some continuity. For all of them,

BEYOND THE JOHANNINE

this world was an evil place in which to live, and

COMMUNITY: THE RISE

those who wanted to escape needed to acquire the

OF CHRISTIAN GNOSTICISM

knowledge (gnosis) necessary for liberation. Christ

was a divine being who brought this knowledge

Many of the charges leveled against the secession—

from on high. Those who received this knowledge

ists of the Johannine community have reminded

were thereby given the means of salvation.

scholars of the ways groups of Christian Gnostics

The Fourth Gospel enjoyed particular success

are portrayed in sources that have survived from

among many of the communities of Christian

the second century. These groups are called

Gnostics, and, in the opinion of some scholars, the

Gnostic because of a fundamental notion that they

views of the secessionists from the Johannine com—

all appear to have held in common, that “gnosis”

munity were closely related to those held by

(the Greek word for “knowledge”) was necessary

Christian Gnostics of a slightly later period.

SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 11.3 House Churches in Early Christianity

Most people do not realize that for many, many years Christians did not construct church buildings for their services of worship and fellowship. The earliest Christian church building to be uncovered by archaeologists (actually a house that was converted to serve as a church in the city of Dura in Eastern Syria) dates from around the year 250 C.E., well over two centuries after the death of Jesus. The lack of a specially designated sacred space for Christian worship during its first two hundred years made this religion different from almost all others in its world. Pagan cults were centered in temples and shrines, and Jews, of course, worshipped in synagogues (which were themselves sometimes converted homes).

If Christians did not meet in buildings specifically designed for the purpose, where did they meet? References in Paul’s letters, the book of Acts, and other early Christian literature show that the early Christian communities were “house churches.” Christians gathered together in the private homes of their wealthier members, who alone would have had room to accommodate more than a few persons. One consequence was that the membership and attendance at any given church would have been limited by the size of the house in which they met. Also, within a given city there could have been a number of Christian churches, each possibly with its own leader, who in many cases, presumably, was the person who provided the house.

This situation may shed light on the problem of interchurch conflict addressed in 3 John.

It is possible, for example, that Diotrephes owns a relatively large house and meets weekly with a group of Christians, among whom he has assumed the role of leader and patron. Could it be that he sees the “elder” as an interloper who is out of bounds in trying to control what happens within the confines of his own home, among the Christians whom he entertains weekly for a service of worship and fellowship?





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Moreover, as we will see in the next chapter, some

involved eating babies—must be scrutinized with

of these Christian Gnostics produced Gospels of

care (see Chapter 26).

their own, books that never became part of the

One of the most significant archaeological dis—

New Testament. If we want to understand the early

coveries of the twentieth century provided us with

Christian literature from a historical point of view,

an entirely new source of information about

we have to learn about these other writings and see

Gnostics, a source not penned by its opponents

how they portray Jesus as a divine redeemer.

but by Gnostic believers themselves. In 1945, just

over a year before the discovery of the Dead Sea

The Problems of Definitions, Sources,

Scrolls, an Egyptian bedouin stumbled upon a jar

and Dating

containing thirteen ancient books. These books

contained some fifty-two literary works, most of

Scholars in the present century have engaged in

them previously unknown. When they finally

heated debates over how to define Gnosticism.

made their way through antiquities dealers into

These debates are intimately related to the prob—

the hands of competent scholars, it became clear

lems that we have with the ancient sources that

what they were. This bedouin had accidentally

describe Gnostics or were written by Gnostics.

unearthed a collection of ancient Gnostic texts

Until about a hundred years ago, our only sources

written in Coptic, an ancient Egyptian language.

for understanding Gnosticism were the writings of

The books themselves were manufactured in

its most vocal opponents, the proto-orthodox

the fourth century (we can tell because the scrap

church fathers of the second, third, and fourth

paper used to strengthen the bindings includes

centuries. In our discussion of the Johannine epis—

receipts that are dated), but they contain copies

tles, we have already seen some of the problems

of documents that were produced much earlier,

with reconstructing a group’s beliefs and activities

many of them during the second century at the

on the basis of an attack by its enemies. With

latest. Linguists have established beyond any

regard to Gnosticism the problems are even more

doubt that the books were originally written in

severe. Proto-orthodox church fathers like Justin,

Greek. The newly discovered documents repre—

Irenaeus, and Tertullian saw Gnosticism as a major

sent translations of these earlier compositions,

threat to the success and unity of Christianity and

made perhaps in the third or fourth centuries. In

pulled out all the stops in their assaults on it.

some respects these documents have revolution—

Many of their charges—for example, their claim

ized our understanding of early Christian history.

that certain groups of Gnostics engaged in wild

For here is a library of texts evidently of some

sexual orgies and bizarre nocturnal rituals that

importance to a community of Gnostic believers,

F P O

F P O

Figure 11.2 The Gnostic books discovered in 1945 near Nag Hammadi, Egypt, and the place where they were found.

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THE NEW TESTAMENT: A HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

texts in some ways like and in other ways unlike

church fathers, for example, evidently had access

those that later became known as the New

to writings very similar to some of the works dis—

Testament. They are similar in that they also con—

covered at Nag Hammadi, but they misunderstood

tain Gospels and other writings allegedly penned

(or misrepresented) how they were to be read. The

by apostles. They are different in that their per—

anti-Gnostic author Irenaeus, for instance, appears

spectives on Jesus and God and the created uni—

to have read Gnostic poetry that celebrated the

verse are quite at odds with those that made it

mysteries of creation. Instead of allowing for

into the canon. Among the most interesting of

poetic license, however, he interpreted the texts

these texts are the other Gospels about Jesus,

literally as straightforward descriptions of how the

including one allegedly written by his disciple

universe came into being. As modern interpreters,

Philip, another by his female companion Mary,

we do not want to fall into the same trap: imagine

and a third by his twin brother Thomas (see box

how well you would do in an English poetry class

12.2). Some of these writings report hitherto

if you failed to recognize metaphor when you saw

unknown revelations that Jesus allegedly impart—

it! But with the Nag Hammadi documents, it is

ed to his closest apostles after his resurrection;

often hard to know whether we are reading histor—

others contain mystical reflections on how the

ical narrative or metaphysical poetry, proposition—

universe came into being and how humans came

al truths or mystical reflections.

to occupy a place in it.

In what follows I will try to lay out some of the

Since these writings were discovered near the

basic assumptions that appear to underlie most of

village of Nag Hammadi, Egypt, they have become

the Gnostic systems that we know about. Before

known as the “Nag Hammadi library.” For histori—

doing so, I need to say a word about the dates of

ans of Christian Gnosticism they are of unparal—

these systems and their relationship to non—

leled significance, in no small measure because they

Gnostic Christianity, also matters of intense and

allow us to speak more confidently about what

heated debates among scholars.

Gnostics believed without having to rely complete—

The anti-Gnostic church fathers maintained

ly on the claims and charges of their opponents.

that Gnosticism was a Christian heresy invented

This is not to say that scholars have now reached

by evil persons who corrupted the Christian faith

a consensus on every (or any!) important aspect of

to their own ends. A good deal of modern scholar—

the study of Gnosticism. Far from it. Just as it is dif—

ship has been committed to showing that this per—

ficult to use the writings of the church fathers to

spective cannot be right, that, in fact, Gnosticism

learn exactly what Gnostics really thought, so too it

originated apart from Christianity but was later

is difficult to use these Gnostic writings themselves.

merged with it in some religious groups, forming a

For one thing, the writings found at Nag Hammadi

kind of synthesis, a Gnostic Christianity.

do not share a consistent point of view, and we have

It is difficult to know what cultural forces would

no assurance that all of these texts were ever seen as

have produced Gnosticism, but it appears to repre—

authoritative by any one community, in the way the

sent a creative combination of diverse religious

texts of the New Testament later came to be for

and philosophical perspectives, melded together

orthodox Christians. Moreover, since these texts

in an age in which numerous religions and

appear to have been written for the internal con—

philosophies were widely known and often linked.

sumption of the communities that produced them,

If this is right, then Gnosticism and Christianity

they assume a good deal about what their authors

may have started out at about the same time, and

and readers already knew to be the case. They do

because of many of their similarities, which we will

not spell out the Gnostic system (or the Gnostic

see momentarily, came to influence each other in

systems) but appear to presuppose it. Thus, to

significant ways. It is interesting to note that some

understand these writings we have to reconstruct

of the Gnostic tractates discovered at Nag

their underlying world(s) of thought.

Hammadi appear to be non-Christian, which

Finally, it is difficult to know exactly how to go

would be hard to explain if Gnosticism originated

about interpreting these writings. Some of the

as a Christian heresy.

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So, in the way I will be using the term here,

The World: Metaphysical Dualism.

Gnostics

“Gnosticism” refers to a diverse set of views, many

understood the world in radically dualistic terms.

of them influenced by Christianity, that may have

All of existence could be divided into two funda—

been in existence by the end of the first century

mental components of reality: matter and spirit.

but certainly by the middle of the second. Our best

Some aspects of this worldview have struck schol—

evidence for specific Gnostic groups comes from

ars as similar to certain Eastern religions, such as

the second century, the period in which the proto—

the Zoroastrianism of ancient Persia, with which

orthodox opponents of the Gnostics were penning

some Gnostics may have come in contact. Other

their vitriolic attacks and many of the documents

aspects resemble philosophical views propagated

preserved at Nag Hammadi were originally pro—

in the West, such as the teachings of Plato and his

duced.

followers. Wherever Gnostics derived their

notions, they appear to have believed that the

material and spiritual worlds were at odds with one

The Tenets of Gnosticism

another and that ultimately the material world

Certain basic tenets appear to underlie the various

was evil and the spiritual world was good.

Christian Gnostic religions. These are not explicit—

Unlike representatives of certain Eastern reli—

ly set forth in any of the Gnostic writings that have

gions, Gnostics did not believe that the struggle

survived; they do, however, appear to be presup—

between matter (evil) and spirit (good) was eter—

posed by many of them as an underlying worldview.

nal. For them, the material world had not always

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 11.4 How Do You Know a Gnostic When You See One?

One of the major problems for proto-orthodox church fathers who attacked Christian Gnostics was knowing what constituted Gnosticism and, therefore, how to recognize a Gnostic when they met one. Part of the problem was that many different religious ideas could be called Gnostic, and those who might be considered Gnostic were far from agreeing with one another on a number of important issues. Frustration over this predicament is evident in the writings of one of the best-known authors of the second century, the anti-Gnostic church father Irenaeus. In his words: “Since they [the Gnostics] differ so widely among themselves both as respects doctrine and tradition, and since those of them who are recognized as being most modern make it their effort daily to invent some new opinion, and to bring out what no one ever before thought of, it is a difficult matter to describe all their opinions”

( Against the Heresies, 1. 21. 5).

One thing Irenaeus and his colleagues were convinced of, however, was that even though Gnostics were difficult to recognize they had thoroughly infiltrated many of the churches:

“Such persons are to outward appearance sheep; for they appear to be like us, by what they say in public, repeating the same words as we do; but inwardly they are wolves” ( Against the Heresies, 3. 16. 8). In other words, the Gnostic Christians could agree with everything the proto-orthodox Christians said—they could affirm everything in the proto-orthodox creeds and participate in all the proto-orthodox rituals—but inwardly they understood these things as having deeper, symbolic meanings that the proto-orthodox Christians rejected. No wonder it was so difficult for the anti-Gnostic opponents to drive them out of the churches. It was not easy to recognize a Gnostic when you saw one.

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existed but came into being at some point in time.

plify here in my brief summary), there was one true

Nor did they subscribe to the view, held by most

God, an all-powerful divine being who was totally

Jews and proto-orthodox Christians, that the one

spirit. This God was unlike everything we can

true God had created this world. For them, the

imagine. He continues to exist even now, of

material world was inherently evil. The true God,

course, but he is so great and so unlike anything

author of all good, could not have created some—

human that he is far beyond anyone’s capacity to

thing that was evil.

comprehend. He is unknown and unknowable.

According to the Gnostics, the creation of the

At some point in eternity past, this divine spir—

world was the result of a cosmic catastrophe. The

it produced offspring, other divine beings who

myths that the Gnostics told largely functioned to

were also spirit. These offspring were produced as

explain how this catastrophe came about. As I

couples and were sometimes called “aeons.” Some

have indicated, it is not a simple matter to deter—

of these couples themselves produced offspring,

mine when these myths are to be taken literally

eventually creating a large divine realm, inhabited

and when they represent mystical reflections on

by spiritual beings at greater or lesser remove from

the nature of being. In either case, they appear to

the true God, depending on when they came to be

reflect the Gnostics’ sense of alienation from the

generated. According to some of the myths, one of

material world and to explain how this state of

these aeons, sometimes named Sophia (the Greek

alienation came into being. The myths generally

word for “wisdom”), exceeded her bounds by try—

begin before the creation of the world, when there

ing to comprehend the whole of the divine realm.

was no material existence at all but only the good

In overreaching herself, she fell from the world of

realm of the spirit, inhabited by the true God.

the divine, becoming separated from the other

divinities and her own consort. In her fall, she

The Divine Realm: The Unknowable God and

became terrified, angry, and upset. These emotions

his Aeons.

In the beginning, according to some

somehow became personified and took on a life of

of the Gnostic myths (which I will necessarily sim—

their own. In a sense, they were the offspring that

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 11.5 Gnostics and the Jewish Scriptures

You might think that Gnostics were as a rule opposed to Judaism. After all, they thought the world was created by an evil deity who was not the true God, whereas most Jews maintained that there was only one true God, who had created all things. But many of the Gnostics claimed to find their understandings of the mysteries of the universe buried in the Jewish Bible. A large number of Gnostic writings are mystical reflections based on the story of creation and the “Fall” of Adam and Eve found in the book of Genesis. Moreover the main character of some of the Gnostic myths has the name of the Hebrew God. Perhaps most significantly, the dualism that we find in Gnostic texts is in some ways not far removed from that found in Jewish apocalyptic texts, where there are also supernatural forces engaged in a cosmic struggle over the world and the intelligent beings who inhabit it.

In the opinion of some historians, some Gnostic groups may have originated among, or been influenced by, Jews who became disenchanted with the traditional form of their religion and came to think that there must be a God (or several gods) greater than the God of their ancestors. For these “heterodox” Jews, the world created by this God was not simply corrupted and subject to the ravages of evil forces (as in apocalyptic thinking; see Chapter 15) but was itself inherently evil. If this historical reconstruction is correct, then quite possibly there were Gnostic groups made up largely of people who continued to consider themselves Jews.

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resulted from her fall, but they were imperfectly

it would take to change it. Since Gnostics were

formed in that they were generated apart from the

the imprisoned spirits, this knowledge involved an

union of Sophia with her divine consort.

intricate self-understanding of who they were and

These malformed divine beings are responsible

how they came to be here, of where they came

for the creation of the world. One of them in par—

from and how they could return.

ticular, named Ialdabaoth in some of the Gnostic

This knowledge, of course, was only for those

texts (a name closely related to the Hebrew name

destined for salvation. Those who were “in the

of God in the Jewish Scriptures), is portrayed as the

know” (i.e., those who were “gnostic”) were capable

Demiurge (= the Maker), the one who brought the

of receiving and understanding this secret knowl—

material world into being (see box 11.5).

edge, which was hidden from the common folk.

He did so because he and the other fallen off—

We are not certain, exactly, what this knowledge

spring of Sophia wanted to capture her and rob her

entailed, since the Gnostics who attained it kept it

of her divine power. To prevent her from recover—

secret. It appears that different Gnostic groups

ing her strength and returning to the divine realm,

propagated different forms of instruction, probably

they divided her into innumerable pieces and

corresponding to the different myths that they told.

entrapped her in matter. The material world was

Included in many circles would be knowledge of

thus created by these evil deities as a prison where

how the spiritual bondage had occurred and what it

Sophia, or rather her parts, are confined.

would take to escape it. In some systems, the soul

Specifically, this element of the divine is

could be liberated at death only by knowing the

entrapped in human bodies.

passwords that the evil creator gods required for passage through their respective heavenly realms on

The Human Race: The Divine Spark.

The reathe journey to the highest world of the true God.

son Gnostics feel so alienated in this world is

What were these passwords? I would tell you, if I

because they are alienated. Within them is a spark

were certain that you too were a Gnostic.

of the divine, entrapped by alien beings who are

The knowledge that is necessary for salvation

committed to keeping it imprisoned for their own

obviously cannot come from within this world.

purposes. True Gnostics know that they do not

The world is material and therefore evil; there are

belong in this material world; heaven is their home.

no material means for discovering the truth of our

To be sure, not all humans experience this sen—

entrapment or the secrets for our liberation. Saving

sation, for the divine spark does not reside in

knowledge must therefore come from outside this

everyone, only in the elect few. Other humans are

world. It must come from the world of God.

simply part of the material world, with nothing

In most Gnostic systems, the only way to

divine within them. They are like other animals,

escape this world is for an aeon to come down from

created by the Demiurge and destined, eventually,

the divine realm to communicate the knowledge

to be destroyed along with all other works of his

necessary for salvation to the sparks that have

creation. The Gnostics, however, are destined for

been entrapped.

better things, for within them is the spark of the

divine which can be liberated from this miserable

Christ: The Divine Redeemer.

This emissary

existence. How can the spirit within be set free to

from the divine realm obviously could not be

return to its heavenly home? Only by acquiring

human, for to be human means to be entrapped in

the knowledge necessary for salvation.

the realm of matter. Thus, the divine emissary

could not have a real flesh-and-blood body, he

Salvation: The Knowledge (Gnosis) That

could not actually be born, could not actually

Liberates.

Gnostics claimed that a person could

bleed, and could not actually die. For Gnostic

be saved from this material world only by acquir—

Christians the divine being who came into the

ing the proper knowledge. Wisdom had become

world was Christ himself. There were two different

fragmented and ignorance reigned supreme.

ways that Gnostics could understand Christ as the

Salvation meant acquiring the true knowledge of

one who came from above without being human.

how this state of affairs had come to be and what

One is the docetic view that we examined earlier



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in relation to the secessionists from the Johannine

when he receives the Spirit, and ends on the cross,

community and the opponents of Ignatius from

when he cries out, “My God, my God, why have

roughly the same time period (and Marcion some

you left me behind?” (as these Gnostics interpreted

years later). In this view, Christ was not a real

Jesus’ final words).

human being but only appeared to be. In the words

of the apostle Paul, which some of these Gnostics

The Church: The Body of the Elect.

As we

could quote, Christ came “in the likeness of sinful

have seen, not everyone could acquire the knowl—

flesh” (Rom 8:3). For these Gnostics, Christ

edge of salvation; not even other Christians were

looked like a human but was not.

entitled to learn the true mysteries of the faith. It

According to this view, Jesus was a totally spir—

was only for the elite few who had the divine spark

itual being who communicated to his disciples the

within them. The Gnostics therefore kept their

gnosis required for their liberation; they in turn

knowledge a secret.

passed it along to their own followers by word of

According to some Christian Gnostics, the

mouth. When they committed this knowledge to

human race could thus be divided up into three

writing, it was only in veiled texts that were hard

classes: (a) the Gnostics themselves, possessors of

for all but insiders to understand (otherwise, the

ultimate knowledge, destined for a glorious salva—

divine gnosis would be available to everybody).

tion when they returned to the heavenly realm

For the sake of the public eye, Jesus kept up his

whence they came; (b) other Christians, who

human appearance throughout his ministry, seem—

mistakenly believed that they had the truth,

ing to become hungry and thirsty, seeming to

when they had nothing but a superficial knowl—

bleed and die. But it was all an appearance.

edge of it through a literal understanding of the

The other Gnostic option was to claim that

sacred writings of the apostles and the doctrines

whereas Jesus was a real flesh-and-blood human

transmitted in the church (see box 11.4); these

being, he was not the same person as the heaven—

persons would receive some form of salvation if

ly Christ, a separate being who temporarily inhab—

they had faith and did good works, but their

ited Jesus’ body. This view appears to have been

afterlife would not be nearly as glorious as that of

more common among Gnostics, so far as we can

the true Gnostics; and (c) all other persons, who

tell from our surviving sources. In this understanding, Jesus was a righteous man who was chosen by

a divine being, the heavenly Christ, as a dwelling

place. When Jesus was baptized, the Christ

descended from heaven in the form of a dove and

entered into him, empowering him to do miracles

and to teach the gnosis necessary for salvation.

Then, prior to Jesus’ death, the Christ departed

from him, leaving him alone to suffer and die. As

a spiritual being, the Christ himself obviously

could not come in contact with pain and death.

According to some of these Gnostics, the

Christ returned to Jesus after his crucifixion and

raised him from the dead, empowering him to

appear to his disciples over a long period of time

and to convey the gnosis that they too would need

to survive death and return to the heavenly realm.

We are told by the early church writer Irenaeus

that some Gnostics with this point of view had a

Figure 11.3 Picture of the Gnostic Creator God “IAO,” por-particular attachment to the Gospel of Mark, in

trayed as a demon spirit with a cock’s head, on a gem from

which Jesus’ public life begins with the baptism,

Perugia.

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# CHAPTER 11

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had no part of the divine within them and were

Throughout the ancient world, a wide range of

destined for destruction along with the rest of the

groups, even groups of Jews and proto-orthodox

material world when the salvation of the divine

Christians, were accused of engaging in precisely

sparks had been complete.

the same kinds of activities (see Chapter 26). It

A large number of Gnostics were active mem—

appears that one way to cast aspersions on one’s

bers of Christian churches and would not have

opponents was to implicate them in such ways,

been recognized as unique simply on the basis of

much as today politicians have standard epithets

outward appearances (see box 11.4). They were

(e.g., “tax-and-spend liberal,” “opponent of family

able to read the sacred books and profess the

values”) that they sling at their opponents, hoping

sacred truths of the Christian religion along with

they stick, whether or not they happen to conform

everyone else. But in their hearts they professed to

to reality. In the case of the Gnostics, the logic of

understand the deeper truths of these things and

the charges would have been convincing to out—

to possess ultimate knowledge and real under—

siders. Here was a secretive group of people who

standing. Thus, they saw themselves as an elite

totally devalued the body. If the body doesn’t mat—

body within the churches.

ter, then surely it doesn’t matter what you do with

The intellectuals among the non-Gnostic

your body.

Christians (such as Irenaeus and Tertullian)

The Gnostics themselves, however, appear to

looked upon this Gnostic deeper knowledge as a

have employed a different kind of logic in their

rejection of the basic truths of Christianity. For

ethics, one that led to just the opposite results. For

these proto-orthodox writers, anyone who claimed

the Gnostics, since the body was evil, along with

that the creator God was not the true God, that

all other material things, one should not become

the material world he made was evil, that Jesus was

attached to it or submit to its evil physical desires.

not his true son, and that he did not really shed

Thus the Gnostic writings embrace an ascetic

blood and die on the cross—anyone who believed

lifestyle which condemned gluttony, drunkenness,

such things could not claim to be Christian and

and sexual activity of every kind in an attempt to

could have no part in the salvation of God.

contribute to the liberation of the soul.

Most Christians today would probably agree.

But we should always remember that modern-day

Christians are the spiritual descendants of the

group that won these debates in the second and

GNOSTICS AND THE

third centuries. As a consequence, they have

JOHANNINE COMMUNITY

inherited these proto-orthodox positions. Gnostics, on the other hand, would say that such Chris—

You may have already been struck by certain simi—

tians have simply failed to see the truth, as

larities between of these Gnostic views and those

revealed in the gnosis conveyed by Christ himself.

of some members of the Johannine community.

While we cannot assume that the secessionists, let

Ethics: The Ascetic Ideal.

One of the most

alone the author of the Fourth Gospel, considered

interesting aspects of ancient Gnosticism is that

themselves to be Gnostics, the similarities in their

Gnostics were routinely charged by their oppo—

views are nonetheless quite interesting, particular—

nents with engaging in flagrant acts of indecency

ly with respect to christology. As we have seen, the

and immorality. For example, they were accused of

Gospel of John portrays Jesus not merely as a

engaging in scandalous and offensive sex rituals, of

human being chosen by God to be his messiah but

murder, and of cannibalism. In hindsight we might

as a divine being come down from heaven to dwell

say that Gnostics were charged with these things,

among humans. In some sense, he is God himself,

not because they did them, but because they were

the Word of God come to speak to the world. His

thought to have done them, since in the eyes of

discourses reveal who he is as the one who has

their opponents they were secretive purveyors

been sent from above; his miracles are performed

false doctrine.

to show that he is right. His ultimate goal is to

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convey the liberating knowledge that is necessary

the sort described in this chapter. It is equally pos—

for salvation: “You will know the truth, and the

sible that the sect disappeared from the face of the

truth will make you free” (8:32).

earth by being integrated into a larger society of

Such notions proved quite palatable to Gnostic

gnostically-minded individuals. What we do know

Christians of the second century, many of whom

with some degree of probability, based on the his—

revered the Fourth Gospel as a sacred text that

torical reconstruction sketched earlier, is that

revealed the mysteries of their faith. Indeed, so far

prior to leaving the Johannine community the

as we know, the first commentary on any Christian

secessionists had already developed perspectives

text of any kind was the commentary on John

that would have proved compatible with views

written by Heracleon, a Gnostic Christian living

embraced by various groups of Gnostics, and when

around the year 170 C.E.

they seceded from the community, they took their

Unfortunately, we may never know what his—

Gospel with them. From their point of view, of

torical relationship existed between this Gnostic

course, their interpretation of the Gospel was the

commentator of the late second century and the

correct one. It was also an interpretation that

secessionists who withdrew from the Johannine

made sense to various Christian Gnostics of the

community some three-quarters of a century earli—

second century. It did not make sense, however, to

er. It is possible that the secessionists came into

the Johannine Christians they left behind or to

contact with a sect of non-Christian Gnostics and

the proto-orthodox Christians of later years, who

adopted many of their perspectives so as to create

condemned the Gnostics and their interpretations

a kind of hybrid faith, a Christian Gnosticism of

and succeeded in advancing their own.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Brown, Raymond. The Community of the Beloved Disciple.

Lieu, J. M. The Theology of the Johannine Epistles.

New York: Paulist, 1979. A superb and influential

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991. A good

study that uses a socio-historical method to trace the

recent discussion of major themes in 1, 2, and 3 John.

history of the community from the time prior to the

Fourth Gospel through the writing of the Johannine

Robinson, James, ed. The Nag Hammadi Library in English.

epistles, and beyond.

3d ed. New York: Harper & Row, 1988. A very convenient English translation of the documents discovered

at Nag Hammadi, with brief introductions.

Layton, Bentley. The Gnostic Scriptures: A New Translation with Annotations. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1987.

An invaluable translation of important Gnostic docu—

Rudolph, Kurt. Gnosis: The Nature and History of

ments, including those discovered at Nag Hammadi

Gnosticism. Trans. R. McL. Wilson. San Francisco:

and those quoted by the church fathers, with a very

Harper & Row, 1987. The best book-length introduc—

useful introductory sketch of Gnosticism.

tion to ancient Gnosticism.

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# CHAPTER 12

Jesus from Different Perspectives:

Other Gospels in Early Christianity

We have already seen that Matthew, Mark, Luke,

history (roughly through the first half of the sec—

and John were not the only Gospels produced by

ond century) but in the later second, third, and

the early Christians. They were simply the four

fourth centuries, and on into the Middle Ages. It

that came to be included in the New Testament.

is important to recognize the existence of these

Indeed, it is striking that the author of one of

later Gospels, however, because they show that

them, Luke, indicates that he had “many” prede—

Christians did not stop reflecting on the signifi—

cessors in producing a narrative of the things Jesus

cance of Jesus or refrain from writing accounts of

said and did. It is unfortunate that apart from the

his life once the books of the New Testament were

Gospel of Mark, all of these earlier accounts have

produced. Stories about him continued to be told,

been lost. Still, by studying the canonical Gospels,

and invented, for centuries. They continue to be

we have been able to learn something about their

invented even today, as you can see by watching

sources, including Q, the collection of Jesus’ say—

any of the versions produced in Hollywood.

ings (and several deeds) that both Matthew and

In the last chapter we examined the beliefs of

Luke used for their narratives, the signs source

the Christian Gnostics and saw that in addition to

used by John for his accounts of Jesus’ miracles,

using the Gospels of Mark and, especially, John

several sources for the discourses of Jesus in John,

they produced Gospels of their own. So too did

and passion narratives (possibly written) underly—

some of the opponents of Gnostics, for example,

ing the accounts in Mark and John.

the Jewish-Christian group known as the

Some scholars have detected additional sources

Ebionites, who had their own Gospel, also alleged—

behind the canonical Gospels. And we know for

ly written by an apostle (see Chapter 1). So did

a fact that Christian communities read and

the Marcionites, who opposed the Jewish

revered yet other Gospel texts. Indeed, thanks to

Christians and the Jewish religion that they

manuscript discoveries over the past century,

embraced. And so did certain groups of proto—

including the Nag Hammadi library, some two

orthodox Christians, whose love for the Gospels

dozen accounts of Jesus’ life and teachings now

that became part of the New Testament did not

survive from the early centuries of Christianity.

prevent them from penning still other accounts of

We know that others were written as well (which

the words and deeds of Jesus. Among these various

have not survived) because they are discussed, and

noncanonical Gospels, several are of real interest

sometimes quoted, in the writings of the early

to the historian of earliest Christianity, including

church fathers.

the Gospel of Peter, which provides an intriguing

Only a few of the noncanonical Gospels will be

account of Jesus’ death and resurrection, and the

of concern to us here, since most of them were not

Gospel of Thomas, touted by some scholars as the

produced during the earliest period of Christian

“Fifth Gospel” since it appears to preserve actual

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teachings of the historical Jesus not found in the

attempted to distinguish themselves from the non—

New Testament.

Christian Jews in their environment. But not all of

For the purposes of our study, I will categorize the

them did. We know of Christian communities

earliest Gospels into three groups: (a) “narrative”

throughout the second century that were made up

Gospels, which are written accounts of Jesus’ say—

of Jews who had converted to belief in Jesus as the

ings, deeds, and experiences; (b) “sayings” Gospels,

messiah but who nonetheless continued to main—

which are comprised almost exclusively of Jesus’

tain their Jewish identity, keeping kosher food

words to his disciples, whether during his ministry

laws, observing the sabbath, circumcising their

or after his resurrection; and (c) “infancy” Gospels,

baby boys, praying in the direction of Jerusalem,

which are narratives of Jesus’ birth and youth.

and engaging in a number of other Jewish practices. Various “Jewish-Christian” communities

were scattered throughout portions of the

NARRATIVE GOSPELS

Mediterranean. We know of some, for example, in

the Transjordan region of Palestine (east of the

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John can all be con—

Jordan River) and of others in Alexandria, Egypt.

sidered narrative Gospels. So can some of the

Each of these groups, no doubt, differed from oth—

written sources underlying these Gospels, for

ers in specific matters of doctrine and practice.

example, the signs source of the Fourth Gospel,

Some of these Jewish-Christian groups had

and possibly the special sources for Matthew and

their own Gospels, accounts of the life of Jesus

Luke, called M and L (if these were actual written

that portrayed him in ways amenable to the com—

sources). We know that still other narrative

munities’ own views, just as the canonical Gospels

Gospels existed in the early church, for Luke

were amenable to the views of the communities

labels the works of his predecessors “narratives.”

that produced them. We know of three of these

With the exception of Mark, however, none of

Jewish-Christian Gospels from the writings of

these earlier accounts has survived intact. What

church fathers who discuss them.

have survived are numerous references to Gospels

of this kind in the writings of the church fathers,

The Gospel of the Nazareans.

This Gospel was

sometimes with discussions of their contents and

evidently written in Aramaic, the native language

quotations from their texts. In addition, we have

of Jesus and his earliest followers. It may have been

a fragmentary manuscript of one of the most

produced in Palestine near the end of the first cen—

important of these works, a Gospel that claims to

tury, that is, at about the time of the Gospel of John.

have been written by Jesus’ disciple Peter.

The church fathers who refer to it sometimes claim

that it was an Aramaic translation of the Gospel

The Jewish-Christian Gospels

according to Matthew, minus the first two chapters.

We have seen that Christianity started out as a

This claim makes sense, since the Gospel of

movement within Judaism. Jesus, his disciples, and

Matthew is in many respects the most Jewish of our

the people they originally converted were Jewish;

Gospels. It is there, for example, that Jesus instructs

they read the Jewish Scriptures, observed the

his followers to keep the entire law even better than

Jewish Law, and adhered to Jewish customs. Each

the scribes and the Pharisees (5:17–20). At the

of the Gospels we have examined, however, strives

same time, Matthew’s story of Jesus’ miraculous

to show, in its own way, how Jesus was rejected by

conception (Matthew 1–2) would have been unac—

his own people, leading to the establishment of a

ceptable to Jewish Christians who believed that

community of believers outside of Judaism. This

Jesus was a righteous man chosen to be God’s mes—

can be most clearly observed in the case of John,

siah but not himself divine or born of a virgin.

where the Christian community appears to have

The church fathers who refer to the Gospel of the

been excluded from the local synagogue at some

Nazareans intimate that some of its stories differed

point prior to the writing of the Gospel.

from the accounts found in Matthew. These differ—

We will see throughout our study that most

ences make it difficult to judge whether the anony—

other Christian authors of the first century also

mous author of this Gospel (a) had access to a ver-

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sion of Matthew that was somewhat different from

accounts were merged to form one longer and fuller

the one that later became part of the Christian

version of Jesus’ life. It was evidently written in Greek

canon, for example, in lacking a birth narrative, (b)

and was possibly used among Jewish Christians living

modified the Matthew that we know, for example

in the Transjordan. One of its striking features is that

by deleting the opening chapters, or (c) did not

it recorded words of Jesus to the effect that Jews no

actually use a version of the Gospel of Matthew at

longer needed to participate in animal sacrifices in

all. In the last case, he may have used traditions

the Temple. Connected with this abolition of sacri—

similar to those found in Matthew, which circulat—

fice was an insistence that Jesus’ followers be vegetar—

ed in the same or a neighboring community, and

ian. This insistence led to some interesting alterations

produced his own version from them.

of stories found in the Synoptics. Simply by changing

one letter, for example, the author modified the diet

The Gospel of the Ebionites. This Gospel appears

of John the Baptist; rather than eating “locusts”

to have been a combination of the Synoptic Gospels,

(Mark 1:6; the Greek word is akrides) he is said to

a kind of “Gospel harmony” in which the three

have eaten “pancakes” ( egkrides).

SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 12.1 The Gospel of the Ebionites

and Early Gospel Harmonies

When the earliest Gospels began to enjoy a wide circulation among churches throughout the Mediterranean, careful readers soon realized that there were differences among them. The discrepancies proved puzzling to some readers and downright disconcerting to others. One of the ways later Christian authors were able to deal with these apparent inconsistencies was by producing “Gospel harmonies,” versions that incorporated elements of each of the available Gospels so as to give a fuller and more harmonious accounts of what Jesus said, did, and experienced.

The Gospel of the Ebionites reveals one of the most interesting techniques in its harmonization of the three stories of Jesus’ baptism recorded in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The voice from heaven speaks slightly different words in each of these accounts. In Matthew, it addresses the crowds in words that echo the Jewish Scriptures (see Isa 42:1): “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.” In Mark it speaks almost the same words but directly to Jesus: “You are my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.” And in Luke it alludes to a different scriptural passage altogether (according to our oldest witnesses to Luke’s Gospel): “You are my Son, today I have begotten you” (cf. Ps 2:7). How can these three accounts be reconciled with one another? The Gospel of the Ebionites did so by combin-ing the three versions into one longer account, so that the voice speaks from heaven three times, once to the crowds and twice to Jesus!

The most famous Gospel harmony of the early church was produced some years after the Gospel of the Ebionites by an author who probably was not familiar with it. Around the year 170 C.E., Tatian, a Christian scholar from Syria created one Gospel out of the four that eventually came to be part of the New Testament. The book was called the Diatesseron, which literally means “through the four.” Thus, the one Gospel of Jesus was being preserved through the four earlier accounts. Tatian’s Diatesseron became quite popular among Christian readers in various parts of the empire. In the Syrian church, it was the only Gospel that Christians read for nearly three centuries.

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The Gospel of the Hebrews.

This Gospel was

Scriptures and the creation of the world and ascrib—

also written in Greek and was in use among Jewish

ing them to Jesus. Marcion decided to correct the

Christians in Alexandria, Egypt. Its title was evi—

work of these scribes, and so produced a revised

dently given to it by outsiders to differentiate it

version of the Gospel, which for him represented

from the one used by the Gentile Egyptian na—

the original version, one without these references.

tionals, who called the work the Gospel of the

Evidently, he used the Gospel of Luke as his

Egyptians. We know that the Gospel of the Hebrews

starting point. From this Gospel he excised pas—

narrated important events in the life of Jesus,

sages that referred positively to the Old Testament

including his baptism, temptation, and resurrec—

and to the Jewish God and his creation. He appar—

tion, but the brief quotations of it found in the

ently removed the entire first two chapters as well,

writings of the church fathers show that these sto—

which contain the birth narrative, since in his

ries were not simply borrowed from the other

docetic christology Jesus could not have been

Gospels that we know. It appears that the author

born. He may also have added several passages to

collected stories, possibly from the oral tradition,

get his point across more firmly; in his Gospel,

and compiled a narrative of his own much as Mark

Jesus allegedly claims to have come “not to fulfill

and John had done. Several of the church fathers’

the Law, but to abolish it” (contrast Matt 5:17).

references to this Jewish-Christian Gospel imply

Even though Marcion’s Gospel does not survive

that it had a Gnostic slant; this would not be sur—

intact, it is quoted at length by his chief adversary,

prising given the use of this Gospel in Alexandria,

the proto-orthodox church father Tertullian. It

a major center of early Christian Gnosticism.

would be wrong to overlook the significance of

this text simply because Marcion created it by

modifying other Gospels that we already have.

Marcion’s Gospel

Matthew and Luke did so as well! (Recall how

As we saw in Chapter 1, the second-century the—

they handled Mark.) Moreover, Marcion’s Gospel

ologian Marcion stood at the opposite end of the

proved to be particularly important in the second

Christian spectrum from the Jewish Christians.

century. In certain communities throughout the

Whereas they embraced the Jewish Scriptures and

Mediterranean around the year 200 C.E.,

maintained Jewish ways, he rejected Judaism as

Marcionites reading this version of the Gospel

the religion of a false God. Indeed, for him the

outnumbered every other kind of Christian.

true God had sent Jesus to counteract the works of

the creator. It was the creator who had chosen

Israel and given them his law. His righteous

The Gospel of Peter

demands, however, were harsh, and the punish—

Another narrative Gospel that was popular in

ment for disobedience was severe. The true God,

some circles of the second century was one

the God of love, had sent Jesus in the appearance

allegedly written by Jesus’ close disciple Peter. We

of human flesh to redeem people from this God of

have known about this book for centuries, thanks

the Jews. Jesus himself had no dealings with the

to the writings of the fourth-century church father

creator or his creation.

Eusebius, but we have come to know parts of its

Marcion claimed the apostle Paul as his author—

actual text only over the past 100 years, since a

ity for these views. Throughout his letters, Paul

fragment of its final pages was discovered in 1886

speaks of his “Gospel,” but which Gospel did he

in the grave of a Christian monk in Egypt.

mean? Marcion decided that Paul’s Gospel differed

Eusebius indicates that the Gospel was popular

from the one(s) used in the Christian churches,

in parts of Syria during the second half of the sec—

which had been corrupted by copyists who did not

ond century. According to his account, Serapion,

realize that Jesus had nothing to do with the Jewish

the bishop of Antioch, approved the Gospel of

God or the religion that he established. In their

Peter for use in the church of Rhossus, even

ignorance, they altered the stories they copied by

though he had not read it himself. When Serapion

inserting positive references to the Jewish

was told, though, that the book contained passages

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that could be used to support a docetic christology,

even though his body remains on the cross. Is Jesus

he perused a copy and quickly dashed off a letter

here bemoaning the departure of the divine Christ

forbidding its use and detailing the offensive pas—

from him prior to his death, in keeping with the

sages. Eusebius quotes from this letter but does not

view of many Gnostics?

cite the passages Serapion had in mind. This is

The account continues by describing Jesus’ bur—

particularly to be regretted because without them

ial and then, in the first person, the distress of the

we cannot be certain that the Greek manuscript

disciples: “We fasted and sat mourning and crying

discovered at the end of the nineteenth century is

night and day until the Sabbath” (v. 27). As in

from the same Gospel of Peter as the one Serapion

Matthew’s Gospel, the Jewish leaders ask Pilate for

had read. In any event, the manuscript is of con—

soldiers to guard the tomb. This Gospel, however,

siderable interest in and of itself.

provides more elaborate detail. The centurion in

The document consists of only a few pages near

charge is named Petronius, who along with a num—

the end of the narrative. It is impossible to know

ber of soldiers rolls a huge stone in front of the

how long the entire account was or whether, for

tomb and seals it with seven seals. They then pitch

example, it included stories of Jesus’ entire min—

their tent and stand guard.

istry or only of his Passion. The text begins in the

Then comes perhaps the most striking passage

middle of a passage with the statement that “None

of the narrative, an actual account of Jesus’ resur—

of the Jews washed his hands, neither did Herod

rection and emergence from the tomb, an account

nor any of his judges. As they did not wish to

found in none of the other early Gospels. A crowd

wash, Pilate got up.” Evidently the preceding pas—

has come from Jerusalem and its surrounding

sage narrated the story, otherwise known only

neighborhoods to see the tomb. During the night

from Matthew, of Pilate’s washing his hands at

hours, they hear a great noise and observe the

Jesus’ trial (Matt 27:24). In Peter’s account, how—

heavens open up; two men descend in great splen—

ever, the emphasis is not on Pilate, who is por—

dor. The stone before the tomb rolls away of its

trayed throughout as innocent of Jesus’ death, but

own accord, and the two men enter. The soldiers

on Herod, the King of the Jews, and on the Jewish

standing guard awaken the centurion, who comes

leaders who collaborated with him. In the next

out to see the incredible spectacle. From the tomb

verse, it is Herod who orders Jesus to be taken out

there emerge three men; the heads of two of them

and crucified.

reach into heaven. They are supporting the third,

The narrative continues with the request of

whose head reaches up beyond the heavens.

Joseph (of Arimathea) for Jesus’ body, the mockery

Behind them emerges a cross. A voice then speaks

of Jesus, and his crucifixion. These accounts are

from heaven: “Have you preached to those who

both like and unlike what we read in the canoni—

are sleeping?” The cross replies, “Yes” (vv. 41–42).

cal Gospels. For example, in verse 10, Jesus is said

The soldiers run to Pilate and tell him all that

to be crucified between two criminals, as in the

has happened. The Jewish leaders beg him to keep

other Gospels, but then we find the unusual state—

the story quiet, for fear that they will be stoned

ment that “he was silent as if he had no pain.”

once the Jewish people realize what they have

This last statement could well be taken in a

done in putting Jesus to death. Pilate commands

docetic way; perhaps Jesus appeared to have no

the soldiers to silence, but only after reminding

pain because he in fact did not have any. Some

the Jewish leaders that Jesus’ crucifixion was

scholars have seen this verse as providing evidence

indeed their fault, not his. The next day at dawn,

that the document is the “heretical” Gospel

not knowing what has happened, Mary Magdalene

known to Serapion. Further confirmation may

goes with several women companions to the tomb

come several verses later. When Jesus is about to

to provide a more adequate burial for Jesus’ body,

die, he utters his “cry of dereliction” in words sim—

but the tomb is empty, save for a heavenly visitor

ilar to, but not identical with, those found in

who tells her that the Lord has risen and gone.

Mark’s account: “My power, O power, you have

The manuscript then ends in the middle of a story

left me” (v. 19). He is then said to be “taken up,”

that apparently described Jesus’ appearance to

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some of his disciples (perhaps similar to that found

actions. The interpretation of the destruction of

in John 21): “But I, Simon Peter, and Andrew, my

Jerusalem as God’s vengeance upon the Jewish peo—

brother, took our nets and went to the sea; and

ple for the execution of Jesus became a common

with us was Levi, the son of Alphaeus, whom the

theme in Christian writers of the second century.

Lord . . . “ (v. 60). Here the manuscript breaks off.

Further support for the late date of the account

Scholars continue to debate certain aspects of

comes in the hints of a Gnostic understanding of

this fascinating account. Did this Gospel contain

Jesus’ Passion, which we noted earlier. It appears,

a narrative of Jesus’ ministry or only of his Passion?

therefore, that the account as we now have it was

Was it written by a Gnostic? When was it written?

written after the Gospels that eventually became

Did its author use any of the canonical Gospels as

part of the New Testament.

sources? If not, where did he acquire his accounts?

Is the Gospel of Peter based on any of these ear—

Are some of the traditions that are preserved here

lier narratives? It does have a number of close par—

earlier than those found in the Passion narratives

allels to the canonical Gospels, particularly to

of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John?

Matthew, where we also read of Pilate washing his

Rather than go into all of the details of these

hands and the posting of a guard at the tomb. At

debates, let me simply indicate the view that

the same time, we would be hard-pressed to explain

strikes me as the most reasonable and explain why.

why this author left out so many canonical passages

This Gospel appears to have been written after the

that would have suited his purposes so admirably,

canonical Gospels but not in reliance upon them.

had he known them, including the cry from the

It was based on popular stories about Jesus’

Jewish crowds, in which they assume full responsi—

Passion, which were in circulation in a number of

bility for Jesus’ death after Pilate washes his hands

Christian circles. Its author may have had Gnostic

(“His blood be upon us and our children”; Matt

leanings and certainly felt considerable antipathy

27:25), the account of Jesus carrying his cross, and

towards non-Christian Jews.

the mocking of Jesus during his crucifixion. Recall

That the Gospel of Peter represents a later stage

that the only solid grounds for thinking that one

of development in the traditions about Jesus than

document was the source for another is when they

what we find in the first-century Gospels is sug—

have extensive verbal agreements. There are no

gested first of all by the heightened legendary ele—

full sentences that the Gospel of Peter shares word

ments, especially, the (literally) heightened Jesus

for word with the other Gospels; indeed, there are

and the cross that walks behind him and speaks to

virtually no verbatim agreements of any kind that

the heavens. The treatment of “the Jews” in this

extend for more than two or three words.

account is also significant for dating its traditions,

Perhaps it is best, then, to see the accounts of

for here they are made even more culpable for

this narrative as having been drawn from stories

Jesus’ death than in the canonical Gospels. Indeed,

about Jesus’ Passion and resurrection that were in

Pilate, representing the Roman authorities, is alto—

wide circulation among Christians. Some of these

gether blameless; it is the king of the Jews, Herod,

stories would have been known in similar forms in

along with the other Jewish leaders, who are total—

different communities; none of them would have

ly at fault for Jesus’ unjust condemnation. This por—

been told in exactly the same way, since they were

trayal coincides with views that were developing in

passed along by word of mouth. As Christians told

Christian circles in the second century, a period in

the stories, they modified them, adding legendary

which Christian anti-Judaism began to assert itself

details here and there, eliminating parts that

with particular vigor (as we will see in Chapter 25).

appeared irrelevant, and incorporating their own

One byproduct of this increased animosity is that

views into the narrative. The author of the Gospel

Christians began to exonerate Pilate for Jesus’

of Peter, living perhaps at the beginning of the sec—

death and to blame Jews (indeed, all Jews) more

ond century, did what others had done before him

and more. In the Gospel of Peter, it is Jews who

and as others would do afterwards; he collected the

actually do the dirty work of crucifying Jesus; later

stories he had heard, or possibly read, and created

they regret it, and explicitly express their fears that

out of them a narrative of the words, deeds, and

Jerusalem will now be destroyed as a result of their

experiences of Jesus.

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SAYINGS GOSPELS

who can understand. In fact, the opening statement indicates that the correct understanding of

We have seen that some of the sources lying

these sayings will provide more than wisdom; it

behind the canonical Gospels may have contained

will bring eternal life: “These are the secret words

principally, or exclusively, sayings of Jesus. Most,

which the living Jesus spoke, and Didymus Judas

but not all, of the Q material consists of sayings,

Thomas wrote them down. And he said, ‘He who

and at least two sources recounting Jesus’ discours—

finds the meaning of these words will not taste

es were used by the author of the Fourth Gospel.

death’ ” ( Gosp. Thom. 1).

Unfortunately, we are not able to determine

The Jesus of this Gospel is not the Jewish mes—

whether these Johannine sources included other

siah that we have seen in other Gospels, not the

traditions as well, for example, stories of what

miracle-working son of God, not the crucified and

Jesus did and experienced.

resurrected Lord, and not the Son of Man who will

For many years, scholars denied that a pure

return on the clouds of heaven. He is the eternal

“sayings” Gospel, that is, one filled with Jesus’

Jesus, whose words bring salvation.

teachings and nothing else, could have existed in

the early church, especially if these sayings made

The Reputed Author.

Who is Didymus Judas

no reference to Jesus’ own death and resurrection.

Thomas, who allegedly penned these words? We

This view was based on the prevailing notion that

know this name from other ancient Christian

for all early Christians the real significance of Jesus

sources, such as the Acts of Thomas. Both

was that he died for the sins of the world and was

“Didymus” and “Thomas” are words that mean

raised from the dead. To be sure, Jesus’ teachings

“twin” (the first is Greek, the second Semitic);

were important to the early church, but according

Judas is his proper name. According to the Acts of

to this view all of the early Christians believed

Thomas, he was a blood relation of Jesus, the same

that his death and resurrection alone had brought

one mentioned in the New Testament (Mark 6:3).

salvation. The discovery of “sayings” Gospels,

Thus, Didymus Judas Thomas was Jesus’ twin

especially the Gospel of Thomas, has forced schol—

brother (see box 12.2). Who better to relate the

ars to reconsider this view.

secret words of Jesus that can bring eternal life

than his own twin brother?

The Gospel of Thomas

The Character of the Sayings.

Many of the say—

The Gospel of Thomas is without question the most

ings of Jesus in this Gospel will be familiar to those

significant book discovered in the Nag Hammadi

who have read the Synoptic Gospels: “If a blind

library. Unlike the Gospel of Peter, discovered sixty man leads a blind man, the two of them fall into a

years earlier, this book is completely preserved. It

pit” ( Gosp. Thom. 34); “Blessed are the poor, for

has no narrative at all, no stories about anything

yours is the Kingdom of Heaven” (54); “ The har—

that Jesus did, no references to his death and res—

vest is great, but the workers are few; but beseech

urrection. The Gospel of Thomas is a collection of

the Lord to send workers to the harvest” (73).

114 sayings of Jesus.

Other sayings sound vaguely familiar, yet somewhat peculiar: “Let him who seeks not cease seek-

The Sayings of the Collection.

The sayings are

ing until he finds, and when he finds, he will be

not arranged in any recognizable order. Nor are

troubled, and when he is troubled, he will marvel,

they set within any context, except in a few

and he will rule over the All” (2).

instances in which Jesus is said to reply to a direct

Still other sayings of Jesus in the Gospel of

question of his disciples. Most of the sayings begin

Thomas sound quite unlike anything known from

simply with the words “Jesus said.” In terms of

the New Testament: “ . . . On the day when you

genre, the book looks less like the New Testament

were one, you became two. But when you have

Gospels and more like the Book of Proverbs in the

become two, what will you do?” (11); “If the flesh

Hebrew Bible. Like Proverbs, it is a collection of

exists because of spirit, it is a miracle, but if spirit

sayings that are meant to bring wisdom to the one

exists because of the body, it is a miracle of miracles.

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SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 12.2 Judas Thomas as Jesus’ Twin Brother

Some of the Christians in Syria thought that Jesus’ brother Judas (or Jude), mentioned in Mark 6:3, was actually his twin. Hence the name, Judas Thomas, “Jude, the Twin.” This idea is puzzling for most modern readers. If these ancient Syrian Christians believed that Jesus was unique in being born of a virgin, how could they also think that he had a twin brother?

Unfortunately, none of the ancient Syrian texts that allude to this belief answers the question. But we may be able to gain some insight by considering other places in ancient literature in which twins are born, one the son of a mortal and the other the son of a god. The most famous account comes from Greek mythology in the tale of the birth of Heracles (Hercules) and his twin brother, the mortal Iphicles. The story was retold many times, perhaps most memorably in a humorous play titled Amphitryon, by the Roman playwright Plautus, in the second century B.C.E.

The plot goes like this. Amphitryon is a general in the Greek army who leaves his pregnant wife Alcmena in order to go off to war. The night before he returns, Zeus looks down upon Alcmena and becomes awestruck by her ravishing beauty. Assuming the shape of Amphitryon, Zeus comes to her, claiming to have returned from battle. They spend the night in passionate embrace; so much does Zeus enjoy the tryst that he commands the constella-tions to stop their motion so as to prolong the night. When he finally departs, many hours later, Amphitryon himself returns home, dismayed and distraught that Alcmena isn’t overjoyed at seeing him after his long absence—not understanding, of course, that she thinks she has just spent a wild night frolicking in his arms.

Her divine encounter has left Alcmena doubly pregnant. She eventually gives birth to two sons: Iphicles, the human son of Amphitryon, and Heracles, the divine son of Zeus. Did the ancient Syrian Christians know tales such as this and think that it might be possible for Jesus and Judas to be twins, born at the same time of the same mother, one being the son of God and the other the son of Joseph?

But I marvel at how this great wealth established

The Overarching Message of the Book.

The

itself in this poverty” (29); “I stood in the midst of

meanings of these sayings are in no way obvious. If

the World, and I appeared to them in the flesh. I

they were, they would not be called secret! They

found all of them drunk; I did not find any of them

will seem far less obscure, however, if you try to

thirsting. And my soul was pained for the sons of

understand them in light of the basic gnostic myth

men because they are blind in their hearts, and they

explained in the preceding chapter. Many of the

do not see that they came empty into the world. . . .

most puzzling sayings in this collection appear to

When they have shaken off their wine, then they

reflect the notion that within the hearer is a spark

shall repent” (28); “His disciples said, ‘On what day

of the divine that had a heavenly origin. This

will you be revealed to us and on what day shall we

spark has tragically fallen into the material world,

see you?’ Jesus said, ‘When you undress without

where it has become entrapped in a body (sunk

being ashamed, and you take your clothes and put

into “poverty”), and in that condition it has

them under your feet as little children and tramp on

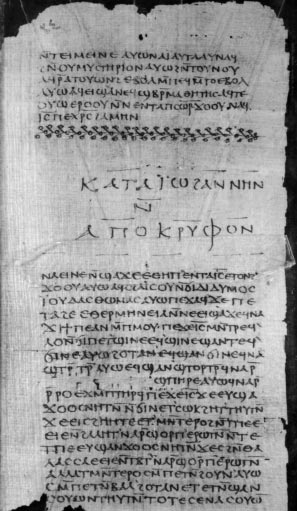
become forgetful of its origin (or “drunk”). It needs

them, then you shall see the Son of the Living One,

to be reawakened by learning the truth about this

and you shall not fear’ ” (37).

material world and the impoverished material



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body that it inhabits. Jesus is the one who conveys

this truth; once the spirit learns the meaning of his

words, it will be able to strip off this body of death,

symbolized sometimes as garments of clothing, and

escape this material world. It will then have salvation, life eternal; it will rejoin the divine realm

and rule over all.

There is not a word in the Gospel of Thomas

about Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection. Indeed,

for this author none of Jesus’ earthly activities

appears to matter; there is no word here of his miracles or encounters or experiences. What matters

are Jesus’ secret teachings. He brings salvation not

F P O

through his Passion but by conveying the message

necessary for deliverance from this impoverished

material existence.

Not only are Jesus’ bodily experiences of no

importance in the Gospel of Thomas, but the physical existence of the believer is irrelevant as well.

For this reason, neither human events on the personal level nor history itself is of any consequence.

The kingdom of God is not something to be

expected in the future: “His disciples said to him,

‘On what day will the kingdom come?’ ” Jesus

answers: “It will not come by expectation. They

will not say, ‘Look here,’ or, ‘Look there,’ but the

Kingdom of the Father is spread out on the earth

and people do not see it” ( Gosp. Thom. 113). The

kingdom is here, now, for those who know who

they are and whence they have come; it is not a

Figure 12.1 The opening of the Coptic Gospel of Thomas, physical place, but a salvation from within. Jesus

which begins (in the middle of the page) with the words “These says “If the ones who lead you say, ‘There is the

are the secret words which the living Jesus spoke, and Didymus kingdom, in heaven,’ then the birds of heaven

Judas Thomas wrote them down.”

shall go before you. If they say to you, ‘It is in the

sea,’ then the fish shall go before you. Rather the

the material world was good because it was created

kingdom is within you and outside you. If you

by God, who taught that the kingdom of God

know yourselves, then you will be known, and you

would be a physical presence on earth to come in

will know that you are sons of the living Father.

the near future, and who proclaimed that salvation

But if you do not know yourselves, then you are in

came not by understanding the secret message of

poverty and you are poverty” ( Gosp. Thom. 3).

Jesus but by believing in his death and resurrection.

Thus this material world and the body that we

inhabit are poor excuses for existence. Only

Thomas and the Synoptics.

Scholars have nat—

through knowledge—knowledge of who one really

urally raised the question of whether the Gospel of

is, as revealed by the living Jesus—can we escape

Thomas represents a form of Christianity that is

and enjoy the riches of the kingdom of the Father.

early and independent of that preserved, say, in

This is a powerful message, and one that stands

the Synoptic Gospels or whether it represents a

in stark contrast to the Gospel proclaimed by other

later development of Christianity, based in part on

Christians of the early church, who maintained that

the teachings of Jesus found in the Synoptics but

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modified in light of Gnostic beliefs. As we have

some of them old, some of them new, and put

seen, some of the sayings in Thomas are like those

them into a Gospel designed for his community,

found in the Synoptics, with slight differences.

where beliefs were rooted not in the death and res—

Could some of these be closer to the way Jesus

urrection of Jesus but in his secret message.

actually expressed himself? Other sayings cannot

be found in the Synoptics. Could some of these be

Thomas and the Q Source.

The final product

authentic? Is the entire collection early, from the

reminds many scholars of the Q source. Some have

first century itself, or was it compiled only later?

maintained that Q was also composed entirely of

These are intriguing questions but ones that are

the sayings of Jesus and that the community for

not easily answered. Scholars have argued about

whom it was written was not concerned about Jesus’

them intensely since the discovery of the Gospel,

activities and experiences, including his death on

and even now, fifty years later, the heat of the

the cross. If they are right, then something like

debate has not subsided. Let me explain the posi—

Thomas’s community, even if not quite so Gnostic

tion that strikes me as the most plausible.

in its orientation, was already in existence prior to

It does not appear that the Gospel of Thomas actu—

the writing of the New Testament Gospels.

ally used the Synoptic Gospels to formulate its own

Many other scholars, on the other hand, have

sayings of Jesus. As we have seen, the burden of proof

their doubts. For one thing, it is not true that Q

in such matters is on the one who claims that an

contained no narratives. As we have seen, two of

author used another document as a source. The

them survive: the temptation of Jesus and the

surest indicators of reliance upon a source are

healing of the centurion’s son. How many others

detailed and extensive verbal parallels, but this is pre—

did Q narrate? Unfortunately, despite the extrava—

cisely what we do not find with the Gospel of Thoma s

gant claims of some scholars, we simply cannot

in relation to the Synoptics. There are many similar

know. Even more unfortunately, we cannot know

sayings but few extensive verbal correspondences.

whether the Q source contained a Passion narra—

The fact that the Gospel of Thomas is written in

tive, even though scholars commonly claim that it

Coptic rather than Greek, the language of the

did not. The reality is that our only access to Q is

Synoptics, does not work against this position.

through the agreements of Matthew and Luke in

Several Greek fragments of Thomas have also sur—

stories not found in Mark. True, Matthew and

vived from antiquity, discovered not at Nag

Luke do not agree in their Passion narratives

Hammadi but in an ancient trash heap elsewhere

against Mark. Does this mean that Q did not have

in Egypt, in a town called Oxyrhynchus. These small

a Passion narrative? Not necessarily. It could mean

fragments date to some point in the second centu—

that when either Matthew or Luke differs from

ry, much earlier than the Coptic translation. They

Mark in the Passion narrative, one account was

show us that the Gospel was originally written in

taken from Q and the other was drawn from Mark.

Greek, and they indicate something about the care

Or it could mean that Matthew or Luke, or both,

with which the translator did his work. When stud—

occasionally utilized their other traditions (M and

ied closely, they confirm our suspicion that exten—

L) for Jesus’ Passion, rather than Q.

sive verbal similarities did not exist between the

There is at least one stark difference between Q

original Gospel of Thomas and the Synoptics.

and Thomas, which relates directly to the beliefs

Finally, if Thomas did use the Synoptics, it

of the communities that preserved them. We have

would be especially hard to explain why he left out

seen that Thomas denies the future coming of the

of his account most of their sayings of Jesus, many

Son of Man in judgment upon the earth; this

of them relevant to his agenda. It is probably bet—

futuristic hope, however, is an important theme in

ter, therefore, to assume that the author who calls

Q. Some scholars have argued that Q sayings like

himself Thomas knew a number of the sayings of

Luke 12:8–9 (Matt 10:32–33), which speaks of the

Jesus and understood these sayings in a particular

day of judgment when the Son of Man arrives,

way, based on his knowledge of what I have called

were not in the original version of Q but were only

the Gnostic myth. He collected these sayings,

added later. Their reason for thinking so, however,

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## JESUS FROM DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

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SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 12.3 The Older Sayings of the Gospel of Thomas

If the Gospel of Thomas was written independently of the Synoptics, what does one make of the sayings of Jesus that they have in common but in slightly different forms? Is it possible that Thomas may preserve an older form of some of these sayings, closer to the way in which Jesus delivered them? It is generally conceded that this is at least theoretically possible.

How do we know when a saying is older? We will consider this issue at greater length in Chapter 13. Here let me point out one controversial criterion that some researchers have used. If there are two different forms of a saying, these scholars claim, then the one that is simpler and more direct is more likely to be older. The logic behind this criterion is that sayings were generally embellished and expanded in the retelling.

Not everyone agrees with this criterion, but it at least deserves some consideration. What happens when it is applied to the sayings found in both Thomas and the Synoptics? Sometimes the form found in Thomas can lay claim to being older. Consider the following examples: Thomas The Synoptics

The disciples said to Jesus, “Tell us, what is

He also said, “With what can we compare

the Kingdom of Heaven like?” He said to

the kingdom of God, or what parable will we

them, “It is like a mustard seed, smaller than

use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which,

all seeds. But when it falls on plowed

when sown upon the ground, is the smallest

ground, it puts forth a large shrub and

of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown

becomes a shelter for the birds of heaven.”

it grows up and becomes the greatest of all

( Gosp. Thom. 20)

shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that

the birds of the air can make nests in its

shade.” (Mark 4:30–32)

And he said, “The man is like a wise fisher-

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net

man who threw his net into the sea. He

that was thrown into the sea and caught fish

drew it up from the sea; it was full of small

of every kind; when it was full, they drew it

fish. The fisherman found among them a

ashore, sat down, and put the good into bas—

large, good fish. He threw all the small fish

kets but threw out the bad. So it will be at

back into the sea; with no trouble he chose

the end of the age. The angels will come out

the large fish. He who has ears to hear, let

and separate the evil from the righteous and

him hear.” ( Gosp. Thom. 8)

throw them into the furnace of fire, where

there will be weeping and gnashing of

teeth.” (Matt 13:47–50)

Jesus said, “If a blind man leads a blind man,

He also told them a parable: “Can a blind

the two of them fall into a pit.” ( Gosp.

person guide a blind person? Will not both

Thom. 34)

fall into a pit?” (Luke 6:39; the version in

Matt 15:14 is somewhat longer)

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is that they believe that the original version of Q

of the human race, and its salvation through the

was not apocalyptic in its orientation: any apoca—

appearance of a divine aeon from on high, who

lyptic ideas would therefore not have been original

reveals the secret knowledge necessary for deliver—

to it. As you might surmise, this leads to a kind of

ance from this material world. The form of the

circular reasoning, no less curious for being so

Gnostic myth revealed here is very similar to the

common: if Q was like Thomas, it cannot have

account narrated by the church father Irenaeus

had apocalyptic sayings; if we remove the apoca—

around the year 180 C.E., so the book appears to

lyptic sayings from Q, it is like Thomas; therefore,

have been known in Christian churches by the

Q was originally like Thomas.

middle of the second century.

Belonging to the same basic genre and coming

Conclusion: The Date of Thomas and Its

from about the same time is the Apocryphon of

Traditions.

Although we cannot know whether

James, Nag Hammadi another of the writings of

a source like Thomas existed during the first cen—

the library. This Gospel is a dialogue between Jesus

tury, there are good reasons for thinking that

and his two disciples Peter and James 550 days

Thomas itself did not. The most obvious is that

after his resurrection. In the dialogue Jesus

the full-blown Christian-gnostic myth that many

responds to the questions of his followers and urges

of Thomas’s sayings presuppose cannot be docu—

them to attain salvation by knowing themselves

mented as existing prior to the second century.

and living in ways appropriate to the children of

This is not to deny, however, that individual

God.

sayings found in Thomas may go back to Jesus

Not all of the revelation discourses were

himself. Indeed, as we will see later, all of the say—

Gnostic, however. In fact, one of the most inter—

ings in Thomas, and in every other source, canon—

esting is a proto-orthodox writing from the early

ical and noncanonical, must be judged as theoret—

or mid second century produced in large measure

ically going back to Jesus. Moreover, there are

to counter gnostic ideas about the nature of

grounds for thinking that some of the 114 sayings

Christ’s body. This work does not come from Nag

of this particular Gospel, especially some of the

Hammadi but was uncovered in a Coptic transla—

parables, are preserved in an older form than in

tion in Cairo at the end of the nineteenth centu—

the canonical Gospels, that is, they may be more

ry. It is called the Epistle of the Apostles because it like what Jesus actually said (see box 12.3).

is allegedly a letter written to Christians around

the world by the eleven apostles after Jesus’ resurrection (Judas having hanged himself). In this let-

Revelation Discourses

ter, the “apostles” claim to have received a special

The other kind of sayings Gospel is an account in

revelation from Jesus warning them to avoid the

which Jesus appears to one or more of his disciples

teachings of the false apostles Simon Magus and

after his resurrection and conveys the secret revela—

Cerinthus, two of the most infamous Gnostics in

tion that is necessary for their salvation, a revelation

the eyes of second-century proto-orthodox writers.

which they then dutifully record for those who are

In particular, the document affirms the idea that

chosen. Often these secret revelations have to do

Jesus was a real flesh-and-blood human being and

with the mysteries of how the universe came into

emphasizes that those who believe in him are des—

existence, how souls came to be present here, and

tined to be raised, bodily, from the dead.

how they can escape. In other words, the vast majority of these Gospels are Gnostic in their orientation.

One example is the widely circulated

INFANCY GOSPELS

Apocryphon of John (an apocryphon is a secret

book), in which the resurrected Jesus appears to

As can be seen from the revelation discourses,

John the son of Zebedee to reveal to him the

Christians appear to have been intrigued with the

secrets of the universe and the divine realm, the

activities of Jesus after his resurrection, perhaps

origin of the evil creator Ialdabaoth, the creation

because the earliest traditions said so little about

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## JESUS FROM DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

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what he did between his resurrection and ascen—

When Joseph sends him to school to learn to read,

sion into heaven. One other period about which

Jesus refuses to recite the alphabet. His teacher

the earliest traditions were largely silent was Jesus’

pleads with him to cooperate. Jesus replies with a

infancy and youth. The New Testament Gospels

scornful challenge: “If you really are a teacher and

present only a few stories relating to Jesus’ young

know the letters well, tell me the power of Alpha

life, for example, Matthew’s account of the worship

and I’ll tell you the power of Beta.” More than a lit—

of the Magi and the flight to Egypt and Luke’s story

tle perturbed, the teacher cuffs the boy on the

of Jesus’ visit to the Temple as a twelve-year-old.

head, the single largest mistake of an illustrious

After the New Testament Gospels were written—

teaching career. Jesus withers him on the spot.

and possibly earlier, although we have no hard evi—

Joseph is stricken with grief and gives an urgent

dence one way or the other—Christians began to

order to his mother: “Do not let him go outside:

tell stories about Jesus as a young boy. For the most

anyone who makes him angry dies.”

part, the legendary character of these creative ficAs time goes on, however, Jesus begins to use

tions is easily detected. We are fortunate that later

his powers for good. He saves his friends from

authors collected some of them into written texts,

deadly snake bites, heals the sick, and proves

the so-called infancy Gospels, which began to be

remarkably handy around the house: when Joseph

produced by the first part of the second century at

miscuts a board, Jesus corrects his mistake miracu—

the latest.

lously. The account concludes with Jesus as a

One of the earliest is the Infancy Gospel of

twelve-year old teaching in the Temple, surround-

Thomas (not to be confused with the Coptic

ed by scribes and Pharisees who listen to him and

Gospel of Thomas discovered near Nag Hammadi),

bless Mary for the wonderful child she has brought

a document sometimes dated as early as 125 C.E.

into the world.

Here is a fascinating account of Jesus’ youth

The blessing of Mary is a theme that is played

beginning at the tender age of five. Behind the

out in some of the other infancy Gospels, although

narrative lies a question that intrigues some

most of these are dated after the second century.

Christians even today: if Jesus was a miracle—

One that may have been written early, however, is

working Son of God as an adult, what was he like

the Gospel of James. The James of the title is the

as a kid? According to this account, as it turns

brother of Jesus, known from other sources. His

out, he was more than a little mischievous. When

Gospel, or “proto-Gospel,” as it is sometimes called

he first appears in this text, he is making clay

since it narrates events prior to Jesus’ birth,

sparrows by a stream on the Sabbath. A Jewish

describes the miraculous character of their mother,

man passing by sees what he has done and

Mary. Jesus obviously did not come into the world

upbraids him for violating the Law by not keeping

in a normal way, in this author’s view, since his

the Sabbath day holy. Instead of apologizing, the

mother was a virgin. Why, though, was she chosen

child Jesus claps his hands and tells the sparrows

to bear the Son of God? The accounts of this

to be gone. They come to life and fly off, thereby

Gospel provide some pious reflections that give an

destroying any evidence of wrongdoing!

answer: Mary herself was born miraculously and

One might have expected that with his super—

was set apart for the service of God at a young age.

natural powers Jesus would have been a useful and

The account describes Mary’s birth, early life, and

entertaining playmate for the other children in

activities prior to and immediately after bearing

town. It turns out, however, that the boy has a

Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit, includ—

temper and is not to be crossed. When a child

ing a more extended description of her relations

accidentally runs into him on the street, Jesus

with Joseph, a narrative of their journey to

turns in anger and declares, “You’ll go no further

Bethlehem, and an account of her postpartum

on your way.” The child falls down dead. (Jesus

examination. Narratives such as this became

later raises him from the dead, along with others

increasingly important in the early Middle Ages as

that he has cursed on one occasion or another.)

Christians began to venerate the Blessed Virgin

And Jesus’ wrath is not reserved for children.

Mary, or “mother of God,” as she came to be called.

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CONCLUSION:

considered the age of a document to be an impor-

THE OTHER GOSPELS

tant criterion for deciding whether or not it

belonged. Those that had been around for a long

What can we say in conclusion about the other

time, and that were widely known as a result, were

Gospels, those that did not make it into the New

more likely to be included in the canon than those

Testament? Most of them are later than the canon—

that had been penned only recently.

ical four. This does not mean, however, that

The noncanonical Gospels are important for

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were the earliest

the study of the New Testament, however, for they

accounts to be written. On the contrary, these

show that Christians continued to reflect on the

books were themselves based on earlier sources that

significance of Jesus and to incorporate their views

have since been lost. Moreover, some of the tradi—

into the stories told about his words and deeds.

tions preserved in the noncanonical Gospels, espe—

This process began at the very outset of

cially in the Gospels of Thomas and Peter, may be

Christianity itself, when the earliest believers told

much older than the books themselves, at least as

others about the man in whom they believed. This

old as some of the traditions in the canonical

widespread modification of the tradition explains

books. On the whole, though, the noncanonical

why we have to approach the surviving Christian

Gospels are of greater importance for understand—

Gospels not only from the literary perspective, to

ing the diversity of Christianity in the second and

see how each Gospel portrays Jesus—a task that

third and later centuries than for knowing about

we have now completed—but also from the his—

the writings of the earliest Christians. When the

torical perspective, to determine which of the tra—

Christians of the second century began to collect

ditions preserved in these Gospels, both canonical

apostolic writings into a canon of Scripture, they

and noncanonical, are historically accurate.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Cameron, Ron, ed. The Other Gospels: NonCanonical

Elliott, J. K. The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Gospel Texts. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982. A con-Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation.

venient collection of the noncanonical Gospels of the

Oxford: Clarendon, 1993. An excellent one-volume

second and third centuries, in English translation with

collection of noncanonical Gospels, acts, epistles, and

brief introductions.

apocalypses, in a readable English translation with

nice, brief introductions.

Cartlidge, David R., and David L. Dungan, eds. Documents

for the Study of the Gospels. 2d ed. Philadelphia:

Ehrman, Bart D. After the New Testament: A Reader in Early Fortress, 1994. A valuable selection of ancient literary

Christianity. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

texts that relate to the New Testament Gospels,

A collection of significant Christian writings from the

including English translations of the Gospels of

second and third centuries, including the Gospels dis—

Thomas and Peter and selections from several other

cussed in this chapter.

noncanonical Gospels.

Hennecke, Edgar, and Wilhelm Schneemelcher, eds. New

Crossan, John Dominic. Four Other Gospels: Shadows on the

Testament Apocrypha, 2 vols. Trans. by A. J. B. Higgins, Contours of the Canon. Minneapolis: Winston Press,

et al. Ed. R. McL. Wilson. Philadelphia: Westminster

1987. Presenting an alternative perspective from that

Press, 1991. English translations of all the early non—

sketched in the present chapter, Crossan maintains

canonical writings preserved from Christian antiquity,

that some of the noncanonical Gospels were earlier and

with detailed scholarly introductions; an indispensable

more reliable than those within the New Testament.

resource for advanced students.

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Klijn, A. F. J. Jewish-Christian Gospel Tradition. Leiden: E. J.

Pagels, Elaine. The Gnostic Gospels. New York: Random Brill, 1992. The most thorough examination of the non-House, 1976. An enormously popular and provocative

canonical Jewish-Christian Gospels, as attested principal—

account of the views presented in the Gnostic Gospels

ly in the writings of the early Christian church fathers.

discovered near Nag Hammadi, especially in relation

to emerging Christian orthodoxy.

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# CHAPTER 13

The Historical Jesus: Sources, Problems, and Methods

Up to this point in our study we have examined

can the historian decide what really happened

the early Christian Gospels as discrete pieces of

during his life? Before addressing this question

literature, uncovering their unique portrayals of

directly, let me say a word about the grounds of our

Jesus through a variety of methods: literary-his—

knowledge about Jesus, or about any other person

torical, redactional, comparative, thematic, and

from the past.

socio-historical. At every stage, we have been

interested in learning how an author, and the

sources he used, understood and portrayed the life

of Jesus. But no point have we moved beyond

PROBLEMS

these literary concerns to ask about what actually

WITH SOURCES

happened during the life of Jesus, to find out what

he really said, did, and experienced. We are now

The only way that we can know what a person

in a position to explore these other, purely histor—

from the past said and did is by examining sources

ical issues. Apart from what certain Christian

from the period that provide us with information.

authors said about Jesus long after the fact, what

Most of our sources for the past are literary, that is,

can we know about the man himself, about the

they are texts written by authors who refer to the

actual life of the historical Jesus?

person’s words and deeds. But sources of this kind

This is a difficult question to answer (even

are not always reliable. Even eyewitness accounts

though Christian scholars, preachers, and laypeo—

are often contradictory, and contemporary

ple seem to answer it easily all the time) because,

observers not infrequently get the facts wrong.

as we have seen, the earliest accounts of the his—

Moreover, most historical sources, for the distant

torical Jesus, the Christian Gospels, vary so widely

past at least, do not derive from eyewitnesses but

among themselves. The differences are not

from later authors reporting the rumors and tradi—

restricted to conflicting details scattered here and

tions they have heard.

there among the records, even though differences

For these reasons, historians have to devise cri—

of this kind do indeed abound, as anyone who does

teria for determining which sources can be trusted

a methodical comparison of the early Gospels can

and which ones cannot. Most historians would

see. The differences go much deeper, to the very

agree that for reconstructing a past event the ideal

heart and soul of how Jesus is understood and por—

situation would be to have sources that (a) are

trayed. Think of how differently Jesus appears, for

numerous, so they can be compared to one anoth—

example, in the Gospels of Mark and John and

er, (b) derive from a time near the event itself, so

Thomas.

that they are less likely to have been based on

Given the variety of portrayals of Jesus and the

hearsay or legend, (c) were produced indepen—

different accounts of what he said and did, some of

dently of one another, so that their authors were

them difficult to reconcile with one another, how

not in collusion, (d) do not contradict one anoth-

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# CHAPTER 13

## THE HISTORICAL JESUS

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er, so that one or more of them is not necessarily

incredible miracles must have turned the world on

in error, (e) are internally consistent, suggesting a

its ear. Even those who had never seen him must

basic concern for reliability, and (f) are not biased

have been abuzz with his spectacular deeds.

toward the subject matter, so that their authors

Reports about this Son of God come to earth must

have not skewed their accounts to serve their own

even have filtered into the highest reaches of gov—

purposes.

ernment. Possibly the order for his execution came

Are the New Testament Gospels—our princi—

from on high—from the emperor himself, fearful

pal sources for reconstructing the life of Jesus—

that he had met his match in this Son of God

these kinds of sources? Before pursuing the ques—

become man.

tion, let me emphasize once again that I am not

In this “commonsensical” view, Jesus’ impact

passing judgment on the worth of these books, tryon the society of his day must have been immense,

ing to undermine their authority for those who

like a comet striking the earth. In that case, we

believe in them, or asking whether they are impor—

could expect to find scores of accounts of his words

tant as religious or theological documents. I am

and deeds written by contemporaries outside the

instead asking the question of the historian: are

group of his closest disciples. Surely people had a

these books reliable for reconstructing what Jesus

lot to say about him, whether his friends or ene—

actually said and did?

mies. If so, we would be well advised to see what

As a first step toward an answer, we can ask

they said.

whether any of the Gospel accounts can be corrob—

Unfortunately, the commonsensical view is not

orated by other ancient sources that describe the

even close to being right—biblical epics on the

life and teachings of the historical Jesus. For orga—

wide screen (the source of many people’s knowl—

nizational purposes we can categorize these other

edge about the Bible!) notwithstanding. If we look

sources as non-Christian (whether Jewish or

at the historical record itself—and, I should

pagan) or Christian (whether within the canon or

emphasize, for historians there is nothing else to

outside of it). For fairly obvious reasons, our inves—

look at—it appears that whatever his influence on

tigation will be restricted to sources that can be

subsequent generations, Jesus’ impact on society in

plausibly dated to within a hundred years of Jesus’

the first century was practically nil, less like a

death, that is, to those written before the year 130

comet striking the planet than a stone being

C.E. This is about the length of time that separates

tossed in the ocean.

us today from William McKinley, the twenty-fifth

This becomes especially clear when we consid—

president of the United States. Sources produced

er what his own contemporaries had to say about

much later than this are almost certainly based on

him. Strangely enough, they said almost nothing.

hearsay and legend rather than reliable historical

memory.

Pagan Sources

How many times is Jesus mentioned among the

NON-CHRISTIAN SOURCES

hundreds of documents by pagan writers (i.e., those

who were neither Jewish nor Christian) that sur—

Most people in our society imagine that Jesus must

vive from the first century of the Common Era—

have had an enormous effect on the people of his

writings by historians, poets, philosophers, religious

day—not just on his immediate followers. He was,

thinkers, public officials, and private persons,

after all, the founder of the most historically sig—

including literary texts, public inscriptions, private

nificant religion in the history of Western

letters, and notes scribbled on scratch paper? Not

Civilization. During his own time he must have

a single time. There are no birth records, official

attracted masses of attention—not only among

correspondence, philosophical rebuttals, literary

the crowds that he taught and healed, but

discussions, or personal reflections. Nothing writ—

throughout society at large. Anyone who could

ten by any pagan author of the first century so

deliver such brilliant teachings and produce such

much as mentions Jesus’ name.

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The first reference to Jesus in a pagan source comes

since Jesus himself had been executed some twenty

some eighty years after his death, in a letter written in

years before these riots swept through the capital.

112 C.E. by the Roman governor of Bithynia-Pontus,

At about the same time (115 C.E.), another

Pliny the Younger, who asks his emperor, Trajan, what

Roman historian, Tacitus, mentions Christians in his

he should do about prosecuting Christians in his

famous history of Rome called the Annals. In one of

province. Pliny’s letter tells us some interesting things

the best known passages of the book, Tacitus reports

about the followers of Jesus, for example, that they

that when Nero torched the city of Rome, he placed

covered a range of ages and socioeconomic classes;

the blame on the Christians and used them as scape—

but all it says about Jesus himself is that he was wor—

goats. In this context, Tacitus gives us the first bit of

shipped by these people as a god. This is worth know—

historical information about Jesus from a pagan

ing for understanding how far Christianity had spread

author: “Christus, from whom their [the Christians’]

and what it was like in the early years of the second

name is derived, was executed at the hands of the

century. But it is of practically no use for helping us

procurator Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius”

learn what Jesus actually said and did.

( Annals 15.44). Tacitus goes on to indicate that the

A few years later, the Roman historian Suetonius

“superstition” that emerged in Jesus’ wake first

mentions riots that had occurred among the Jews in

appeared in Judea (see box 13.1).

Rome during the reign of the emperor Claudius

It is a pity that Tacitus does not tell us more.

(41–54 C.E.). He says they were instigated by a person

One must assume either that he did not consider

named “Chrestus.” Is this a misspelling of “Christ”?

information about Jesus to be of real historical

Some scholars think so. Unfortunately, Suetonius

importance or that this was all that he knew. Some

tells us nothing about the man. If he does have Jesus

scholars have noted that even this bit of knowl—

in mind, he must be referring only to Jesus’ followers,

edge is not altogether reliable: Pilate was not, in

SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 13.1 Christianity as a Superstition

in the Roman World

Tacitus called Christianity a “superstition,” as did a number of our later Roman sources.

Authors in the Greco-Roman world used this term to describe any set of religious beliefs and practices that were antisocial, irrational, and motivated by raw fear of divine vengeance.

Such beliefs and practices were antisocial in that they involved religious acts that were not sanctioned by the recognized cults and so were out of bounds from the point of view of society at large (see the discussion of magic in Chapter 2). They were irrational in that they could not be justified in terms of the prevailing modes of logic. They were motivated by fear, rather than the more “noble” virtues of love, truth, and honor, in that they maintained that the gods were bent on punishing those who did not perform their prescribed religious acts regularly and scrupulously.

For many of the highly educated members of Roman society in the second century, Christianity fit this description perfectly. As we will see in Chapter 26, this religion was not sanctioned by the state and was perceived to be a secret and mildly dangerous society; its beliefs struck outsiders as irrational, especially its central claim that an executed criminal was the Lord of the universe; and its members often preached “fire and brimstone” against all who rejected its message, showing fear of divine retribution. Small wonder that the upper echelons of Roman society were not immediately drawn to this new religion.

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fact, a procurator but a prefect. In any event,

by the Roman emperor Vespasian) and his twenty—

Tacitus’s report confirms what we know from other

volume history of the Jewish people from Adam

sources, that Jesus was executed by order of the

and Eve up to the time of the Jewish War, a book

Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, some—

that he titled The Antiquities of the Jews. Scores of time during Tiberius’s reign. We learn nothing,

important, and less important, Jews, especially

however, about the reason for this execution, or

Jews in and around Josephus’s own time, are dis—

about Jesus’ life and teachings.

cussed in these historical works. Jesus is not men—

Odd as it might seem, these are the only refer—

tioned at all in Josephus’s treatment of the Jewish

ences to Jesus in pagan sources during the hun—

War, which comes as no surprise since his crucifix—

dred-year period after his death. On the whole,

ion took place some three decades before the war

they provide scarcely any information concerning

started, but he does make two tantalizingly brief

the things Jesus said, did, and experienced. For this

appearances in the Antiquities.

kind of information, we are therefore obliged to

One reference to Jesus occurs in a story about

turn elsewhere.

the Jewish high priest Ananus, who abused his

power before Rome in the year 62 C.E. by unlaw—

fully putting to death James, whom Josephus iden-

Jewish Sources

tifies as “the brother of Jesus who is called the mes—

In contrast to pagan sources, we have very few

siah” ( Ant. 20.9.1). From this reference we can

Jewish texts of any kind that can be reliably dated

learn that Jesus was known to have a brother

to the first century of the Common Era. There are

named James, which we already knew from the

references to Jesus in later documents, such as

New Testament (see Mark 6:3 and Gal 1:19), and

those that make up that great collection of Jewish

that he was thought by some people to be the mes—

lore and learning, the Talmud. This compilation

siah, although obviously not by Josephus himself,

of traditions was preserved by rabbis living in

who remained a non-Christian Jew.

the first several centuries of the Common Era,

Josephus’s religious perspective has made the

and some of the traditions found in the Talmud

other reference to Jesus a source of considerable

may possibly date back to the period of our con—

puzzlement over the years, for he not only mentions

cern, but scholars have increasingly realized that

Jesus as a historical figure but also appears to profess

it is difficult to establish accurate dates for these

faith in him as the messiah—somewhat peculiar for

traditions. The collection itself was made long

a person who never converted to Christianity (see

after the period of Jesus’ life; the core of the

box 13.2). This second passage indicates that Jesus

Talmud is the Mishnah, a collection of Rabbinic

was a wise man and a teacher who performed star—

opinions about the Law that was not written until

tling deeds and as a consequence found a following

nearly two centuries after his death. Moreover,

among both Jews and Greeks; it states that he was

Jesus is never mentioned in this part of the

accused by Jewish leaders before Pilate, who con—

Talmud; he appears only in commentaries on the

demned him to be crucified; and it points out that

Mishnah that were produced much later. Scholars

his followers remained devoted to him even after—

are therefore skeptical of the usefulness of these

wards ( Ant. 18.3.3).

references in reconstructing the life of the histor—

It is useful to know that Josephus had this much

ical Jesus.

information about Jesus. Unfortunately, there is not

There is one Jewish author, however, who both

much here to help us understand specifically what

wrote during our time period (before 130 C.E.) and

Jesus said and did. We might conclude that he was

mentioned Jesus. The Jewish historian Josephus

considered important enough for Josephus to men—

produced several important works, the two best

tion, though not as important as, say, John the

known of which are his insider’s perspective on

Baptist or many other Palestinian Jews who were

the Jewish War against Rome in 66–73 C.E. (he

thought to be prophets at the time, about whom

had been a general in the Jewish army but was cap—

Josephus says a good deal more. We will probably

tured and then made into a kind of court historian

never know if Josephus actually had more informa-

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SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 13.2 The Testimony of Flavius Josephus

Probably the most controversial passage in all of Josephus’s writings is his description of Jesus in book 18 of The Antiquities of the Jews.

At this time there appeared Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one should call him a man. For he was a doer of startling deeds, a teacher of people who receive the truth with pleasure. And he gained a following both among many Jews and among many of Greek origin. He was the Messiah. And when Pilate, because of an accusation made by the leading men among us, condemned him to the cross, those who had loved him previously did not cease to do so. For he appeared to them on the third day, living again, just as the divine prophets had spoken of these and countless other wondrous things about him. And up until this very day the tribe of Christians, named after him, has not died out. (Ant. 18. 3. 3) This testimony to Jesus has long puzzled scholars. Why would Josephus, a devout Jew who never became a Christian, profess faith in Jesus by suggesting that he was something more than a man, calling him the messiah (rather than merely saying that others thought he was), and claiming that he was raised from the dead in fulfillment of prophecy?

Many scholars have recognized that the problem can be solved by looking at how, and by whom, Josephus’s writings were transmitted over the centuries. For in fact they were not preserved by Jews, many of whom considered him to be a traitor because of his conduct during and after the war with Rome. Rather, it was Christians who copied Josephus’s writings through the ages. Is it possible that this reference to Jesus has been beefed up a bit by a Christian scribe who wanted to make Josephus appear more appreciative of the “true faith”?

If we take out the Christianized portions of the passage, what we are left with, according to one of the most convincing recent studies, is the following: At this time there appeared Jesus, a wise man. For he was a doer of startling deeds, a teacher of people who receive the truth with pleasure.

And he gained a following both among many Jews and among many of Greek origin. And when Pilate, because of an accusation made by the leading men among us, condemned him to the cross, those who had loved him previously did not cease to do so. And up until this very day the tribe of Christians, named after him, has not died out. (Meier 1991, 61) tion about Jesus at his disposal or if he told us all CHRISTIAN SOURCES

that he knew.

No other non-Christian Jewish source written

Outside the New Testament Gospels

before 130 C.E. mentions Jesus.

Clearly, we cannot learn much about Jesus from

Most of the noncanonical Gospels are legendary

non-Christian sources, whether pagan or Jewish.

and late, dating from the second to eighth cen—

Thus if we want to know what Jesus actually said

turies. In many cases they are dependent on infor—

and did during his life, we are therefore compelled

mation gleaned from our earlier sources, especially

to turn to sources produced by his followers.

the New Testament Gospels. As we have seen, the

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Gospel of Thomas may provide some independent

Testament are more concerned with other matters.

knowledge of aspects of Jesus’ teaching, but we

Moreover, the Gospel accounts outside the New

must be alert to the gnostic inclination of its more

Testament tend to be late and legendary, of con—

unusual sayings; and the Gospel of Peter may pro—

siderable interest in and of themselves, but of lit—

vide information concerning events at Jesus’ trial,

tle use to the historian interested in knowing

although the anti-Jewish slant of the report makes

what happened during Jesus’ lifetime. With the

even this doubtful. For the historian interested in

partial exceptions of the Gospels of Thomas and

knowing what really happened, the other non—

Peter, which even by the most generous interpre—

canonical Gospels do not inspire confidence.

tations cannot provide us with substantial

Students are sometimes surprised to learn how

amounts of new information, the only real sources

little information about the historical Jesus can be

available to the historian interested for the life of

gleaned from the New Testament writings that fall

Jesus are therefore the New Testament Gospels.

outside of the four Gospels. The apostle Paul, who

was not personally acquainted with Jesus but who

may have known some of his disciples, provides us

The New Testament Gospels

with the most detail. Regrettably, it is not much.

To what extent are these New Testament docu—

As we will see in somewhat greater length in

ments reliable for the historian, and how can they

Chapter 22, Paul informs us that Jesus was born of

be used to answer historical questions about Jesus?

a woman (Gal 4:4), that he was born as a Jew (Gal

The answers to these questions can be inferred

4:4), that he had brothers (1 Cor 9:5), one of

from our earlier analysis of these documents as lit—

whom was named James (Gal 1:19), that he min—

erary texts. We have seen, for example, that the

istered among the Jews (Rom 15:7), that he had

New Testament Gospels were not written at the

twelve disciples (1 Cor 15:5), that he instituted

time of Jesus’ life or immediately thereafter. It

the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor 11:23–25), possibly that

appears that Mark, the earliest Gospel, was

he was betrayed (1 Cor 11:23, assuming that the

penned around the year 65 C.E. or so, and that

Greek term here means “betrayed” rather than

John, the latest, was written perhaps around the

“handed over” to death by God), and that he was

year 95 C.E. These are only approximate dates, of

crucified (1 Cor 2:2). In terms of Jesus’ teachings,

course, but they are accepted by virtually all schol—

in addition to the words at the Last Supper (1 Cor

ars. Thus, the earliest surviving Gospels were pro—

11:23–25), Paul may refer to two other sayings of

duced thirty-five to sixty-five years after the

Jesus, to the effect that believers should not get

events they narrate. In modern terms, this would

divorced (1 Cor 7:10–11) and that they should pay

be like having written records of John F. Kennedy

their preachers (1 Cor 9:14).

or Albert Einstein or Babe Ruth appear for the first

Apart from these few references, Paul says

time this year.

almost nothing about the life and teachings of

We have also seen that the authors of these

Jesus, even though he has a lot to say about the

Gospels were likely not among the earliest follow—

significance of Jesus’ death and resurrection and

ers of Jesus. They themselves do not claim to be

his expected return in glory. The other New

disciples; the books are all anonymous, and they

Testament authors tell us even less. This means

give no solid information as to their authors’ iden—

that if historians want to know what Jesus said and

tity. And there are few reasons for thinking that

did they are more or less constrained to use the

the later traditions about who they were can be

New Testament Gospels as their principal sources.

accepted as anything but hearsay.

Let me emphasize that this is not for religious or

These circumstances do not in themselves

theological reasons—for instance, that these and

make the Gospels unreliable as historical docu—

these alone can be trusted. It is for historical rea—

ments. A book written fifty years after the fact by

sons, pure and simple. Jesus is scarcely mentioned

someone who was not an eyewitness is not neces—

by non-Christian sources for over a century after

sarily historically inaccurate. What is more telling

his death, and the other authors of the New

is the lack of consistency among these earliest



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accounts of the life of Jesus. For as we have repeat—

word of mouth for years and years among

edly seen, both in their details and in their overall

Christians who recounted them for a variety of

portrayals of who Jesus was, what he taught, and

reasons: to magnify the importance of Jesus, to

what he did, the four Gospels do not stand in per—

convince others to believe in him, to instruct

fect harmony with one another. They differ both

them concerning his relationship with God, to

in the factual information they provide, such as

show how he understood the Hebrew Scriptures,

where Jesus’ family was from, what he did during

to encourage his followers with the hope that his

his life, when he died, and what his disciples expe—

words could bring, and so forth. As the stories cir—

rienced afterwards, and in the ways they under—

culated orally, they were changed to suit the pur—

stand who he was and what he did, for instance,

poses at hand. They were modified further when

whether he taught about his own identity and

they were written down and further still when

whether he performed miracles in order to demon—

they were later redacted. Recall that this view is

strate who he was.

not based simply on scholarly imagination; we

Moreover, all of the early Christian authors had

have evidence for it, some of which I have laid out

perspectives on who Jesus was and on how he was

in earlier chapters.

significant. These perspectives affected the ways

Because these documents were of such impor—

they told stories about him. In addition, each

tance to people who believed in Jesus as the Son

author inherited a number of his stories from ear—

of God, their concerns, to put it somewhat sim—

lier written sources. and each of these sources had

plistically, were less historical than religious.

its own perspective. And before anyone bothered

Those who passed along the traditions and those

to write about Jesus, the stories had circulated by

who wrote them down were not interested in providing the brute facts of history for impartial

observers; they were interested in proclaiming

their faith in Jesus as the Son of God. This was

“good news” for the believer. But it is not necessarily good news for historians who are interested

in getting behind the perspectives of the authors

of the Gospels, and those of their sources, to

reconstruct what Jesus really said, did, and experienced. How can “faith documents” such as the

Gospels, produced by believers for believers to

promote belief, be used as historical sources?

Over the course of the past century, historians

have worked hard to develop methods for uncovering historically reliable information about the

F P O

life of Jesus. In this hotly debated area of research,

reputable and intelligent scholars have expressed

divergent views concerning both the methods to

be applied to the task and the conclusions to be

drawn, even when there is a general agreement

about method. I will sketch several of the methodological principles that have emerged from these

debates in the pages that follow. As you will

see, there is a logic behind each of them that is

Figure 13.1 Jesus, the Good Shepherd. This is one of the ear-driven by the character of the sources. All of these

liest paintings of Jesus to survive from antiquity (from about two centuries after Jesus’ death), from the catacomb of San

principles can be applied to any tradition about

Callisto in Rome.

Jesus, early or late, Christian or non-Christian,

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preserved in the New Testament Gospels or else—

In terms of our own study, this means that the

where. Anyone who does not find these principles

earliest sources should be especially valued. Of our

satisfactory must come up with others that are

four New Testament Gospels, John is the latest,

better; in no case, however, can we simply ignore

written, probably, about sixty or seventy years after

the problems of our sources and accept everything

the events it narrates. On the whole, it is less like—

they say about Jesus’ words and deeds as historically to be accurate than Mark, written some thirty

ly accurate. Once it is acknowledged that these

years earlier. (Recall what John did with the date

Gospels are historically problematic, then the

and time of Jesus’ death!) So too the Gospels of

problems must be dealt with in a clear and system—

Peter and Thomas, which, while relying on earlier

atic fashion. My sketch of the historical Jesus in

materials, were themselves evidently produced in

Chapter 16 will be based on the application of

the early second century. Following this principle,

these various principles.

our best source of all would be Paul (who regrettably doesn’t tell us very much), and then Q (that

is, the common source shared by Matthew and

USING OUR SOURCES: SOME

Luke for stories not found in Mark) and Mark, fol-

OF THE BASIC RULES OF THUMB

lowed by M (Matthew’s special source[s]) and L

(Luke’s) and so on.

Before elaborating on some specific criteria that

scholars have devised, let me say something about

a few very basic methodological principles that

Theological Merits / Historical Demerits

most historians would agree should be applied to

Over the course of Christian history, probably the

our sources.

most religiously significant and theologically powerful account of Jesus’ life has been the Gospel of

John. As we have seen, John says things about

The Earlier the Better

Jesus found nowhere else in Scripture: only here,

In general, historical sources closest to an event

for example, is Jesus identified as the “Word” that

have a greater likelihood of being accurate than

was from the beginning of all time, who was with

those at a further remove. This isn’t a hard and fast

God and who was God, the Word that became

rule, of course—sometimes later sources can

flesh and dwelt among us (1:1–14); only here does

recount events more accurately than earlier ones.

Jesus claim to be equal with God (10:30); only

But not usually, and especially not in antiquity,

here does Jesus say that anyone who has seen him

when later authors did not have the research tech—

has seen the Father, that anyone who rejects him

niques and data retrieval systems available to us

has rejected the Father, and that anyone who

today. The rule of thumb, particularly in the

believes in him will have eternal life with the

ancient world, is that earlier is better.

Father (5:22–24; 6:40; 14:9). These are powerful

The logic of the principle, especially when

theological statements. But if they were actually

dealing with ancient sources, is that as an event

said by Jesus, the historian might ask, why do they

gets discussed and reports about it circulate, there

never occur in sources that were written earlier

are greater and greater opportunities for it to be

than John? Nothing like them can be found in

changed—until just about everyone gets it wrong.

Mark, Q, M, or L—let alone Paul or Josephus. As

The less time that has elapsed in the transmission

true as these statements about Jesus may be to the

process, the less time there is for alteration and

believer, it is difficult to think that they represent

exaggeration. Thus if you want to know about the

things he really said to his disciples.

Marcionites who lived near the end of the second

And thus a second rule of thumb that historians

century, it’s better to consult sources from about

follow: accounts of Jesus that are clearly imbued

their time than sources produced two centuries

with a highly developed theology are less likely to

later.

be historically accurate. The reason relates to our

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first rule of thumb: later sources tend to be more

ria to make a case for what actually happened dur—

theologically oriented than earlier ones, since the

ing his life.

greater passage of time has allowed greater sustained theological reflection. And so, books like

John and Thomas—which may indeed preserve

Piling on the Testimony: The Criterion of

important historical information on occasion—are

Independent Attestation

not as valuable to the historian as sources that do

In any court trial, it is better to have a number of wit—

not promote as distinctive a theological agenda.

nesses who can provide consistent testimony than to

have only one, especially if we can show the witnesses did not confer with one another to get their story

Beware the Bias

straight. A strong case will be supported by several

The final rule of thumb is closely related to the

witnesses who independently agree on a point at

preceding two. It is sometimes possible to detect a

issue. So too with history. An event mentioned in

clear bias in an author—for example, when just

several independent documents is more likely to be

about every story in his or her account drives

historical than an event mentioned in only one. This

home, either subtly or obviously, the same point.

principle does not deny that individual documents

We’ve seen a bit of this, for example, in the Gospel

can provide reliable historical information, but with-

of Peter, whose vendetta against the Jewish people

out corroborating evidence it is often impossible to

colors just about every episode.

know if an individual source has made up an

Whenever you can isolate an author’s biases,

account, or perhaps provided a skewed version of it.

you can take them into account when considering

For the life of Jesus, we do in fact have a num—

his report. That is to say, statements supporting his

ber of independent sources. For example, Mark,

bias should then be taken with a pound of salt (not

the apostle Paul, and the authors of Q, M, L, and

necessarily discarded, but scrutinized carefully).

the signs source probably all wrote independently

An example is the report in the Gospel of Peter

of one another; that is, it appears that Mark had

that it was the Jewish King Herod and his court

not read the signs source, that Paul had not read

that had Jesus crucified. In all of our other early

Q, and so on. Moreover, we have seen that the

sources, the Roman governor Pilate is said to be

Gospel of Thomas, possibly the Gospel of Peter,

responsible. Peter’s established bias against the

probably the Johannine discourse sources, and cer—

Jews should therefore give one pause when evalu—

tainly Josephus were all produced independently

ating his account.

of the other surviving accounts. Therefore, if there

Having said all this by way of general evalua—

is a tradition about Jesus that is preserved in more

tion of our sources, what specific criteria can we

than one of these documents, no one of them

apply to the traditions about Jesus preserved in

could have made it up, since the others knew of it

them?

as well, independently. If a tradition is found in

several of these sources, then the likelihood of its

going back to the very beginning of the tradition

SPECIFIC CRITERIA

from which they all ultimately derive, back to the

AND THEIR RATIONALE

historical Jesus himself, is significantly improved.

This criterion does not work for sources that are

In many respects, the historian is like a prosecut—

not independent. For example, the story of Jesus

ing attorney. He or she is trying to make a case and

and the so-called rich young ruler is found in three

is expected to bear the burden of proof. As in a

of the Gospels (Matt 19:16–22; Mark 10:17–22;

court of law, certain kinds of evidence are

and Luke 18:18–23; see box 6.1), but since

acknowledged as admissible, and witnesses must

Matthew and Luke took the story over from

be carefully scrutinized. Given the circumstances

Mark—assuming the view of Markan priority that

that our “witnesses” are the documents from antiq—

we discussed in Chapter 6—it is not independent—

uity that speak about Jesus, we can use three crite—

ly attested. Thus, the criterion of independent

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attestation does not work for stories found in all

Second, Jesus is said to have brothers in Mark

three Synoptic Gospels, since the source for such

(6:3), John (7:3), and Paul’s first letter to the

stories is Mark, or in any two of them, since these

Corinthians (9:5). Moreover, Mark, Paul (Gal

are either from Mark or Q.

1:19), and Josephus all identify one of his brothers

In other circumstances, however, the criterion

as James. Conclusion: Jesus probably did have

does work. Some simple examples can show how.

brothers and one of them probably was named

First, stories in which John the Baptist encounters

James. Finally, Jesus tells parables in which he

Jesus at the beginning of his ministry can be found

likens the kingdom of God to seeds in Mark, Q,

in Mark, in Q (where John’s preaching is expound—

and the Gospel of Thomas. Conclusion: Jesus prob—

ed), and in John. Why did all three sources, inde—

ably did tell such parables. All of these examples

pendently of one another, begin Jesus’ ministry

involve independent sources.

with his association with John the Baptist?

Obviously there are limitations to the criterion

Possibly because it really did start this way.

of independent attestation. Merely because a tradi—

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 13.3 Aramaisms as a Criterion of Authenticity

In addition to the three criteria sketched here, scholars have proposed a number of others over the years. One whose popularity has fluctuated over the course of this century is the criterion of “Aramaisms.” This criterion states that if a saying of Jesus can be translated back from the Greek of the Gospels into Jesus’ own language, Aramaic, and if it appears to make even better sense there than in Greek, then it is likely to be authentic.

Here is an example. At the conclusion of the story of the disciples plucking grain on the Sabbath (Mark 2:23–28), Jesus makes the memorable statement: “The Sabbath was made for humans, not humans for the Sabbath; therefore the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.” The statement is difficult to understand in at least one respect: why does Jesus say “therefore”?

Why does the fact that God made the Sabbath for humans and not the other way around make Jesus, the Son of Man, the master of the Sabbath?

It is much easier to understand this statement in Aramaic, since the Greek terms for

“humans” and “son of man” may both represent translations of the Aramaic word, bar nasha.

In Aramaic, therefore, the saying would be as follows: “Sabbath was made for bar nasha, not bar nasha for the Sabbath; therefore bar nasha is Lord of the Sabbath.” Now it is quite easy to understand the “therefore.” Because the Sabbath was made for humans and not vice versa, humans have priority over the Sabbath. The Christian who translated the phrase into Greek, whether Mark or an earlier source at his disposal, took the first two instances of bar nasha in the sense of “humans,” but the third as a title for Jesus, creating a problem in understanding how the saying ties together.

We are still left, however, with the question of whether or not the criterion of Aramaisms can take us back to the historical Jesus. If a saying can be translated successfully back into Aramaic, does that necessarily mean that Jesus himself said it? You can probably see the difficulty with pressing the criterion too far, given what we have already seen in our study; for Jesus’ earliest followers were also speakers of Aramaic. If we know that converts to Christianity sometimes modified and invented sayings of Jesus, then we can’t simply assume that this happened only among those who spoke Greek. Surely the same process occurred among Aramaic-speaking Christians as well.



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tion is found in only one source—for example,

we would have to say that Jesus really did make

Jesus’ visit to the Temple as a twelve-year-old or

clay sparrows come to life when he was a five-year

the parable of the Good Samaritan—it is not auto—

old and zap his young playmates when they irritat—

matically discounted as historically inaccurate.

ed him, that he really did come forth from his

That is to say, the criterion shows which traditions

tomb at his resurrection with his head reaching

are more likely to be authentic, but it does not

above the clouds, supported by angels as tall as

show which ones are necessarily inauthentic—a

skyscrapers, and that he really did reveal the secret

critical difference!

Gnostic doctrines to his disciples months and

At the same time, multiply attested traditions

years after his resurrection. No one believes that

are not necessarily authentic either; they are simall of these events actually happened (at least no

ply more likely to be authentic. If a tradition is

attested independently, then at the very least it

must be older than all of the sources that record it,

but it does not necessarily go all the way back to

Jesus. It could well be, for example, that a multiply

attested tradition derives from the years immediately after Jesus’ death, with different forms of the

story being told in a variety of communities thereafter. For this reason, our first criterion has to be

supplemented with others.

What an Odd Thing to Say: The Criterion

of Dissimilarity

The most controversial criterion that historians

use, and often misuse, to establish authentic tradition from the life of Jesus is commonly called the

“criterion of dissimilarity.” It too can be explained

by analogy to a legal trial. Any witness in a court

of law will naturally tell things the way he or she

F P O

sees them. Thus, the perspective of the witness has

to be taken into account when trying to evaluate

the merits of a case. Moreover, sometimes a witness has a vested interested in the outcome of the

trial. A question that perennially comes up, then,

involves the testimony of interested parties: are

they distorting, or even fabricating, testimony for

reasons of their own? The analogy does not completely work, of course, for ancient literary sources

(or for modern ones either, for that matter).

Authors from the ancient world were not under

oath to tell the historical facts, and nothing but

the facts. When examining ancient sources, however, the historian must always be alert to the perspective of the witness.

The criterion is rooted in the fact that early

Christians modified and invented stories about

Figure 13.2 Portrayal of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, from Jesus. There is no one who disputes this: otherwise

one of the oldest surviving Christian sarcophagi.

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# CHAPTER 13

## THE HISTORICAL JESUS

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one that I know). How, then, did they come to be

Most Christians appear to have understood that

written down? Somebody made them up, and told

when a person was baptized, he or she was spiritu—

them to other people, and eventually they came

ally inferior to the one who was doing the baptiz—

into the hands of an authorwho wrote about

ing. This view is suggested in the Gospel of

them—unless he made them up himself.

Matthew, where we find John protesting that he is

How can we know which stories were made up

the one who should be baptized by Jesus, not the

and which ones are historically accurate? The surest

other way around. It is hard to imagine a Christian

way is to determine the sorts of things Christians

inventing the story of Jesus’ baptism since this

were saying about Jesus in other sources and then

could be taken to mean that he was John’s subordi—

ascertain whether the stories told about his sayings

nate. It is more likely that the baptism is something

and deeds clearly support these Christian views. If

that actually happened. The story that John ini—

they do, then there is at least a theoretical possibil—

tially refused to baptize Jesus, on the other hand, is

ity that these sayings and deeds were made up to

not multiply attested (it is found only in Matthew)

advance the views that some Christians held dear.

and appears to serve a clear Christian agenda. On

On the other hand, sometimes a saying or deed

these grounds, even though the story of John’s

attributed to Jesus does not appear to support a

reluctance cannot be proven to be a Christianized

Christian cause. A tradition of this kind would

form of the account, it may be suspect.

likely not have been made up by a Christian. Why

Consider another example. According to all

then would it be preserved in the tradition?

four canonical Gospels, and perhaps Paul, at the

Perhaps because it really happened that way.

end of Jesus’ life he was betrayed by one of his own

Dissimilar traditions, that is, those that do not

followers. Is this a story that a Christian believer

support a clear Christian agenda, are difficult to

would invent? Would Christians want to admit

explain unless they are authentic; they are there—

that Jesus was turned in by one of his closest

fore more likely to be historical.

friends and allies? It seems unlikely; surely Jesus

This criterion too has limitations. Just because a

would have had a commanding presence over

saying or deed of Jesus happens to conform to what

those closest to him. Why, then, do we have this

Christians were saying about him does not mean

tradition of betrayal, which is independently

that it cannot be accurate. Obviously the earliest

attested? Perhaps the betrayal is something that

followers of Jesus, who must have appreciated the

really happened.

things that he said did, would have told stories that

A final, fairly obvious example. The earliest

included such things. Thus, the criterion may do no

Christians put a good deal of effort into convincing

more than cast a shadow of doubt on certain tradi—

non-Christian Jews that the messiah had to suffer

tions. For example, the story of the young Jesus with—

and die, that Jesus’ crucifixion was according to the

ering his playmates and then raising them from

divine plan. It was difficult for them to persuade

the dead looks like something drawn from later

others in part because, prior to the Christian procla—

Christian imagination, and the story of his revealing

mation of Jesus, there were no Jews, so far as we

the secret doctrines of gnosis to a handful of follow—

know, who believed that the messiah was going to

ers is too closely aligned with the Gnostic theology

be crucified; on the contrary, the messiah was to be

to be beyond doubt. The criterion of dissimilarity is

the great and powerful leader who delivered Israel

best used, however, not in a negative way to estab—

from its oppressive overlords. Christians who want—

lish what Jesus did not say or do, but in the positive ed to proclaim Jesus as messiah would not have

way to show what he did.

invented the notion that he was crucified because

This criterion can be clarified by a couple of

his crucifixion created such a scandal. Indeed, the

brief examples. As we have seen, Jesus’ association

apostle Paul calls it the chief “stumbling block” for

with John the Baptist at the beginning of his min—

Jews (1 Cor 1:23). Where then did the tradition

istry is multiply attested. In some traditions, Jesus is

come from? It must have actually happened.

actually said to have been baptized by John. Is this

Other sayings and deeds of Jesus do not pass the

a tradition that a Christian would have made up?

criterion of dissimilarity. In Mark’s Gospel, for

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example, when Jesus predicts that he is to go to

to be plausibly situated in the historical context of

Jerusalem and that he will be rejected by the scribes

first-century Palestine in order to be trusted as reli—

and elders, crucified, and then in three days raised

able. Any saying or deed of Jesus that does not make

from the dead, he is proclaiming precisely what the

sense in this context is automatically to be suspect—

early Christian preachers were saying about him.

ed. The sayings of the Gospel of Philip, for example,

The passion predictions cannot pass the criterion of

give Gnostic interpretations of the Christian sacra—

dissimilarity. Does that mean that Jesus did not pre—

ments of baptism and the Eucharist. It is much eas—

dict his own death? Not necessarily. It means that

ier to situate these particular interpretations in the

we can’t show that he did through the use of this crilater second or early third century, when we know

terion. Also, in John’s Gospel Jesus claims to be

that Gnosticism was thriving and working out its

equal with God, a claim that coincides perfectly

theology, rather than in the days of Jesus.

with what John’s community was saying about him.

Something similar may be said of many of the

Does that mean that Jesus did not really make this

Gnostic sayings of the Gospel of Thomas.

claim? Not necessarily. It means that the claim can—

Some of the traditions of the New Testament

not pass this criterion.

Gospels do not fare well by the contextual criteri—

Historians have to evaluate all of the tradion either. For example, in Jesus’ conversation

tions about Jesus to determine whether they

with Nicodemus in John 3, there is a play on

coincide with the beliefs and practices of the

words that creates a certain confusion in

early Christians who were proclaiming them

Nicodemus’s mind. Jesus says “You must be born

before they can render a judgment concerning

from above,” but Nicodemus misunderstands him

their historical reliability. One of the problems

to mean “You must be born again.” The misun—

inherent in the criterion of dissimilarity, as you

derstanding arises from the fact that the Greek

might have guessed, is that we do not know as

word for “from above” also means “again.”

much about what the early Christians believed

Nicodemus has to ask for clarification, which

and practiced as we would like; moreover, what

leads Jesus to enter into an extended discourse.

we do know indicates that they believed and

From a historical point of view the problem is that

practiced a whole range of things. For these reathe confusion makes sense in Greek, the language

sons, it is easier to make a judgment concerning

of the Fourth Gospel, but it cannot be replicated

a particular tradition when it passes both of the

in Aramaic, the language spoken by Jesus himself

criteria we have discussed. The judgment can be

(in which the word for “from above” does not also

made even more easily when a tradition passes a

mean “again”). Thus, if this conversation did take

third criterion as well.

place (it passes neither of our other criteria

either), it could not have occurred exactly in the

way described by John’s account.

If the Shoe Fits: The Criterion of

A somewhat different problem of contextual

Contextual Credibility

credibility occurs in John 9:22, where “the Jews”

For the testimony of a witness in a court of law to be

are said to have agreed that anyone who professed

judged trustworthy, it has to conform with what is

belief in Jesus as the messiah was to be “put out of

otherwise known about the facts of the case. The

the synagogue.” We have good reason for thinking

same applies to historical documents. If a recently

that something of this sort did happen later in the

“discovered” diary purports to be from the hand of

first century, but not during the days of Jesus; at

“Joshua Harrison, explorer of the western territories

that time Jewish leaders had not yet passed any

of the United States” and was dated A.D. 1728, you

legislation concerning Jesus or his followers. It is

would know that you have a problem.

likely, then, that the story as narrated in the

For ancient documents, reliable traditions must

Fourth Gospel cannot be historically accurate.

conform with the historical and social contexts to

Unlike the other two criteria, the criterion of

which they relate. In the case of the Gospels, the

contextual credibility serves a strictly negative

sayings, deeds, and experiences of Jesus must be able

function. The others are used to argue for a tradi-

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tion, on the grounds that it is attested by two or

community, and that make sense in light of a first—

more independent sources and that it is a story that

century Palestinian context.

Christians would not have invented. This third cri—

Finally, I should emphasize that with respect to

terion is used to argue against a tradition, on the

Jesus, or indeed any historical person, the histori—

grounds that it does not conform to what we know

an can do no more than establish probabilities. In

about the historical and social context of Jesus’ life.

no case can we reconstruct the past with absolute

certitude. All that we can do is take the evidence

that happens to survive and determine to the best

of our abilities what probably happened. Thus,

CONCLUSION:

scholars will always disagree about the end results

RECONSTRUCTING

of their labors. But nothing can be done about

this: the past cannot ever be empirically proved, it

THE LIFE OF JESUS

can only be reconstructed.

To sum up. We know that Christians were modify—

It is this situation that creates the final method—

ing and inventing stories about Jesus and that our

ological problem that I want to address, the prob—

written sources preserve both historically reliable

lem of how the historian who can establish only

information and theologically motivated

what probably has happened in the past can (or

accounts. In light of this situation, the traditions

cannot!) deal with miracles that are alleged to

that we can most rely on as historically accurate

have occurred. As this is a special problem for the

are those that are independently attested in a

historian interested in knowing what Jesus actual—

number of sources, that do not appear to have

ly said and did, I have devoted the following chap—

been created to fulfill a need in the early Christian

ter to the issue.

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and the criteria that can be used to do so.

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# CHAPTER 14

Excursus: The Historian and the Problem of Miracle

Miracles crop up on virtually every page of the

historical evident to show that they have ever hap—

New Testament Gospels. Jesus is born miraculous—

pened. Let me be clear at the outset: I am not say—

ly: his mother has never had sexual intercourse.

ing that Jesus—or Apollonius of Tyana or Hanina

As an adult he does one miracle after the other:

ben Dosa or anyone else—did not perform mira—

casting out demons, walking on water, calming

cles. I’m saying that even if they did, the historian

the storm, feeding the multitudes, healing the

cannot demonstrate it. I’ll call this the “historical”

sick, raising the dead. At the end comes the

problem of miracle. Let me explain the problem at

biggest miracle of all: Jesus dies and is buried, but

some length.

three days later he is raised from the dead, never

to die again. This return to life is not like those

narrated elsewhere in the Gospels; presumably,

MIRACLES IN THE MODERN

Jairus’s daughter and Lazarus died again when

WORLD AND IN ANTIQUITY

their time came. Jesus’ time never was to come; he

actually conquered death.

People today typically think of miracles as super—

How can we know whether or not any of these

natural violations of natural law, divine interven—

Gospel miracles actually happened? A lot of mod—

tions into the natural course of events. This pop—

ern people, of course, believe that by their very

ular idea does not fit particularly well into modern

nature miracles are, strictly speaking, impossible—

scientific understandings of nature, to the extent

that is, that they never happen—and that people

that scientists today are less confident of the

who believe they do happen are either deluded or

entire category of “natural law” than they were,

naive. For such people, there is no reason, by defi—

say, in the nineteenth century. For this reason, it

nition, to discuss Jesus’ miracles, since if miracles

is probably better to think of miracles, not as

don’t happen, then Jesus didn’t do any. This view,

supernatural violations of natural laws, but as

which is rooted in ideas first popularized in the

events that contradict the normal workings of

European Enlightenment, is sometimes called the

nature in such a way as to be virtually beyond

“philosophical” problem of miracles.

belief and to require an acknowledgment that

I do not want to address this particular issue

supernatural forces have been at work.

here. For the sake of the argument, I’m willing to

As we will see momentarily this understanding

grant that miracles—that is, events that we can—

is itself the major stumbling block for a historical

not explain within our concepts of how “nature”

demonstration of miracles, since the historian has

normally works—can and do happen. There still

no access to supernatural forces but only to the

remains, though, a huge, I’d even say insurmount—

public record, that is, to events that can be

able, problem when discussing Jesus’ miracles.

observed and interpreted by any reasonable person,

Even if miracles are possible, there is no way for

of any religious persuasion. If accepting the occur—

the historian who sticks strictly to the canons of

rence of a miracle requires belief in the supernatur-

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# CHAPTER 14

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al realm, and historians by the very nature of their

craft can speak only about events of the natural

world (which are accessible to observers of every

kind) how can they ever certify that an event out-

side the natural order—i.e., a miracle—occurred?

Before pursuing this question, I should point

out that in the ancient world miracles were not

understood in the quasi-scientific terms that we

use today. These terms have been available to us

only since the advent of the natural sciences during the Enlightenment. To be sure, even in antiquity people understood that nature worked in certain ways. Everyone knew, for example, that iron

ax-heads would sink in water, and people would

too, if they tried to walk on water in the middle of

F P O

a lake. But in the ancient world, almost no one

thought that this was because of some inviolable

“laws” of nature, or even because of highly consistent workings of nature whose chances of being

violated were infinitesimally remote. The question was not whether things happened in relatively fixed ways; the question was who had the

power to do the things that happened.

For people in Greco-Roman times, the universe was made up of the material world, divine

beings, humans, and animals, with everyone and

everything having a place and a sphere of authority. A tree could not build a house, but a person

could. A person could not make it rain, but a god

could. A normal human being could not heal the

sick with a word or a touch, or cast out an evil

demon, or bring the dead back to life, but a divine

human could. Such a person, like Jesus or

Apollonius, stood in a special relation to the gods.

Figure 14.1 Marble statue of Asclepius, son of the god Apollo For someone like this to heal the sick or raise the

and known throughout the Greco-Roman world as a great god

dead was not a miracle in the sense that it violat—

of healing.

ed the natural order; rather, it was “spectacular” in

the sense that such things did not happen very

often, since few people had the requisite power.

These occurrences did not involve an intrusion

And when they did happen, they were a marvel to

from outside of the natural world into an estab—

behold.

lished nexus of cause and effect that governed the

This means that for most ancients the question

way things work. For ancient people there was no

was thus not whether miracles were possible.

closed system of cause and effect, a natural world

Spectacular events happened all the time. It was

set apart from a supernatural realm. Thus, when

spectacular when the sun came up or the light—

spectacular events (which people today might call

ning struck or the crops put forth their fruit. It

miracles) occurred, the only questions for most

was also spectacular when a divine man healed

ancient persons were (a) who was able to perform

the blind or cured the lame or raised the dead.

these deeds and (b) what was the source of their

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power? Was a person like Jesus, for example,

sink, but it does provide an extremely high level

empowered by a god or by black magic?

of what we might call presumptive probability. In

To agree with an ancient person that Jesus

common parlance, a “miracle” would involve a

healed the sick, walked on water, cast out a

violation of this known working of nature; it

demon, or raised the dead is to agree, first, that

would be a miracle, for example, if a preacher

there were divine persons (or magicians) walking

prayed over a bar of iron and thereby made it

the earth who could do such things and, second,

float.

that Jesus was one of them. In other words, from a

The historical disciplines are not like the nat—

historian’s perspective, anyone who thinks that

ural sciences, in part because they are concerned

Jesus did these miracles has to be willing in prin—

with establishing what has happened in the past,

ciple to concede that other people did them as

as opposed to predicting what will happen in the

well, including the pagan holy man Apollonius of

future, and in part because they cannot operate

Tyana, the emperor Vespasian, and the Jewish

through repeated experimentation. A historical

miracle worker Hanina ben Dosa. The evidence

occurrence is a one-time proposition; once it has

that is admitted in any one of these cases must be

happened, it is over and done with. Since histori—

admitted in the others as well.

ans cannot repeat the past in order to establish

But what evidence could there be? Here is

what has probably happened, there will always be

where we get into our problem.

less certainty in their conclusions. It is much

harder to convince people that John F. Kennedy

was the victim of a lone assassin than to convince

them that a bar of Ivory soap will float.

THE HISTORIAN

And the farther back you go in history, the

AND HISTORICAL METHOD

harder it is to mount a convincing case. For

events in the ancient world, even events of earth—

For historians who are interested in establishing

shattering importance, there is often scant evi—

what probably happened in the past but who are

dence to go on. All the historian can do is estab—

not required either to embrace or to deny partic—

lish what probably happened on the basis of

ular religious beliefs, what would count as evi—

whatever supporting evidence happens to survive.

dence that a miracle has ever taken place? One

This is what makes alleged miracles so prob—

way to approach the question is by reflecting for a

lematic. On one level of course, everything that

moment on the ways in which historians engage

happens is to some extent improbable. Suppose

in their craft, in contrast, say, to the ways natural

you were in a minor car accident last night. The

scientists engage in theirs. The natural sciences

chances of that happening were probably not very

use repeated experimentation to establish predic—

great. But it’s not so unlikely as to defy the imagi—

tive probabilities based on past occurrences. To

nation. And if some people fifteen years from now

illustrate on the simplest level, suppose I wanted

wanted to show that you did have that accident

to demonstrate that a bar of iron will sink in a tub

last night, they could appeal to certain kinds of

of lukewarm water but a bar of Ivory soap will

evidence—newspaper articles, police reports, eye—

float. I could perform a relatively simple experi—

witness accounts—and demonstrate their histori—

ment by getting several hundred tubs of lukewarm

cal claim to most peoples’ satisfaction. They could

water, several hundred bars of iron, and several

do this because there is nothing improbable about

hundred bars of Ivory soap. By tossing the bars of

the event itself. People have accidents all the

iron and soap into the tubs of water, I could

time, and the only issue would be whether you

demonstrate beyond reasonable doubt that one

had one on the night in question.

will sink and the other will float, since the same

What about events that do not happen all the

result will occur in every instance. This does not

time? As events that defy all probability, miracles

necessarily prove that in the future every bar of

create an inescapable dilemma for historians.

iron thrown into a tub of lukewarm water will

Since historians can only establish what probably







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F P O

F P O

F P O

Figure 14.2 Patients who believed they were healed by the god Asclepius would commonly dedicate terra-cotta replicas of their restored body parts to him, hanging them on the walls of his temple. This picture shows some of the offerings found in the temple precincts of Asclepius in the city of Corinth, evidently from people who had previously been deaf, blind, and, possibly, suffering from breast cancer.

happened in the past, and the chances of a mira—

about the case: who the eyewitnesses were, what

cle happening, by definition, are infinitesimally

they claimed they saw, what can be known about

remote, they can never demonstrate that a mira—

the body of water in question, and so forth. What

cle probably happened.

the historian cannot claim, however, at least

This is not a problem for only one kind of his—

when discussing the matter as a historian, is that

torian, for atheists or agnostics or Buddhists or

Reverend Jones actually did it. This is more than

Roman Catholics or Baptists or Jews or Muslims;

we can know using the canons of historical

it is a problem for all historians of every stripe.

knowledge. The problem of historical probabili—

Even if there are otherwise good sources for a

ties restrains our conclusion. For the fact is that

miraculous event, the very nature of the historical

we all know several thousand people, none of

discipline prevents the historian from arguing for

whom can walk across pools of water, but all of

its probability. Let me illustrate the problem with

whom at one time or another have been mistaken

a hypothetical example. Suppose that three oth—

about what they thought they saw, or have been

erwise credible eyewitnesses claimed to see

misquoted, or have exaggerated, or have flat out

Reverend Jones of the Plymouth Baptist Church

lied. To be sure, such activities may not be proba—

walk across his parishioner’s pond in 1926. The

ble, especially for the upstanding members of the

historian can certainly discuss what can be known

Plymouth Baptist Church. But they would be

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more probable than a miracle that defies the nor—

ty of the historian but in the capacity of the

mal workings of nature. Thus, if we as historians

believer. In the sketch of the historical Jesus that

can only say what probably happened, we cannot

follows in Chapter 16, I am not taking the position

say—as historians—that the good Reverend prob—

of the believer, nor am I saying that one should or

ably performed a miracle.

should not take such a position. I am taking the

I should emphasize that historians do not have

position of the historian, who on the basis of a lim—

to deny the possibility of miracles or deny that

ited number of problematic sources has to deter—

miracles have actually happened in the past. Many

mine to the best of his or her ability what the his—

historians, for example, committed Christians,

torical Jesus actually said, did, and experienced. As

observant Jews, and practicing Muslims, believe

a result, in reconstructing Jesus’ activities, I will

that they have in fact happened. When they think

not be able to affirm or deny the miracles that he

or say this, however, they do so not in the capaci—

is reported to have done.

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understandings of miracles and miracle workers in the

and evaluates the New Testament stories of Jesus’

Greco-Roman world; for more advanced students.

miracles.

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# CHAPTER 15

Jesus in Context

In Chapter 13 we saw why it is so difficult, given

I think it is more relevant for understanding the

the nature of our ancient sources, to reconstruct

historical Jesus than for understanding the tradi—

the life of the historical Jesus. If we uncritically

tions that circulated about him in other parts of

accepted whatever our ancient accounts of Jesus

the Mediterranean some decades later. To be sure,

happen to say about him, the resulting picture

even to study the Gospels one must understand

would be hopelessly and endlessly contradictory.

certain aspects of Judaism, but the precise nature

We should not throw our hands up in despair, how—

of life in first-century Palestine is chiefly relevant

ever, as if we can know nothing at all about the

to the study of someone who happened to live

things Jesus said and did. On the contrary, when we

there. Jesus was a Jewish man living in the first

approach our sources critically, using the kinds of

century of the Common Era in the Roman territo—

criteria we have discussed, they can indeed supply

ry of Galilee. If we want to know about his life, we

us with reliable historical information.

have to learn about his world.

In a short treatment we will not be able to discuss every facet of Jesus’ life. We can however,

apply the criteria that I have mapped out to discover the kind of person Jesus was, as revealed by

POLITICAL CRISES

the sorts of things that he taught and did. Since the

IN PALESTINE AND

life of Jesus is a hotly debated area of research

THEIR RAMIFICATIONS

among New Testament scholars, I cannot simply

describe “the consensus” among present-day histo—

The ancient history of Palestine is long and com—

rians. Despite what some scholars claim (especially

plex. Here we will consider only the minute

when they want everyone else to agree with them),

aspect of it that had a direct bearing on the con—

there is no consensus. Instead, I will make a case for

text of Jesus’ adult life in the 20s of the Common

the position that strikes me as the most compelling.

Era. In a nutshell, the political history of the land

The best place for us to begin is with the one

had not been happy for some 800 years; during

negative criterion discussed in Chapter 13: con—

this time it experienced periodic wars and virtual—

textual credibility. If something that Jesus allegedly permanent foreign domination. The northern

ly said or did cannot be credibly situated in his

part of the land, the kingdom of Israel, was over—

own social and historical context, then it cannot

thrown by the Assyrians in 721 B.C.E.; then, about

be regarded as authentic. This criterion is similar

a century and a half later, in 587–86 B.C.E., the

to a principle that I have emphasized throughout

southern kingdom of Judah was conquered by the

our study, the importance of context for under—

Babylonians. Jerusalem was leveled, the Temple

standing events of the past. Up to this point I have

destroyed, and the leaders of the people taken

merely touched upon the social and political con—

into exile. Some fifty years later, the Babylonian

text of first-century Palestine, principally because

empire was overrun by the Persians, who brought

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an end to the forced exile and allowed the Judean

his subjects to adopt aspects of Greek civilization.

leaders to return home. The Temple was rebuilt,

Some of the Jews living in Palestine welcomed

and the priest in charge of the Temple, the high

these innovations. Indeed, some men were

priest, was given jurisdiction as a local ruler of the

enthused enough to undergo surgery to remove

people. This man was from an ancient family that

the marks of their circumcision, allowing them to

traced its line back hundreds of years to a priest

exercise in the Jerusalem gymnasium without

named Zadok. Ultimately, of course, the Persian

being recognized as Jewish. Others, however,

king was the final authority over the land and its

found this process of Hellenization, or imposition

people.

of Greek culture, absolutely offensive to their reli—

This state of affairs continued for nearly two

gion. In response to their protests, Antiochus

centuries, until the conquests of Alexander the

tightened the screws even further, making it ille—

Great, ruler of Macedonia (see box 2.2).

gal for Jews to circumcise their baby boys and to

Alexander overthrew the Persian empire, con—

maintain their Jewish identity, converting the

quering most of the lands around the Eastern

Jewish Temple into a pagan sanctuary, and requir—

Mediterranean as far as modern-day India. He

ing Jews to sacrifice to the pagan gods.

brought Greek culture with him into the various

A revolt broke out, started by a family of

regions he conquered, building Greek cities and

Jewish priests known to history both as the

schools and gymnasia (centers of Greek culture),

Maccabeans, based on the name given to one of

encouraging the acceptance of Greek culture and

its powerful leaders, Judas Maccabeus (“the

religion, and promoting the use of the Greek lan—

Hammerer”), and also as the Hasmoneans, based

guage. Alexander died a young man in 323 B.C.E.

on the name of a distant ancestor. The

The generals of his army divided up his realm, and

Maccabean revolt began as a small guerrilla skir—

Palestine fell under the rule of Ptolemy, the gen—

mish in 167 B.C.E.; soon much of the country was

eral in charge of Egypt. During all of this time, the

in armed rebellion against its Syrian overlords. In

Jewish high priest remained the local ruler of the

less than 25 years, the Maccabeans had success—

land of Judea. This did not change when the ruler

fully driven the Syrian army out of the land and

of Syria wrested control of Palestine from the

assumed full and total control of its governance,

Ptolemaeans in 198 B.C.E.

creating the first sovereign Jewish state in over

It is hard to know how widespread or intense

four centuries. They rededicated the Temple (one

the antagonism toward foreign rule was through—

of their first acts, in 164 B.C.E., commemorated

out most of this period, given our sparse sources.

still in the Hanukkah celebration) and appointed

No doubt many Jews resented the idea that their

a high priest as supreme ruler of the land. To the

rulers were answerable to a foreign power. They

dismay of many Jews in Palestine, however, the

were, after all, the chosen people of the one true

high priest was not from the ancient line of Zadok

God of Israel, who had agreed to protect and

but from the Hasmonean family.

defend them in exchange for their devotion.

The Hasmoneans ruled the land as an

Judea was the land that he had promised them,

autonomous state for some eighty years, until 63

and for many Jews it must have been distressing,

B.C.E., when the Roman general Pompey con—

both politically and religiously, to know that ulti—

quered it. The Romans allowed the high priest to

mately someone else was in charge.

remain in office, using him as an administrative

In any event, there is no doubt that the situa—

liaison with the local Jewish leadership, but there

tion became greatly exacerbated under the Syrian

was no doubt who controlled the land.

monarchs. Over the century and a half or so since

Eventually, in 40 B.C.E., Rome appointed a king to

Alexander’s death, Greek culture had become

rule the Jews of Palestine, Herod the Great,

more and more prominent throughout the entire

renowned both for his ruthless exercise of power

Mediterranean region. One Syrian ruler in partic—

and for his magnificent building projects, which

ular, Antiochus Epiphanes, decided to bring

served not only to beautify the cities but also to

greater cultural unity to his empire by requiring

elevate the status of Judea and employ massive





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F P O

F P O

Figure 15.1 Silver coin from Antioch with a portrait of Antiochus Epiphanes and the inscription: “King Antiochus, a god made manifest.”

numbers of workers. Many Jews, however, casti—

period that the Jewish sects of Jesus’ day (e.g., the

gated Herod as an opportunistic collaborator with

Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes) were formed,

the Romans, a traitorous half-Jew at best. The lat—

and it was the Roman occupation that led to

ter charge was based in part on his lineage: his

numerous nonviolent and violent Jewish uprisings

parents were from the neighboring country of

during Jesus’ time. For many of Jews, any foreign

Idumea and had been forced to convert to

domination of the Promised Land was both politi—

Judaism before his birth.

cally and religiously unacceptable. Moreover, it was

During the days of Jesus, after Herod’s death,

the overall sense of inequity and the experience of

Galilee, the northern region of the land, was ruled

suffering during these times that inspired the ideol—

by Herod’s son Antipas; and starting when Jesus

ogy of resistance known as apocalypticism, a world—

was a boy, Judea, the southern region, was gov—

view that was shared by a number of Jews in first—

erned by Roman administrators known as prefects.

century Palestine.

Pontius Pilate was prefect during the whole of

Jesus’ ministry and for some years after his death.

His headquarters were in Caesarea, but he came to

the capital city Jerusalem, with troops, whenever

THE FORMATION

the need arose.

OF JEWISH SECTS

The point of this brief sketch is not to indicate

what children learned in their fifth-grade history

It was during the rule of the Hasmoneans, and evi—

classes in Nazareth; indeed, there is no way for us

dently in large measure in reaction to it, that vari—

to know whether a boy like Jesus would ever have

ous Jewish sects emerged. As we have seen, the

even heard of such important figures from the

Jewish historian Josephus mentions four of these

remote past as Alexander the Great or Ptolemy.

groups; the New Testament makes explicit refer—

Rather, the historical events leading up to his time

ence to three. In one way or another, all of them

are significant for understanding Jesus’ life because

play a significant role in our understanding of the

they had social and intellectual ramifications for all

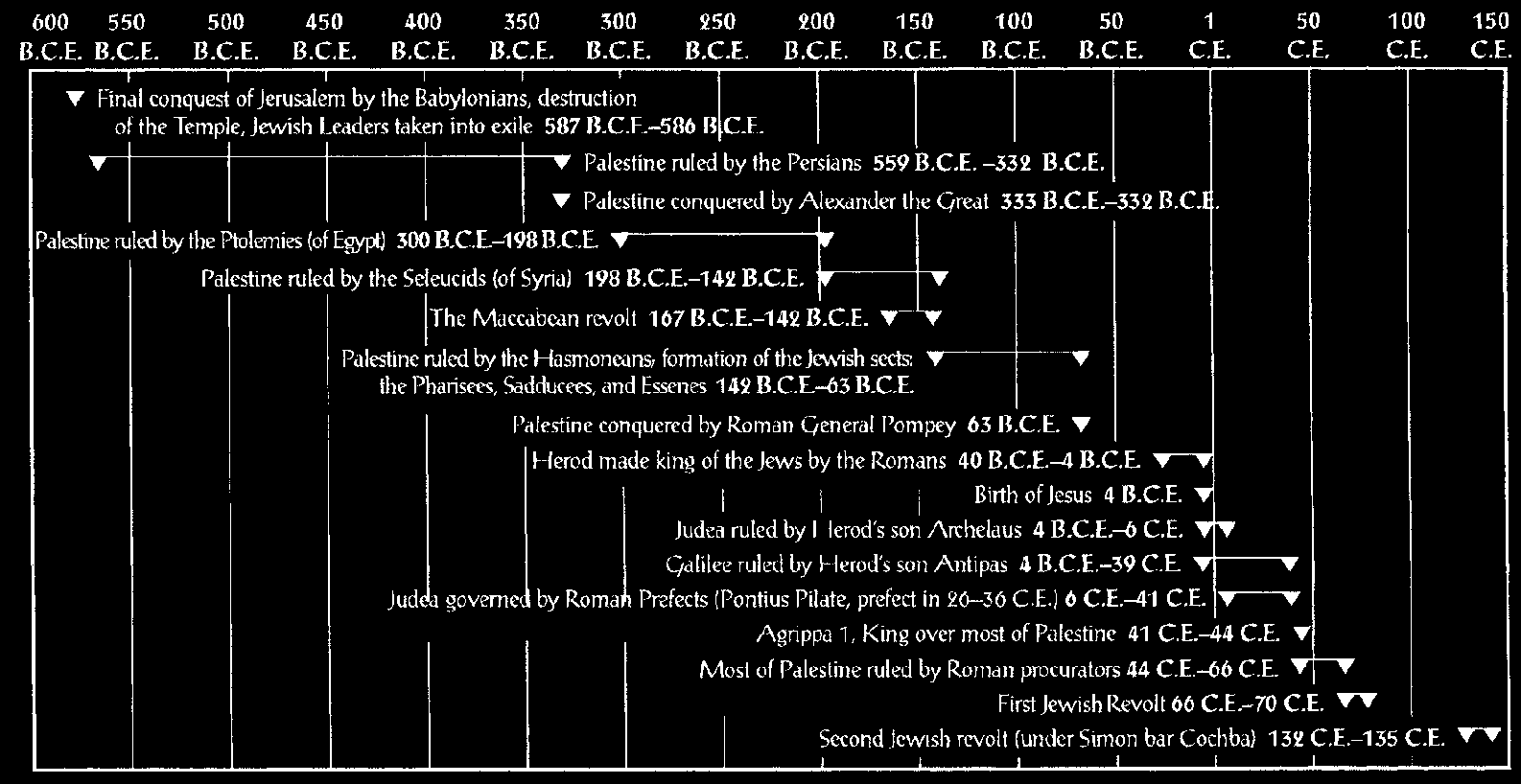
life of the historical Jesus.

Palestinian Jews. It was in response to the social,

I should emphasize at the outset that most Jews

political, and religious crises of the Maccabean

in Palestine did not belong to any of these groups.



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Figure 15.2 Time Line of Key Events in the History of Palestine.

We know this much from Josephus, who indicates

Pharisees

that the largest sect, the Pharisees, claimed 6,000

members and that the Essenes claimed 4,000. The

The Pharisees represent probably the best-known

Sadducees probably had far fewer. These numbers

and least understood Jewish sect. Because of the

should be considered in light of the overall Jewish

way they are attacked in parts of the New

population in the world at the time; the best esti—

Testament, especially in Matthew, Christians

mates put the number at something like three and

through the ages have wrongly considered the

a half million.

Pharisees’ chief attribute to be hypocrisy.

What matters for our purposes here, however, is

It appears that this sect began during the

not the size of these groups, for they were influential

Maccabean period as a group of devout Jews

despite their small numbers, but the ways in which

intent above all else on keeping the entire will of

they understood what it meant to be Jewish, espe—

God. Rather than accepting the culture and reli—

cially in light of the political crises that they had to

gion of the Greeks, these Jews insisted on know—

face. Members of all of the sects, of course, would

ing and obeying the Law of their own God to the

have subscribed to the basic principles of the reli—

fullest extent possible. One of the difficulties with

gion, as sketched earlier in Chapter 2: each believed

the Law of Moses, though, is that in many places

in the one true God, the creator of all things, who

it is ambiguous. For example, Jews are told in the

was revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures, who had

Ten Commandments to keep the Sabbath day

chosen the people of Israel, and who had promised

holy, but nowhere does the Torah indicate pre—

to protect and defend them in exchange for their

cisely how this is to be done. Pharisees devised

committed devotion to him through following his

rules and regulations to assist them in keeping this

laws. The groups differed in significant ways, how—

and all the other laws of Moses. These rules even—

ever, in their understanding of what obedience to

tually formed a body of tradition, which, to stay

God’s laws required and in how they responded to

with our example, indicated what a person could

the rule of a foreign power and to the presence of a

and could not do on the Sabbath day in order to

high priest from a line other than Zadok’s.

keep it holy, or set apart from all other days. Thus,

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for example, when it was eventually determined

and did so in isolation from other Jews. Many

that a faithful Jew should not go on a long journey

scholars think that the term “Pharisee” itself orig—

on the Sabbath, it had to be decided what a

inally came from a Persian word that means “sep-

“long” journey was, and consequently what dis—

arated ones.” Eventually, however, some decades

tance a Jew could travel on this day without vio—

after Jesus’ execution, the Pharisees did become

lating its holiness. Likewise, a worker who

powerful in the political sense. This was after the

believed that he or she should not labor on the

Jewish War (which I will describe more fully

Sabbath had to know what constituted “work”

below), which culminated in the destruction of

and what therefore could and could not be done.

Jerusalem and the Temple in the year 70 C.E. With

Or a second example. The Law of Moses com—

this calamity the other groups passed from the

mands Jewish farmers to give one-tenth of their

scene for a variety of reasons, and the Pharisees

crops, that is, a tithe, to the priests and Levites (for

were given greater authority by the Roman over—

example, Num 18:20–21). Priests performed sacri—

lords. The oral tradition continued to grow and

fices in the temple, and Levites were their assis—

eventually took on the status of divinely revealed

tants. Since they themselves were not allowed to

law. It was eventually written down around the

farm, the tithes they received represented their

year 200 C.E. and is today known as the Mishnah,

financial support for serving God. What should a

the heart of the Jewish sacred collection of texts,

person do, though, who purchased food from a

the Talmud.

farmer, not knowing whether the food had been

The Pharisees are important for understanding

properly tithed? To be on the safe side, some

the historical Jesus, in part because he set his mes—

Pharisees maintained that they should tithe the

sage over against theirs. As we will see, Jesus did

food they purchased, as well as the food they grew.

not think that scrupulous and detailed adherence

This way they could be certain that God’s law was

to the laws of Torah was the most important

being followed. And if it got followed twice in this

aspect of a Jew’s relationship with God, especially

case, so much the better—especially for God’s

as these laws were interpreted by the Pharisees.

priests and Levites!

The rules and regulations that developed

among the Pharisees came to have a status of their

Sadducees

own and were known in some circles as the “oral”

It is difficult to reconstruct exactly what the

Law, which was set alongside the “written” Law of

Sadducees stood for because not a single literary

Moses. It appears that Pharisees generally

work survives from the pen of a Sadducee, in con—

believed that anyone who kept the oral law would

trast to the Pharisees, who are represented to

be almost certain to keep the written law as a con—

some extent by the later traditions of the Talmud,

sequence. The intent was not to be legalistic but

by Josephus, who was a Pharisee, and by the one

to be obedient to what God had commanded.

Pharisee who left us writings before the destruc—

The Pharisees may have been a relatively

tion of the Temple (after he had converted to

closed society in Jesus’ day, to the extent that they

Christianity), the apostle Paul. To understand the

stayed together as a group, eating meals and hav—

Sadducees, however, we must turn to what is said

ing fellowship only with one another, that is, with

about them in other sources, such as Josephus and

those who were like-minded in seeing the need to

the New Testament.

maintain a high level of obedience before God.

During Jesus’ own day, the Sadducees were evi—

Those who did not show this obedience were

dently the real power players in Palestine. They

thought to be unclean.

appear to have been, by and large, members of the

It is important to recognize that the Pharisees

Jewish aristocracy in Jerusalem who were closely

were not the “power players” in Palestine in Jesus’

connected with the Jewish priesthood in charge of

day. That is to say, they appear to have had some

the Temple cult. Most of the Sadducees were

popular appeal but no real political clout. In some

themselves priests (though not all priests were

ways they are best seen as a kind of separatist

Sadducees). As members of the aristocracy, grant—

group; they wanted to maintain their own purity

ed some limited power by their Roman overlords,

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Sadducees appear to have been conciliatory

Essenes who lived in a community east of Jerusalem

toward the civil authorities, that is, cooperative

in the wilderness area near the Western shore of the

with the Roman governor. The local Jewish coun—

Dead Sea, in a place that is today called Qumran.

cil, commonly called the Sanhedrin, which was

Although the term “Essene” never occurs in the

occasionally called together to decide local affairs,

scrolls, we know from other ancient authors such as

was evidently made up principally of Sadducees.

Josephus that a community of Essenes was located

With their close connection with the Temple,

in this area; moreover, the social arrangements and

Sadducees emphasized the need for Jews to be

theological views described in the Dead Sea Scrolls

properly involved in the cultic worship of God as

correspond to what we know about the Essenes

prescribed in the Torah. Indeed, it appears that

from these other accounts. Most scholars are reathe Torah itself, that is, the five books of Moses,

sonably certain, therefore, that the scrolls represent

was the only authoritative text that the

a library used by this sect, or at least by the part of

Sadducees accepted. In any event, we know that

it living near Qumran.

they did not accept the oral traditions formulated

As was the case with the Gnostic documents

by the Pharisees. Less concerned with personal

uncovered near Nag Hammadi, Egypt, the discov—

purity and the regulation of daily affairs such as

ery of the Dead Sea Scrolls was completely

eating, travel, and work, the Sadducees focused

serendipitous. In 1947, a shepherd boy searching

their religious attention on the sacrifices in the

for a lost goat in the barren wilderness near the

Temple and expended their political energy on

Northwest shore of the Dead Sea happened to

working out their relations with the Romans so

toss a stone into a cave and heard it strike some—

that these sacrifices could continue.

thing. Entering the cave, he discovered an

It may have been their rejection of all written

ancient earthenware jar that contained a number

authority outside of the five books of Moses that

of old scrolls. The books were recovered by

led the Sadducees to reject several doctrines that

bedouin shepherds. When news of the discovery

later became characteristic of other groups of

reached antiquities dealers, biblical scholars

Jews. They denied, for example, the existence of

learned of the find, and a search was conducted

angels and disavowed the notion of the future res—

both to find more scrolls in the surrounding caves

urrection of the dead. Their views of the afterlife

and to retrieve those that had already been found

may well have conformed, essentially, with those

by the bedouin, who cut some of them up to sell

of most non-Jews throughout the empire: either

one piece at a time.

the “soul” perishes with the body, or it continues

Some of the caves in the region yielded entire

on in a kind of shadowy netherworld, regardless of

scrolls; others contained thousands of tiny scraps

the quality of its life here on earth.

that are virtually impossible to piece back togeth—

The Sadducees are of importance for underer, since so many of the pieces are missing.

standing the historical Jesus, in part because he

Imagine trying to do an immense jigsaw puzzle, or

roused their anger by predicting that God would

rather dozens of immense jigsaw puzzles, not

soon destroy the locus of their social and religious

knowing what the end product of any of them

authority, their beloved Temple. In response,

should look like, when most of the pieces are lost

some of their prominent members urged Pontius

and those that remain are all mixed together! All

Pilate to have him executed.

in all hundreds of documents are represented,

many of them only in fragments the size of

postage stamps, others, perhaps a couple of dozen,

Essenes

in scrolls of sufficient length to give us a full idea

The Essenes are the one Jewish sect not explicitly

of their contents.

mentioned in the New Testament. Ironically, they

Most of the scrolls are written in Hebrew, but

are also the group about which we are best

some are in Aramaic. Different kinds of lit—

informed. This is because the famous Dead Sea

erature are represented here (see box 15.1). There

Scrolls were evidently produced by a group of

are at least partial copies of every book of the

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Jewish Bible, with the exception of the book of

that their community at Qumran was started dur—

Esther, and some of them are fairly complete.

ing the early Maccabean period, perhaps around

These are extremely valuable because of their age;

150 B.C.E., by pious Jews who were convinced that

they are nearly a thousand years older than the

the Hasmoneans had usurped their authority by

oldest copies of the Hebrew Scriptures that we

appointing a non-Zadokite as high priest.

previously had. We can therefore check to see

Believing that the Jews of Jerusalem had gone

whether Jewish scribes over the intervening cen—

astray, this group of Essenes chose to start their

turies reliably copied their texts. The short answer

own community in which they could keep the

is that, for the most part, they did. There are also

Mosaic law rigorously and maintain their own rit—

commentaries on some of the biblical books, writ—

ual purity in the wilderness. They did so fully

ten principally to show that the predictions of the

expecting the apocalypse of the end of time to be

ancient prophets had come to be fulfilled in the

imminent. When it came, there would be a final

experiences of the Essene believers and in the his—

battle between the forces of good and evil,

tory of their community. In addition, there are

between the children of light and the children of

books that contain psalms and hymns composed

darkness. The battle would climax with the tri—

by members of the community, prophecies that

umph of God and the entry of his children into

indicate future events that were believed to be

the blessed kingdom.

ready to transpire in the authors’ own day, and

Some of the scrolls indicate that this kingdom

rules for the members of the community to follow

would be ruled by two messiahs, one a king and

in their lives together.

the other a priest. The priestly messiah would lead

Sifting through all of these books, scholars

the faithful in their worship of God in a purified

have been able to reconstruct the life and beliefs

temple, where sacrifices could again be made in

of the Essenes in considerable detail. It appears

accordance with God’s will. In the meantime, the

SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 15.1 Divine Revelation in the Dead Sea Scrolls

Two kinds of writing found among the Dead Sea Scrolls are of particular interest to historians of early Christianity. Both have to do with the Essenes’ belief that God had revealed to members of the community the course of historical events.

The Biblical Commentaries. Like many other Jews, the Essenes believed that the prophets of Scripture had spoken about events that came to transpire in their own day, centuries later. In the words of the commentary on Habakkuk, “God told Habakkuk to write down that which would happen to the final generation, but He did not make known to him when time would come to an end.” The Essenes had developed a particular method of interpretation to explain these secret revelations of God’s divine purpose. Scholars have called this method of interpretation “pesher,” from the Hebrew word used in the Qumran commentaries to introduce the explanation of a prophetic statement. The commentaries typically cite a verse of Scripture and then give its “pesher,” or interpretation. In every case, the interpretation indicates how the prediction has come to fulfillment in the world of the Qumran community itself.

The following examples from the Habakkuk Commentary can show how the method works. In italics is the passage of Scripture, followed by the pesher. I have placed my own explanatory comments in brackets.

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For behold, I rouse the Chaldeans [another name for the Babylonians], that bitter and hasty nation (Hab 1:6). Interpreted, this concerns the Kittim [a code name for the Romans] who are quick and valiant in war.

O traitors, why do you stare and stay silent when the wicked swallows up one more righteous than he? (Hab 1:13b). Interpreted, this concerns the House of Absalom [a prominent group of Jews in Jerusalem] and the members of its council who were silent at the time of the chastisement of the Teacher of Righteousness [the leader of the Qumran community at its beginning] and gave him no help against the Liar [the high priest in Jerusalem who was the community’s sworn enemy] who flouted the Law in the midst of their whole congregation.

Moreover, the arrogant man seizes wealth without halting... (Hab 2:5).

Interpreted, this concerns the Wicked Priest [the same figure as the

“Liar” above] who was called by the name of truth when he first arose.

But when he ruled over Israel his heart became proud, and he forsook God and betrayed the precepts for the sake of riches.

As you can see simply from these passages, the history of the Qumran community can be read from their own interpretations of the ancient prophecies.

The War Scroll. This scroll details the final war between the forces of good and evil that will take place at the end of time. It sketches the course of the battles, gives regulations for the soldiers who fight, and describes the outcome that is assured by God as the “children of light” (the members of the Essene communities) overcome the “children of darkness” (the Romans, the apostate Jews, and everyone else). The war will take forty years, the first six of which involve overcoming the “Kittim” (the Romans), the rest being devoted to campaigns against the other nations.

This document, then, provides an apocalyptic vision of the final struggle between good and evil, between the forces of God and those of his enemies. While the War Scroll is unique among ancient Jewish literature in its graphic and detailed description of the future battle that will end the age, in general terms, it relates closely to apocalyptic texts written by other Jews in the period, as we will see further in box 16.5.

true people of God needed to be removed from

of fasting, and strict penalties were imposed for

the impurities of this world, including the impuri—

unseemly behavior such as interrupting one

ties prevalent in the Jewish Temple and among

another, talking at meals, and laughing at inap—

the rest of the Jewish people. These Essenes there—

propriate times.

fore started their own monastic-like community,

It appears that when the Jewish war of 66–73

with strict rules for admission and membership. A

C.E. began the Essenes at Qumran hid some of

two-year initiation was required, after which, if

their sacred writings before joining in the struggle.

approved, a member was to donate all of his posIt may well be that they saw this as the final bat—

sessions to the community fund and share the

tle, preliminary to the end of time when God

common meal with all the other members.

would establish his kingdom and send its messiahs.

Rigorous guidelines dictated the life of the com—

The Essenes are important for understanding

munity. Members had fixed hours for work and

the historical Jesus, in part because Jesus appears

rest and for their meals, there were required times

to have shared many of their apocalyptic views,



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Figure 15.3 One of the most important of the Dead Sea Scrolls, a Hebrew copy of the book of Isaiah.

even though he did not belong to their sect. Like

backed the usurper, was to be opposed, by violent

them, he believed that the end of time was near

means if necessary. Among those who took this

and that people had to prepare for the coming

line in the middle of first century were the Sicarii,

onslaught.

a group whose name comes from the Latin word

for “dagger.” These “daggermen” planned and carried out assassinations and kidnappings of high-

The “Fourth Philosophy”

ranking Jewish officials who were thought to be in

When Josephus writes about Judaism for a Roman

league with the Roman authorities. Another

audience, he describes each of the sects that we

group that subscribed to this philosophy, some—

have discussed as a “philosophy,” by which he

what later in the century, were the Zealots. These

means a group with a distinctive and rational out—

were Jews who were “zealous” for the Law and

look on the world. He never gives a name to the

who urged armed rebellion to take back the land

fourth sect that he discusses but simply calls it the

God had promised his people. More specifically,

“fourth philosophy.” The tenets of this philoso—

based on what we find in Josephus, Zealots were

phy, however, are clear, and they were manifested

Galilean Jews who fled to Jerusalem during the

in several different groups that we know about

Jewish revolt around the year 67 C.E., overthrew

from various ancient sources. Each of these groups

the priestly aristocracy in the city in a bloody

in its own way supported active resistance to

coup, and urged the violent opposition to the

Israel’s foreign domination.

Roman legions that ultimately led to the destruc—

The view that characterized these sundry

tion of Jerusalem and the burning of the Temple

groups was that Israel had a right to its own land,

in 70 C.E.

a right that had been granted by God himself.

Such groups are important for understanding

Anyone who usurped that right, and anyone who

the historical Jesus, in part because he too

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thought that the Romans were to be overthrown.

other inhabitants of the empire. Since the days of

But it was not to be by armed resistance.

Julius Caesar, Jews were not required to supply

Rome with soldiers from their ranks (an exemption that was in Rome’s best interest as well, since

devout Jews refused to soldier every seventh day)

POPULAR MODES OF

or to provide direct support for Roman legions

RESISTANCE TO OPPRESSION

stationed nearby or marching through to the fron—

tiers. In another respect, though, the Jewish situAs we have seen, Jews in Palestine had been

ation could be seen as far worse than average, in

under direct foreign domination for most of the

that many Jews considered it blasphemous to pay

eight centuries prior to the birth of Jesus. The

taxes to support the Roman administration of the

struggles of the Hasmoneans against the

land that God had given them.

Hellenizing policies of their Syrian overlords led

Jews reacted to their domination by Rome in dif—

to the formation of sects that were active in Jesus’

ferent ways. For many Jews, no doubt, the Roman

day. Most Jews did not belong to any of these par—

domination was tolerable and had its advantages,

ties, but all Jews were directly affected by the poli—

for example, protection from hostile nations to the

cies of domination enforced by Rome.

East; but for others, it was a political and religious

As a conquered people, Jews in Palestine were

nightmare. Resistance to Roman power appears to

required to pay taxes to the empire. Since the

have been widespread, but rarely was it active or

Roman economy was agrarian, taxation involved

violent. Throughout the first century, however,

payment of crops and of monies to fund the

Jews of Palestine did lock horns with their Roman

armies and infrastructure provided by Rome,

overlords on several occasions. It will suit our pur—

including roads, bridges, and public buildings. In

poses to consider the nature of these conflicts

monetary terms, the oppression of Jews appears to

have been no worse than that of other native populations in the Roman provinces. We have no

Silent Protests

reliable numbers from ancient sources themselves,

The population of Jerusalem would swell many

but the best estimates by modern scholars suggest

times over during the weeklong Passover festival

that a typical Jewish farmer was taxed on average

(see Chapter 3), and there is little doubt that

about 12 or 13 percent of his income to support

those who came to the celebration did not do so

the Roman presence in the land, on top of taxes

for purely commemorative reasons. Jews celebrat—

to support the Temple and local Jewish adminis—

ing the Passover were not simply remembering

tration, which might run an additional 20 percent

the past, when God acted on their behalf to save

or so. His total taxes, then, were perhaps a third

them from their subjugation to the Egyptians;

of his overall income (Sanders, 1992).

they were also looking to the future, when God

These taxes may not appear exorbitant by the

would save them yet again, this time from their

standards of today’s highly industrialized nations;

present overlords, the Romans.

we should recall, however, that in ancient agrari—

Roman officials appear to have understood full

an societies, without modern means of irrigation,

well the potentially subversive nature of the cele—

labor-saving machinery, and sophisticated tech—

bration. They typically brought armed troops in

nology, most farmers did well to eke out an exis—

just for the occasion, stationing them in the

tence in the best of circumstances. When one is

Temple, the locus of all activity. Most Jews did

living close to the edge, having to provide finan—

not much appreciate the Roman presence on such

cial support for a foreign oppressor is not a cheery

sacred occasions.

prospect. Paying for Rome’s excesses was seen by

The tension was particularly evident during a

many Jews, as well as by many others in the

Passover celebration in the 50s of the Common

empire, as both unmanageable and perverse.

Era, when a Roman governor named Cumanus

At the same time, the treatment of the Jews in

was procurator of Judea. During the feast, one of

Palestine was better in some respects than that of

the soldiers stationed on the wall of the Temple

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# CHAPTER 15

## JESUS IN CONTEXT

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decided to show his disdain of the Jews and their

to Rome to explain why the act would be offen—

religion. In the words of Josephus, he “stooped in

sive and blasphemous for them. Caligula respond—

an indecent attitude, so as to turn his backside to

ed with intransigence, ordering that a statue of

the Jews, and made a noise in keeping with his

himself, with the body of Zeus, be set up in the

posture” ( Jewish War 2.224–27). The worshippers

Jerusalem Temple. According to Josephus, tens of

present were not amused. Some picked up stones

thousands of Jews in Palestine appeared in protest

and began to pelt the soldiers. A report was sped

before the Roman legate of Syria, Petronius, who

off to Cumanus, who was nearby. When he sent in

had arrived with two full legions to enforce the

reinforcements, a riot broke out. According to

policy. They vowed not to plant their crops if he

Josephus (who probably exaggerated the numbers)

carried out his orders and offered themselves as

some 20,000 Jews were killed in the mayhem.

martyrs rather than live to see the desecration of

Thus, the Passover feast represented a silent

their Temple. Petronius was himself powerless to

protest against the Roman presence in the

revoke the emperor’s order, although he was

Promised Land, but on occasion the event led to

impressed both by the strength of the opposition

violent resistance and death. As a rule, the

and by the danger to the crops, knowing that

Romans worked hard at keeping the situation

Rome could collect no tribute if the land lay fal—

under control, resolving problems before they led

low. Fortunately for him, he was saved from the

to massive uprisings or public riots. You may recall

consequences of failing to follow the emperor’s

that Jesus was arrested and removed from the pub—

order; for reasons unrelated to the protest,

lic eye during Passover.

Caligula was assassinated.

Nonviolent Uprisings

Prophetic Proclamations

Roman administrators would occasionally do or

One particularly noteworthy form of Jewish

threaten to do something offensive to Jews in

protest against foreign domination involved the

Palestine, who would in turn rise up in protest. It

occasional appearance of self-styled prophets pre—

appears that for most of the first century these

dicting the imminent intervention of God on

protests were nonviolent. In the year 26 C.E., for

behalf of his people. This intervention was mod—

example, when Pilate assumed the prefectorship

eled on earlier acts of salvation as recorded in the

of Judea, he had Roman standards brought into

Hebrew Scriptures. Some of these prophets gath—

Jerusalem during the night and set up around the

ered a large following among the Jewish masses.

city. These standards bore the image of Caesar.

For obvious reasons, they were not well-received

Jews in the city erupted in protest and demanded

by the Romans.

their removal. Pilate refused. According to

Less than fifteen years after Jesus’ execution, a

Josephus, hundreds of the leading citizens staged a

prophet named Theudas led a large crowd of Jews

kind of sit-in at his residence in Caesarea. After

to the Jordan River, where he publicly proclaimed

five days, Pilate had the protesters surrounded by

that he would make the waters part, allowing his

soldiers three deep and threatened to have them

people to cross on dry land. Word of his activities

all put to the sword. The Jews responded by fling—

reached the Roman authorities, who evidently

ing themselves to the ground and stretching out

knew enough Jewish tradition to recognize the

their necks, claiming to prefer death to such a fla—

allusion to the Exodus event under Moses, when

grant transgression of their Law. Pilate rescinded

the children of Israel were delivered from their

his order and had the standards removed.

slavery in Egypt and the Egyptian army was rout—

Something similar happened fourteen years or

ed during the crossing of the Red Sea. Rather

so later, when the megalomaniacal emperor

than risk an uprising, the governor sent out the

Caligula required the inhabitants of the empire to

troops; they slaughtered Theudas’s followers and

worship him as a god, the first Roman emperor to

brought his head back to Jerusalem for display.

do so. Jews around the world vehemently protest—

About a decade later another prophet arose,

ed. Some from the diaspora came in delegations

who is called simply “the Egyptian” by Josephus



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F P O

Figure 15.4 Detail from the arch built in Rome to commemorate the victory of Titus over Jerusalem in the year 70 C.E. This part of the arch shows the menorah from the Temple being carried away to Rome.

and the book of Acts, the two sources that refer to

against the Romans. These were isolated rather

him. This prophet acquired a large following

than everyday occurrences, however. One of them

among the masses (30,000 people according to

occurred around 6 C.E., during Jesus’ childhood,

Josephus), whom he led to the Mount of Olives.

when Archelaus, son of Herod the Great, was

There he proclaimed the destruction of the walls

deposed as ruler of Judea and replaced by a Roman

of Jerusalem, another transparent reference, this

prefect. A census was imposed for tax purposes,

time to the conquest of Jericho, when the chil—

and a group of Jews led by a freedom fighter named

dren of Israel came into the Promised Land and

Judas the son of Hezekiah resisted with the sword.

“the walls came tumbling down.” Again, the

The revolt was crushed, effectively and brutally.

Roman troops were sent forth to hunt down and

The second, and more disastrous, uprising

slaughter the group.

came sixty years later when Roman atrocities such

Other prophets arose and experienced similar

as the governor’s plundering of the Temple trea—

fates. Roman administrators of Judea appear to

sury led to a widespread revolt. The Romans sent

have had no qualms about destroying those whose

in the legions from the north and within a year

proclamation of God’s intervention on behalf of

subjugated Galilee (this was when Josephus was

his people could win them a following and, poten—

the commander of the Jewish troops there, prior

tially, lead to riots—especially in Jerusalem.

to surrendering). A group of Galilean Jews who

fled from the Roman army arrived in Jerusalem

and eventually provoked a bloody civil war

Violent Insurrections

against the priestly aristocracy who had been in

In Palestine during the first century, there were

charge of the Temple and the rest of the city.

also violent insurrections in which Jews with fore—

Once they acquired control, these “Zealots”

thought and intent engaged in armed revolt

pressed the fight against the Romans to the end.

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The result was a horrifying three-year siege of

ars date to the time of the Maccabean revolt. It is

Jerusalem, in which reports of starvation and can—

also prominent in the Dead Sea Scrolls, the writ—

nibalism were rampant. The war ended in a

ings of the Essene community at Qumran. In

bloodbath in which tens of thousands of Jews

addition, it is found in a range of other Jewish

were slaughtered or enslaved, rebel leaders were

writings that did not make it into the Bible.

crucified, much of the city was leveled, and the

These books are called “apocalypses” because

Temple was burned to the ground.

their authors claim that the course of future

In sum, Palestine was under Roman domina—

events had been revealed to them.

tion in the first century and Jews in the land

The worldview of the apocalypticists originat—

reacted to the situation in a variety of ways. They

ed in the turbulent history of the Jews in

sometimes protested in silence, anticipating a

Palestine. We have seen that most ancient Jews

deliverance to be wrought by God, they some—

believed that God had made a covenant with his

times engaged, when necessary, in acts of nonvio—

people to be their divine protector in exchange

lent resistance, and they sometimes became

for their devotion to him through keeping his law.

caught up in spontaneous rioting, provoked by

This point of view naturally came to be chal—

the insensitive treatment from Roman rulers and

lenged by political events in Palestine. If God had

soldiers. Some publicly proclaimed the imminent

promised to protect and defend Israel against its

end of their suffering through the supernatural

enemies, how could one account for its perpetual

intervention of God, while others sought to take

foreign domination—by the Assyrians, the

matters into their own hands, taking up the sword

Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, the

to engage in violent resistance. The nonviolent

Syrians, and the Romans?

protesters had some success in forcing the Romans

One of the popular answers was given by

to back down on particular issues; the violent pro—

ancient Jewish prophets, including those whose

testers, whether rioting masses, prophetic figures,

writings were later canonized in the Hebrew

or guerrilla warriors, had none whatsoever. In the

Bible, prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos,

cases we know of, the Romans effectively and

and Hosea. According to these authors, Israel

ruthlessly destroyed those who preached or prac—

continued to suffer military and political setbacks

ticed violence against them.

because it had disobeyed God. He was still their

God and he remained the all-powerful ruler of the

world, able to dictate the course of human events.

But the people of Israel had sinned against him,

AN IDEOLOGY

and their military defeats and economic disasters

OF RESISTANCE

represented God’s punishment for their sins.

According to the prophets, if the people would

Another important aspect of Jesus’ historical con—

only return to the ways of God, and again become

text involves one of the “worldviews” evident in a

devoted to keeping his Law, he would relent and

number of Jewish writings from around his time.

establish them once more as a sovereign power in

Modern scholars have called this worldview

their own land( see box 15.2).

“apocalypticism” from the Greek term apocalypsis,

This basic point of view has always been popu—

which means an “unveiling” or a “revealing.” Jews

lar, not only among Jews but also among

who subscribed to this worldview maintained that

Christians: people suffer because they have

God had revealed to them the future, in which he

sinned, and this suffering is their punishment.

would soon overthrow the forces of evil and estab—

Some Jewish thinkers eventually became dissatis—

lish his kingdom on earth.

fied with this view, however, because it could not

We know about Jewish apocalyptic thought

adequately explain historical realities. It was not

from a number of ancient sources. It is first attest—

only the sinners who suffered but people who

ed in some of the latest writings of the Hebrew

were righteous as well. Furthermore, matters did

Bible, especially the book of Daniel, which schol—

not improve when people repented and commit-

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ted themselves to keeping God’s Law. Why would

This apocalyptic dualism had clear historical

Israel continue to suffer after it returned to God,

implications. All of history could be divided into

while other nations that made no effort to please

two ages, the present age and the age to come.

him at all prospered?

The present age was the age of sin and evil. The

Around the time of the Maccabean revolt,

powers of darkness were in the ascendancy, and

when the oppressive policies of Antiochus

those who sided with God were made to suffer by

Epiphanes became too much to bear for many

those in control of this world. Sin, disease,

Jews in Palestine, when they were forbidden on

famine, violence, and death were rampant. For

pain of death from keeping the Torah, some of

some unknown reason, God had relinquished

them came up with another position. In their

control of this age to the powers of evil—and

view, the suffering of God’s people could not be

things were getting worse.

explained as a penalty for their sin. God surely

At the end of this age, however, God would

would not punish his people for doing what was

reassert himself, intervening in history and

right, for keeping his laws, for example. Why,

destroying the forces of evil. After a cataclysmic

then, did the people suffer? There must be some

break in which all that was opposed to God would

other supernatural agency, some other superhu—

be annihilated, God would bring in a new age. In

man power that was responsible. God was not

this new age, there would be no more suffering or

making his people suffer; his enemy, Satan, was.

pain; there would be no more hatred, despair, war,

According to this new way of thinking, God

disease, or death. God would be the ruler of all, in

was still in control of this world in some ultimate

a kingdom that would never end.

sense, but for unknown and mysterious reasons he

had temporarily relinquished his control to the

forces of evil that opposed him. This state of

Pessimism

affairs, however, was not to last forever. Quite

Even though, in the long run, everything would

soon, God would reassert himself, destroying the

work out for those who sided with God, in the

forces of evil and establishing his people as rulers

short term things did not look good. Jewish apoc—

over the earth. When this new kingdom came,

alypticists maintained that those who sided with

God would fulfill his promises to his people. This

God were going to suffer in this age, and there was

ideology, which tried to make sense of the oppres—

nothing they could do to stop it. The forces of evil

sion of the people of God, is commonly called

were going to grow in power as they attempted to

apocalypticism.

wrest sovereignty over this world away from God.

There was no thought of being able to improve

the human condition through mass education or

Dualism

advanced technology. The righteous could not

Jewish apocalypticists were dualists. They main—

make their lives better because the forces of evil

tained that there were two fundamental compo—

were in control, and those who sided with God

nents to all of reality: the forces of good and the

were opposed by those who were much stronger

forces of evil. The forces of good were headed by

than they. Things would get worse and worse until

God himself, the forces of evil by his superhuman

the very end, when, quite literally, all hell would

enemy, sometimes called Satan, Beelzebub, or the

break loose.

Devil. On the side of God were the good angels;

on the side of the Devil were the demons. On the

side of God were righteousness and life; on the

Vindication

side of the Devil were sin and death. These forces

At the end, when the suffering of God’s people

were cosmic powers to which human beings were

was at its height, God would finally intervene on

subject and with which they had to be aligned.

their behalf and vindicate his name. In the apoc—

No one was in neutral territory. People stood

alyptic perspective, God was not only the creator

either with God or with Satan, in the light or in

of this world but also its redeemer. His vindica—

darkness, in the truth or in error.

tion would be universal; it would affect the entire

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## JESUS IN CONTEXT

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SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 15.2 Prophecy and Apocalypticism

Most historians of ancient Judaism agree that the apocalyptic views found in such books as Daniel and the noncanonical works of 1 Enoch and 4 Ezra are closely linked to the older prophetic views found in the classical prophets, including Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, and Micah. Both prophets and apocalypticists believed that God was going to intervene on behalf of his people Israel to alleviate their suffering. But they disagreed on why the suffering was occurring, who was at fault, and how it would be removed.

Prophetic View

Apocalyptic View

Why do God’s people suffer?

They have sinned against

There are evil cosmic forces in

God, and he is punishing

the world that are opposed to

them for it.

God and are creating havoc

among his righteous people.

Who is causing the

God himself. He is punish—

The evil cosmic forces. They

suffering?

ing his people in order to get

are bent on hurting God’s

them to repent.

people.

Who is at fault?

The people of God, because

The cosmic forces in the

they have sinned.

world, who oppose God’s

righteous ones.

What must happen to bring

The people of God must

God must intervene on behalf

the suffering to an end?

repent and turn back to

of his righteous people, and

him.

destroy the forces of evil.

What must the people of

Turn away from their sin

Remain faithful and wait for

God do?

and return to God.

God to intervene.

world, not simply the Jewish nation. Jewish apoc—

to lead the troops of the children of light into battle

alypticists maintained that the entire creation

against the forces of evil. In others, God was to send

had become corrupt because of the presence of sin

a kind of cosmic judge of the earth, sometimes also

and the power of Satan. This universal corruption

called the messiah or the Son of Man, to bring about

required a universal redemption; God would

a cataclysmic overthrow of the demonic powers that

destroy all that is evil and create a new heaven

oppressed the children of light.

and a new earth, one in which the forces of evil

This final vindication would involve a day of

would have no place.

judgment for all people. Those who had aligned

Different apocalypticists had different views con—

themselves with the powers of evil would face the

cerning how God would bring about this new cre—

Almighty Judge and render an account of what

ation, even though they all claimed to have received

they had done; those who had remained faithful

the details in a revelation from God. In some apoc—

to the true God would be rewarded and brought

alyptic scenarios, God was to send a human messiah

into his eternal kingdom. Moreover, this judg-

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ment applied not only to people who happened to

standing here who will not taste death until they

be living at the time of the end. One could not

see that that kingdom of God has come with

side with the powers of evil, oppress the people of

power.” These, in fact, are the words of Jesus

God, die prosperous and contented, and get away

(Mark 9:1). Or as he says elsewhere, “Truly I tell

with it. God would allow no one to escape. He

you, this generation will not pass away before all

was going to raise all people bodily from the dead

these things have taken place” (Mark 13:30).

to receive their reward or punishment: eternal

bliss for those who had taken his side, eternal torment for everyone else.

JESUS IN HIS

APOCALYPTIC CONTEXT

Imminence

Some of the earliest traditions about Jesus por—

According to Jewish apocalypticists, this vindica—

tray him as a Jewish apocalypticist who responded

tion of God was going to happen very soon.

to the political and social crises of his day, includ—

Standing in the tradition of the prophets of the

ing the domination of his nation by a foreign

Hebrew Bible, apocalypticists maintained that

power, by proclaiming that his generation was liv—

God had revealed to them the course of history

ing at the end of the age, and that God would soon

and that the end was almost here. Those who

intervene on behalf of his people. He would send a

were evil had to repent before it was too late.

cosmic judge, the Son of Man, who would destroy

Those who were good, who were suffering as a

the forces of evil and set up God’s kingdom. In

result, were to hold on, for it would not be long

preparation for his coming, the people of Israel

before God would intervene by sending a savior,

needed to repent and turn to God, trusting him as

possibly on the clouds of heaven, to pass judg—

a kindly parent and loving one another as his spe—

ment on the people of the earth and bring the

cial children. Those who refused to accept this

good kingdom to those who had remained faithful

message would be liable to the punishment of God.

to his Law. Indeed, the end was right around the

Is this ancient portrayal of Jesus, which is embod—

corner. In the words of one first-century Jewish

ied in a number of our oldest traditions, historically

apocalypticist: “Truly I tell you, there are some

accurate? Was Jesus a Jewish apocalypticist?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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London: SCM Press; Philadelphia: Trinity Press

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before and during the time of the New Testament.

Fitzmyer, Joseph A. Responses to 101 Questions on the Dead Sea Scrolls. New York: Paulist, 1992. Probably the best Schürer, Emil. The History of the Jewish People in the Age of and easiest way for a beginning student to learn the Jesus Christ. Rev. and ed. Geza Vermes and Fergus

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Millar. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1973. A standard

Scrolls, from a renowned expert.

work on the major political, economic, and religious

aspects of first-century Judaism; for advanced students.

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# CHAPTER 16

Jesus, the Apocalyptic Prophet

One of the most hotly contested areas of modern

L, for example—all portray Jesus apocalyptically.

scholarship on the New Testament has to do

Our later sources for example, John and Thomas

with the apocalyptic character of Jesus. The view

—do not. Is this an accident?

that Jesus was in some sense an apocalypticist

I don’t need to give every piece of data here to

has dominated scholarship, at least in America

make my basic point (you can find a fuller discus—

and Germany, for most of the present century.

sion of the issue in my book on Jesus mentioned in

Some more recent scholars, however, have tried

the bibliography at the end of the chapter).

to argue that the apocalyptic sayings recorded in

Throughout the earliest accounts of Jesus’ words

the Gospels do not go back to Jesus, but were

are found predictions of a kingdom of God that is

placed on his lips by his later followers (see, for

soon to appear, in which God will rule. This will

example, boxes 16.1 and 16.2). At the outset of

be an actual kingdom here on earth. When it

this chapter, I intend to show why I think this

comes, the forces of evil will be overthrown, along

opinion is very much mistaken. When one looks

with everyone who has sided with them; only

carefully at the surviving evidence of our

those who repent and follow Jesus’ teachings will

Gospels, in light of the various historical criteria

be allowed to enter the Kingdom. Judgment on all

we have already discussed at length in Chapter

others will be brought by the Son of Man, a cosmic

13, it becomes clear that Jesus was indeed an

figure who is to arrive from heaven at any

ancient Jewish apocalypticist.

moment. Being a member of Israel will not be

To begin our investigation of this question, we

enough to escape the coming judgment. People

might first consider the basic “rules of thumb” that

need to heed Jesus’ words, return to God, and fol—

historians use in reconstructing events of the past

low his commandments before it’s too late. Jesus is

on the basis of our surviving sources.

said to have proclaimed such a message in Q (see

Luke 17:24, 26–27, 30; cf. Matt 24:27; 37-39),

Mark (8:38–9:1; 13:24–27, 30), M (Matt

CONSIDERING THE RULES

13:40–43), and L (Luke 21:34–36).

OF THUMB

And yet, as we have already seen, the message

begins to be toned down in our later sources, before

As we have seen, scholars of antiquity agree that,

disappearing altogether. Recall that the Gospel of

as a rule, we should give preference to sources that

Luke, written perhaps in the 80s of the Common

are closest to the time of the events they narrate

Era, went to some length to alter Jesus’ words inher—

and that are not (insofar as possible) overly ten—

ited from Mark, so that in Luke Jesus does not pre—

dentious. What do we have in the case of Jesus?

dict that the end will come in his disciples’ lifetime,

There is in fact a very clear and consistent trend

even though the author may have thought that it

when it comes to the apocalyptic materials. The

was going to come in his own. The Gospel of John

earliest sources at our disposal—Q, Mark, M, and

didn’t just modify such traditions, but, as we have

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seen, virtually eliminated them (though there are

apocalypticist from the standpoint of the trickiest

some surviving remnants even here; see John

of our criteria to use, the criterion of dissimilarity.

5:28–29). Thomas, the latest of these sources, goes

Most of his followers, as I’ve already pointed out,

even further, arguing against an apocalyptic message

were his followers precisely because they agreed

that the Kingdom of God will come to earth at the

with him, and if the burden of his message was

end of the age (e.g., Gosp. Thom. 3, 18, 113).

that the end of the world was coming soon

How does one make sense of these data?

through the appearance of the Son of Man, we

Sources closest to Jesus himself portray him as an

might expect them to have said something fairly

apocalypticist; as time passes, the portrayal is

similar. But there are a couple of aspects of the

increasingly modified, so that by the end of the

apocalyptic traditions that make them look

first century and the beginning of the second, this

authentic, even given the difficulties of the case.

view is either passed over or explicitly rejected. I’d

That is to say, some of the ways Jesus talks about

say we have a trend. With the passing of time,

the coming end do not coincide with the way his

Christians became dissatisfied with earlier tradi—

followers later talked about it, suggesting that

tions that showed that Jesus was an apocalyptic

these particular sayings are not ones they would

prophet of the coming Kingdom.

have invented.

Can this judgment be sustained by looking at

As an example, consider Mark 8:38: “Whoever

the specific criteria scholars use to reconstruct the

is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulter—

words and deeds of Jesus?

ous and sinful generation, of that one will the Son

of Man be ashamed when he comes in the glory of

his Father with the holy angels.” Now we know

CONSIDERING THE

that the earliest Christians believed that Jesus himself was the Son of Man (cf. Rev 1:13). For that

SPECIFIC CRITERIA

reason, when Jesus talks about himself as the Son of

Probably the easiest way to proceed is by taking

Man in the Gospels—as he frequently does—

our criteria in reverse sequence.

there’s no way to know, in view of this criterion,

whether that’s the way he actually talked or if that’s

how Christians—who believed he was the Son of

Contextual Credibility

Man—“remembered” him talking. But in sayings

There is absolutely no trouble seeing Jesus as an apoc—

like Mark 8:38, there is no indication that he is

alypticist in terms of contextual credibility. We know

talking about himself. In fact, if you didn’t know in

that there were apocalyptic Jews—in fact lots and lots

advance the Christian idea that Jesus was the Son

of apocalyptic Jews—in first-century Palestine, that is,

of Man, there’d be no way you would infer it from

in precisely his time and place. A number of these

this saying. On the contrary, just taking the saying

Jews have left us writings (e.g., the book of Daniel and

on its own terms, Jesus appears to be referring to

the Dead Sea Scrolls; see further box 16.5) and others

someone else. To paraphrase the saying: “whoever

of them have been written about (e.g., John the

doesn’t pay attention to what I’m saying will be in

Baptist, Theudas, and the Egyptian). If Jesus was an

big trouble when the Son of Man arrives.” That is,

apocalypticist expecting a cataclysmic break in histo—

at the end of this age, the cosmic judge from heav—

ry to be brought by God, he didn’t stand out as a sore

en will punish those who reject Jesus’ message.

thumb at all during his own time. Scores of other peo—

My point is that since Christians thought Jesus

ple—teachers, prophets, and just regular folk—

was the Son of Man, it seems unlikely that they

thought something similar.

would make up a saying in such a way as to leave

it in question whether he was referring to himself.

That means Jesus probably did say the words now

Dissimilarity

found in Mark 8:38.

In some respects, there isn’t a whole lot that we

Or take a second example. At the end of

can say about the various traditions of Jesus as an

Matthew 25 is Jesus’ famous description of the

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final judgment, in which the “Son of Man comes

Jesus that would bring a person into the coming

in his glory, and all the angels with him, and he

kingdom. But nothing in this passage even hints at

sits on his glorious throne” (Matt 25:31). There

the need to believe in Jesus per se: these people

appear before the Son of Man all the nations, and

didn’t even know him. What matters is helping the

he separates them into two groups, as a shepherd

poor, oppressed, and needy. It doesn’t seem likely

would separate the sheep from the goats. He wel—

that a Christian would formulate a passage in just

comes those on his right hand, the “sheep,” and

this way. The conclusion? It probably goes back to

invites them to come in to “inherit the kingdom

Jesus.

prepared for you from the foundation of the earth.”

There are other apocalyptic materials that pass

Why are they entitled to the kingdom? Because,

this criterion, as we’ll see later; for now it’s enough

says the king, “I was hungry and you gave me food,

to know that not only are the traditions about

I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a

Jesus as an apocalypticist contextually credible,

stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and

some of them also appear to pass the criterion of

you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I

dissimilarity.

was in prison and you came to me.” These righteous ones, though, don’t understand, since they

had never laid eyes on this glorious divine figure,

Independent Attestation

let alone done anything for him. And so they ask

Luckily I don’t need to say much about the inde-

“when did we see you hungry and feed you, or

pendent attestation of the apocalyptic traditions,

thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see

given what I’ve already said. Not only are these

you a stranger and welcome you . . . ?” And the

traditions early, they permeate our independent

king replies to them: “as you did it to one of the

sources. We find Jesus portrayed as an apocalypti—

least of these, my brothers, you did it to me”

cist in Mark, Q, M, and L (there are numerous pas-

(25:34–40).

sages I haven’t cited above; see, again, the bibliog—

He then turns to the group on his left, the

raphy). Fragments of the tradition are found even

“goats,” and curses them, telling them to “depart

in John (for example, 5:28–29); and they are

into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his

argued against in our later Gospel of Thomas (why angels.” Why? Because “I was hungry and you

argue against something unless someone else sub—

gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no

scribes to it?). All of these sources were indepen—

drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome

dent of one another; all of them to a greater or

me, naked and you did not cloth me, sick and in

lesser extent—the earlier the greater, as it turns

prison and you did not visit me.” These, though,

out—portray Jesus apocalyptically.

are equally surprised, for they too have never seen

On the grounds of these criteria alone I should

this king of kings. But he then informs them,

think that we would be justified in thinking that

“Truly I say to you, insofar as you did not to it to

Jesus must have been an apocalypticist in some

the least of these, my brothers, neither did you do

sense of the term. (We haven’t begun to explore

it to me.” And he then sends them “away into

yet, of course, what he specifically said and did,

eternal punishment,” whereas the righteous enter

but we can probably rest assured that it was some-

“into eternal life” (25:41–46).

thing apocalyptic!) But I’ve actually saved what I

What is striking about this story, when consid—

consider to be the strongest argument for last, a

ered in view of the criterion of dissimilarity, is that

final coup d’etat.

there is nothing distinctively Christian about it.

In a nutshell, the argument is that we know

That is to say, the future judgment is not based on

beyond any reasonable doubt what happened at

belief in Jesus’ death and resurrection, but on

the very beginning of Jesus’ public ministry and we

doing good things for those in need. Later

know what happened in its aftermath. The conti—

Christians—including most notably Paul (see, for

nuity between the two is Jesus’ public ministry

example, 1 Thess 4:14–18), but also the writers of

itself. This ministry began on a decidedly apoca—

the Gospels—maintained that it was belief in

lyptic note; its aftermath continued apocalyptical-

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ly. Since Jesus is the link between the two, his

pretty sight. In preparation, Jews can no longer

message and mission, his words and deeds, must

rely on having a covenantal relationship with

also have been apocalyptic. That is to say, the

God: “Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We

beginning and end are the keys to the middle.

have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God

is able from these stones to raise up children to

Abraham” (Luke 3:8). Instead, they must repent

THE BEGINNING AND END

and turn to God anew by doing the things he

AS KEYS TO THE MIDDLE

requires of them.

Jesus went out into the wilderness to be bap—

There is little doubt about how Jesus began his min—

tized by this prophet. But why did he go? Since

istry: he was baptized by John. The story is inde—

nobody compelled him, he must have gone to

pendently attested by multiple sources; Mark, Q,

John, instead of to someone else, because he

and John all begin with Jesus’ associating with the

agreed with John’s message. Jesus did not join the

Baptist. Also, it is not a story the early Christians

Pharisees, who emphasized the scrupulous obser—

would have been inclined to invent, since it was

vance of the Torah, or align himself with the

commonly understood that the one doing the bap—

Sadducees, who focused on the worship of God

tizing was spiritually superior to the one being bap—

through the Temple cult. He did not associate

tized (i.e., the story passes the criterion of dissimi—

with the Essenes, who formed monastic commu—

larity). Moreover, in view of our discussion earlier

nities to maintain their own ritual purity, or sub—

in this chapter, we can see that the event is contex—

scribe to the teachings of the “fourth philosophy,”

tually credible. John appears to have been one of

which advocated a violent rejection of Roman

the “prophets” who arose during the first century of

domination. He associated with an apocalyptic

the Common Era in Palestine. Somewhat like

prophet in the wilderness who anticipated the

Theudas and the Egyptian, he predicted that God

imminent end of the age.

was about to destroy his enemies and reward his

That was how Jesus began. Is it possible,

people, as he had done in the days of old.

though, that he changed his views during the

John the Baptist appears to have preached a

course of his ministry and began to focus on some—

message of coming destruction and salvation.

thing other than what John preached? This is cer—

Mark portrays him as a prophet in the wilderness

tainly possible, but it would not explain why so

who proclaims the fulfillment of the prophecy of

many apocalyptic sayings are found on Jesus’ own

Isaiah that God would again bring his people from

lips in the earliest sources for his life. Even more

the wilderness into the Promised Land (Mark

seriously, it would not explain what clearly

1:2–8). When this happened the first time,

emerged in the aftermath of his ministry. I have

according to the Hebrew Scriptures, it meant

argued that we are relatively certain about how

destruction for the nations already inhabiting the

Jesus’ ministry began; we are even more certain

land. In preparation for this imminent event,

about what happened in its wake. After Jesus’

John baptized those who repented of their sins,

death, those who believed in him established

that is, those who were ready to enter into this

communities of followers throughout the

coming kingdom. The Q source gives further

Mediterranean. We have a good idea of what

information, for here John preaches a clear mes—

these Christians believed because some of them

sage of apocalyptic judgment to the crowds that

have left us writings. These earliest writings are

have come out to see him: “Who warned you to

imbued with apocalyptic thinking. The earliest

flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of

Christians were Jews who believed that they were

repentance. . . . Even now the ax is lying at the

living at the end of the age and that Jesus himself

root of the trees; every tree therefore that does

was to return from heaven as a cosmic judge of the

not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into

earth to punish those who opposed God and to

the fire” (Luke 3:7–9). Judgment is imminent (the

reward the faithful (e.g., see 1 Thess 4:13–18; 1

ax is at the root of the tree) and it will not be a

Cor 15:51–57, writings from the earliest Christian

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author, Paul). The church that emerged in Jesus’

a simple life, depending on no one but God (see

wake was apocalyptic.

box 16.3), then he would scarcely have been seen

Thus, Jesus’ ministry began with his associa—

as a threat to the social order and nailed to a

tion with John the Baptist, an apocalyptic

cross. Great moral teachers were not crucified—

prophet, and ended with the establishment of the

unless their teachings were considered subver—

Christian church, a community of apocalyptic

sive. Nor were charismatic leaders with large fol—

Jews who believed in him. The fact that Jesus’

lowings—unless their followers were thought to

ministry began apocalyptically and ended apoca—

be dangerous.

lyptically gives us the key to interpreting what

The subversive teachers from Jesus’ day were

happened in between. The only connection

labeled as prophets, people who proclaimed the

between the apocalyptic John and the apocalyptic

imminent downfall of the social order and the

Christian church was Jesus himself. How could

advent of a new kingdom to replace the corrupt

both the beginning and the end be apocalyptic if

ruling powers. According to the traditions record—

the middle was not as well? Jesus himself must

ed in the New Testament and Josephus, John the

have been a Jewish apocalypticist.

Baptist was imprisoned and executed because of

To call Jesus an apocalypticist does not mean

his preaching; according to the Gospels he direct—

that Jesus was saying and doing exactly what every

ed his words against Herod Antipas, appointed to

other Jewish apocalypticist was saying and doing.

rule over the Promised Land. Jesus was to fare no

We are still interested in learning specifically what

better. Those who prophesied the judgment of

Jesus taught and did during his life. Knowing that

God were liable to the judgment of Rome.

his overall message was apocalyptic, however, can

In the case of Jesus, however, it is not alto—

help us understand other aspects of the tradition

gether clear that Rome initiated the proceedings.

about him that can be established as authentic.

It appears that Jesus’ message was directed not

For our purposes here, I can give only a brief

only against the Roman powers but also against

sketch of his deeds and teachings.

the Jewish leadership of Jerusalem that supported

them, as seen in another tradition that can be

established beyond reasonable doubt as authentic.

THE APOCALYPTIC

DEEDS OF JESUS

The Temple Incident

We know with relative certainty that Jesus pre-

The Crucifixion

dicted that the Temple was soon to be destroyed

The most certain element of the tradition about

by God. Predictions of this sort are contextually

Jesus is that he was crucified on the orders of the

credible given what we have learned about other

Roman prefect of Judea, Pontius Pilate. The cru—

prophets in the days of Jesus. Jesus’ own predic—

cifixion is independently attested in a wide array

tions are independently attested in a wide range of

of sources and is not the sort of thing that believ—

sources (cf. Mark 13:1; 14:58; John 2:19; Acts

ers would want to make up about the person pro—

6:14). Moreover, it is virtually certain that some

claimed to be the powerful Son of God. Why, his—

days before his death Jesus entered the Temple,

torically, was Jesus crucified? This is the question

overturned some of the tables that were set up

that every reconstruction of the life of Jesus has

inside, and generally caused a disturbance.

to answer, and some of the answers proffered over

The account is multiply attested (Mark 11 and

the years have been none too plausible. If, for

John 2) and it is consistent with the predictions

example, Jesus had simply been a great moral

scattered throughout the tradition about the com—

teacher, a gentle rabbi who did nothing more

ing destruction of the Temple. Therefore, it is

than urge his devoted followers to love God and

unlikely that Christians invented the story, in

one another, or an itinerant philosopher who

order to show their own opposition to the Temple,

urged them to abandon their possessions and live

as some scholars have claimed. It is possible, how-

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SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 16.1 Explaining Away the Apocalyptic Traditions:

Seeking the Lost

Since one cannot very well deny that our earliest surviving sources portray Jesus as an apocalypticist, one interesting approach taken by scholars who do not see him this way is to claim that he was portrayed differently in the earliest non-surviving sources. One of the most popular proposals along this line involves the Q source, which, as I’ve pointed out, we no longer have (see pp. 79–81). This has not stopped scholars from telling us all sort of things about it—not only what its precise contents were (and more importantly, what they were not) but also what the communities that produced it were like and what had happened in their social lives together. Not bad for a nonexistent source!

This is an important issue precisely because of the undeniable fact that if Q was the source for the materials in common between Matthew and Luke that are not found in Mark, then it was loaded with apocalyptic traditions. If one does not want to portray Jesus as an apocalypticist, how can one get around this problem? By arguing that Q in fact came out in multiple editions.

According to this line, the original edition of Q did not have the apocalyptic traditions about Jesus. These were only added later, when the document was edited by Christians who were a bit obsessed with the imminent end of the age. Thus, according to this theory, Q as we have it (well, even though we don’t have it), may be an apocalyptic document. But in fact it provides evidence of a non-apocalyptic Jesus.

This proposal is principally held by scholars who maintain that Jesus was a witty and compelling teacher, but not an apocalyptic preacher of the coming end of the age. And it’s easy to see the drawing power of the theory: in the earliest edition of this nonexistent source, Jesus is said to have delivered a lot of terrific one-liners, but uttered not a word about a coming Son of Man, sent from heaven in judgment.

Still, the proposal is enormously problematic. To reconstruct what we think was in Q is hypothetical enough. But at least in doing so we have some hard evidence, since we do have traditions that are verbatim the same in Matthew and Luke (but not found in Mark), and we have to account for them in some way. But to go further and insist that we know what was not in the source—for example, all of its apocalyptic sayings—really goes far beyond what we can know, however appealing such “knowledge” might be. And remember: these sayings are found in the only two documents that provide us our only solid evidence for the contents of Q!

What evidence, though, exists to disprove this particular theory of Q? Well, strictly speaking, none. The document doesn’t exist!

ever, that Christians modified the tradition in

bances. Mark’s account, then, may represent an

some ways, as they modified most of the stories

exaggeration of the effect of Jesus’ actions.

that they retold over the years. In the earliest sur—

It is hard to know whether Jesus’ words during

viving account, Jesus displays a superhuman show

this episode should be accepted as authentic. He

of strength, shutting down the entire Temple cult

quotes the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah to indi—

by an act of his will (Mark 11:16). The Temple

cate that the Temple cult has become corrupt,

complex was immense, and there would have been

calling it “a den of thieves.” Indeed, it is possible

armed guards present to prevent any major distur—

that Jesus, like the Essenes, believed that the wor-

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SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 16.2 Explaining Away the Apocalyptic Traditions:

Setting a Date

One of the most prominent scholars engaged in the study of the historical Jesus is a witty and indomitable historian named John Dominic Crossan, whose books on Jesus have become bestsellers. Crossan does not think Jesus was an apocalypticist. What does he do with the fact that our earliest sources, Q, Mark, M, and L portray Jesus as an apocalypticist? He denies that these are our earliest sources.

Crossan engages in a detailed analysis to argue that other sources not found in the New Testament are earlier than the sources that are. These others include such documents as the “Egerton Gospel,” a fragmentary text from the second century that contains four stories about Jesus; the Gospel of the Hebrews, which, as we have seen, no longer survives, but is quoted a bit by some church fathers in the late second to the early fifth centuries; and parts of the Gospel of Peter, which survives again only in fragments. Such sources, Crossan claims, provide more reliable access to Jesus than the New Testament Gospels, which everyone, including Crossan, dates to the first century.

Again, one can see the appeal of such an argument for someone who denies that Jesus was an apocalypticist. For if in fact the Gospel of the Hebrews, to pick one example, is older than the Gospel of Mark, even though it’s never mentioned or even alluded to until 190 C.E. or so (and is seen by nearly everyone else, therefore, as a second-century production) then Mark’s apocalyptic Jesus could well be a later creation formed from the non-apocalyptic Jesus of the Gospel of the Hebrews!

But this strikes most scholars as a case of special pleading. Most recognize clear and certain reasons for dating the New Testament Gospels to the first century. But giving yet earlier dates to noncanonical Gospels that are, in most cases, not quoted or even mentioned by early Christian writers until many, many decades later seems to be overly speculative and driven by an ultimate objective of claiming that Jesus was not an apocalypticist even though our earliest sources indicate that he was.

ship of God in the Temple had gotten out of hand

alyptic message? Two possible answers suggest them—

and that the Sadducees in control had abused

selves. It may be that he believed that in the new age

their power and privileges to their own end. But it

there would be a new Temple, totally sanctified for

is also possible that Jesus’ actions are to be taken

the worship of God. This was the view of the apocas a kind of enacted parable, comparable to the

alyptically minded Essenes. Or it may be that Jesus

symbolic actions performed by a number of the

believed there would be no need for a temple at all

prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures (see box 16.4).

in the kingdom that was coming, since there would

By overturning the tables and causing a disturno longer be any evil or sin, and therefore no need

bance, Jesus could have been projecting what was

for the cultic sacrifice of animals to bring atone—

to happen when his words against the Temple

ment. In either case, the implication of Jesus’ actions

came to fruition, foreshadowing the destruction of

is clear: for Jesus, the Temple cult and the officials in

the Temple that he anticipated was soon to come.

charge of it were a temporary measure at best and a

How, though, did Jesus’ prediction that the

corruption of God’s plan at worst. They would soon

Temple would be destroyed fit into his broader apoc—

be done away with when the kingdom arrived.

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Box 16.3 Was Jesus a Cynic Philosopher?

A number of recent American scholars have proposed that Jesus should be understood not as a Jewish apocalypticist but as a kind of Jewish Cynic philosopher. The term “cynic” in this context does not carry the same connotations that it does for us when we say that someone is “cynical.” When referring to the Greco-Roman world, it denotes a particular philosophical position that was advocated by a number of well-known public characters.

The term “cynic” actually means “dog.” It was a designation given to a certain group of philosophers by their opponents, who claimed that they lived like wild mongrels. In some respects, the designation was apt, for Cynics urged people to abandon the trappings of society and live “according to nature.” For them, the most important things in life were those over which people could have some control, such as their attitudes toward others, their likes and dislikes, and their opinions. Other things outside of their control were of no importance.

Followers of the cynics were therefore admonished not to burden themselves with material possessions, such as nice houses or fine clothes, or to worry about how to earn money or what to eat. To this extent, the Cynics were closely aligned in their views to the Stoic philosophers. They differed, though, in the degree of their social respectability. Cynics rejected most constraints imposed by society, even society’s ethical mores, so as to live “naturally.” The Cynics who practiced what they preached had virtually no possessions, often lived on the streets, rarely bathed, begged for a living, performed private bodily functions in public places, and spent their days haranguing people to adopt their philosophical views. They were especially renowned for abusing people on street corners and in marketplaces, where they castigated those who thought that the meaning of life could be found in wealth or in any of the other trappings of society.

Scholars who think that Jesus was a Jewish teacher who embraced Cynic values point out that many of his teachings sound remarkably similar to what we hear from the Cynics. Jesus’

followers were to abandon all their possessions (Matt 6:19–21; Mark 11:21–22), they were not to be concerned about what to wear or what to eat (Matt 6:25–33), they were to live with the bare essentials and accept whatever was given to them by others (Mark 6:6–13; Luke 10:1-12); they were to condemn those who rejected their message (Luke 10:1–12), and they were to expect to be misunderstood and mistreated (Matt 5:11–12). Was not Jesus, then, a Jewish Cynic?

Other scholars believe that this is taking matters too far. All of our ancient sources portray Jesus as quoting the Hebrew Scriptures to support his perspective, but never does he quote any of the Greek or Roman philosophers or urge his followers to adhere to their teachings. Moreover, the message of his teaching is not, ultimately, about living in accordance with nature. It is about the God of Israel, the true interpretation of his Law, and the coming judgment against those who are unrepentant. Thus, while it is true that Jesus’ followers were told not to concern themselves with wealth and the trappings of society, these teachings were not rooted in a concern for promoting self-sufficiency in a harsh and capricious world.

Rather, his followers were not to be tied to the concerns of this age because it was passing away and a new age was soon to come. Jesus may have appeared to an outsider to be similar in some ways to an itinerant Cynic philosopher, but his message was in fact quite different.

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This message did not escape the notice of those

posing of yet one more troublemaker who might

in charge of the Temple, the chief priests who also

cause a major disturbance.

had jurisdiction over the local affairs of the people

in Jerusalem. These priests, principally Sadducees,

were the chief liaison with the Roman officials, in

Jesus’ Associations

particular, the Roman prefect Pilate. For these rea—

One other aspect of Jesus’ public ministry can be

sons, the most plausible scenario for explaining

spoken of with confidence by the historian, and

Jesus’ death is that Jesus’ apocalyptic message,

here again an apocalyptic context provides some

including its enactment in the Temple, angered

important insights. With whom did Jesus associate?

some of the chief priests on the scene. These

There is little doubt that he had twelve followers

priests recognized how explosive the situation

whom he chose as his special disciples; the Gospels

could become during the Passover feast, given the

of Mark (3:16) and John (6:67), and the apostle

tendency of the celebration to become a silent

Paul (1 Cor 15:5) all mention “the Twelve.”

protest that might erupt into something much

Curiously, even though the Synoptics give differ—

worse. The Sadducean priests conferred with one

ent names for some of these followers (Mark

another, had Jesus arrested, and put him on trial

3:13–19; Matt 10:1–4; and Luke 6:12–16), all three

for his words against the Temple. Knowing that

Gospels know that there were twelve of them. But

they could not execute Jesus themselves, perhaps

why twelve? Why not eight? Or fourteen?

because the Romans did not allow the Jewish

The number twelve makes sense from an apoc—

authorities to execute criminals (the matter is

alyptic perspective. The present age was coming

debated among historians), they delivered him

to an end; God was bringing in his new kingdom

over to Pilate, who had no qualms at all about dis—

for his people. Those who repented and did what

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 16.4 The Temple Incident as an Enacted Parable

Parables are simple stories that are invested with deeper spiritual meaning. An enacted parable is a simple action that carries a symbolic, spiritual significance. In the Hebrew Bible, prophets were sometimes told by God to perform a symbolic action to accompany their message. For some interesting examples, read Jeremiah 13:1–14; 19:1–15; and 32:1–44, and Ezekiel 4:1–17. One of the most dramatic occurs in Isaiah 20:1–6 (one of the first recorded instances of streaking in human history).

Is it possible that Jesus’ actions in the Temple were enacted parables meant to symbolize something far greater than themselves? It is indeed possible that by overturning the tables and disrupting a small part of the Temple operation, Jesus was making a symbolic gesture to indicate what was to happen in the coming destruction. Such an action would fit well with the predictions of the Temple’s destruction by Jesus throughout the early (and late) traditions.

Jesus was by no means the first Jewish prophet to attack the Temple. Some 600 years earlier the prophet Jeremiah pronounced a judgment that was quite similar (Jer 7:1–15; 26:1–15) and received a comparable response from the leaders in charge of the place (see Jer 26:8, 11). This may be one additional piece of evidence to suggest that Jesus saw himself principally as a prophetic spokesperson of God urging the people of Israel to repent in light of the coming judgment.

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0

300 meters

0

300 yards

Approximate lines of City Walls:

under Herod the Great

added by Agrippa I

Modern roads

? Fullers Tower

ROYAL

y

CAV

A

ER

H

Damascus Gate

N

T Pool of

e

S

E

Z

Bethzatha

E

Pool

(Bethesda)

B ANTONIA TOWER

l

s

Pool

G

l

e

Emmaus

Gethsemane

vi

a

T E M P L E

l

Jewish Tombs

O

Golgotha ?

C. of C. C.

V

?Beautiful

of of

Priests I. W.

Gate

f

Court

of

Western Wall

o

Gentiles

Pool

B

Tombs

Solomon’s Portico

Pha sael ?Ma riamme

Royal Portico

Gennath

t

ROYAL

Gate

PALACE

n

? Gabbatha

y

PRAE—

TORIUM

n

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Bethany

S

Gihon Spring

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d

i

t

n

d

B = Bridge

Pool

o

o

c

r

i

C. of I. = Court of Israel

e

e

u

C. of Priests = Court of Priests

o

H

C. of W. = Court of Women

d

Pool of

Conduit

H

p

?

Siloam

e

K

o

u

i

r

q

? Solomon‘s

A

y

n

Pool

T

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Bethlehem

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y

Figure 16.1 Jerusalem in the Days of Jesus.

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# CHAPTER 16

JESUS, THE APOCALYPTIC PROPHET

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God wanted them to do, as revealed in the teach—

tions of the Torah, faithfully attend to the Temple

ings of Jesus, would enter into that kingdom. This

cult, or focus their attention on their own ritual

new people of God would arise out of the old. Just

purity. The kingdom that is coming is open to all

as Israel had started out as twelve tribes headed by

who are willing to repent of their misdeeds, even

twelve patriarchs (according to the book of

the most lowly; they need only turn to God in love

Genesis), so the new people of God would emerge

and receive his loving acceptance in return. Those

from old Israel with twelve leaders at their head:

who are willing to abandon everything to follow

“Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when

the teachings of Jesus, to turn from their evil ways

the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his

and love God above all else and their neighbors as

glory, you who have followed me will also sit on

themselves—whether they are from the lower

twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel”

social classes, like the impoverished fishermen

(Matt 19:28; from Q). Thus the disciples repre—

among the disciples, from the scandalous upper

sented the new people of God, those who had

classes, like some of the wealthier tax collectors, or

repented in anticipation of the kingdom that

from the ranks of the religious outcasts, like the

would come soon, on the day of judgment. This

sinners—all such people will enter into the king—

appears to be why Jesus chose twelve of them.

dom of God that is soon to arrive.

We know that Jesus also associated with two

Finally, as we’ll see at greater length in Chapter

other groups of people, whom early sources desig—

24, it is clear that Jesus was widely known to have

nate as “tax collectors” and “sinners.” We can

associated with women and ministered to them in

accept this tradition as authentic because refer—

public, even though this would have been unusual

ences to these groups are scattered throughout our

for a first-century rabbi. Still, the importance of

sources (e.g., see Mark 2:15; Luke 7:34 [Q]; Luke

women for Jesus’ ministry is multiply attested in

15:1–2 [L]); moreover, this is probably not the sort

our earliest traditions. Mark, L (Luke’s special

of tradition that a follower of Jesus would be

source), and even Thomas, for example, indicate

inclined to make up. “Tax collectors” refers to

that Jesus was accompanied by women in his trav—

local Jews employed by regional tax corporations

els (Mark 15:40–41; Luke 8:1–3; Gosp. Thom.

to collect the Roman taxes. These persons were

114). Mark and L also indicate that women pro—

unpopular in first-century Palestine because they

vided Jesus with financial support during his min—

supported Roman rule and sometimes grew rich

istry, evidently serving as his patrons (Mark

through their association with the imperial gov—

15:40–41; Luke 8:1–3). In both Mark and John,

ernment. For these reasons, tax collectors had a

Jesus is said to have engaged in public dialogue

bad reputation among many of the Jewish subjects

and debate with women who were not among

of Rome; they were not the sort of people that

his immediate followers (John 4:1–42; Mark

pious religious leaders were supposed to befriend.

7:24–30). Both Gospels also record, independent-

“Sinners” does not necessarily refer to prostitutes,

ly of one another, the tradition that Jesus had

as is sometimes thought, although certainly prosti—

physical contact with a woman who anointed him

tutes and other habitually “sinful” people could be

with oil in public (Mark 14:3–9; John 12:1–8).

included in their ranks. It refers simply to those

Moreover, in all four of the canonical Gospels,

who were not scrupulous about observing the law

women are said to have accompanied Jesus from

of God. Jesus appears to have spent a good deal of

Galilee to Jerusalem during the last week of his

his time with such folk.

life, to have been present at his crucifixion, and to

From an apocalyptic perspective, these associa—

have been the first to believe that Jesus’ body was

tions make sense. We have numerous teachings of

no longer in the tomb (Matt 27:55; 28:1–10; Mark

Jesus in which he proclaims that the kingdom is

15:40–41; 16:1–8; Luke 23:49, 55; 24:10; John

coming not to those who are righteous but to

19:25; 20:1–2; cf. Gosp. Pet. 50–57).

those who are sinful. We have already seen that he

This widely attested tradition is contextually

does not associate in a friendly way with the reli—

credible within an apocalyptic context. If, as we

gious leaders who scrupulously observe the regula—

shall see, Jesus proclaimed that God was going to

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intervene in history to bring about a reversal of

had overcome the powers of evil might well have

fortunes in which the last would be first and the

wanted to tell stories to show that he did. But they

first last, in which the humble would be exalted

are contextually credible, to the extent that we

and the exalted humbled, then it would make

know of other persons, both pagan and Jewish,

sense that Jesus would have freely associated with

who were said to have had power over demons,

women, who were generally looked down upon as

including, for example, the great pagan holy man,

inferior by the men who made the rules and ran

Apollonius of Tyana, who lived a bit later in the

the society—and that they would have been par—

first century (see also Mark 9:38).

ticularly intrigued by his proclamation of the comIt is interesting to observe that the controversy

ing Kingdom.

over Jesus was not about whether or not he had

this ability but whether he had this power from

God or the Devil. As reported in our earliest sur-

Jesus Reputation as an Exorcist and Healer

viving Gospel:

I have already stressed at some length in Chapter

14 that it is impossible for the historian who sticks

And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem were

to the canons of historical inquiry to demonstrate

saying that “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the

that miracles have been performed in the past—

demons he casts out demons.” (Mark 3:22)

whether by Jesus, Apollonius, Hanina ben Dosa,

Mohammed, or anyone else. To acknowledge that

Jesus’ response to the charge is telling, especially

a miracle occurred requires belief in a supernatur—

in the version preserved in the Q source:

al realm to which the historian, as a historian, has

no direct access (although a historian may feel

If I cast demons out by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons

that he or she has access to it as a believer). This

cast them out? . . . But if I cast demons out by the spirit

does not mean, though, that the historian cannot

of God, behold the Kingdom of God is come upon you.

talk about the reports of miracles that have been

Or how is anyone able to enter into the house of a

handed down from the past. These are a matter of

strong man and steal his property, if he does not first

public record, and when it comes to the historical

bind the strong man? Only then he can plunder his

Jesus, of course, there are numerous such reports.

house. (Matt 12:27–30; cf. Luke 11:19–23)

In particular, he is said to have performed exorcisms (i.e., cast out demons) and to have healed

Note that everyone—Jesus and his opponents

the sick.

together—admits not only that Jesus can cast

To begin with the exorcisms, there can be little

out demons, but that other Jewish exorcists can

doubt that whether or not supernatural evil spirits

do so as well. Moreover, for Jesus, casting out

invade human bodies to make them do vile and

demons signified the conquest over the forces of

harmful things, Jesus was widely thought to be able

evil (the “strong man,” in this case, would repre—

to cast them out, restoring a person to health. His

sent the main power opposed to God, Satan).

exorcisms are among the best attested deeds of the

And most importantly, Jesus’ exorcisms are

Gospel traditions, with individual accounts scat—

interpreted apocalyptically. They show that the

tered throughout the first part of Mark (e.g.,

Kingdom of God was at the doorstep. Strikingly,

1:21–28; 5:1–20; 7:24–30), in M (e.g., Matt

this apocalyptic view is the earliest understand—

9:32–34; this may be Q), and in L (e.g., Luke

ing of the widespread tradition that Jesus could

13:10–14). Moreover, the theme that Jesus could

cast out demons.

and did cast out demons is documented in multi—

Much the same can be said about Jesus’ reputa—

ply attested forms throughout the sayings materi—

tion as a healer. On numerous layers of our tradi—

als, for example, Mark, Q, and L (Mark 3:22; Matt

tions Jesus is said to have healed those with vari—

12:27–28; Luke 11:15, 19–20; 13:32). Such tradi—

ous ailments—fever, leprosy, paralysis, hemorrhag—

tions cannot pass the criterion of dissimilarity, of

ing, lameness, blindness, and so on,—and even to

course, since Christians who thought that Jesus

have raised some who had already died (see Mark

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5:35–43 and John 11:38–44). Whatever you think

whether Jesus was himself the final prophet before

about the philosophical possibility of miracles of

the end, Jesus reportedly replied:

healing, it’s clear that Jesus was widely reputed to

have done them. I might add that he was also

Tell John the things you have seen and heard: the blind

known to have performed other miracles not asso—

are regaining their sight, the lame are starting to walk,

ciated with healing physical ailments, though

the lepers are being cleansed, the deaf are starting to

dealing still with the “natural” world—for exam—

hear, the dead are being raised, and the poor are hearing

ple, multiplying the loaves, walking on water, still—

the good news! (Luke 7:22; Matt 11:4–5)

ing the storm. Such miracles too are attested in

multiple sources. Like the exorcisms, they cannot,

The end has come, and the Son of Man is soon to

of course, pass the criterion of dissimilarity.

appear in the climactic act of history, after which

They are contextually credible to the extent

there will never again be any who are blind, lame,

that there were other persons from the ancient

leprous, deaf, or poor. Jesus represented the final

world—lots of them, in fact—who were said to

prophet before the end, who was already overcom—

have done some fairly miraculous things, either

ing the forces of evil in the world.

through prayer (as in the case of Hanina ben Dosa

and Honi the “circle-drawer”) or directly because

of their own holiness (e.g., Apollonius of Tyana).

In Sum: The Deeds of Jesus

It may be worth noting that many of the healing

Although historians cannot demonstrate that

and nature miracles of Jesus in fact are closely

Jesus performed miracles, they have been able to

related to miracles described in the Hebrew Bible

establish with some degree of certainty a few basic

of other Jewish prophets, and invariably, Jesus

facts about Jesus’ life: he was baptized, he associat—

comes off looking even better than his prophetic

ed with tax collectors and sinners, he chose twelve

predecessors. The prophet Elijah, for example, had

disciples to be his closest companions, he caused a

to engage in some real personal theatrics to raise a

disturbance in the Temple near the end of his life,

child from the dead (1 Kings 17:17–24); Jesus

this disturbance eventuated in his crucifixion at

could do it with just a word (Mark 5:35–43).

the hands of the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate,

Elijah’s successor, Elisha, allegedly fed 100 people

and in the wake of his death his followers estab—

with just twenty barley loaves (2 Kings 4:42–44);

lished vibrant Christian communities. What is

Jesus fed over 5,000 (not counting the women and

striking is that all of these pieces of information

children!) with just five (Mark 6:30–44). Elisha

add up to a consistent portrayal of Jesus. Jesus was

was able to make an axehead float on the water (2

an apocalyptic prophet who anticipated the immi—

Kings 6:1–7); Jesus could himself walk on the water

nent end of the age, an end that would involve the

(Mark 6:45–52).

destruction of Israel, including the Temple and its

Interestingly enough, our earliest sources did

cult, prior to the establishment of God’s kingdom

not understand these activities to be signs that

on earth. As we turn now to consider more specif—

Jesus was himself God. They were the sorts of

ically some of the teachings of Jesus, we can fill out

things that Jewish prophets did. Jesus simply did

this basic apocalyptic message.

them better than anyone else. Moreover, the earliest traditions again assign an apocalyptic meaning to these acts. In the coming Kingdom of God

THE APOCALYPTIC

there would be no more disease or death. Jesus

TEACHINGS OF JESUS

healed the sick and raised the dead. In a small way,

then, the Kingdom was already becoming mani—

Scholars have been unable to establish a solid con—

fest. And there was not much time to wait before

sensus on what the historical Jesus said. Certainly,

the end finally arrived. According to an account

we cannot uncritically assume that he said many

in Q, when John the Baptist wanted to know

of the things recorded in such Gospels as Thomas

whether to expect another one to come or

or even John. As we have seen, a number of these

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teachings are not independently attested, and

“The time has been fulfilled, the kingdom of God

most of them appear to conform to the perspec—

is near; repent and believe in this good news!” For

tives on Jesus that developed within the commu—

Jesus, the time of this age was all but complete; the

nities that preserved them. Thus, although Jesus

bottom of the sand clock was nearly filled. This

makes many self-identifications in John’s

age was near its end and the new Kingdom was

Gospel—“I am the bread of life,” “I am the light of

almost here. People needed to prepare by turning

the world,” “I am the way, the truth, and the life,

to God and accepting this good news.

no one comes to the Father but through me,” “I

Here we cannot consider all of the sayings that

and the Father are one”—none of these is inde—

can be established as authentically from Jesus, but

pendently attested in any other early source and

we will explore several of the more characteristic

all of them coincide with the christology that

ones. Jesus taught that God’s kingdom was soon to

developed within the Johannine community.

arrive on earth. Given Jesus’ social context and the

Indeed, one interesting piece of evidence that the

apocalyptic character of his ministry, we can

author of the Fourth Gospel modified his tradi—

assume that he had in mind an actual kingdom—

tions of Jesus’ sayings in conformity with his own

which people could “enter,” in which there would

views is that it is nearly impossible to know who is

be human rulers and paradisial banqueting (see

doing the talking in this narrative, unless we are

Matt 19:28; Luke 13: 23–29). This kingdom would

explicitly told. For John the Baptist, Jesus himself,

replace the corrupt powers that were presently in

and the narrator of the story all speak in almost

control, a kingdom perhaps headed by God’s spe—

exactly the same way, suggesting that there is only

cial anointed one, his messiah. This kingdom was

one voice here, that of the Gospel writer.

going to come in a powerful way (Mark 9:1); peo—

Is it not possible, though, that the apocalyptic

ple must watch for it and be prepared, for no one

sayings of Jesus were also modified in accordance

could know when exactly it would come and it

with the views of the early Christians, who, after

would strike unexpectedly (Mark 13:32–35; Luke

all, were apocalypticists? This indeed is a possibili—

21:34–36). But Jesus did know that it was to arrive

ty, and one that should be carefully considered, but

soon—at least within the lifetime of some of his

remember that we have already established on other

disciples (Mark 9:1; 13:30).

grounds that Jesus was an apocalypticist. It is very

It appears that Jesus expected the kingdom to

hard to explain the basic orientation of his ministry

be brought by one whom he called the Son of

otherwise, given the fact that it began with his

Man. Scholars have engaged in long and acrimo—

decision to associate with the apocalypticist John

nious debates about how to understand this desig—

the Baptist and was followed by the establishment

nation. Is it a title for a figure that Jews would gen—

of apocalyptic communities of his followers.

erally understand, for instance, a reference to the

Moreover, the deeds and experiences of Jesus that

figure mentioned in Daniel 7:13–14? Is it a gener—

we can establish beyond reasonable doubt are con—

al description of “a human-like being”? Is it a self—

sistent with his identity as an apocalypticist.

reference, a circumlocution for the pronoun “I”?

Given this orientation, it is not surprising that

Moreover, did Jesus actually use the term? Or did

a large proportion of Jesus’ sayings in our earliest

the Christians come up with it and attribute it to

sources are teachings about the imminent arrival

Jesus? If Jesus did use it, did he actually refer to

of the Son of Man, the appearance of the kingdom

himself as the Son of Man?

of God, the coming day of judgment, and the need

The details of this debate cannot concern us

to repent and live in preparation for that day, the

here, but I can indicate what seems to me to be the

climax of history as we know it. While we cannot

best way to resolve it. Some of Jesus’ sayings men—

assume that every saying in the Gospels that has

tion the Son of Man coming in judgment on the

any tint of apocalypticism in it is authentic, many

earth (e.g., Mark 8:38; 13:26–27; 14:62; Luke

of the apocalyptic sayings must have come from

12:8); these appear to presuppose a knowledge of

Jesus himself. Mark’s summary of Jesus’ teaching

the passage in Daniel where “one like a son of

appears to be reasonably accurate (Mark 1:15):

man” comes and is given the kingdoms of earth.



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Figure 16.2 Ancient portrayal of Jesus teaching the apostles, from the catacomb of Domitilla in Rome.

We know of other Jewish apocalypticists who

This judgment would bring about a total rever—

anticipated a cosmic judge of this type, sometimes

sal of the social order. Those in positions of power

called the “Son of Man” (see box 16.5). Jesus him—

and prestige would be removed, and the oppressed

self seems to have expected the imminent appear—

and afflicted would be exalted. It was the forces of

ance of such a cosmic judge. In some sayings, such

evil who were currently in charge of this planet,

as the ones cited above (especially Mark 8:38 and

and those who sided with them were the ones in

14:62), he does not identify himself as this figure

power. Those who sided with God, however, were

but seems, at least on the surface, to be speaking of

the persecuted and downtrodden, who were domi—

somebody else. If Christians were to make up a

nated by the cosmic powers opposed to God. Thus,

saying of Jesus about the Son of Man, however,

when God reasserted his control over this planet,

they would probably not leave it ambiguous as to

all of this would be reversed: “The first shall be last

whether he was referring to himself. As we have

and the last first” (Mark 10:30), and “all those

seen, therefore, on the grounds of dissimilarity

who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those

(again, hotly debated) such sayings are probably

who humble themselves will be exalted” (Luke

authentic. Jesus anticipated the coming of a cos—

14:11; 18:14[Q]) This was not simply a hopeful

mic judge from heaven who would bring in God’s

pipe dream; Jesus expected it actually to happen.

kingdom.

The coming of the Son of Man was not good

When he came, there would be cosmic signs

news for those in power. They would be better

and a universal destruction. The messengers of

served to relinquish their power—to become like

God would gather together those who have been

children (Mark 10:13–15), to give away their

chosen for the kingdom (Mark 13:24–27). On the

wealth and become poor (Mark 10:23–30), to yield

day of judgment, some people would be accepted

their positions of prestige and become slaves (Mark

into the kingdom, and others cast out. The judge

10:42–44). Not even the official leaders of the

would be like a fisherman who sorts through his

Jewish people would escape, for everyone who lord—

fish, taking only the best and disposing of all the

ed it over another would be liable. Indeed, the very

others (Matt 13:47–50; Gosp. Thom. 8).

locus of power for the influential Sadducees, the

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Temple of God itself, would be destroyed on judg—

are you who are hated by others, and reviled . . .

ment day: “There will be not one stone left upon

for your reward will be great” (Luke 6:20–23; see

another that will not be destroyed” (Mark 13:2).

Gosp. Thom. 54, 68–69).

On the other hand, those who currently suf—

Because there was to be such a dramatic rever—

fered, the oppressed and downtrodden, would be

sal when the Son of Man brought the kingdom, a

rewarded. This promise is expressed in Jesus’

person should be willing to sacrifice everything in

Beatitudes, found in Q: “Blessed are you who are

order to enter into it. A person’s passion to obtain

poor, for yours is the kingdom of Heaven [meaning

the kingdom should be like that of a merchant in

that they will be made rich when it arrives];

search of pearls; when he finds one that is perfect,

Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be

he sells everything that he has to buy it (Matt

satisfied [when the kingdom comes]; Blessed are

13:45–46; Gosp. Thom. 76). People should not, for

you who weep now, for you shall rejoice; Blessed

this reason, be tied to this world or the alluring

SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 16.5 The Cosmic Deliverer of Israel

In the time of Jesus there was no fixed notion of what Israel’s future deliverer would be like. Sometimes he was thought of as a future king like David, sometimes as an authoritative priest who could provide definitive instruction in God’s Law, and sometimes as a cosmic figure sent by God to overthrow the forces of evil. For examples of this last type of deliverer, consider the following Jewish apocalyptic texts of the first century: And they [the people of God] had great joy, and they blessed and praised and exalted because the name of that Son of Man had been revealed to them. And he sat on the throne of his glory, and the whole judgment was given to the Son of Man, and he will cause the sinners to pass away and be destroyed from the face of the earth. And those who led astray the world will be bound in chains, and will be shut up in the assembly-place of their destruction, and all their works will pass away from the face of the earth. And from then on there will be nothing corruptible, for that Son of Man has appeared and has sat on the throne of his glory, and everything evil will pass away and go from before him. (1 Enoch 69) As I kept looking the wind made something like the figure of a man come up out of the heart of the sea. And I saw that this man flew with the clouds of heaven; and everywhere he turned his face to look, everything under his gaze trembled. . . . After this I looked and saw that an innumerable multitude of people were gathered together from the four winds of heaven to make war against the man who came up out of the sea. . . . When he saw the onrush of the approaching multitude, he neither lifted his hand nor held a spear, or any weapon of war; but I saw only how he sent forth from his mouth something like a stream of fire, and from his lips a flaming breath. . . . [which] fell on the onrushing multitude that was prepared to fight, and burned up all of them, so that suddenly nothing was seen of the innumerable multitude but only the dust of ashes and the smell of smoke. (4 Ezra 13:1–11) 1958.e16\_p229-251 4/24/00 9:37 AM Page 245

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treasures that it has to offer; instead, they should

love were not at the root of their dealings with one

focus on the kingdom that is coming (Matt 6:19,

another society might fall apart. He was not a

33; Gosp. Thom. 63).

teacher of ethics concerned with how people

At the same time, we should not think that

should get along in the future. For Jesus, the end

Jesus was maintaining that everyone who hap—

was coming soon, within his own generation. The

pened to be poor or hungry or mistreated would

motivation for ethical behavior, then, sprang from

enter into God’s kingdom. He expected that people

the imminent arrival of the kingdom, to be

first had to repent and adhere to his teachings (see

brought by the Son of Man in judgment.

Mark 1:15; 2:17; Luke 15:7). This is what his own

Those who began to implement the ideals of

disciples had done; they left everything to follow

the kingdom, where there would be no sin, hatred,

him. As a result, they were promised special places

or evil, had in a sense begun to experience the rule

of prominence in the coming kingdom. Similarly,

of God here and now. This rule of God that would

Jesus’ association with tax collectors and sinners

find its climax in the powerful appearance of the

should not be taken to mean that he approved of

Son of Man. The followers of Jesus who had begun

any kind of lifestyle. To be sure, he did not insist

to live the life of the kingdom by loving God and

that his followers keep the detailed traditions of

their neighbors as themselves were merely a small

the Pharisees, in part because he appears to have

prelude; they were like a tiny mustard seed in com—

felt that the Torah itself was only a provisional

parison with the great mustard bush that repre—

measure: what need would there be of “Law” in a

sented the coming kingdom (Mark 4:30–31; Gosp.

kingdom in which there was no sin or evil?

Thom. 20). Indeed, they were not many in num—

Moreover, he appears to have believed that at the

ber, since the words of Jesus for the most part fell

heart of the Torah was the command for people to

on deaf ears. But when these words came to those

love God with their entire being and to love their

who were chosen for the kingdom, they were like

neighbors as themselves (Mark 12:28–31, where he

vibrant seed falling on rich soil; they bore fruit of

quotes Deut 6:4 and Lev 19:18; see Gosp. Thom.

far greater worth and magnitude than one could

25). Occasionally, in his view, the overly scrupu—

imagine (Mark 4:1–9; Gosp. Thom. 9). For this

lous attention to the details of the Torah could,

reason, those who heard the good news of the

perhaps ironically, lead to a violation of these basic

kingdom were not only to prepare themselves but

principles (Mark 7:1–13). The Sabbath, for exam—

also to proclaim the message of Jesus to others. As

ple, was created for the sake of humans, not

the Gospels express it, no one puts a lamp under a

humans for the Sabbath. Human need, therefore,

bushel but on a light stand, so that all might see

had priority over the punctilious observation of

the light and recognize the truth that has now

rules for keeping the Sabbath (Mark 2:27–28). For

been made clear, the truth of God’s coming king—

Jesus, then, keeping the Torah was indeed impor—

dom (Mark 4:21–22; Gosp. Thom. 33).

tant; this happened, however, not when Jews fol—

It is difficult to know what Jesus thought about

lowed the carefully formulated rulings of the

his own role in this imminent kingdom of God.

Pharisees but when they repented of their bad

On occasion he speaks as if he expected to enter

behavior and turned to God with their entire being

into the kingdom himself, and he seems to have

and manifested their love for him in their just and

anticipated that this was to be soon (e.g., Mark

loving treatment of their neighbors.

14:25). As we have seen, the disciples were to be

These examples make it clear that the guide—

leaders in this new kingdom, but who would lead

lines for living that Jesus gave, that is, his ethics,

them? Would it still be Jesus? Would he be the

were grounded in his apocalyptic worldview. They

ultimate leader of this new kingdom of God on

are probably misunderstood, therefore, when they

earth, the one whom God appoints as king? If this

are taken as principles for a healthy society. Jesus

is what Jesus thought—and, of course, it is impos—

did teach that people should love one another, but

sible to know what anyone thinks, especially

not because he wanted to help them lead happy

someone who lived 2,000 years ago, whom we

and productive lives or because he knew that if

know only through such fragmentary sources—

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SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 16.6

Jesus and “Family Values”

One of the hardest things for modern people who are interested in Jesus to realize is that he lived in a completely different culture from ours, with a foreign set of cultural values and norms — so much so that people commonly claim that he did not (or rather could not) have meant what he said. Nowhere is this more clear than in the area known today as “family values.”

Since the modern sense of family values seems to be so good and wholesome, it is only natural for people to assume that Jesus too must have taught them. But did he? It is striking that in our earliest traditions Jesus does not seem to place a high priority on the family.

Consider the words preserved in Q: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters and even his own life, he is not able to be my disciple” (Luke 14:26; Matt 10:37). A person must hate his or her family? The same word is used, strikingly, in the saying independently preserved in the Gospel of Thomas: “The one who does not hate his father and mother will not be worthy to be my disciple”

( Gosp. Thom. 55). If we understand “hate” here to mean something like “despise in comparison to” or “have nothing to do with,” then the saying makes sense. Parents, siblings, spouses, and even one’s own children were to be of no importance in comparison with the coming Kingdom.

This may help explain Jesus’ reaction to his own family. For there are clear signs not only that Jesus’ family rejected his message during his public ministry, but that he in turn spurned them publicly (independently attested in Mark 3:31–34 and Gosp. Thom. 99).

And Jesus clearly saw the familial rifts that would be created when someone became committed to his message of the coming Kingdom:

You think that I have come to bring peace on earth; not peace, I tell you, but division. For from now on there will be five people in one house, divided among themselves: three against two and two against three; a father will be divided against his son and a son against his father, a mother against her daughter and a daughter against her mother; a mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law (Luke 12:51–53; Matt 10:34–46; independently attested in Gosp. Thom. 16).

And family tensions would be heightened immediately before the end of the age, when “a brother will betray his brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise up against their parents and kill them” (Mark 13:12).

These “anti-family” traditions are too widely attested in our sources to be ignored (they are found in Mark, Q, and Thomas, for example), and suggest that Jesus did not support what we today might think of as family values. But why not? Could it be that Jesus was not ultimately interested in establishing a good society and doing what was necessary to maintain it?

Remember: for him the end was coming soon, and the present social order was being called radically into question. What mattered were not strong family ties and the social institutions of this world. What mattered was the new thing that was coming, the future kingdom. And it was impossible to promote this teaching while trying to retain the present social structure.

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That would be like trying to put new wine into old wineskins or trying to sew a new piece of cloth to an old garment. As any winemaster or seamstress could tell you, it just won’t work.

The wineskins would burst and the garment would tear. New wine and new cloth require new wineskins and new garments. The old is passing away and the new is almost here (Mark 2:18–22; Gosp. Thom. 47).

then he may have considered himself to be the

itinerant teacher from Galilee went to Jerusalem,

future messiah—but only in this apocalyptic sense.

we should stick to our historical criteria.

It is possible that Jesus simply wanted to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem, as did so many

thousands of other Jews every year. But Jesus’

THE APOCALYPTIC

actions there appear to have been well thought out.

DEATH OF JESUS

When he arrived, he entered the Temple and caused

a disturbance. Afterwards he evidently spent severAs we have seen, several aspects of the Gospel

al days in and out of the Temple, teaching his mes—

Passion narratives appear to be historically accu—

sage of the coming kingdom. Given Jesus’ under—

rate. Jesus offended members of the Sadducees by

standing that this kingdom was imminent and the

his apocalyptic actions in the Temple just prior to

urgency with which he taught others that they

the Passover feast. They decided to have him

needed to repent in preparation for it, we should

taken out of the way. Perhaps they were afraid

perhaps conclude that he had come to Jerusalem to

that his followers would swell as the feast pro—

bring his message to the center of Israel itself, to the

gressed and that the gathering might lead to a

Temple in the holy city, where faithful Jews from

riot; or perhaps they simply found his views offen—

around the world would be gathered to worship the

sive and considered his attack on the Temple of

God who saved them from their oppressors in the

God blasphemous. In either case, they appear to

past and who was expected to do so once more. Jesus

have arranged with one of his own disciples to

came to the Temple to tell his people how this sal—

betray him. Jesus was arrested and questioned by a

vation would occur and to urge them to prepare for

Jewish Sanhedrin called for the occasion, possibly

it by repenting of their sins and accepting his teach—

headed up by the high priest Caiaphas. He was

ings. He proclaimed that judgment was coming and

then delivered over to the Roman prefect Pontius

that it would involve a massive destruction, includ—

Pilate, who condemned him to be crucified. The

ing the destruction of the Temple.

time between his arrest and his crucifixion may

Did Jesus realize that he was about to be arrest—

have been no more than twelve hours; he was sent

ed and executed? Again, there is simply no way to

off to his execution before anyone knew what was

know for certain what Jesus thought. It is not hard

happening.

to imagine, though, that anyone with any knowl—

What else can we know about Jesus’ last days?

edge at all of how prophets of doom were generally

Here we will look at some of the more intriguing

received, both in ancient times and more recently,

questions that have occurred to scholars over the

might anticipate receiving similar treatment.

years. One of these is, why was Jesus in Jerusalem

Moreover, Jesus would probably have known that

in the first place? The theologian might say that

the leaders in Jerusalem did not take kindly to his

Jesus went to Jerusalem to die for the sins of the

message, and he certainly would have known

world; this view, however, is based on Gospel say—

about their civil power. According to the tradi—

ings of Jesus that cannot pass the criterion of

tions, of course, Jesus knew that his time had come

dissimilarity (e.g., his three passion predictions

on the night of his arrest. There are a number of

in Mark). In making judgments about why this

difficulties with accepting the accounts of the Last



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have been proposed over the years, some of which

are more plausible than others (see box 16.7).

What appears certain is that Jesus was eventually

handed over to the Roman authorities, who tried

him on the charge that he called himself king of the

Jews. That this was the legal case against him is multiply attested in independent sources. Moreover, as

has often been noted, in the early Gospels the designation of Jesus as king of the Jews is found only in

the accounts of his trial (Mark 15, Matt 27, Luke 23,

John 18–19); nowhere do his followers actually call

him this. Since the early Christians did not generally favor, or even use, the designation “king of the

Jews” for Jesus, they probably would not have made

it up as the official charge against him. This must,

therefore, be a historically accurate tradition.

Claiming to be king of the Jews was a political

charge that amounted to insurrection or treason

against the state. That is why Jesus was executed

Figure 16.3 A portrayal of Jesus’ triumphal entry, found on the famous sarcophagus of a Christian named Junius Bassus.

by the Romans under Pontius Pilate, not by the

Jewish authorities, who may not have been granted the power of capital punishment in any case.

Supper as historically accurate, especially when

That the Romans actually did the deed is attested

Jesus indicates that his death will be for the for—

by a wide range of sources, including even

giveness of sins, a clearly Christian notion that

Josephus and Tacitus.

cannot pass the criterion of dissimilarity. Still, we

Why, though, did the Roman authorities exe—

have two independent accounts of the event

cute Jesus if it was the Jewish authorities who had

(Mark 14:22–26 and 1 Cor 11:23–26), the earliest

him arrested in the first place? We know that Jesus

of which was written in the mid-50s by Paul, who

must have offended powerful members of the

claims to have received the tradition from others.

Sadducees by his action in the Temple. Through

Did he learn it from someone who was present at

the high priest Caiaphas, the chief authority over

the event, or from a Christian who knew someone

local affairs, these leaders arranged to have Jesus

who was there? In any case, the basic notion that

arrested. Once he was taken, he was brought in for

at his last meal Jesus explained that he would not

questioning. We cannot know for certain how the

last long in the face of his powerful opposition is

interrogation proceeded; none of Jesus’ disciples

not at all implausible.

was present, and our earliest account, Mark’s, is

Why did Judas betray Jesus, and what did he

historically problematic (see box 5.4). Perhaps we

betray? These again are extraordinarily difficult

can best regard it as a fact-finding interrogation.

questions to answer. That Judas did betray Jesus is

The Sanhedrin evidently decided to have Jesus

almost certain; it is multiply attested and is not a

taken out of the way. Using the information

tradition that a Christian would have likely invent-

(given by Judas? see box 16.7) that he had been

ed. Why he did so, however, will always remain a

called the messiah, they sent Jesus before the pre—

mystery. Some of our accounts intimate that he did

fect Pilate. We do not know exactly what hap—

it simply for the money (Matt 26:14–15; cf. John

pened at this trial. Possibly Pilate was as eager to

12:4–6). This is possibly the case, but the “thirty

be rid of a potential troublemaker during these tur—

pieces of silver” is a reference to a fulfillment of a

bulent times as the chief priests were.

prophecy in the Hebrew Bible (Zech 11:12) and

When Pilate chose to have someone executed,

may not be historically accurate. Other theories

he could do so on the spur of the moment. There

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was no imperial legal code that had to be followed,

utes. Two other persons were charged with sedi—

no requirements for a trial by jury, no need to call

tion the same morning. All three were taken out—

witnesses or to establish guilt beyond reasonable

side of the city gates to be crucified.

doubt, no need for anything that we ourselves

According to the Gospel traditions, Jesus was

might consider due process. Roman governors

first flogged. It is hard to say whether this is a

were given virtually free reign to do whatever was

Christian addition to show how much Jesus suf—

required to keep the peace and collect the tribute

fered or a historical account. In any event, he and

(see Chapter 26). Pilate is known to history as a

the others would have been taken by soldiers out—

ruthless administrator, insensitive to the needs

side the city gates and forced to carry their cross—

and concerns of the people he governed, willing to

beams to the upright stakes kept at the site of exe—

exercise brutal force whenever it served Rome’s

cution. The uprights were reused, possibly every

best interests. So, perhaps on the basis of a brief

day. There the condemned would have been nailed

hearing in which he asked a question or two,

to the crossbeams, or possibly to the uprights them—

Pilate decided to have Jesus executed. It was prob—

selves, through the wrists and possibly the ankles.

ably one of several items on a crowded morning

There may have been a small ledge attached to the

agenda; it may have taken only a couple of min—

upright on which they could sit to rest.

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 16.7 Jesus and Judas, the Betrayer

A number of explanations of why Judas betrayed Jesus have been proposed over the years.

Some scholars have thought that Judas originally expected Jesus to bring in the kingdom by raising an army, but when he realized that Jesus was not interested in this kind of kingdom, he turned him over to the authorities in anger and with a sense of betrayal. Others have proposed that Judas continued to think that Jesus would rouse the masses in his support but that he needed to be urged to do so; by having him arrested, Judas may have wanted to force his hand. We will never know.

A second question is, what did Judas betray? The common answer is that he told the Jewish authorities Jesus’ whereabouts, so they could have him arrested in private without stirring up the crowds. But surely the authorities could simply have had Jesus trailed, thereby saving themselves the hassle and expense of hiring a traitor. Is it possible, then, that Judas betrayed more? Jesus was eventually condemned for claiming to be the king of the Jews, but throughout his public ministry, so far as we can tell, he made no such claim openly. Persons in first-century Palestine who heard the term “king” or “messiah” (which would mean a future king) would normally think of a civil ruler. Jesus appears not to have understood himself in this way. If he did see himself as the messiah (a mighty if), then it would more likely have been as the messiah who would rule the future kingdom of God after the Son of Man arrived. If he did see himself in this way (another if!), is it possible that he taught something to this effect, not publicly, but only to his inner circle? If so, then Judas may have been the one who divulged the information to the authorities, giving them all they needed to have Jesus arrested and put on trial before the Roman governor on charges of treason: he had called himself king when only Caesar, or the one whom he appoints, can be king. The scenario is at least plausible.

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The death itself would have been slow and painful.

wrists or by pushing on those through the feet, or

Crucifixion was reserved for the worst offenders of the

both. Death came only when the victim lacked the

lowest classes: slaves, common thieves, and insurrec—

strength to continue. Sometimes it took days.

tionists. It was a death by suffocation. As the body

In Jesus’ case, death came within several hours,

hung on the cross, the lung cavity would distend

in the late afternoon, on a Friday during Passover

beyond the point at which one could breathe. To

week. He was taken from his cross and given a

relieve the pain on the chest, one had to raise the

quick burial sometime before sunset on the day

body up, either by pulling on the stakes through the

before Sabbath.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Allison, Dale C. Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet.

Gospels, written by prominent evangelical Christian

Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998. A compelling demonstra—

scholars who by and large represent different perspec—

tion that Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet, for

tives from those presented in this chapter.

advanced students.

Horsley, Richard A. Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Crossan, John Dominic. Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography.

Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine. Minneapolis:

San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1994. An

Fortress, 1993. An intriguing alternative view, which

intriguing and moving portrayal of Jesus as one who

sees Jesus principally as an advocate of nonviolent

was not an apocalypticist, by one of the leading schol-social revolution against the imperialistic policies of

ars in this field. A national bestseller.

Rome.

Ehrman, Bart D. Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New

Meier, John. A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical

Millennium. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Jesus. Vols. 1–2. New York: Doubleday, 1991, 1994.

A fuller treatment of the issues and views set forth in

Written at an introductory level. but filled with

the present chapter, for popular audiences.

erudite documentation in the end notes, this is one

of the finest treatments of the historical Jesus of the

Evans, Craig, and Bruce Chilton, eds. Studying the Historical twentieth century.

Jesus: Evaluations of the Current Stage of Research.

Leiden: Brill, 1994. Essays on important aspects of the

Sanders, E. P. The Historical Figure of Jesus. London: Penguin, historical Jesus; some of these essays take exception to

1993. All in all, perhaps the best single-volume sketch

the view of Jesus as an apocalypticist, preferring

of the historical Jesus for beginning students.

instead to see him as a kind of first-century Jewish

Cynic; for more advanced students.

Schweitzer, Albert. Quest of the Historical Jesus. Trans. W.

Montgomery. New York: Macmillan, 1968. The classic

Green, Joel, et al., eds. Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels.

study of the major attempts to write a biography of

Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1994. A Bible

Jesus up to the first part of the twentieth century, and

Dictionary with in-depth articles on a wide range of

one of the first and perhaps the most important

topics pertaining to the historical Jesus and the

attempt to portray Jesus as a Jewish apocalypticist.

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Vermes, Geza. Jesus the Jew: A Historian’s Reading of the

Wright, N.T. Jesus and the Victory of God. Minneapolis: Gospels. New York: Macmillan, 1973. A readable but

Fortress, 1996. A full examination of the Jesus of his—

learned study of Jesus in light of traditions of other

tory by a traditional British scholar, for more advanced

Jewish holy men from his time, by a prominent Jewish

students.

scholar.

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# CHAPTER 17

From Jesus to the Gospels

We began our study of the New Testament with the

We might say that it began with Jesus’ ministry.

oral traditions about Jesus that were in circulation

Obviously, without the words and deeds of Jesus

in the early Christian churches and saw how the

there would have been no religion based on him.

stories that eventually made it into the Gospels

At the same time, Christianity has traditionally

were modified and sometimes, perhaps, created by

been much more than a religion that espouses

Christians who narrated them in order to convert

Jesus’ teachings. Indeed, if Jesus was the apocalyp—

others to faith and to educate, encourage, and

tic prophet that he appears to have been, then the

admonish those who had already been converted.

Christianity that emerged after his death represents

We moved from there to a study of our earliest

a somewhat different religion from the one he him—

written accounts of Jesus—books that were not the

self proclaimed. In the simplest terms, Christianity

first to be produced by Christians (the letters of

is a religion rooted in a belief in the death of Jesus

Paul were earlier) but were the first to portray the

for sin and in his resurrection from the dead. This,

most important figure of early Christianity, Jesus

however, does not appear to have been the religion

himself. We initially examined these works as liter—

that Jesus preached to the Jews of Galilee and

ary documents, trying to uncover their distinctive

Judea. To use a formulation that scholars have

portrayals of Jesus. We then moved behind these

tossed about for years, Christianity is not so much

portrayals to reconstruct the life of the man himself

the religion of Jesus (the religion that he himself

by applying a variety of historical criteria to uncov—

proclaimed) as the religion about Jesus (the reli—

er what Jesus actually said and did.

gion that is based on his death and resurrection).

We have now come full circle back to where we

Should we say, then, that Christianity began

began. This is an ideal stage for us to pause and

with Jesus’ death? This too may contain some ele—

reexamine the original point of entry into our

ment of truth, but it also is somewhat problematic.

study in light of what we have learned en route.

If Jesus had died and no one had come to believe

Here we will discuss with somewhat greater

that he had been raised from the dead, then his

sophistication (and brevity) the development of

death would perhaps have been seen as yet another

the traditions about Jesus that circulated in the

tragic incident in a long history of tragedies experi—

early decades of the Christian movement.

enced by the Jewish people, as the death of yet

another prophet of God, another holy man dedicated to proclaiming God’s will to his people. But it

THE BEGINNING

would not have been recognized as an act of God for

OF CHRISTIANITY

the salvation of the world, and a new religion would

probably not have emerged as a result.

Hypothetically speaking, every religious and philo—

Did Christianity begin with Jesus’ resurrection?

sophical movement has a point of origin. When did

Historians would have difficulty making this judg—

Christianity begin? There are several possibilities.

ment, since it would require them to subscribe to

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# CHAPTER 17

## FROM JESUS TO THE GOSPELS

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faith in the miraculous working of God. Yet even

On one important point, however, Paul does stand

if historians were able to speak of the resurrection

in agreement with the early Gospel accounts:

as a historically probable event, it could not, in

those who initially came to understand that God

and of itself, be considered the beginning of

had raised Jesus from the dead were some of Jesus’

Christianity, for Christianity is not the resurrec—

closest followers, who had associated with him

tion of Jesus but the belief in the resurrection of

during his lifetime.

Jesus. Historians, of course, have no difficulty

It is probably safe to say that all of these fol—

speaking about the belief in Jesus’ resurrection,

lowers had accepted Jesus’ basic apocalyptic mes—

since this is a matter of public record. It is a his—

sage while he was still alive. Otherwise they would

torical fact that some of Jesus’ followers came to

not have followed him. Thus, the first persons to

believe that he had been raised from the dead soon

believe in Jesus’ resurrection would have been

after his execution. We know some of these believ—

apocalyptically minded Jews. For them, Jesus’ resers by name; one of them, the apostle Paul, claims

urrection was not a miracle that some other holy

quite plainly to have seen Jesus alive after his

person had performed on his behalf. Jesus’ follow—

death. Thus, for the historian, Christianity begins

ers believed that God had raised Jesus from the

after the death of Jesus, not with the resurrection

dead. Moreover, he had not been raised for a brief

itself, but with the belief in the resurrection.

period of time, only to die a second time. Jesus had

been raised from the dead never to die again.

What conclusions would be drawn by these Jewish

apocalypticists, the earliest Christians?

JESUS’ RESURRECTION

We have already seen that apocalypticists

FROM AN APOCALYPTIC

believed that at the end of this age the powers of

PERSPECTIVE

evil would be destroyed. These powers included the

devil, his demons, and the cosmic forces aligned

How did belief in Jesus’ resurrection eventually

with them, the forces of sin and death. When these

lead to the Gospels we have studied? Or to put the

powers were destroyed, there would be a resurrec—

question somewhat differently, how does one

tion of the dead, in which the good would receive

understand the movement from Jesus, the Jewish

an eternal reward and the evil would face eternal

prophet who proclaimed the imminent judgment

punishment. Many Jewish apocalypticists, like Jesus

of the world through the coming Son of Man, to

himself, believed that this end would be brought by

the Christians who believed in him, who main—

one specially chosen by God and sent from heaven

tained that Jesus himself was the divine man

as a cosmic judge of the earth. Given this basic

whose death and resurrection represented God’s

apocalyptic scenario, there is little doubt as to how

ultimate act of salvation? To answer this question,

the first persons who believed in Jesus’ resurrection

we must look at who the first believers in Jesus’

would have interpreted the event. Since the resur—

resurrection actually were.

rection of the dead was to come at the end of the

The Gospels provide somewhat different

age and since somebody had now been raised (as

accounts about who discovered Jesus’ empty tomb

they believed), then the end must have already

and about whom they encountered, what they

begun. It had begun with the resurrection of a par—

learned, and how they reacted once they did so.

ticular person, the great teacher and holy man Jesus,

But all four canonical Gospels and the Gospel of

who had overcome death, the greatest of the cosmic

Peter agree that the empty tomb was discovered by

powers aligned against God. Thus, Jesus was the

a woman or a group of women, who were the first

personal agent through whom God had decided to

of Jesus’ followers to realize that he had been

defeat the forces of evil. He had been exalted to

raised. Interestingly, the earliest author to discuss

heaven, where he now lived until he would return

Jesus’ resurrection, the apostle Paul, does not mento finish God’s work. For this reason, people were to

tion the circumstance that Jesus’ tomb was empty,

repent and await his second coming.

nor does he name any women among those who

Sometime after Jesus’ resurrection—it is im—

first believed in Jesus’ resurrection (1 Cor 15:3–8).

possible to say how soon (since our sources were

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written decades later)—these earliest apocalyptic

who was soon to come from heaven in judgment

believers began to say things about Jesus that

over the earth. For them, Jesus himself was now

reflected their belief in who he was now that he

exalted to heaven; clearly, he must be the judge

had been raised. These early reflections on Jesus’

about whom he had spoken. Therefore, in their

significance strongly influenced the beliefs that

view, Jesus was soon to return in judgment as the

came to be discussed, developed, and modified for

Son of Man.

centuries to follow, principally among people who

Jesus also spoke of the kingdom of God that was

were not apocalyptic Jews to begin with. For

to arrive with the coming of the Son of Man. As

example, the earliest Christians believed that

we have seen, he may have thought that he would

Jesus had been exalted to heaven; that is, God had

be given a position of prominence in that king—

bestowed a unique position upon him. Even dur—

dom. For these early Christians, that was precisely

ing his lifetime, they knew, Jesus had addressed

what would happen: Jesus would reign over the

God as Father and taught his disciples that they

kingdom that was soon to appear. For them, he

should trust God as a kindly parent. Those who

was the king to come, the king of the Jews, the

came to believe in his resurrection realized that he

messiah (see box 17.1).

must have had a relationship with God that was

Jesus also taught that in some sense this king—

truly unique. In a distinctive way, for them, he was

dom had already been inaugurated. He therefore

the Son of God.

taught his followers to implement the values of

Moreover, these Christians knew that Jesus

the kingdom and adopt its ways in the here and

had spent a good deal of time talking about one

now by loving one another as themselves. Those

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 17.1 Jesus, the Messiah, and the Resurrection

Over the years, many people have assumed that first-century Jews who came to believe that Jesus had been raised from the dead would naturally conclude that he was the messiah.

This is probably an erroneous assumption; for to our knowledge there were no Jews prior to Christianity who believed that the future messiah was to die for sins and then be raised from the dead.

Why, then, did the earliest Christians use Jesus’ resurrection to prove that Jesus was the messiah? Perhaps the ones who first insisted on Jesus’ messiahship after his resurrection were those who already thought that he was the messiah before he died. The scenario may have been something like this. Before Jesus was crucified, some of his followers came to think he was the messiah. This belief, though, was radically disconfirmed by what happened to him when he came to Jerusalem. He was summarily executed for sedition against the state, thereby shattering the hopes of his followers that he could be the future deliverer of his people. But these hopes took on a new life, so to say, when some of Jesus’ followers came to believe that he had been raised from the dead. This belief compelled them to reassert their earlier convictions with even greater vigor: since God had vindicated Jesus, he must be the one they had said he was.

Even so, he clearly was not the messiah anyone had expected. The earliest Christian believers were therefore compelled to insist that the messiah, contrary to general expectation, was to die and be raised from the dead, and they began to search their Scriptures for divine proof. Thus began the distinctively Christian notion of a suffering messiah, who died for the sins of the world and was vindicated by God in a glorious resurrection.

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# CHAPTER 17

## FROM JESUS TO THE GOSPELS

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who believed in his resurrection maintained that

box 5.1). Jesus, on the other hand, was a relative—

the kingdom proclaimed by Jesus had indeed

ly obscure teacher who was crucified for sedition

already begun. As the exalted one, he was already

against the empire. How could a convicted crimi—

its ruler. He was, in fact exalted above all of cre—

nal be God’s messiah? Jesus never overthrew the

ation; for believers, Jesus was the Lord of all that

state; he was mocked, beaten, and executed by the

is, in heaven and on earth.

state. For most Jews, to call Jesus the messiah, let

These new and important ways of understand—

alone Lord of the universe, was preposterous, even

ing Jesus came to prominence quickly and natural—

blasphemous. To our knowledge, prior to the

ly. Within several years after his death he was pro—

advent of Christianity, there were no Jews who

claimed in small communities scattered

believed that the messiah to come would suffer

throughout the Eastern Mediterranean as the

and die for the sins of the world and then return

unique Son of God, the coming Son of Man, the

again in glory.

Jewish messiah, and the Lord of all. Christians

Christians today, of course, believe that this is

who understood Jesus in these ways naturally told

precisely what the messiah was supposed to do. The

stories about him that reflected their understand—

reason they think so, however, is that the earliest

ing. For example, when they mentioned Jesus’

Christians came to believe that the Jewish Bible

teaching about the Son of Man, they sometimes

anticipated the coming of a suffering messiah (see

changed what he said so that instead of speaking

box 17.1). Recall: these earliest Christians were

about this other one to come, he was said to be

Jews who believed that God spoke to them through

speaking of himself, using the first person singular:

their sacred writings. For them, the Scriptures were

“Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will

not simply the records of past events; they were the

acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven”

words of God, directed to them, in their own situ-

(Matt 10:32; contrast Mark 8:38). Likewise, when

ation. Not only the earliest Christians, but most

Jesus spoke about himself, they sometimes

Jews that we know about from this period under—

changed words given in the first person singular

stood the Scriptures in a personal way, as a revela-

(“I”) to the title “Son of Man.” Thus Matthew’s

tion of meaning for their own times (see box 15.1).

form of Jesus’ question to his disciples is, “Who do

Thus, even though the Hebrew Bible never specif—

people say that the Son of Man is?” (Matt 16:13;

ically speaks of the messiah as one who is to suffer,

contrast Mark 8:27).

there are passages, in the Psalms, for example, that

speak of a righteous man who suffers at the hands

of God’s enemies and who comes to be vindicated

by God. Originally, these “Psalms of Lament” may

JESUS’ DEATH, ACCORDING TO

have been written by Jews who were undergoing

THE SCRIPTURES

particularly difficult times of oppression and who

found relief in airing their complaints against the

As we have seen, the earliest Christians had an

evil persons who attacked them and expressing

obvious problem when they tried to convince

their hopes that God would intervene on their

their fellow Jews that Jesus was the one upon

behalf (e.g., see, Pss 22, 35, and 69). Christians

whom God had shown his special favor. For non—

who read such Psalms, however, saw in them not

Christian Jews who were anticipating a messiah

the expressions of oppressed, righteous Jews from

figure were not looking for anyone remotely like

the distant past but the embodiments of the pain,

Jesus. To be sure, the Jewish messianic expec—

suffering, and ultimate vindication of the one truly

tations reflected in the surviving sources are quite

righteous Jew who had recently been unjustly con—

disparate. But they all had one thing in common:

demned and executed.

they all expected the messiah to be a powerful fig—

As they reflected on what had happened to

ure who would command the respect of friend and

Jesus, these Jewish Christians saw in his suffering

foe alike and lead the Jewish people into a new

and death a fulfillment of the words of the right—

world that overcame the injustices of the old (see

eous sufferer described in the Psalms. In turn,

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these words shaped the ways Christians under—

having taken place in the past (although his vin—

stood and described the events of Jesus’ own

dication is in the future). Christians, however,

Passion. They took the words of Psalm 22, for

understood Jesus’ own suffering in light of this and

example, as expressive of the events surrounding

similar passages. For them, these ancient words

Jesus’ execution:

described well what Jesus went through. Moreover,

for them, Jesus clearly was the chosen one, given

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me” (v.

his resurrection and exaltation (see box 17.1).

1); “All who see me mock at me, they make mouths

Their conclusion: God’s messiah had to suffer, as a

at me, they shake their heads (v. 7); “I am poured out

sacrifice for the sins of the world. (see box 17.2)

like water, and all my bones are out of joint . . . my

The crucifixion, then, was turned from a stum—

mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue

bling block for Jews into a foundation stone for

sticks to my jaws” (vv. 14–15); “A company of evildoers encircles me. My hands and feet have shriv—

Christians (see 1 Cor 1:23). In reflecting upon

eled; I can count all my bones —they stare and gloat

their Scriptures, the earliest Jewish Christians

over me; they divide my garments among them, and

concluded that Jesus was meant to suffer and die.

for my clothing they cast lots” (vv. 16–18).

His death was no mere miscarriage of justice; it

was the eternal plan of God. Jesus faithfully carried

For the early Christians, the sufferings of the right—

out his mission, bringing salvation to the world.

eous Jesus were foreshadowed by the sufferings of

God therefore exalted him to heaven, making him

the righteous Jew of the Psalms. His sufferings

the Lord of all and setting in motion the sequence

were therefore no mere miscarriage of justice; they

of events that would lead to his return in fiery

were the plan of God.

judgment on the earth.

Other portions of Scripture explained why this

suffering was God’s plan. Again, these were passages

that did not mention the messiah, but Christians

THE EMERGENCE

nonetheless took them to refer to Jesus, whom they

OF DIFFERENT

believed to be the messiah. Most important were

UNDERSTANDINGS OF JESUS

passages found in the writings of the prophet Isaiah,

who also speaks of the suffering of God’s righteous

Not all the Christian communities that sprang up

one, whom he calls the “Servant of the Lord.”

around the Mediterranean were completely uni—

According to the “Songs of the Suffering Servant,”

fied in the ways they understood their belief in

as scholars have labeled four different passages in

Jesus as the one who had died for the sins of the

Isaiah, the most important of which is Isaiah

world. We have seen numerous differences that

52:13–53:12, this servant of God was one who suf—

emerged among these groups, particularly as the

fered a heinous and shameful fate: he was despised

religion spread from the small group of apocalypti—

and rejected (53:3), he was wounded and bruised

cally minded Jews who followed Jesus in Galilee

(53:4–5), he was oppressed and afflicted, he suffered

and Jerusalem to other regions and different types

in silence and was eventually killed (53:7–8). This

of people. This variety can be seen, on its most

is one who suffered and died to atone for the sins of

basic level, in the ways that different believers in

the people (53:4–5)

the first decades of Christianity would have under—

The interpretation of the original meaning of

stood the descriptions of Jesus that we have

this passage is difficult, but the widely held view

already examined.

among scholars is that it was originally speaking of

The term “Son of Man,” for example, might

the suffering of the nation of Israel during the

have made sense to Jews familiar with the predic—

Babylonian captivity (see Isa 49:3). We have no

tion of Daniel 7:13–14 that “one like a son of man”

indication that any Jew, prior to Christianity, ever

was to come on the clouds of heaven. For such an

took the passage as a reference to the future Jewish

audience, the identification of Jesus as the Son of

messiah. You may notice in reading it that the

Man would have meant that he was destined to be

author refers to the Servant’s suffering as already

the cosmic judge of the earth. A pagan audience,

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## FROM JESUS TO THE GOSPELS

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SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 17.2 Vicarious Suffering in Jewish Martyrologies

and Other Greco-Roman Literature

The idea that someone would suffer and die in order to save others, a notion called vicarious suffering, was not invented by the Christians. Prior to Christianity the notion is found, for example, in a number of stories of Jewish martyrs. Is it possible that these tales affected the ways Christians narrated their stories about Jesus?

In the account of the Maccabean revolt known as 1 Maccabees, we find a Jewish warrior named Eleazar who single-handedly attacks an elephant thought to be bearing the king of Syria, the enemy of God. Eleazar ends up beneath the beast, crushed for his efforts. In the words of the author, “So he gave his life to save his people” (1 Macc 6:44).

A later account of martyrs from the Maccabean period, known as 4 Maccabees, describes in graphic detail the tortures that faithful Jews underwent because they refused to forsake the Law of Moses. The author claims that God accepted their deaths as a sacrifice on behalf of the people of Israel: “Because of them our enemies did not rule over our nation, the tyrant was punished, and the homeland purified—they having become, as it were, a ransom for the sin of our nation. And through the blood of those devout ones and their death as an atoning sacrifice, divine Providence preserved Israel that previously had been mistreated” (4 Macc 17:20–22). In these writings, the death of the faithful martyr brings salvation to others.

Literary portrayals of vicarious suffering can be found in ancient pagan literature as well.

One of the most interesting instances occurs in the moving play of Euripides entitled Alcestis.

Alcestis is the beautiful wife of Admetus. He is fated to die at a young age, but the god Apollo, who had earlier befriended him, has worked out a special arrangement with the Fates: someone else can voluntarily die in his stead. Admetus tries in vain to persuade his parents to undertake the task as a familial duty. As a last resort, Alcestis agrees to perform the deed. After her death, Admetus is understandably stricken by grief, although, perversely enough, he is more upset that people will think badly of him than that he has actually made his wife sacrifice her own life for his. But he is comforted by the god Heracles, who goes down into Hades in order to rescue Alcestis from the throes of death and brings her back alive to her stricken husband. Euripides’s story is thus about a person who voluntarily dies in someone else’s stead and is then honored by a god who conquers death by raising the victim back to life. Sound familiar?

on the other hand, would have had to be told

7:14 and Psalm 2), than to Gentiles, for whom it

about the book of Daniel, or, as sometimes hap—

would probably mean a divine man. The term “mes—

pened, they would have tried to understand the

siah” may have made no sense at all to Gentiles who

phrase as best they could, perhaps by taking it to

were not familiar with its special significance in

mean that since Jesus was the son of a man, he was

Jewish circles. Literally it would have designated

a real human being. This is the way many

someone who had been anointed or oiled (e.g., an

Christians today understand the term, even though

athlete after a hard workout)—scarcely a term of

it probably would not have meant this either to

reverence for a religious leader, let alone for the

Jesus or to his apocalyptically minded followers.

Savior of the world!

The term “Son of God” would have meant some—

Even communities that agreed on the basic

thing quite different to Jews, who could have taken

meaning of these various titles may have disagreed

it as a reference to the king of Israel (as in 2 Sam

on their significance as applied to Jesus. Take, for



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Figure 17.1 Portrayal of Hercules (= Heracles; with the club left of center) leading Alcestes (middle) back to life from the god of the underworld, Pluto (seated), after she had voluntarily died in the place of her husband. The scene is found on a pagan sarcophagus of the second century C.E. (see box 17.2).

instance, the title Son of God. If, in the general

accounts that show that Jesus had no human

sense, the title refers to Jesus’ unique standing

father, so that he literally was the Son of God

before God, the question naturally arises, when

(e.g., see Luke 1:35). Still other Christians came

did Jesus receive this special status? Some early

to believe that Jesus must have been the Son of

communities appear to have thought that he

God not simply from his birth but from eternity

attained it at his resurrection when he was “begot—

past. By the end of the first century, Christians in

ten” by God as his son. This belief is reflected, for

some circles had already proclaimed that Jesus was

example, in the old traditions preserved in Acts

himself divine, that he existed prior to his birth,

13:33–34 and Romans 1:3–4. Other communities,

that he created the world and all that is in it, and

perhaps somewhat later, came to think that Jesus

that he came into the world on a divine mission as

must have been God’s special son not only after

God himself. This is a far cry from the humble

his death but also during his entire ministry. For

beginnings of Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet.

these believers, Jesus became the Son of God at his

Perhaps these beginnings can be likened to a mus—

baptism, when a voice from heaven proclaimed,

tard seed, the smallest of all seeds. . . .

“You are my son, today I have begotten you,” as

The various notions of who Jesus was, and the

the story is preserved in some manuscripts of Luke

diverse interpretations of the significance of what

and among Ebionite Christians. Others came to

he had said and done, came to be embodied in the

think that Jesus must have been the Son of God

various written accounts of his life. This, in my

not only for his ministry but for his entire life.

judgment, is a certainty. Otherwise, there is no

Thus, in some of the later Gospels, we have

way to explain the radically different portrayals of

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Jesus that we find, for instance, in the Gospels of

on, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were all

Mark, John, Thomas, and Peter. It was only later,

acclaimed as authoritative and interpreted in light

when Christians decided to collect several of these

of one another. Their placement in the Christian

Gospels into a canon of Scripture that the differ—

canon thus led to a homogenization, rather than

ences came to be smoothed over. From that time

illumination, of their distinctive emphases.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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New Testament Images of Jesus. New Haven, Conn.:

Trans. John E. Steely. New York: Abingdon, 1970. A

Yale University Press, 1988. An important study of the

classic study that tries to show how the view of Jesus as

earliest Christian views of Jesus and the ways they devel—

the Lord developed very early in Christianity among

oped as Christianity moved away from its Jewish roots.

Gentiles living in a polytheistic environment where

there were numerous other competing “Lords.”

Fuller, Reginald. Foundations of New Testament Christology.

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Testament (e.g., Son of Man, Son of God, Messiah,

1994. A massive and exhaustive discussion of the

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influenced early Christian reflections on Jesus’ death

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tion of interesting and provocative essays that show

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those that he inherited from the tradition before him,

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Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism. Philadelphia: Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the

Fortress, 1988. A valuable study that argues that the

Incarnation. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980. A sys—

source of conflict between early Christians and non—

tematic attempt to understand how Christians devel—

Christian Jews was not, strictly speaking, over whether

oped their exalted views of Jesus through the New

Jesus could be thought of as divine but whether he was

Testament period.

to be worshipped.

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# CHAPTER 18

Paul the Apostle: The Man and His Mission

The importance of the apostle Paul in the

sons, preaching the gospel in cities and towns of

Christian movement was not universally recog—

Syria, Cilicia, Asia Minor, Macedonia, and

nized in his own day. Indeed, Paul appears to have

Achaia (modern-day Syria, Turkey, and Greece),

been a highly controversial figure among his con—

which were significant areas of growth for

temporaries. From his own letters it is clear that he

Christianity in its first few decades.

had at least as many enemies as friends.

As important as his role in the geographical

Nonetheless, for the entire history of Christianity

spread of the faith—in some respects, far more

from the first century to our own, no figure except

important—was Paul’s contribution to its spread

Jesus has proved to be more important.

across ethnic lines. More than anyone else that we

Consider the New Testament itself. Thirteen of

know about from earliest Christianity, Paul

its twenty-seven books claim to be written by Paul.

emphasized that faith in Jesus as the messiah who

One other book, the Epistle to the Hebrews, was

died for sins and was raised from the dead was not

accepted into the canon only after Christians

to be restricted to those who were born Jews.

came to believe that Paul had written it, even

Moreover, it was not to be restricted to Gentiles

though it makes no such claim for itself. Yet

who converted to Judaism. The salvation brought

another book, the Acts of the Apostles, sketches a

by Christ was available to everyone, Jew or

history of early Christianity with Paul as the prin—

Gentile, on an equal basis.

cipal character. Thus, well over half of the books

This may not sound like a radical claim in our

of the New Testament, fifteen out of twenty—

day, when very few people who believe in Jesus are

seven, are directly or indirectly related to Paul.

Jewish and when it would be nonsensical to argue

Consider next the spread of Christianity after

that a person must convert to Judaism before

its inauspicious beginnings among a handful of

becoming a Christian, but people like Paul had to

Jesus’ followers in Jerusalem. By the beginning of

argue the point vehemently in antiquity. For Paul,

the second century the religion had grown into an

even though faith in Jesus was in complete con—

interconnected network of believing communities

formity with the plan of the Jewish God as found

scattered throughout major urban areas of the

in the Jewish Scriptures, it was a faith for all per—

empire. Paul was instrumental in this Christian

sons, Jews and Gentiles alike.

mission. He did not, of course, accomplish it sinAt first, Paul probably stood in the minority on

gle-handedly. As he himself admits, at the outset

this issue. To most of the earliest followers of Jesus,

he was violently and actively hostile to the

who were born and raised Jewish, it was Paul’s

spreading Christian church. But in one of the

claim that a person did not have to be a Jew to be

most dramatic turnabouts in history, Paul con—

counted among the people of God that would

verted to the faith that he had previously perse—

have made no sense. These early Christians main—

cuted and became one of its leading spokesper—

tained that Jesus had been sent by the Jewish God

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## PAUL THE APOSTLE

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to the Jewish people in fulfillment of the Jewish

by pagan, Jewish, and Christian writers of the

Law to be the Jewish messiah. Jesus himself had

ancient world (see Chapter 12). Indeed, letters

followed Jewish customs, gathered Jewish disci—

allegedly written by Paul proliferated in the sec—

ples, and interpreted the Jewish Law. The religion

ond and later centuries. Among those that still

he founded was Jewish. People who wanted to fol—

survive are a third letter to the Corinthians, a let—

low Jesus had to become Jews first. This seemed

ter addressed to the church in the town of

fairly obvious to most early Christians. But not to

Laodicea (cf. Col 4:16), and an exchange of corre—

Paul. The kind of Christianity that was defined

spondence between Paul and the famous Greek

and advocated by the apostle Paul was open to

philosopher Seneca (see box 18.2). Interestingly,

both Jews and Gentiles and was rooted in the

we learn from the church father Tertullian that

belief that Jesus had died and been raised for the

one second-century Christian was caught in the

salvation of the world, not just of Israel.

act of forging writings in Paul’s name and con—

Before we can begin to examine Paul’s views in

fessed to the deed. The question of why authors in

greater depth, we need to engage in two prelimi—

antiquity would forge documents in someone else’s

nary tasks. First, we must explore the methodolog—

name is intriguing, and we will take it up later in

ical difficulties that this kind of study involves.

Chapter 23.

Second, we must set our investigation into a some—

Is it conceivable, though, that some of the let—

what broader context by considering some of the

ters that made it into the New Testament are this

major aspects of Paul’s own life, insofar as these

kind of literature, pseudonymous writings in the

can be deduced from his surviving writings.

name of Paul? For most scholars, this is not only

conceivable but almost certain; they have, as a

consequence, grouped the letters attributed to

Paul into three categories (see box 18.1). (In later

THE STUDY OF PAUL:

chapters I will discuss the arguments that have

METHODOLOGICAL

proven persuasive to most historians and allow you

DIFFICULTIES

to weigh their merits for yourself.)

First there are the three Pastoral epistles. These

The problems of reconstructing the life and teach—

are the letters allegedly written to the pastors

ings of the historical Paul are in some ways analo—

Timothy (1 and 2 Timothy) and Titus, that progous to the problems of reconstructing the life and

vide instruction on how these companions of Paul

teachings of the historical Jesus, in that they relate

should engage in their pastoral duties in their

to the character of our sources. But there is one

churches. For a variety of reasons, most critical

significant difference: Jesus left us no writings,

scholars are persuaded that these letters were writ—

whereas Paul did. Indeed, thirteen letters in the

ten not by Paul but by a later member of one of

New Testament are penned in Paul’s name. A

Paul’s churches who wanted to appeal to his

major problem involved in studying these letters,

authority in dealing with a situation that had

however, is that scholars have good reasons for

arisen after his death. As we will see, the argu—

thinking that some of them were not written by

ments revolve around whether the writing style,

Paul, but by later members of his churches writing

vocabulary, and theology of these letters coincides

in his name.

with what we find in the letters that we are reasonably certain Paul wrote, and whether Paul’s

own historical context can make sense of the

The Problem of Pauline Pseudepigrapha

issues that the letters address (see Chapter 23).

The fact that some ancient authors would falsely

Next, there are the three epistles of Ephesians,

attribute their writings to a famous person (like

Colossians, and 2 Thessalonians, called the

Paul) comes as no shock to historians. Writings

“Deutero-Pauline” epistles because each of them is

under a false name are known as “pseudepigrapha.”

thought by many scholars to have been written by

We know of numerous pseudepigrapha produced

a “second Paul,” a later author (or rather three

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THE NEW TESTAMENT: A HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 18.1 The Pauline Corpus

Undisputed Pauline Epistles (almost certainly authentic)

Romans

1 Corinthians

2 Corinthians

Galatians

Philippians

1Thessalonians

Philemon

Deutero-Pauline Epistles (possibly pseudonymous)

Ephesians

Colossians

2 Thessalonians

Pastoral Epistles (probably pseudonymous)

1 Timothy

2 Timothy

Titus

later authors) who was heavily influenced by

than from Paul himself, then despite the impor—

Paul’s teachings (the term “Deutero-” means “sectance of these letters for understanding how

ond”). Scholars continue to debate the authorship

Pauline Christianity developed in later years, they

of these books. Most continue to think that Paul

cannot be used as certain guides to what Paul

did not write Ephesians and probably not

himself taught. For methodological reasons a

Colossians; the case for 2 Thessalonians has

study of Paul has to restrict itself to letters that we

proved somewhat more difficult to resolve (see

can be confident he wrote, namely, the seven

Chapter 23).

undisputed epistles.

Finally, there are seven letters that virtually all

scholars agree were written by Paul himself:

Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians,

The Problem of Acts

Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon.

What, though, about the book of Acts, Luke’s

These “undisputed” epistles are similar in terms of

account of the history of the early church, which

writing style, vocabulary, and theology. In addi—

features Paul as one of its chief protagonists? For a

tion, the issues that they address can plausibly be

historically accurate account of what Paul said and

situated in the early Christian movement of the

did, can we rely on Luke’s narrative?

40s and 50s of the Common Era, when Paul was

Different scholars will answer this question dif—

active as an apostle and missionary.

ferently. Some trust the book of Acts with no

The significance of this threefold classification

qualms, others take its accounts with a grain of

of the Pauline epistles should be obvious. If schol—

salt, and still others discount the narrative alto—

ars are right that the Pastorals and the Deutero—

gether (that is, they discount its historical credi—

Paulines stem from authors living after Paul rather

bility for establishing what Paul said and did, not

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# CHAPTER 18

## PAUL THE APOSTLE

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necessarily its importance as a piece of literature).

leave from there for Athens), but it stands at odds

My own position is that the book of Acts is about

with him on some of the specifics.

as reliable for Paul as the Gospel of Luke is for

Other differences are of greater importance. For

Jesus. Just as Luke modified aspects of Jesus’ words

example, Paul is quite emphatic in the epistle to

to reflect his own theological point of view, for

the Galatians that after he had his vision of Jesus

instance, with respect to when the end was to

and came to believe in him, he did not go to

arrive, and similarly changed some of the tradi—

Jerusalem to consult with the apostles (1:15–18).

tions concerning his actions, for instance, with

This is an important issue for him because he wants

respect to what occurred during his Passion, so too

to prove to the Galatians that his gospel message

in the book of Acts Paul’s words and deeds have

did not come from Jesus’ followers in Jerusalem

been modified in accordance with Luke’s own per-

(the original disciples and the church around

spective. Thus, Acts can tell us a great deal about

them) but from Jesus himself. His point is that he

how Luke understood Paul, but less about what

has not corrupted a message that he received from

Paul himself actually said and did.

someone else; his gospel came straight from God,

In our discussion of Acts I have already indi—

with no human intervention. The book of Acts, of

cated why I do not think that the book was writ—

course, provides its own narrative of Paul’s conver—

ten by one of Paul’s traveling companions. Even if

sion. In this account, however, Paul does exactly

it were, we would still have to ask whether its por—

what he claims not to have done in Galatians: after

trayal of Paul is historically accurate, for even eye—

leaving Damascus some days after his conversion,

witnesses have their own perspectives. In any

he goes directly to Jerusalem and meets with the

event, in evaluating the reliability of Acts we are

apostles (Acts 9:10–30).

fortunate that Paul and Luke sometimes both

It is possible, of course, that Paul himself has

describe the same event and indicate Paul’s teach—

altered the real course of events to show that he

ings on the same issues, making it possible to see

couldn’t have received his gospel message from

whether they stand in basic agreement.

other apostles because he never consulted with

them. If he did stretch the truth on this matter,

Events of Paul’s Life. In virtually every instance

though, his statement of Galatians—“In what I am

in which the book of Acts can be compared with

writing to you, before God, I do not lie”—takes on

Paul’s letters in terms of biographical detail, differ—

new poignancy, for his lie in this case would have

ences emerge. Sometimes these differences

been bald-faced. More likely the discrepancy

involve minor disagreements concerning where

derives from Luke, whose own agenda affected the

Paul was at a certain time and with whom. As one

way he told the tale. For him, as we have seen, it

example, the book of Acts states that when Paul

was important to show that Paul stood in close

went to Athens he left Timothy and Silas behind

continuity with the views of the original followers

in Berea (Acts 17:10–15) and did not meet up

of Jesus, because all the apostles were unified in

with them again until after he left Athens and

their perspectives. Thus, he portrays Paul as con—

arrived in Corinth (18:5). In 1 Thessalonians Paul

sulting with the Jerusalem apostles and represent—

himself narrates the same sequence of events and

ing the same faith that they proclaimed.

indicates just as clearly that he was not in Athens

As we saw in our discussion of Acts, Luke por—

alone but that Timothy was with him (and possi—

trays Paul as standing in harmony not only with

bly Silas as well). It was from Athens that he sent

the original apostles of Jesus but also with all of the

Timothy back to Thessalonica in order to see how

essentials of Judaism. Throughout this narrative,

the church was doing there (1 Thess 3:1–3).

Paul maintains his absolute devotion to the Jewish

Although this discrepancy concerns a minor

Law. To be sure, he proclaims that Gentiles do not

detail, it shows something about the historical reli—

need to keep this Law, since for them it would be

ability of Acts. The narrative coincides with what

an unnecessary burden. He himself, however,

Paul himself indicates about some matters (he did

remains a good Jew to the end, keeping the Law in

establish the church in Thesssalonica and then

every respect. When Paul is arrested for violating

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the Law, Luke goes out of his way to show that the

rather than willfully disobedient to him, he has

charges are trumped up (chaps. 21–22). As Paul

overlooked their false religions until now. With

himself repeatedly asserts throughout his apolo—

the coming of Jesus, though, he is calling all peo—

getic speeches in Acts, he has done nothing con—

ple to repent in preparation for the coming judg—

trary to the Law (e.g., 28:17).

ment (Acts 17:23–31).

In his own writings, Paul’s view of the Law is

This perspective contrasts sharply with the

extremely complicated. Several points, however,

views about pagan idolatry that Paul sets forth in

are reasonably clear. First, in contrast to the

his own letters. In the letter to the Romans, for

account in Acts, Paul appears to have had no

example, Paul claims that pagan idolaters are not

qualms about violating the Jewish Law when the

ignorant of the one true God, that all along they

situation required him to do so. In Paul’s words, he

have known of his existence and power by seeing

could live not only “like a Jew” when it served his

the things that he has made. Here the worship of

purposes but also “like a Gentile,” for example,

idols is said to be a willful act of disobedience.

when it was necessary for him to convert Gentiles

Pagans have rejected their knowledge of the one

(1 Cor 9:21). On one occasion, he attacked the

true God, the maker of all, and chosen of their

apostle Cephas for failing to do so himself (Gal

own free will to worship the creation rather than

2:11–14). In addition, Paul did not see the Law

the creator. As a result of their rejection of God,

merely as an unnecessary burden for Gentiles,

he has punished them in his wrath (Rom

something that they didn’t have to follow but

1:18–32).

could if they chose. For Paul, it was an absolute

These passages appear to be at odds with one

and total affront to God for Gentiles to follow the

another on a number of points. Do pagans know

Law, a complete violation of his gospel message. In

that there is only one God? (Acts, no; Romans,

his view, Gentiles who did so were in jeopardy of

yes.) Have they acted in ignorance or disobedi—

falling from God’s grace, for if doing what the Law

ence? (Acts: ignorance; Romans: disobedience.)

required could contribute to a person’s salvation,

Does God overlook their error or punish it? (Acts,

then Christ died completely in vain (Gal 2:21,

overlooks; Romans: punishes.)

5:4). This is scarcely the conciliatory view attrib—

Some scholars think that the two passages can

uted to Paul in Acts.

be reconciled by considering the different audiences that are being addressed. In Acts Paul is try-

Paul’s Teaching. Paul’s teachings in Acts differ in

ing to win converts, and so he doesn’t want to be

significant ways from what he says in his own let—

offensive, whereas in Romans he is addressing the

ters. Here we look at just one important example.

converted, so he doesn’t mind saying what he real—

Almost all of Paul’s evangelistic sermons men—

ly thinks. To be sure, it is possible that Paul would

tioned in Acts are addressed to Jewish audiences.

say the opposite of what he believed in order to

This itself should strike us as odd given Paul’s

convert people or tell a white lie intended to bring

repeated claim that his mission was to the

about a greater good; but another explanation is

Gentiles. In any event, the most famous exception

that Luke, rather than Paul, is the author of the

is his speech to a group of philosophers on the

speech on the Areopagus, just as he is the author of

Areopagus in Athens (chap. 17). In this speech,

all the other speeches in his account, as we saw in

Paul explains that the Jewish God is in fact the

Chapter 9. This explanation goes a long way

God of all, pagan and Jew alike, even though the

toward showing why so many of the speeches in

pagans have been ignorant of him. Paul’s under—

Acts sound similar to one another, regardless of

standing of pagan polytheism is reasonably clear

who the speaker is—Paul sounding like Peter, for

here: pagans have simply not known that there is

example, and Peter like Paul (compare the speech—

only One God, the creator of all, and thus cannot

es of Acts 2 and 13). Rather than embodying Paul’s

be held accountable for failing to worship him.

view of the pagan religions, then, the Areopagus

Since they have been ignorant of the true God,

speech may embody Luke’s view, and thus repre-

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# CHAPTER 18

## PAUL THE APOSTLE

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SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 18.2 Other Sources for the Life of Paul

Just as a number of legendary accounts of Jesus sprang up from the first century through the Middle Ages, so too a number of pseudepigraphal accounts of Paul and the other apostles appeared. We will look at one of the earliest and most interesting of these narratives, T he Acts of Paul and Thecla, in Chapter 22. There we will see how Paul came to be portrayed as a proponent of the gospel of the ascetic life, who deprecated sexual relations of every kind, both within and outside of marriage.

As was the case with the apocryphal tales about Jesus, these stories about Paul are less important for what they tell us about the man Paul himself than for what they reveal about Christianity in the years during which they were told. Something similar can be said of the interesting set of correspondence forged by a third-century Christian in the names of Paul and Seneca, the famous philosopher and mentor of the emperor Nero. Written some two hundred years after both parties were dead (both of them killed, according to tradition, by order of Nero), these fourteen letters were meant to show that Paul’s significance as an author was recognized by one of the greatest philosophical minds of his day. In the second letter that “Seneca” addresses to Paul, he claims to be particularly impressed with Paul’s writings and expresses his desire to make them known to the emperor himself: I have arranged some scrolls [of your letters] and have brought them into a definite order corresponding to their several divisions. Also I have decided to read them to the emperor. If only fate ordains it favourably that he show some interest, then perhaps you too will be present; otherwise I shall fix a day for you at another time when together we may examine this work. And if only it could be done safely, I would not read this writing to him before meeting you. You may then be certain that you are not being overlooked. Farewell, most beloved Paul.

sent the kind of evangelistic address that he imag—

Pauline epistles. Even the use of these letters,

ines would have been appropriate to the occasion.

however, is not without its problems.

What then are we left with? The book of Acts

appears to contain a number of discrepancies with

the writings of Paul himself, with respect both to

The Occasional Nature of Paul’s Letters

the events of his life and to the nature of his teach—

Probably the most important insight into the

ings. If this is so, then it cannot be accepted

Pauline epistles in modern scholarship is that all

uncritically as a historically accurate portrayal of

of them are “occasional.” Paul’s letters are not

Paul, any more than the Gospel of Luke can be

essays written on set themes or systematic treatis—

accepted uncritically as a historically accurate por—

es that discuss important issues of theology. They

trayal of Jesus. To gain a historical understanding

are actual communications to particular individ—

of Paul, however, we are at least able to proceed on

uals and communities, sent through the ancient

the basis of his own writings, for we have seven

equivalent of the mail. With all but one excep—

other New Testament books that stem from his

tion, Paul wrote these letters to address problems

pen. Our study of Paul and his teachings will

that arose in the Christian communities he

therefore rely principally on the undisputed

established. In every case, they are occasioned by

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situations that he felt compelled to address as an

conversion experience itself, and his activities as

apostle of Christ.

an apostle afterwards.

Because of the occasional nature of these letters, they do not contain everything that we may

want to know about Paul and his views. Since he

Paul the Pharisee

is addressing issues that have come up in the com—

We can say very little for certain about Paul prior

munities that he founded, then beliefs, practices,

to his conversion. He does tell us that he was a Jew

and perspectives that are not at issue will not be

born to Jewish parents and that he was zealous for

addressed, even when these were of central impor—

the Law, adhering strictly to the traditions

tance to Paul. As numerous scholars have noted, if

endorsed by the Pharisees (Gal 1:13–14; Phil

Paul had not taken exception to the way the

3:4–6). He does not tell us when he was born,

Corinthians were celebrating the Lord’s Supper,

where he was raised, or how he was educated. The

we would never have known that he even sup—

book of Acts, however, does provide some infor—

ported (or knew of) the practice.

mation along these lines. There Paul is said to have

Another implication of the occasional nature

been from the Greek city of Tarsus (21:39) in

of Paul’s letters is that if we want to approach

Cilicia, in the southeastern part of Asia Minor, and

them from a historical perspective, then we need

to have been educated in Jerusalem under the

to learn about the occasions that lie behind them.

renowned rabbi Gamaliel (22:3). Since Paul him—

Each of these books has a specific historical set—

self makes neither claim, a historian might suspect

ting, a real-life context. If we misconstrue the

Luke of attempting to provide superior credentials

context, or pretend that it never existed, we

for his protagonist. Tarsus was the location of a

change what the books mean. For this reason, we

famous school of Greek rhetoric, that is, a school of

will be applying the contextual method to the

higher learning reserved for the social and intellec—

Pauline epistles, as we did with the Johannine let—

tual elite, something like an Ivy League University.

ters (Chapter 11). For each writing, we will begin

Jerusalem, of course, was the center of all Jewish

by looking for clues as to the historical circum—

life, and Gamaliel was one of its most revered

stances that prompted Paul to produce it, or at

teachers.

least the circumstances as he appears to have per—

Paul’s own letters give little indication of the

ceived them. Of course, in every case we have

extent of his formal education. Simply his ability to

only Paul’s side of the argument, but the contex—

read and write shows that he was better educated

tual method will help us understand what he says

than most people of his day; recent studies indicate

in light of the way he appears to have construed

that some 85–90 percent of the population in the

the context. We should not assume, however, that

empire could do neither. Moreover, Paul writes on a

his perception of the situation was necessarily

fairly sophisticated level, showing that he must have

shared by the people he addressed.

had at least some formal training in rhetoric, the

main focus of higher education at the time. He is

certainly not one of the highest of the literary elite,

THE LIFE OF PAUL

but he just as certainly had some advanced school—

ing. It is not altogether implausible, then, that he

Paul’s letters are chiefly concerned with problems

grew up in a place like Tarsus, if not Tarsus itself. In

that have arisen in his churches, not with events

any event, Paul’s native tongue was almost without

that transpired in his life. On occasion, however,

question Greek, and he gives no indication at all of

Paul has reason to mention his past, for instance,

knowing Aramaic, the language more widely used in

when he is trying to establish his credentials as a

Palestine. This is probably an indication that Luke is

true apostle of Christ. It appears from such self-ref—

right in situating him in the Jewish diaspora.

erences as Galatians 1:11–2:14 and Philippians

Although Paul gives no indication that he

3:4–10 that Paul visualized his past in three stages:

studied in Jerusalem, he clearly did study the

his life as a Pharisee prior to faith in Christ, his

Jewish Scriptures extensively, perhaps in some



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# CHAPTER 18

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“traditions of the fathers” (Gal 1:14). These are

usually understood to be the Pharisaic “oral laws”

that were in circulation in Paul’s youth, nearly two

centuries before these laws, or ones like them,

were written down in the Mishnah. We get a picture, then, of a devout and intelligent Jewish

young man totally committed to understanding

and practicing his religion according to the

strictest standards available.

As a Pharisee, Paul’s religion would have centered around the Law of God, the Torah of Moses,

the greatest gift of God to Israel, the exact and

thorough adherence to which was the ultimate

F P O

goal of devotion. Looking back on his early life,

Paul could later claim that he had been “blameless” with respect to the righteousness that the

Law demands (Phil 3:6). It is hard to know exactly what he meant by that. Did he mean that he

never violated a solitary commandment of God?

This seems unlikely given his insistence elsewhere

that no one has kept the Law in all its particulars

(e.g., Rom 3:10–18), a view that he claimed is

taught by the Law itself (Rom 3:19–20). Did he

mean that he did his best to keep the Law, so he

could not be faulted for effort? This interpretation

seems more likely. But he may also have meant

Figure 18.1 A page of P46, the earliest surviving manuscript of that he was blameless because the Law itself makes

Paul’s letters, from around the year 200 C.E.

provision for those who sin, in the sacrifices that it

requires. These sacrifices were explicitly given for

kind of formal setting (comparable, perhaps, to a

those who inadvertently broke the Law, as a way

later rabbinic school?). He appears to be able to

to restore them to a right standing before God. If

quote the Scriptures extensively from memory and

Paul did his utmost to keep the Law and performed

to have meditated and reflected on their meaning

the required sacrifices for his sins when he failed

at a fairly deep level. He knows these Scriptures in

(perhaps on pilgrimages to Jerusalem), he may well

their Greek translation, the Septuagint. Since his

have considered himself “blameless” with respect

letters are all addressed to Greek-speaking

to the righteousness that the Law demands. In that

Christians, it is difficult to know whether he quot—

case, not even the Law could blame him, since he

ed the text in this way in order to accommodate

had done what it requires.

his readers or whether this was the only form of

Paul’s view of himself before the Law is but one of

the text that he knew. That is to say, it is hard to

the many issues that have perplexed his interpreters

know whether or not he could also read the

through the years. Somewhat less perplexing is the

Scriptures in their original Hebrew.

general view of the world that he must have had as a

What is certain is that prior to becoming a

devoted Pharisee. As we have seen, one of the salient

believer in Jesus Paul was an avid Pharisee (Phil

features of the Pharisees, which distinguished them

3:5). In fact, Paul’s letters are the only writings to

from the Sadducees, for example, was their fervent

survive from the pen of a Pharisee, or former

expectation of a future resurrection of the dead. It

Pharisee, prior to the destruction of the Temple in

appears that Pharisees of the first century, along with

70 C.E. Paul claims that he rigorously followed the

other groups such as the Essenes, were by and large

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Jewish apocalypticists, who anticipated the interven—

tree” (Deut 27:26, quoted in Gal 3:13). Far from

tion of God in the world and the destruction of the

being the Christ of God, the one who enjoyed

forces of evil that oppose him. At the end of the age,

divine favor, Jesus was the cursed of God, the one

which would be imminent, God would send a deliv—

who incurred divine wrath. For Paul the Pharisee,

erer for his people, who would set up God’s kingdom

to call him the messiah was probably blasphemous.

on earth; the dead would be raised, and all would face

This problem would have given Paul sufficient

judgment. Paul almost certainly held these views

grounds for persecuting the Christian church.

prior to his conversion to Christianity.

How exactly he went about doing so cannot be

What else can we say about the life of this

known. According to the book of Acts, he

upright Jewish Pharisee? The one aspect of his for—

received authorization from the high priest in

mer life that Paul himself chose to emphasize in

Jerusalem to capture and imprison Christians. Paul

his autobiographical statements in Galatians 1 and

himself says nothing of the sort, and the fact that

Philippians 3 is that it was precisely as a law-abid—

churches in Judea had never seen him before he

ing, zealous Jew that he persecuted the followers of

visited them as a Christian argues against it (see

Jesus. Far from adhering to the gospel, he violent—

Gal 1:22). At the same time, whatever he did to

ly opposed it, setting himself on destroying the

the Christians as a Jewish persecutor, and on what—

church, and he interpreted this opposition as part

ever authority, he apparently gained some notori—

of his devotion to the one true God.

ety for it. He later acknowledges his reputation

Why was Paul so opposed to Jesus’ followers,

among the Christian churches as a sworn enemy

and how exactly did he go about persecuting them?

(Gal 1:13, 23).

Unfortunately, Paul never tells us, but we can make

All of this changed, of course, when the great—

some intelligent guesses, especially with regard to

est persecutor of the church became its greatest

the reasons for his opposition. We have already

proponent. The turning point in Paul’s life came

seen how the Christian proclamation of Jesus as

with his encounter with the risen Jesus. Both Acts

the messiah would have struck most Jews as ludi—

and Paul intimate that this happened when Paul

crous. Various Jews had different expectations of

was a relatively young man.

what the messiah would be like. He might be a

warrior-king who would establish Israel as a sovereign state, an inspired priest who would rule God’s

Paul’s Conversion and Its Implications

people through his authoritative interpretation of

It is difficult for historians to evaluate what actu—

God’s Law, or a cosmic judge who would come to

ally happened to make Paul “turn around,” the lit—

destroy the forces of evil. Each of these expecta—

eral meaning of “convert.” Both Acts and Paul

tions, however, involved a messiah who would be

attribute his conversion to the direct intervention

glorious and powerful. Jesus, on the other hand,

of God, and this kind of supernatural act, by its

was commonly viewed as nothing more than an

very nature, is outside the purview of the historian

itinerant preacher with a small following who was

(see Chapter 14). The historian can, of course,

opposed by the Jewish leaders and executed by the

talk about a person’s descriptions of divine acts,

Romans for sedition against the state. For most

since narratives of this kind are a matter of the

faithful Jews, to call him God’s messiah was an

public record. So we will restrict ourselves to what

affront to God.

Paul claims to have happened at his conversion

For Paul, there appears to have been an addi—

and consider how he understood its significance.

tional problem, relating to the precise manner of

But even here there are problems. Some of these

Jesus’ execution. Jesus was crucified; that is, he was

are easily disposed of, because they relate less to

killed by being attached to a stake of wood. Paul,

Paul than to widespread misperceptions about him

well versed in the Scriptures, recognized what this

by modern readers, as found, for example, in his—

meant for Jesus’ standing before God, for the

torical novels about his life that can be picked up

Torah states, “Cursed is anyone who hangs on a

in used bookstores. In these accounts, the pre-

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# CHAPTER 18

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Christian Paul is a guilt-ridden legalist who felt

It is with good reason that accounts like this are

bound to follow a set of picayune laws that were

found in the fiction section of a bookstore. Paul

impossible to keep and whose remorse over his

himself does not indicate that he experienced a

own failings drove him both to insist with increas—

profound sense of guilt over his inability to keep

ing vehemence that the Law had to be followed at

God’s commandments before becoming a

all costs and to hate those who experienced a per—

Christian, even though after becoming a Christian

sonal freedom like the one that Christ reputedly

he came to recognize that God’s Law was nearly

brought. In this version of his life, Paul saw the

impossible to keep (see Rom 7:14–24). Prior to his

light when he realized that the solution to his guilt

faith in Christ, however, he considered himself to

was not to intensify his efforts but to find forgive—

be blameless before the Law (Phil 3:4–6). Thus, he

ness of his sins in Christ, who died to set him free

did not convert because he was burdened by a Law

from the Law. Paul, in this view, converted from a

that he knew he could not keep. In some sense,

religion of guilt to a religion of love, and so

this popular view of Paul derives more from a kind

became Jesus’ faithful follower, bringing the good

of implicit anti-Semitism—the Jews are burdened

news of release from sins to those burdened with

with an impossible Law and don’t do a good job in

guilt complexes like his own.

keeping it—than from Paul himself.

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 18.3 Paul on the Road to Damascus

The book of Acts narrates the events of Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus on three separate occasions. The event itself is narrated in 9:1–19; Paul later recounts it to a hostile Jewish crowd after his arrest in 22:6–16 and then again to King Agrippa in 26:12–18.

When you compare these accounts carefully, you will find a number of apparent discrepancies, including the following more obvious ones:

• When Jesus appears to Paul in chapter 9, Paul’s companions “heard the voice but saw no one” (9:7). But when Paul recounts the tale in chapter 22, he claims that they “saw the light but did not hear the voice” (22:9).

• In chapter 9 Paul’s companions are left standing while he is knocked to the ground by the vision (v. 7). But according to chapter 26 they all fall to the ground (26:12).

• In the first account Paul is instructed to go into Damascus to receive instruction from a disciple of Jesus named Ananias. In the last account he is not sent to Ananias but is instructed by Jesus himself (26:16–18).

These may seem like minor details, but why are the accounts at odds with one another at all? Some scholars have proposed that there were different versions of the story and that Luke incorporated three of them. If this is right, then we are left with the problem of knowing which one is the most accurate. Others have suggested that Luke knew only one version of the story but modified it for each of the contexts in which it was retold: the hostile crowd in chapter 22 and the court trial in chapter 26. This view seems reasonable, but it also creates problems for the historian who wants to know what really happened. If we have grounds for thinking that Luke modified two of the accounts for literary reasons, why shouldn’t we think that he (or his sources) modified all three?

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Why, then, did Paul convert, and what did his

Jesus’ resurrection in light of his “old” worldview

conversion mean? The book of Acts provides a

of Jewish apocalypticism. We can approach the

detailed account of the event, or, rather, it provides

question by considering two related matters:

three accounts (chaps. 9, 22, and 26) that mention

aspects of Paul’s worldview that would have been

details not found in Paul (e.g., that he was on the

confirmed by an encounter with a man raised from

“road to Damascus” and that he was “blinded by the

the dead and aspects that would have been refor—

light”). These accounts, however, are difficult to

mulated in light of the experience.

reconcile with one another (see box 18.3). Even

Paul’s own references to the event are somewhat

The Confirmation of Paul’s Views in Light of

problematic because he is remembering the event

Jesus’ Resurrection. Apocalypticists maintained

long afterwards and is reflecting on it in light of his

that at the end of the age God was going to inter—

later experiences.

vene in history to overthrow the forces of evil and

The first thing to observe about Paul’s conver—

establish his good reign on earth, and that at that

sion is that he traces it back to an encounter with

time the dead would be raised to face judgment.

the resurrected Jesus. In 1 Cor 15:8–11 he names

What would an apocalyptic Jew conclude if he or

himself as the last person to have seen Jesus raised

she came to believe that God had now raised

from the dead and marks this as the beginning of

someone? Clearly, for such a person, the end had

his change from persecutor to apostle. He appears

already begun.

to be referring to the same event in Gal 1:16,

Paul drew exactly this conclusion. As we will

where he indicates that at a predetermined point

see in greater detail later, he believed that he was

in time, God “was pleased to reveal his son to me.”

living in the end of time and that he would be alive

When Paul experienced this revelation from God,

when Jesus returned from heaven (see 1 Thess

he became convinced, then and there, according

4:13–18 and 1 Cor 15:51–57). Thus, he speaks of

to his later perspective, that he was to preach the

Jesus as the “first-fruit of the resurrection,” evok—

good news of Christ to the Gentiles.

ing an agricultural image that refers to the celebra—

Whatever Paul experienced at this moment, he

tion that comes at the conclusion of the first day of

interpreted it as an actual appearance of Jesus him—

the harvest. On the following day, the workers go

self. We don’t know how long this was after Jesus’

to the fields and continue their labor. Jesus was the

death (several months? several years?) or how

first-fruit of the resurrection in the sense that all

Paul, when he saw whatever he saw, knew it to be

the others would also soon be gathered in.

Jesus, but there is no doubt that he believed that

Other agricultural metaphors were common in

he saw Jesus’ real but glorified body raised from the

Jewish apocalyptic circles. The end of the age

dead. Indeed, as we will see later, one of the rea—

would be like a great harvest, in which the fruit

sons that he believed Christians would eventually

was gathered and the chaff was destroyed. As an

experience a bodily resurrection from the dead is

apocalyptic Jew, Paul probably already believed

because he “knew” that Jesus did. For him, Jesus

that at the end of the age God would intervene

was the “first-fruit” of those who would be raised

to reward the faithful and punish the sinner and

(1 Cor 15:20).

overthrow the forces of evil that plague this

Did this experience, then, lead Paul to reject

world, the demonic rulers and the wicked powers

his Judaism in favor of a religion for the Gentiles?

of sin and death. Jesus’ resurrection must have

Was this a conversion to a completely different

confirmed these views, for one of the reasons that

and contrary set of beliefs? What exactly did his

there will be a resurrection at the end of time is

vision of the resurrected Jesus mean for Paul? As

that death is God’s enemy, and when it is

we have seen, Paul was probably an apocalyptic

destroyed there will be no more dying and no

Jew prior to coming to believe in Jesus. If it is true

more death. Those who have died will therefore

that we can understand something new only in

return to life.

light of what we already know, we can ask how

For Paul, Jesus has already returned to life,

Paul would have understood this “new” event of

which means that God has begun to defeat the

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# CHAPTER 18

## PAUL THE APOSTLE

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power of death in him. This much Paul “knows,”

By raising Jesus, God showed that his death

for if Jesus died but is dead no longer, as Paul

was meaningful rather than meaningless. It

believes because he has seen him alive after his

was meaningful because it served as a sacrifice

death, then he has conquered this most dread of

for the sins of others (see box 17.2). More than

God’s enemies. The cosmic destruction of the

that, it was a death that actually conquered the

forces of evil has therefore begun.

cosmic power of sin. Paul “knew” that Jesus

conquered sin because he had obviously con-

The Reformulation of Paul’s Views in Light of

quered death. Otherwise he would have

Jesus’ Resurrection.

Whereas some of Paul’s

remained dead. In Jesus himself, then, God

views were confirmed by his belief in Jesus’ resur—

had worked to conquer the evil forces that

rection, others had to be reconsidered.

until now had been in control of this world.

1. Paul’s View of Jesus. First and foremost, of

This new belief in Jesus raised an obvious

course, Paul’s understanding of Jesus himself

problem for Paul, the upright Jewish Pharisee

changed. Rather than being the cursed of God

whose upbringing and commitments were cen-

(Paul’s original view), Jesus must be the one

tered on the Jewish Law. If salvation from sins

specially blessed by God, for he was the one

and the defeat of the powers of sin and death

God raised from the dead to conquer the cos—

came through Jesus, what was the role of the

mic forces of sin and death. Jesus, the con—

Law of God, God’s greatest gift to his people?

queror, was thus indeed the messiah, the one

appointed by God as Lord (see Chapter 17).

2. Paul’s View of the Law. Paul’s understanding of

He was presently in heaven, awaiting the

the Law in light of his faith in Christ is

moment of his return in glory when he would

extremely complicated. Some scholars have

finish the deed that he had begun.

wondered, given the variety of things Paul says

Once Paul came to believe that Jesus was

about the Law, whether he ever managed to

raised from the dead, the crucifixion itself must

construct an entirely consistent view. At the

have begun to make more sense. Paul appears

very least, it seems clear that Paul came to

to have turned to the Jewish Scriptures to

believe that a person could not be put into a

understand how Jesus’ death was according to

right standing before God by keeping the Law;

the plan of God, evidently knowing that it had

only faith in Christ could do this. Moreover,

to be, since the resurrection showed that he

he maintained that this view was not contrary

was under God’s particular blessing. From the

to the Law but, perhaps ironically, was precise—

Scriptures, of course, Paul knew of the suffer—

ly what the Law itself taught (Rom 3:31). As

ing of the Righteous One of God, whom God

we will see, he devotes most of the letter to the

ultimately vindicated. Since Jesus was the one

Romans to making these points.

whom God vindicated, for Paul he must have

It appears that after his conversion Paul began

been that righteous one who suffered, not as a

to think that the Jewish Law, even though in

punishment for his own actions, but for the

itself an obviously good thing (see Rom 7:12),

sake of others. That is to say, even though Jesus

had led to some bad consequences. The problem

was cursed, given his death on the cross, the

for Paul, however, was not the Law per se, but

curse could not have been deserved since he

the people to whom it was given.

was God’s righteous one. He must, then, have

Those who had received the good Law of

borne the curse that was meant for others. As

God, according to Paul, had come to misuse it.

the righteous servant of God, Jesus took the

Rather than seeing the Law as a guide for their

punishment that others deserved and bore it

actions as the covenant people of God, they

on the cross. God vindicated this faithful act

began keeping the Law as a way to establish a

by raising him from the dead.

right standing before God, as if by keeping its

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various injunctions they could earn God’s

for Paul, in that he alone has broken the power

favor (e.g., Rom 4:4–5; 10:2–4). It is not clear

of death, as proved by his resurrection. Christ

whether Paul thought that Jews intentionally

has also, therefore, conquered the power of sin.

used the Law in this way. Moreover, Paul does

The Law, then, cannot bring about a right

not appear to have held this view of the Law

standing before God for those who observe it.

prior to his conversion but only afterwards.

Since everyone is enslaved to sin, they are all

Indeed, this view is found in virtually no other

alienated from God. Only the one who has

Jewish writing from the ancient world.

defeated sin can bring deliverance from sin.

In any event, after his conversion Paul came

to think that his fellow Jews had attempted to

3. Paul’s View of Jews and Gentiles. As an apoca—

use the Law to bring about a right standing

lyptic Jew prior to his conversion, Paul probably

before God. For him this was a misuse of the

believed that at the end of time God would

Law. Instead of making people right before

intervene not only on behalf of his people Israel

God, the Law shows that everyone is alienated

but on behalf of the entire world, since every—

from God: “For no human being will be justi—

one was enslaved to the cosmic forces that

fied in God’s sight by deeds prescribed by the

opposed God. In other words, Paul would have

law, for through the law comes the knowledge

been particularly attuned to the Jewish

of sin” (Rom 3:20).

Scriptures that spoke of all the nations coming

What Paul means by this statement is debat—

to worship the true God, after turning from

ed among scholars. On the one hand, he is

their vain devotion to pagan idols and acknowl—

almost certainly thinking about the repeated

edging that the God of Israel was the one true

insistence in the Jewish Scriptures themselves

God (e.g., in Isa 40–66). Once he had decided

that God’s people have fallen short of his

that the death of Jesus, rather than the Law, was

righteous demands (Rom 3:10–20). In addi—

the way to a right relationship with God, he

tion, he may have been reflecting on the sacri—

came to believe that the other nations would

ficial system that is provided by the Torah as a

become God’s people not through converting to

way of dealing with human sins (although Paul

the Law but through converting to Christ.

never mentions it directly), for why would

In reading the Scriptures, Paul recognized

God require sacrifices for sin if people didn’t

that God had made more than one covenant

need them? Whatever Paul’s precise logic was,

with the Jewish patriarchs. The first covenant

it appears certain that as a Christian, he came

was not with Moses (see Exod 19–20) but with

to believe that the Law points to the problem

the father of the Jews, Abraham (see Gen 17).

of human sinfulness against God on the one

God promised Abraham that he would be a

hand but does not provide the power necessary

blessing for all nations, not just Israel (Gen

to overcome that sinfulness on the other.

12:3). Abraham believed God’s promise and

(Why the divinely ordained sacrifices are not

was rewarded with a right standing before

sufficient to overcome sin is an issue that he

God, or, as Paul calls it, “righteousness.” In

never addresses.) The problem for Paul the

Paul’s view, this promise was fulfilled in Jesus,

Christian apocalypticist is that humans are

not only for the Jew who later inherited the

enslaved by powers opposed to God, specifical—

covenant given to Moses but also for the

ly the cosmic powers of sin and death, and the

Gentile who trusted that God had fulfilled his

Law can do nothing to bring about their

promise in the person of Jesus. In other words,

release. Since the problem is enslavement to

the original covenant was for all people, not

an alien force, people cannot be liberated sim—

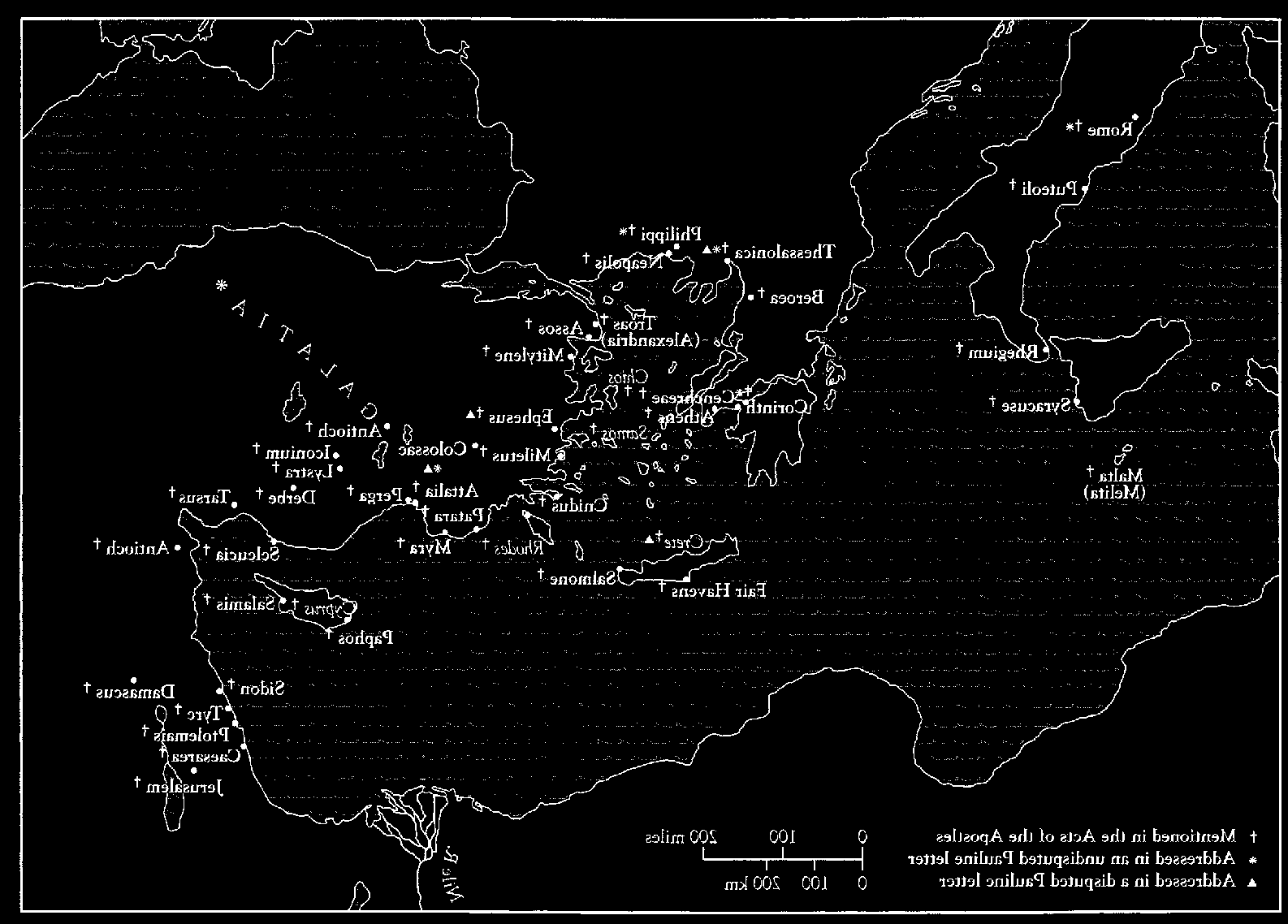
just the Jews, and it was bestowed before and

ply by renewing their efforts to keep the Law of

apart from the Law of Moses, which was given

God. It is Christ alone who brings liberation,

specifically to the Jews. Gentiles, therefore,



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# CHAPTER 18

## PAUL THE APOSTLE

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estament.

Places associated with Paul in the New T

Figure 18.2

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did not have to follow this Law in order to be

chapter). After staying with the new church for

heirs of the original covenant.

some time and providing it with some rudimentary

In short, Paul came to believe, on the basis of

instruction, he would move on to another city and

his experience of the resurrected Jesus, that all

start from scratch. In his wake, evidently, other

people, both Jews and Gentiles, could have a

Christian missionaries would commonly arrive.

right standing with God through Christ. Faith

These sometimes presented a different version of

in Jesus’ death and resurrection was the only

the gospel from the one Paul preached. Some of

way to achieve this standing. The Law was not

Paul’s letters warn against such people. Moreover,

an alternative way, because the Law brings the

problems frequently arose within the congregations

knowledge of sin but not the power to conquer

themselves, problems of immorality, infighting,

confusion over Paul’s teachings, or opposition from

it. Christ conquered sin, however, and whoever

outsiders who took exception to this new faith.

believes in him and accepts his work on the

When Paul learned of such problems, he fired off a

cross will participate in his victory.

letter to warn, admonish, encourage, instruct, or

congratulate the church. As we will see, in some

Our brief exploration of Paul’s theology here has

instances he was himself the problem.

given some indication of how his conversion affect—

The letters that we have from Paul’s hand rep—

ed his understanding of Christ, the Law, salvation,

resent only some of this correspondence. We can

faith, and the relationship between Jews and

probably assume that there were dozens of other

Gentiles. This background will help you in your own

letters that for one reason or another have been

reading of Paul’s letters. As you will see, the letters,

lost. Paul mentions one of them in 1 Corinthians

themselves, for the most part presuppose these points

5:9. The authentic letters that have survived are all

of view rather than describe them. Except for a few

included within the New Testament. In the chap—

places that can be tough going, these Pauline epis—

ters that follow we will examine these letters,

tles are not heavy-duty theological treatises.

beginning with a relatively detailed assessment of

the earliest one, 1 Thessalonians. In this first

Paul the Apostle

instance, we will be looking for information con—

After his conversion, Paul spent several years in

cerning Paul’s modus operandi as an apostle, to

Arabia and Damascus (Gal 1:17). He doesn’t tell

learn (a) how Paul went about establishing a

us what he did there. After a brief trip to

church and communicating with it after he had

Jerusalem, he then went into Syria and Cilicia and

left, (b) the nature of his message when he worked

eventually became involved with the church of

to convert people to faith in Christ and when he

Antioch. It is not altogether clear when he began

wrote to resolve problems that had arisen in his

his missionary activities further west, in Asia

absence, and (c) the actual constituency of his

Minor, Macedonia, and Achaia, but in one of his

churches and the character of their interactions

final surviving letters he claims that he was active—

with one another and with the world around them.

ly involved in spreading the gospel all the way

Having thus set the stage, we will move on in the

from Jerusalem to Illyricum, north of modern-day

following chapter to examine five of the other let—

Greece (Rom 15:19).

ters, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians,

Throughout his career as a preacher of the

and Philemon. There we will apply the contextual

gospel, Paul saw himself as the “apostle to the

method to reconstruct each situation that Paul

Gentiles.” By this he meant that he had been

addresses and assess his response to the problems

appointed by God to bring the good news of salva—

that he perceives. Finally, an entire chapter will be

tion through faith in Christ to those who were not

devoted to the letter to the Romans, the most

Jews. Paul’s normal practice appears to have been

influential of Paul’s writings. There we will explore

to establish a Christian community in cities that

further some of the important ideas of this apostle,

had previously been untouched by a Christian

a figure of paramount importance in the history of

presence (we will explore his methods in the next

Christianity down to our own day.

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SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

In addition to the books mentioned here, see the sugges—

eral major issues take a different perspective from the

tions for reading in Chapters 19–22.

one presented here (such as the authorship of the

Deutero-Pauline and Pastoral epistles).

Aune, David. The New Testament in its Literary

Environment. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987.

Keck, Leander. Paul and His Letters. Philadelphia: Fortress, Includes a superb discussion of the practices of letter-1979. An insightful overview of Paul’s theology as

writing in Greco-Roman antiquity as the social con—

expressed in his letters.

text for Paul’s epistles.

Meeks, Wayne. The First Urban Christians. The Social World Beker, J. Christiaan. Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in of the Apostle Paul. New Haven, Conn.: Yale Life and Thought. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980. A

University Press, 1983. An impressive and highly

sophisticated and astute discussion of the apocalyptic

influential study that explores the Pauline epistles

character of Paul’s theology and its various forms of

from a socio-historical rather than theological perspec—

expression in different situations that the apostle contive; for more advanced students.

fronted; for advanced students.

Meeks, Wayne, ed. The Writings of St. Paul. New York: Bruce , F. F. Apostle of the Heart Set Free. Grand Rapids, Norton, 1972. A very useful annotated edition of

Mich.: Eerdmans, 1977. A full study of Paul’s life and

Paul’s letters that includes a number of classic essays

teachings by a major evangelical Christian scholar.

on various aspects of Paul’s thought and significance.

Dunn, James D. The Theology of Paul the Apostle. Grand Roetzel, Calvin. The Letters of Paul: Conversations in

Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998. A clear and full

Context. 3d ed. Atlanta: John Knox, 1991. Perhaps the overview of the major theological views of Paul, by a

best introductory discussion of each of the Pauline

leading British New Testament scholar.

epistles.

Fitzmyer, Joseph. Pauline Theology: A Brief Sketch. 2d ed.

Sanders, E. P. Paul and Palestinian Judaism. Philadelphia: Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1989. An excel-Fortress, 1977. An enormously influential and erudite

lent overview of Paul’s teachings by a prominent

study that situates Paul in the context of early Judaism;

Roman Catholic scholar, for beginning students.

for advanced students.

Hawthorne, Gerald, and Ralph Martin. Dictionary of Paul

Segal, Alan. Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy and His Letters. Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity, 1993.

of Saul the Pharisee. New Haven, Conn.: Yale

A Bible dictionary that contains over 200 articles on

University Press, 1990. A very interesting study by a

various topics relating to the life and writings of Paul,

Jewish scholar who examines the importance of Paul’s

written by prominent evangelical scholars who on sev—

conversion for his theology and practice.

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# CHAPTER 19

Paul and His Apostolic Mission:

1 Thessalonians as a Test Case

First Thessalonians is a particularly good place to

fared in their world, 1 Thessalonians provides

begin a study of Paul’s letters. Scholars are almost

ample food for thought.

unanimous in thinking that it was the first of his

We will examine this particular letter, there—

surviving works to be written, which also means

fore, not only to learn about its immediate occa—

that it is the oldest book of the New Testament

sion (i.e., the reasons that Paul wrote it) and to

and consequently the earliest surviving Christian

uncover its principal themes but also to find clues

writing of any kind. It is usually dated to about the

about various social and historical aspects of Paul’s

year 49 C.E., that is, some twenty years after Jesus’

apostolic mission to the Gentiles. This kind of

death. It is written to a congregation for which

socio-historical investigation will then set the

Paul has real affection and in which no major

stage for our study of the other Pauline letters.

problems have arisen, at least in comparison with

what we will find in the letters to the Corinthians

and the Galatians. As a consequence, Paul spends

THE FOUNDING OF THE

most of the letter renewing his bonds of friendship

CHURCH IN THESSALONICA

with the congregation, largely by recounting

aspects of their past relationship. Since he has just

Thessalonica was a major port city, the capital of

recently left the community, memories of this rela—

the Roman province of Macedonia, where the

tionship are still fresh.

Roman governor kept his residence, and one of the

Given the nature of the letter, we can learn a

principal targets chosen by Paul for his mission in

good deal about how Paul established this church

the region. This choice appears to be consistent

and about what the people who composed it were

with Paul’s missionary strategy otherwise. So far as

like. We can also learn about the difficulties they

we can tell, he generally chose to stay in relatively

experienced in light of their conversion, the prob—

large urban areas where he would have the greatest

lems that emerged in their community soon there—

opportunity to meet and address potential converts.

after, and the approach that Paul took to dealing

How, then did Paul go about converting people

with these problems. To be sure, we are not proto faith in Christ? That is, how did a Christian mis—

vided with as much information as we would like

sionary like Paul, after arriving in a new city where

about such things; Paul after all was not writing to

he had no contacts, actually go about meeting

us, but to people who were already intimately

people and talking to them about religion in an

familiar with him. Nonetheless, for historians

effort to convert them? First Thessalonians provides

interested in knowing how the Christian mission

some interesting insights concerning Paul’s mission—

was conducted and how the Christian converts

ary tactics, that is, his apostolic modus operandi.

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# CHAPTER 19

## PAUL AND HIS APOSTOLIC MISSION

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Paul’s Modus Operandi

If Paul did not preach from the street corner or

One might imagine that when Paul arrived in town

work through the synagogue, how did he go about

as a complete stranger, he would simply stand on a

making contacts and, eventually, converts? In the

crowded street corner and preach to those passing

course of his letter, Paul reflects on the time he

by, hoping to win converts by his sincerity and

had spent among the Thessalonians, recalling

charisma and by the appeal of his message. As we

with great pride how he and his Christian com—

will see, there was a precedent for this kind of pros—

panions had worked “night and day so that we

elytizing activity among some of the philosophers

might not burden any of you while we proclaimed

in the Greco-Roman world, but Paul gives no indi—

to you the gospel of God” (2:9). Recent scholars

cation that this is how he proceeded.

have realized that Paul literally means that he had

Nor does the book of Acts. In Acts, Paul invari—

been working full time and had used his place of

ably makes new contacts by going to the local syn—

business as a point of contact with people to pro—

agogue, where as a traveling Jew he would be quite

claim the gospel. Paul preached while on the job.

welcome, and using the worship service there as an

Paul’s emphasis on the burdens of his toil (2:9)

occasion to speak of his belief in Jesus as the messi—

makes it reasonably clear that his job involved

ah come in fulfillment of the Scriptures. This tactic

some kind of manual labor. The book of Acts indi—

seems reasonable, and Acts is quite explicit in say—

cates that he worked with leather goods (18:3).

ing that this is how Paul did evangelize the people

Sometimes this is interpreted to mean that he was

of Thessalonica, winning converts among the Jews

a tentmaker, although the term used can refer to a

and the “devout Gentiles” who joined them in their

number of occupations involving animal skins.

worship of the God of Israel (Acts 17:2–4). Luke

Paul himself doesn’t indicate the precise nature of

sometimes calls this latter group “[God]-fearers,” by

his employment (presumably the Thessalonians

which he seems to mean non-Jews who have aban—

would already know). What he does indicate is

doned their idolatry to worship the Jewish God,

that he was not alone in his labors but was

without, however, keeping every aspect of the

accompanied in Thessalonica by two others,

Torah, including circumcision if they were men.

Timothy and Silvanus. The three arrived in town

According to Acts, Paul converted a number of

in active pursuit of converts; they all, evidently,

such people in Thessalonica over a period of three

engaged in the same form of manual labor and all

weeks, after which a group of antagonistic Jews rose

preached their faith to those with whom they

up to run him out of town (17:2–10).

came in contact.

This portrayal in Acts, however, stands in sharp

Before we try to imagine how this mission

contrast with Paul’s own reminiscences of his

took place, we should review the historical con—

Thessalonian mission. Curiously, Paul says noth—

text. In our earlier discussion of Greco-Roman

ing about the Jewish synagogue in his letter;

religions, we saw that none of the religions of the

indeed, he never mentions the presence of any

empire was exclusive; that is, none of them

Jews, either among his Christian converts or

claimed that if you worshipped any one of the

among their opponents in town. On the contrary,

gods, it was inappropriate to worship others as

he indicates that the Christians that he brought to

well. Perhaps because of their inclusive character,

the faith were former pagans, whom he himself

none of these religions was missionary, none of

converted from worshipping “dead idols to serve

them urged their devotees to pursue converts to

the living and true God” (i.e., the Jewish God,

participate in their cult and their cult alone.

whom Paul himself continues to worship through

Thus, when Paul and his coworkers were trying

Jesus; 1:9). These converts, in other words, were

to make converts, they were not modeling them—

neither Jews nor God-fearers. How then do we

selves on what representatives of other sacred

explain the account in Acts 17? It may be that

cults in their day were doing.

Luke knew in general that Paul had preached in

On the other hand, some of the Greco-Roman

Thessalonica but did not know how he had pro—

philosophical schools were missionary, in that they

ceeded or whom he had converted.

had leading spokespersons actively engaged in



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F P O

Figure 19.1 A reconstructed model of a Roman insula, with shops on the lower level and living quarters above, similar to one that Paul may have worked and lived in while engaged in his missionary endeavors in such places as Thessalonica and Corinth.

winning converts to their way of looking at the

instead, to redirect your affections so your happi—

world. In particular, Stoic and Cynic philosophers

ness is based on things that cannot be taken away,

were involved in these kinds of activities. They

such as your freedom to think whatever you like,

tried to convince people to change their notions

your honor, and your sense of duty. Since these are

about life and their ways of living to conform to

things that can never be lost, they should lie at the

the philosophical views that alone could bring

root of your personal well-being and so be the

personal well-being. More specifically, Stoic and

objects of your greatest concern.

Cynic philosophers urged people to give up their

Proselytizers for such philosophies could be

attachments to the things of this world and to

found in a variety of urban settings throughout the

make their overarching concerns those aspects of

empire. Cynics, those who took the Stoic doctrine

their lives that they themselves were able to con—

to an extreme by abandoning all social conven—

trol. The Stoic theory was that people who were

tions, including decent clothing, lodging, bathing,

ultimately committed to matters outside of their

and privacy for bodily functions (see box 16.3),

control, such as wealth, health, careers, or lovers,

sometimes frequented crowded public places,

were constantly in danger of forfeiting their well—

where they urged their views on passersby,

being through the vicissitudes of bad fortune.

maligned those who turned away, and badgered

What happens if you base your happiness on mate—

people for money (since they rejected social con—

rial goods or personal relationships, but then they

vention, they could scarcely be expected to work

are lost or destroyed? The solution to this problem

for a living). More socially respectable philoso—

is not to take measures to protect what you have,

phers were often connected with wealthy house—

since this may not be within your power; it is,

holds, somewhat like scholars-in-residence, and



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# CHAPTER 19

## PAUL AND HIS APOSTOLIC MISSION

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had wealthy patrons who provided for their physi—

ing them to change their lives and adhere to the

cal needs in exchange for services rendered

Christian message (2:12). Like some of the Stoics,

towards the family’s intellectual and spiritual

they refused to be a burden on any of their converts,

needs. A few Greco-Roman philosophers believed

choosing to work with their own hands rather than

in working for a living to keep from depending on

rely on the resources of others (2:9–10).

the support of others for their needs and becoming

subservient to the so-called “nicer things in life.”

So far as we can tell, this final kind of philoso-

Paul’s Message

pher was somewhat rare in the empire, but Paul and

Paul obviously could not launch into a heavy

his companions may have been identified as such

exposition of his theology with people who were

by outsiders in Thessalonica. They were missionar—

just stopping by. This was not simply because of

ies with a particular worldview who were trying to

the setting but even more because of the nature of

convert others to their ideas; they worked hard to

his typical encounter. Even though Paul was

support themselves and refused to take funds from

engaged in manual labor, he was not an ordinary

others (e.g., 1 Thess 2:9).

“blue-collar” worker. He was highly educated, far

Perhaps their mission proceeded something

more so than most of the people that he would

like this. Paul and his two companions arrived in

meet during a workday, and his theological reflec—

the city and as a first step rented out a room in a

tions would be enough to befuddle the average

downtown insula. Insula were the ancient equivalents of modern apartment buildings, packed

close together in urban areas. They had a ground

floor containing rooms that faced the street for

small businesses (grocers, potters, tailors, cob—

blers, metal workers, engravers, scribes, and so

forth), while the upper two or three stories served

as living quarters for the people who worked

below and for anyone else who could afford the

rent. Shops were places not only of commerce but

of social interaction, as customers, friends, and

neighbors would stop by to talk. Given the long

workdays and the absence of weekends (Jews, of

course, took the Sabbath off; and everyone else

closed up for special religious celebrations), the

workplace was much more an arena of social

intercourse than most modern business establish-

F P O

ments are today. Contacts could be made, plans

could be laid, ideas could be discussed—all over

the potter’s wheel or the tailor’s table or the cob—

bler’s bench.

Did Paul and his companions set up a small business, a kind of Christian leather goods shop, in the

cities they visited? If so, this would explain a good

deal of what Paul recounts concerning his interaction with the Thessalonian Christians in the early

days. He and his companions toiled night and day

while preaching the gospel to them (2:9). Like

philosophers in that world, they exhorted, encour-

Figure 19.2 The remains of an insula in the city of Ostia, near aged, and pleaded with those who dropped by, urg-Rome.



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F P O

Figure 19.3 A shoemaker and cordmaker at work, from an ancient sarcophagus. These were manual laborers like Paul, who according to Acts 18:3 was a leather-worker.

person on the street. Moreover, most people stop—

and promised to bless all the nations of earth

ping by the shop were almost certainly pagans,

through them. Thus, Paul’s proclamation began

worshippers of Greco-Roman deities, who

with an argument against the existence and reality

believed that there were lots of gods, all of whom

of the deities worshipped in the local cults.

deserved devotion and cult.

We have no way of knowing how Paul actually

How would Paul begin to talk about his gospel

persuaded people that there was only one true

with people like this? We are again fortunate to

God. Quite possibly he recounted tales of how this

have some indications in Paul’s letter. The critical

one God had proven himself in the past, for exam—

passage is 1:9–10, where Paul reminds his recent

ple, in the stories found in the Jewish Scriptures or

converts what he originally taught them:

in tales of Jesus’ apostles, who were said to have

done miracles. It is likely that these converts had

[To turn] to God from idols, to serve a living and true

at least heard of the Jewish God before, so Paul’s

God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he

initial task appears to have been to convince them

raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from

that wrath that is coming.

that this was the only God worthy of their devotion, and that their own gods had no power but

This appears to have been the core of Paul’s procla—

were dead and lifeless. It may be that some of these

mation to his potential converts. His first step was

people were already inclined to accept the belief

to have them realize that the many gods they wor—

in one God in view of the increasingly widespread

shipped were “dead” and “false” and that there was

notion even in non-Jewish circles that ultimately

only one “living” and “true” God. In other words,

there was one deity in control of human affairs

before Paul could begin to talk about Jesus, he first

(see Chapter 2). If so, then Paul’s success lay in his

had to win converts to the God of Israel, the one

ability to convince them, somehow, that this one

creator of heaven and earth, who chose his people

God was the God that he proclaimed to them.



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# CHAPTER 19

## PAUL AND HIS APOSTOLIC MISSION

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Once Paul’s listeners accepted the notion of the

This appears to have been the burden of Paul’s

one true God, Paul pressed upon them his belief

preaching. From beginning to end it was rooted in

that Jesus was this one God’s Son. Again, it is hard

a worldview that Paul appears to have embraced as

to know how he elaborated this view. There are

a Jewish apocalypticist even prior to his conversion.

reasons to doubt that he proceeded by describing

Thus, to some extent his preaching to the

Jesus’ earthly life, narrating tales of what he said

Thessalonians involved convincing them to accept

and did prior to his crucifixion, for even though he

such basic apocalyptic notions as the end of the age,

constantly reminds his Thessalonian audience of

the coming of God’s judgment, the need for

what he taught them, he says nary a word about

redemption, and the salvation of the godly. It is

Jesus’ sayings or deeds (recall that none of our

striking, in this connection, how much apocalyptic

Gospels was yet in existence; see further Chapter

imagery Paul uses throughout the letter. Consider,

22). What, then, did he teach them?

for example, 5:1–11, where Paul indicates that the

Later in the letter we learn that a central com—

end will come suddenly, like a woman’s labor pains,

ponent of the converts’ faith was the belief that

that it will come like a thief in the night, that the

Jesus died “for them” (5:10) and that he was

children of light will escape but not the children of

raised from the dead (4:14). From this we can surmise that Paul taught his potential converts that

Jesus was a person who was specially connected

with the one true God (the “Son of God,” as he

calls him in 1:9), whose death and resurrection

were necessary to put them into a right relation

with God. What appears to have been the most

important belief about Jesus to the Thessalonians,

however, was that he was soon to return from

heaven in judgment on the earth. The first reference to this belief is here in 1:10, where Paul

reminds his readers that he taught them to “wait

for his Son from heaven—Jesus, who rescues us

F P O

from the wrath that is coming.” Further references to the notion of Jesus’ return are found in

every chapter of the letter (e.g., see 2:19; 3:13;

4:13–18; 5:1–11).

The Thessalonian congregation was also acquainted with the reason that Jesus was soon to

return. On this point Paul is unequivocal: Jesus

was going to come for his followers to save them

from God’s wrath. Paul, in other words, had taught

his Thessalonian converts a strongly apocalyptic

message. This world was soon to end, when the

God who created it returned to judge it; those who

sided with this God would be delivered , and those

who did not would experience his wrath.

Moreover, the way to side with this God, the creator and judge of all, was by believing in his Son,

Figure 19.4 Statue of Artemis (the goddess Diana) from Jesus, who had died and been raised for the sins of

Ephesus. The almost grotesque portrayal of her many breasts

the world and who would return soon for those

emphasizes her role as a fertility goddess, one who gives life in who believe in him, to rescue them from the

abundance. For Paul, though, she (along with all other pagan

impending wrath.

deities) was nothing but a “dead idol” (see 1 Thess 1:8–10).

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darkness, and that the faithful need to be awake and

It seems plausible that the people Paul convert—

sober. All of these images can be found in other

ed began meeting together periodically, perhaps

Jewish apocalyptic texts as well. Moreover, many of

weekly, for fellowship and worship. This appears to

Paul’s allusive comments throughout the letter

have been the pattern of Paul’s churches, as you will

make sense only within a Jewish apocalyptic frame—

see from his other letters (e.g., 1 Cor. 11:17–26;

work; among these are his reference to Satan, the

16:1), and it would make sense of his decision to

great enemy of God and his people (2:18) and his

send a letter to “the church” rather than to individ—

assurance that suffering is necessary for God’s peo—

ual converts. Most historians think that churches

ple here at the end of time (3:3–4). Thus, in its sim—

like this would have met in private homes, and so

plest terms, Paul’s proclamation was designed to

call them “house churches” (e.g., see Philem 2). We

transform the Thessalonian pagans into Jewish

have no hard evidence of actual church buildings

apocalypticists, who believed that Jesus was the key

being constructed by Christians for another two

to the end of the world.

centuries (see box 11.3).

It appears that people in this kind of group

experienced unusual cohesion as a social unit.

There were, of course, other kinds of social groups

THE BEGINNINGS OF THE

in the Greco-Roman world that met periodically

THESSALONIAN CHURCH:

for worship and socializing. We are especially well

A SOCIO-HISTORICAL

informed about ancient trade organizations and

PERSPECTIVE

funeral societies. The church in Thessalonica may

have been roughly organized like one of these

To some extent, Paul succeeded in his mission. We

groups (see box 19.1). On the other hand, given

have no idea how many people he and his comits central commitment to a religious purpose, it

panions converted, but there were clearly some.

may have had some close organizational affinities

Here we will explore the nature of this group of

with the Jewish synagogue as well, although the

converts from the perspective of a social historian,

synagogue may have been much larger than the

asking not so much what they came to believe but

Christian group. It appears that some of the local

rather who they were and how they functioned as

converts became leaders in the Christian congre—

a social group.

gation and that they organized their meetings,

It is nearly impossible to gauge what kind of

distributed the funds they collected, and guided

people Paul’s Gentile converts in Thessalonica

the thinking of the group about religious matters

were. If they were in regular contact with manual

(5:12–13).

laborers like Paul and his companions in their

From a socio-historical point of view, certain

insula, and if it would have been an excessive bur—

features of these converts’ new religion provided

den for them to provide financial support for the

strong bonds with the group. For one thing, they

missionaries, then we might suppose that for the

appear to have understood themselves as a closed

most part the converts were not among the

group. Not just anyone could come off the street to

wealthy and the social elite in town, although cer—

join; membership was restricted to those who

tainly some may have been drawn from among the

accepted Paul’s message of the apocalyptic judg—

upper classes. If this sketch is correct, then the

ment that was soon to come and the salvation that

Thessalonian Christians, as a social group, may

could be obtained only through faith in Jesus, who

have been roughly comparable to the people Paul

died and was raised from the dead. The

was later to convert in the city of Corinth farther

Thessalonian church had a unified commitment

to the south, the majority of whom were not well

to this teaching, and it made them distinct from

educated, influential, or from among the upper

everyone else that they came in contact with.

social classes, according to 1 Corinthians 1:26

This distinctiveness was evidently known to

(presumably some were, or Paul would have not

outsiders as well. Throughout 1 Thessalonians

have said that “not many of you are”).

Paul refers to the persecution that the community

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# CHAPTER 19

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SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 19.1 Rules for a Private Association

Christian house churches may have appeared to outsiders to be like other kinds of voluntary associations found in the Greco-Roman world. Associations were privately organized small groups that met periodically to socialize and share a good meal together; they would often perform cultic acts of worship together; many of them were concerned with providing appropriate burial for their members (a kind of life-insurance arrangement that covered expenses hard to manage on an individual basis). The social activities of such groups were sometimes underwrit-ten by one or more of their wealthier members who served as patrons for the body.

Voluntary associations had rules for membership, some of which we know from surviving inscriptions. To see the close connections of such societies with the early Christian communities, consider the following set of by-laws of a burial society in Lanuvium, Italy, a group that met at the temple of the divine man Antinoüs. These bylaws come to us from an inscription dated to 136 C.E. [A sesterce was a coin worth about one-quarter of an average worker’s daily wage.]

It was voted unanimously that whoever desires to enter this society shall pay an initiation fee of 100 sesterces and an amphora of good wine, and shall pay monthly dues of [2 sesterces]. . . . It was voted further that upon the decease of a paid-up member of our body there will be due him from the treasury 300 sesterces, from which sum will be deducted a funeral fee of 50 sesterces to be distributed at the pyre [among those attending]; the obsequies, furthermore, will be performed on foot. . . .

Masters of the dinners in the order of the membership list, appointed four at a time in turn, shall be required to provide an amphora of good wine each, and for as many members as the society has, a [loaf of] bread costing [1 sesterce], sardines to the number of four, a setting, and warm water with service.

It was voted further that any member who has [served as chief officer] honestly shall [thereafter] receive a share and a half of everything as a mark of honor, so that other [chief officers] will also hope for the same by properly discharging their duties.

It was voted further that if any member desires to make any complaint or bring up any business, he is to bring it up at a business meeting, so that we may banquet in peace and good cheer on festive days.

It was voted further that any member . . . who speaks abusively of another or causes an uproar shall be fined 12 sesterces. Any member who uses any abusive or insolent language to a [chief officer] at a banquet shall be fined 20 sesterces.

It was voted further that on the festive days of his term of office, each [chief officer] is to conduct worship with incense and wine and is to perform his other functions clothed in white, and that on the birthdays of [the goddess] Diana and [the divine] Antinoüs he is to provide oil for the society in the public bath before they banquet. (Taken from Naphtali Lewis and Meyer Rheinhold, Roman Civilization, 3rd ed. [New York: Columbia University Press, 1990] 2.186-88.) 1958.e19\_p276-289 4/24/00 9:44 AM Page 284

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experienced from those who did not belong. As an

The group of believers in Thessalonica thus

apostle who proclaimed the gospel in the face of

understood itself to be part of a much broader

malicious opposition, Paul himself had suffered in

social and historical network of the faithful, a net—

some undisclosed way in the city of Philippi before

work stretching across broad tracks of land and

arriving in Thessalonica (2:1–2). His statement is

reaching back into the misty ages of history. They

consistent with Luke’s account of the founding of

were brothers and sisters (1:4) bonded together for

the Philippian church in Acts 16:19–40, although

a common purpose, standing against a common

Paul does not corroborate any of Luke’s details. In

enemy, partaking of a common destiny—and con—

any event, he instructs his Thessalonian converts

nected with other communities of like purpose

that they too should expect to suffer (3:3–4). He

and destiny who all shared the history of the peo—

does not say why they should expect this, but perple of God, as recorded in the traditions of the

haps it is because he believed that the forces of evil

Jewish Scriptures.

were out in full strength here at the end of time

The exhortations and instructions that Paul

(cf. 2:18; 5:1–11). Moreover, he indicates that the

gives serve further to unify the group as rules,

Thessalonians had already experienced persecu—

guidelines, beliefs, and practices that they share in

tion from their compatriots, just as the earlier

common. He gives them these instructions, of

Christian communities had been persecuted by

course, in response to situations that have arisen

the non-Christian Judeans, who had always served

in the community.

as a thorn in the side of the church, in Paul’s opinion, from the days of Jesus onward (2:14–16).

A shared experience of suffering can help to

consolidate a social group that is already unified by

THE CHURCH AT

a common set of beliefs and commitments. That is

THESSALONICA

to say, suffering for the cause can function to

AFTER PAUL’S DEPARTURE

emphasize and sharpen the boundaries that separate those who “live according to the truth” from

First Thessalonians 3:1 indicates that after Paul

those who “live in error.” Moreover, the Christian

and his companions left Thessalonica they jour—

believers in Thessalonica shared their insider sta—

neyed to Athens, perhaps again to set up shop.

tus with similar groups of believers throughout

After a while, feeling anxious about the young

their world. Thus Paul emphasizes that their faith—

church, they sent Timothy back to check on the

fulness to the gospel had become well known to

situation, and possibly to provide additional

Christian communities throughout the provinces

instruction and support. When Timothy rejoined

of Macedonia and Achaia (1:7–9) and that they

his colleagues (either in Athens or in Corinth,

were linked to the communities of Judea as well.

which was evidently their next stop; Acts indicates

Paul never indicates directly why he men—

the latter but Paul says nothing of it), he filled

tions the churches of Judea, but he may have

them in on the situation (3:6). First Thessalonians

done so because of his cherished notion that his

represents a kind of follow-up letter. Even though,

message did not represent a new religion but the

technically speaking, it was co-authored by Paul,

religion of the Jews come now to fulfillment in

Silvanus, and Timothy (1:1), Paul himself was evi—

Jesus (see Chapter 18). Paul did not teach these

dently the real author (e.g., see 2:18).

converts that they had to become Jews, but he

The most obvious piece of information that

did teach them that the one true God whom

Timothy brought back to his colleagues was that

they now worshipped was the God of Israel, who

the congregation was still strong and deeply

in fulfillment of his promises had sent his messi—

grateful for the work they had done among them.

ah to die for the sins of the world. This was Jesus,

The letter is remarkably personable, with profes—

the Son of the Jewish God, who was now pre—

sions of heartfelt gratitude and affection flowing

pared to return to deliver his people from the

from nearly every page, especially in the first

wrath that was to come.

three chapters.

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# CHAPTER 19

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Although Paul’s epistles generally follow the

Christians sometimes did disturb the peace,

form of most Greco-Roman letters (see Chapter

however, and when they did there could be

11), they are, as a rule, much longer and tend to

reprisals. Paul himself indicates that over the

have a shape of their own. They typically begin

course of his career he had been beaten with

with a prescript that names the sender(s) and the

“rods,” a standard form of Roman corporal punish—

addressees, followed by a prayer or blessing

ment, on three occasions (2 Cor 11:25). Were the

(“Grace to you and peace . . .”), and then an

Christians of Thessalonica, the capital of the

expression of thanksgiving to God for the congre—

Roman province of Macedonia, being condemned

gation. In most of Paul’s letters, the body of the

to punishment by the governor who resided there?

letter, where the main business at hand is

In later times, the case against the Christians

addressed, comes next, followed by closing admo—

was taken up by governors at the instigation of the

nitions and greetings to people in the congrega—

populace, who feared that this new religion was

tion, some references to Paul’s future travel plans,

offensive to the Roman gods. Other non-Roman

and a final blessing and farewell. In 1

religions were generally not seen as offensive

Thessalonians, however, the majority of the letter

because they did not prohibit their adherents from

is taken up by the thanksgiving (1:2–3:13). This is

participating in the state cult. Jews generally did

clearly a letter that Paul was happy to write, in

not participate, of course, but they were granted

contrast, say, to Galatians, where the thanksgiving

an exemption because of the great antiquity of

is replaced by a reprimand!

their traditions (recall: in this world, if something

The closest analogy to 1 Thessalonians from

was old, it was venerable). Christianity, on the

elsewhere in Greco-Roman antiquity is a kind of

other hand, was not at all ancient; moreover, the

correspondence that modern scholars have labeled

Christians not only refused to worship the state

the “friendship letter.” This is a letter sent to

gods, they also insisted that their God was the only

renew an acquaintance and to extend friendly

true God and that all other gods were demonic.

good wishes, sometimes with a few requests or

For the most part, this notion did not sit well with

admonitions. Paul’s letter also contains some

those who believed not only that the gods existed

requests and admonitions, based on the news that

but also that they could terrorize those who

he has received from Timothy. The congregation

refused to acknowledge them in their cults. Some

has not experienced any major problems, but one

decades after Paul, cities that experienced disaster

important issue has arisen in the interim since

would sometimes blame the false religion of the

Paul’s departure. Paul writes to resolve the issue

Christians; when that happened, Christian believ—

and to address other matters that are important for

ers were well advised to keep a low profile.

the ongoing life of the community.

Had something like this happened in

Before considering the major issue that has

Thessalonica? While it is possible that the gover—

arisen, we should examine another aspect of life

nor of the province had sent out the troops at the

in the Thessalonian church—the community’s

instigation of the masses, Paul says nothing to

persecution. We do not know exactly what this

indicate that the situation was so grave or dramat—

persecution entailed. We do know that in a some—

ic. It could be, then, that the Christians were

what later period, some sixty years after 1

opposed not by the government but by other peo—

Thessalonians was written, Roman provincial

ple (organized groups?) who found their religion

authorities occasionally prosecuted Christian

offensive to their sense of right and duty—duty to

believers simply for being Christian (see Chapter

the gods who bring peace and prosperity and duty

26). At least during the New Testament period,

to the state, which was the prime beneficiary of

however, there was no official opposition to

the gods’ kindnesses. It commonly happens that

Christianity, in the sense of an established gov—

closed, secret societies bring out the worst in their

ernmental policy or legislation outlawing the

neighbors, and it may be that the Thessalonian

religion. People could be Christian or anything

Christians, with their bizarre teachings about the

else so long as they didn’t disturb the peace.

end of the world and the return of a divine man

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from heaven, along with their inflammatory

pertaining to the events at the end of time. Paul

rhetoric (for example, against other local cults),

had earlier instructed the Thessalonians about the

proved to be too much for others. These others

imminent end of the world, which would bring sud—

could have included families and former friends of

den suffering to those who were not prepared, like

the converts, who knew enough to be suspicious

the birthpangs of a woman in labor (see 5:1–3). He

but were not themselves inclined to join up.

had warned them that they must be ready, for the

Perhaps they maligned the group or abused it in

day was coming soon and was almost upon them;

other ways (physical attacks? graffiti on the walls

they must be awake and sober lest it catch them

of its house church? organized protests?).

unawares (5:4–9). His converts had presumably

If something like this scenario is at all plausible, it

taken his teaching to heart; they were eagerly

would help explain some of the other things Paul says

awaiting the return of Jesus to deliver them from

in this letter by way of exhortation. He begins the

the wrath that was coming. But Jesus hadn’t

body of the letter (4:1–5:11) by urging his converts

returned and something troubling had happened:

not to engage in sexual immorality. The meaning of

some of the members of the congregation had died.

his words is hotly debated by scholars, to the extent

These deaths caused a major disturbance

that translators of the New Testament cannot even

among some of the survivors. The Thessalonians

agree about how to render them into English. This is

had thought that the end was going to come

especially true of verses 4–6: is Paul urging the

before they passed off the face of the earth. Had

Thessalonian men to be careful in treating their

they been wrong? Even more troubling, had those

wives or in handling their genitals? Whichever

who died missed their chance to enter into the

meaning is preferred, Paul clearly wants the commu—

heavenly kingdom when Jesus returned?

nity to behave in socially acceptable ways. Whether

Paul writes to respond to their concern. You will

or not he is responding to a specific problem of

notice that the response of 4:14–17 is bracketed by

sexual immorality that he wants to nip in the bud is

two exhortations to have hope and be comforted in

difficult to judge. Given his lack of specificity in the

light of what will happen when Jesus appears. At

matter, it may be that Paul simply wants the

his return in glory those who have died will be the

Thessalonian Christians to keep their image pure

first to meet him; only then will those who are

before the outside world, just in case they are sus—

alive join up with them in the air “to be with the

pected of vile activities commonly attributed to

Lord forever” (4:17; this is the verse used by some

secret societies in the ancient world (see box 19.2).

modern evangelical Christians to support their

After all, there is no reason to give outsiders addi—

belief in the “rapture”—a term that occurs neither

tional grounds to malign your group when they

here nor anywhere else in the New Testament). In

already have all the grounds they need.

other words, there will not simply be a resurrection

The same logic may underlie the exhortations

of the dead for judgment at the end of time; there

in 4:9–12. The believers are urged to love one

will also be a removal of the followers of Jesus, both

another, in what we might call the platonic sense,

dead and alive, from this world prior to the coming

not to make waves in society (“mind your own

of the divine wrath. The Thessalonians are to be

affairs”), and to be good citizens (“work with your

comforted by this scenario. Those who have

own hands”). These admonitions serve both to

already died have not at all lost out; rather, they

promote group cohesion and to project an accept—

will precede the living as they enter into the pres—

able image of the group to those who are outside.

ence of the Lord at the end of time.

There are two further points of interest about this

passage. First, it is clear that Paul expects that he and

The Major Issue in the Congregation

some of the Thessalonians will be alive when this

In 4:13 Paul finally comes to the one serious issue

apocalyptic drama comes to be played out. He con—

that the Thessalonians themselves have raised.

trasts “those who have died” with “we who are alive,

Perhaps not surprisingly, given what we have seen

who are left until the coming of the Lord” (v. 15;

about the character of Paul’s message when he con—

also see v. 17). He appears to have no idea that his

verted and instructed these people, it is a question

words would be discussed after his death, let alone

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# CHAPTER 19

## PAUL AND HIS APOSTOLIC MISSION

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SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 19.2 Charges against the Christians

There is no solid evidence to suggest that specific allegations of wrongdoing were being made against the church in Thessalonica at the time of Paul’s writing, but we do know that other secret societies were widely viewed with suspicion and that certain standard kinds of slander were leveled against them. The logic of these slanders is plain: if people meet together in secret or under the cloak of darkness, they must have something to hide.

It is possible that Paul was aware of such charges and wanted the Thessalonian Christians to go out of their way to avoid them. Such a concern would make sense of his injunctions to maintain pure sexual conduct and to keep a good reputation among outsiders.

As an example of the kinds of accusations that were later leveled against the Christians, consider the comments of Fronto, the tutor of the emperor Marcus Aurelius and one of the most highly respected scholars of the mid second century: They [the Christians] recognize each other by secret marks and signs; hardly have they met when they love each other, throughout the world uniting in the practice of a veritable religion of lusts. Indiscriminately they call each other brother and sister, thus turning even ordinary fornication into incest. . . . It is also reported that they worship the genitals of their pontiff and priest, adoring, it appears, the sex of their “father.”. . .

The notoriety of the stories told of the initiation of new recruits is matched by their ghastly horror. A young baby is covered over with flour, the object being to deceive the unwary. It is then served before the person to be admitted into their rites. The recruit is urged to inflict blows onto it—they appear to be harmless because of the covering of flour.

Thus the baby is killed with wounds that remain unseen and concealed.

It is the blood of this infant—I shudder to mention it—it is this blood that they lick with thirsty lips; these are the limbs they distribute eagerly; this is the victim by which they seal their covenant; it is by complicity in this crime that they are pledged to mutual silence; these are their rites, more foul than all sacrileges combined. . . . On a special day they gather for a feast with all their children, sisters, mothers—all sexes and all ages.

There, flushed with the banquet after such feasting and drinking, they begin to burn with incestuous passions. They provoke a dog tied to the lampstand to leap and bound towards a scrap of food which they have tossed outside the reach of his chain. By this means the light is overturned and extinguished, and with it common knowledge of their actions; in the shameless dark with unspeakable lust they copulate in random unions, all equally being guilty of incest. (Minucius Felix, Octavius 9:2–6) read and studied some nineteen centuries later. For have died are). According to this scenario, Jesus

him, the end of time was imminent.

was here with us; he died and so went down to the

Second, Paul’s scenario presupposes a three-sto—

place of the dead; then God raised him up to

ried universe, in which the world consists of an

where he is. Soon he is going to come back down

“up” (where God is, and now Jesus), a “here”

to earth on the clouds (i.e., from heaven above the

(where we are), and a “down” (where those who

sky) to raise up both those who are here and those

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SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 19.3 The Thessalonians’ Perplexity

The occasion of 1 Thessalonians raises some intriguing historical questions. Why were the Thessalonian Christians surprised that some of their members had died, and why didn’t they know that at Jesus’ return he would raise the dead to be with him forever? Had Paul simply neglected to tell them that part? Morever, why was Timothy unable to answer their question? Why did he have to return to ask Paul about it, leaving them in uncertainty for some weeks at the least? Didn’t Timothy know what was supposed to happen at the end?

One possibility is that when Paul was with the Thessalonians his own views were in a state of flux. If he himself didn’t realize how long it would be before Jesus returned, he might not have discussed the matter with either the Thessalonians or his own close companions, Silvanus and Timothy.

who are down below, elevating them to the clouds

dead and exalted to heaven and who would deliver

to live with him forever.

his followers from the wrath that was soon to come.

This scenario is based on an ancient way of look—

Those who accepted this message formed a

ing at the world where there actually was an up and

social group, a church, that met periodically in

a down in the universe. It stands in stark contrast,

one of the member’s home (or in several homes,

obviously, to our modern understanding of the earth

depending on its size). The members of the group

as the third planet of a solar system formed around a

had unusually strong bonds of cohesion, reinforced

minor star, just one of the billions of stars that make

by several factors: (1) the insider information they

up our galaxy, which itself is just one of billions of

had as those who understood the course of history

galaxies in a universe—in other words, a universe in

here at the end of time, (2) the mutual love and

which there is no such thing as up and down, no

support that they showed one another, (3) the

“heaven” above our heads or “place of the dead”

common front they projected in the face of exter—

below. This is simply a reminder that Paul’s world,

nal opposition from those who did not know the

and consequently his worldview, is not ours.

“truth,” and (4) the rules that governed their lives

together. Moreover, they understood themselves

to stand in unity with other groups similarly orga-

CONCLUSION:

nized throughout the provinces of Macedonia and

PAUL THE APOSTLE

Achaia and reaching all the way to Judea. These

groups were unified by their common faith and

It is clear that Paul’s self-acclaimed title “apostle of

common commitment to the God of Israel, who

the Gentiles” was no empty phrase. His converts, at

now in the end of time had fulfilled his promises to

least in Thessalonica, were former pagans, whom he

his people through Jesus, and through him to all

contacted from his place of employment and con—

peoples of the earth, both Jews and Gentiles.

vinced to abandon their traditional cults to worship

Difficulties had arisen in this community, and

the one true God, the creator of the world.

Paul wrote a letter to help resolve them. In this the

Moreover, he and his colleagues couched their

Thessalonians were probably like most of Paul’s

proclamation in apocalyptic terms: the creator of

churches, communities that he established in

the world was also its judge, and his day of reckon—

major urban areas throughout the Mediterranean,

ing was imminent. Soon he was to send his Son,

each of which experienced problems that required

Jesus, who had died and had been raised from the

the apostle’s intervention and advice.

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# CHAPTER 19

## PAUL AND HIS APOSTOLIC MISSION

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SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

See also the general bibliography for Chapter 18

to support themselves and used their workplace as a

forum to propagate their views.

Hock, Ronald. The Social Context of Paul’s Ministry:

Tentmaking and Apostleship. Philadelphia: Fortress,

Malherbe, Abraham. Paul and the Thessalonians: The Philosophic 1980. An interesting investigation of Paul’s apostolic

Tradition of Pastoral Care. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987. An modus operandi in light of representatives of other

insightful study of Paul’s interaction with the

philosophies in the Greco-Roman world, who worked

Thessalonians from a socio-historical perspective.

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# CHAPTER 20

Paul and the Crises of His Churches:

1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, and Philemon

The thirteen New Testament epistles attributed to

advocated the ancient equivalent of “family val—

Paul are arranged roughly according to length,

ues.” Its economy was based not only on trade and

with the longest (Romans) coming first and the

industry but also on commercialized pleasures for

shortest (Philemon) last. As we have seen, this

the well-to-do. It is not certain that Corinth’s loose

arrangement does not coincide with the actual

reputation was altogether deserved, however; some

sequence in which the letters were written; 1

modern historians have suggested that its image

Thessalonians is Paul’s earliest surviving letter and

was intentionally tarnished by the citizens of

Romans the latest. Of the five undisputed letters

Athens, one of its nearby rivals and the intellectu—

that remain, however, a case can be made that

al center of ancient Greece. It was an Athenian,

their canonical sequence also happens to be their

the comic poet Aristophanes, who invented the

chronological. For this reason, we can deal with

verb “Corinthianize,” which meant to engage in

each of these remaining letters in their canonical

sexually promiscuous activities. In any event, many

order: 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians,

people today know about the city only through the

and Philemon.

letter of 1 Corinthians, a document that has done

little to enhance its reputation.

The congregation that Paul addresses appears to

1 CORINTHIANS

have been riddled with problems involving inter—

personal conflicts and ethical improprieties. His

Corinth was a large and prosperous city south of

letter indicates that some of its members were at

Thessalonica, in the Roman province of Achaia,

each others’ throats, claiming spiritual superiority

of which it was the capital. Located on the isthmus

over one another and trying to establish it through

dividing the northern and southern parts of mod—

ecstatic acts during the course of their worship ser—

ern-day Greece, it was a major center of trade and

vices. Different members of the community would

communication, served by two major ports within

speak prophecies and make proclamations in lan—

walking distance. The city was destroyed in 146

guages that no one else (including themselves)

B.C.E. by the Romans but was refounded a century

knew, trying to surpass one another in demonstrat—

later as a Roman colony. In Paul’s time, it was a

ing their abilities to speak in tongues. This one—

cosmopolitan place, the home of a wide range of

upmanship had evidently manifested itself outside

religious and philosophical movements.

the worship service as well. Some people had

Corinth is perhaps best remembered today for

grown embittered enough to take others to court

the image problem it suffered throughout much of

(over what, we are not told). In addition, the perits checkered history, at least among those who

sonal conduct of community members was not at

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# CHAPTER 20

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all what Paul had in mind when he led them away

The majority of Paul’s converts were evidently

from what he viewed as their degenerate pasts into

from the lower classes, as he himself reminds them:

the church of Christ. At their periodic community

“Not many of you were wise by human standards

meals, some had been gorging themselves and get-

[highly educated], not many were powerful, [influ—

ting drunk while others had been arriving late to

ential in the community], not many were of noble

find nothing to eat. Some of the men in the con—

birth” [in the upper classes] (1:26). Recent scholars

gregation had been frequenting prostitutes and

have observed, however, that at least some of the

didn’t see why this should be a problem; one of

Corinthian converts must have been well-educat—

them was sleeping with his stepmother. And this is

ed, powerful, and well born, or else Paul would not

the community that Paul addresses as the “saints

have said that “not many” of them were. Indeed, if

who are in Corinth” (1:2). One wonders what the

we assume that some members of the community

Corinthian sinners looked like.

came from the upper classes, we can make better

sense of some of the problems that they experienced as a group. It would explain, for example,

The Beginnings of the Church

why some of those coming together for the com—

After leaving Thessalonica, Paul and his compan—

munal meal (a bring-your-own-supper kind of

ions, Timothy and Silvanus, arrived in Corinth

affair) could come early and enjoy lots of food and

and began, again, to preach the gospel in an effort

good drink; these were comparatively wealthy

to win converts (2 Cor 1:19). Possibly they pro—

Christians who didn’t have to work long hours.

ceeded as they had in the capital of Macedonia,

Others, however, had to come late and had scarce—

coming into town, renting out a shop in an insula,

ly anything to eat; these were the poorer members,

setting up a business, and using the workplace as a

possibly slaves, who had to put in a full day’s work.

forum to speak to those who stopped by. In this

The presence of some upper-class Christians would

instance, the book of Acts provides some corrobo—

also explain why some members of this community

rating evidence. Luke indicates that Paul did, in

were perturbed that Paul would not allow them to

fact, work in a kind of leather goods shop in

support him, that is, to become his patrons and

Corinth, having made contact with a Jewish cou—

care for all of his financial needs so as to free him

ple named Aquila and Priscilla who shared his

up to preach the gospel (9:7–18, cf. especially 2

profession in both senses of the term; they had the

Cor 12:13). One of the common ways for a philoso—

same career and the same faith in Jesus.

pher to make a living in the Greco-Roman world

In other respects, however, the narrative of Acts

was to be taken into a wealthy household to serve

contrasts with what Paul himself says about his

as a kind of scholar-in-residence in exchange for

sojourn in Corinth. For one thing, Luke indicates

room, board, and other niceties (depending on the

that Paul devoted himself chiefly to evangelizing

wealth of the patron). Paul had reasons for want—

the Jews in the local synagogue until he was dis—

ing none of this arrangement—he saw it as putting

missed with the left foot of fellowship. Even after

his gospel up for sale—but some of the influential

leaving the synagogue, according to Luke, Paul

members of the congregation found his attitude

principally converted Jews (18:4–11). Paul’s own

puzzling and even offensive, as will become yet

letter gives an entirely different impression. Most of

clearer in 2 Corinthians.

his converts, as one would expect, given his claim

Other problems in the congregation may also

to be the apostle to the Gentiles, appear to have

have related to the differing socioeconomic levels

been non-Jews. “You know that when you were

of its members. If we can assume that the upper

pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that

classes in antiquity would have been relatively

could not speak” (12:2). Here, as in Thessalonica,

well educated, it may be that the “knowledge” of

Paul and his companions worked primarily with

some of these people in the Corinthian church

Gentiles to convince them both that there was only

allowed them to see things differently from the

one God worthy of devotion and worship (the God

lower classes and that this led to some differences

of Israel) and that Jesus was his Son.

of opinion in the community. For example, some



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ment concerning the length of his stay, but there

are indications throughout his letter that the

Christians in Corinth, or at least some of them,

had a much more sophisticated understanding of

the faith than those in Thessalonica—even if they

had, from Paul’s perspective, gotten it wrong at

points. Indeed, unlike the Thessalonians, who

understood their new religion at a fairly rudimentary level, some of the Corinthians had so much

knowledge of their faith that they took Paul’s

gospel simply as a starting point and developed

their views in vastly different directions.

What can we say about the message that Paul

originally preached to these people? Again, he evi-

F P O

dently instructed them in the need to worship the

one true God and to await his Son from heaven.

As we will see, however, the second part of this

message (“to await his Son”) made significantly

less impact on the converts in Corinth than on

those in Thessalonica. It is difficult to know exactly what else he taught these people. It does appear,

though, that Paul devoted little if any effort to

narrating tales about what Jesus said and did during his public ministry (at a later stage, we will

consider whether Paul himself knew very much

about this ministry; remember, he was writing long

before the Gospels were written). He does summarize a couple of sayings of Jesus, to the effect that

Christians shouldn’t get divorced (7:10–11) and

they should pay their preacher (9:14), and he does

Figure 20.1 Picture of an ancient philosopher leaning on his narrate the incident of Jesus’ institution of the

walking stick, from a wall painting of the first century B.C.E.

Lord’s Supper (11:24–28). But he says nary a word

Paul himself would have appeared to many people in his world

about Jesus’ baptism, temptation, transfiguration,

as an itinerant philosopher.

preaching of the coming kingdom of God,

encounters with demons, appearance before

members may have thought that eating meat

Pontius Pilate, and so on—all of which would

offered to idols was a real and present danger, in

have been directly germane to the problems that

view of the demonic character of the pagan gods

the Corinthians appear to have experienced.

(possibly a lower-class view), while others took

What he does say, and says emphatically, is that

such scruples as baseless superstition (possibly the

the only thing he “knew” among the Corinthians

view of some of the more highly educated). This is

was “Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (2:2).

one of the major issues that Paul addresses in the

In other words, Paul’s principal message was

letter (chaps. 8–10).

about Jesus as the crucified Christ. It appears to be

During their stay in Corinth, Paul and his com—

a message that the Corinthians, or at least a good

panions appear to have converted a sizable num—

portion of them, didn’t absorb, at least in Paul’s

ber (dozens?) of pagans to the faith. The book of

opinion. We will see why momentarily. First, we

Acts indicates that they spent a year and a half

should consider in some detail Paul’s own brief

there, in contrast to just three weeks in

recollection of what he taught the Corinthians

Thessalonica. Paul himself makes no clear state—

about Jesus. In 15:1–2, he reminds his converts of



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“the good news that I proclaimed to you, which

was later seen alive. Paul had preached a similar

you in turn received, in which also you stand,

message in Thessalonica, but with two differ—

through which also you are being saved, if you

ences, one in the message and the other in the

hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to

way that it was received.

you.” He then summarizes this message:

With regard to the message itself, we find subtle indications in 1 Thessalonians that Paul direct—

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I

ly linked his gospel message with the Jewish reli—

in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in

gion, but never does he quote the Jewish

accordance with the scriptures, and that he was

Scriptures or assume that his followers are person—

buried, and that he was raised on the third day in

accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared

ally conversant with them. The situation is quite

to Cephas and then to the twelve. (15:3–5)

different with the Corinthians. From the outset,

Paul had taught them that Jesus’ death and resur—

Thus, of primary importance in Paul’s preach—

rection were both anticipated in the Scriptures

ing to the Corinthians was the message of Christ’s

(see Chapter 18); moreover, throughout this letter

death and resurrection. Jesus died, fulfilling the

he appeals to the Scriptures in order to make his

Jewish Scriptures, and there’s proof: he was

points. Strikingly, when he does so he emphasizes

buried. Moreover, God raised him from the dead,

that the Scriptures were not written only, or even

fulfilling the Scriptures. Again there’s proof: he

especially, for Jews in times past, but even more

F P O

Figure 20.2 One of the earliest visual representations of Jesus' crucifixion, from a cyprus panel door in the church of Saint Sabina in Rome, nearly 350 years after Paul's day. Earlier Christians were reluctant to portray the crucifixion (contrast Paul in 1 Cor 2:2).

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particularly for Christians in the present (e.g., 1

where, leaving the Christians behind to continue

Cor 9:9–10; 10:1–13). If the Thessalonians had

the mission for themselves. Soon thereafter, an

insider knowledge, the Corinthians have even

acquaintance of Paul named Apollos came to

more; all of God’s interactions with his people

Corinth and proved instrumental in providing

have been leading up to the present time. The

additional instruction to the Christians there.

Christian community is God’s ultimate concern,

According to the book of Acts, Apollos was a

and always has been.

skilled speaker (18:24–28), and it is clear from

This is heady stuff, and there is some indication

Paul’s letter that he acquired a considerable fol—

that it had in fact gone to the heads of some of Paul’s

lowing in the congregation (1:12; 3:4–6).

converts. This can be seen in a second difference

We are not certain of the precise course of

between the Thessalonians and the Corinthians.

Paul’s journeys, but he evidently ended up in the

The former group saw Jesus’ resurrection as the

city of Ephesus not long after leaving Corinth.

beginning of the major climax of history, when he

Ephesus, another large urban area, was in the west—

would return and remove the Christians from this

ern portion of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey).

world before God’s wrath destroys all his enemies.

From there Paul wrote the letter of 1 Corinthians

Some of the Corinthians, on the other hand, appear

(see 16:8). Timothy and Silvanus had apparently

to have interpreted Jesus’ resurrection in a more per—

departed from him already, for he wrote the letter

sonal sense as his exaltation to glory that they them—

not with them but with someone named

selves, as those who have participated in his victory,

Sosthenes, who is otherwise mentioned in the

have come to share. Despite Paul’s protests, some (or

New Testament only in Acts 18:17 as the ruler of

perhaps most?) of the Corinthians came to believe

the Jewish synagogue in Corinth and a convert to

that they had already begun to enjoy the full bene—

Paul’s gospel. Paul obviously wrote the letter of 1

fits of salvation in the here and now, as members of

Corinthians to deal with problems that had arisen

Christ’s resurrected and exalted body. In Paul’s words

in the congregation. He indicates that he has

(which must be taken as a sarcastic echoing of their

heard of these problems from two different sources,

views, given everything else he says in this letter),

one oral and one written.

“Already you have all you want! Already you have

At the beginning of the letter, after the pre—

become rich! Quite apart from us you have become

script (1:1–3) and thanksgiving (1:4–9; notice

kings!” (4:8).

how much shorter it is than the one to the

For Paul himself, the Corinthians’ notion that

Thessalonians), Paul states that he has learned

they were already enjoying an exalted status

about the activities of the congregation from

couldn’t be further from the truth. In his view, the

“Chloe’s people” (1:11). We do not know who this

forces of evil were to remain in power in this world

Chloe was; the name occurs nowhere else in the

until the end came and Christ returned. Until

letter or in the rest of the New Testament. We do

then, life would be a struggle full of pain and suf—

know that it was the name of a woman, and the

fering, comparable to the pain and suffering expe—

reference to her “people” is usually taken to mean

rienced by the crucified Christ himself. Those who

her slaves or former slaves who had come to

believed that they had already experienced a full

Ephesus, perhaps on her business, and had met

and complete share of the blessings of eternity had

with Paul to pass along some news. Since Chloe

simply deceived themselves, creating immense

owned slaves who managed her business affairs,

problems for the church and misconstruing the

she must have been a wealthy woman in Corinth;

real meaning of the gospel.

whether she herself was a member of the Christian

community is difficult to judge. In any event, her

unnamed “people” must have been active in the

The Subsequent History of the Community

congregation, given the inside information that

There is nothing to indicate that the problems

they passed along to Paul.

addressed in this epistle had come to a head during

The news was not good. The church was divided

Paul’s original stay in Corinth. Eventually, he and

against itself, with different factions claiming differ—

his companions left to proclaim their gospel else—

ent leaders, each of whom, from Paul’s perspective,

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# CHAPTER 20

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was seeking to usurp the claims of others by demon—

dead, for example, by citing a group of “witnesses”

strating their own spiritual superiority and claiming

in verses 5–8. In fact, Paul is not trying to demon—

to represent the true faith as expounded by one or

strate to the Corinthians something they don’t

another famous authority (Paul, Cephas, Apollos,

believe, he is reminding them of something they

and Christ himself; 1:12). The conflicts had gotten

already know (see vv. 1 and 3), that Jesus was

nasty at times, with some of the members taking

raised bodily from the dead.

others to court over their differences (not their dif—

For Paul, Jesus’ resurrected body was a glorified

ferences over inner church politics, of course, but

spiritual body, not like the paltry mortal flesh that

over matters that the civil law courts could decide).

we ourselves are stuck with; but just as important—

Moreover, immorality was evidently rampant.

ly, it was an actual body that could be seen and

Generally, this was not the happy community of the

recognized (15:5–8, 35–41). Paul’s point is that

faithful that Paul had envisioned, especially com—

the exalted existence that Jesus entered involved

pared to the model church of the Thessalonians.

the total transformation of his body (15:42–49,

The information from Paul’s other source was

53–54). It was not some kind of ethereal existence

equally troubling. It appears that he had received a

in which his disembodied soul was elevated to the

letter from some of the Corinthians (probably not

realm of divinity; his was a bodily resurrection (see

all of them; as we will see, not everyone felt

box 20.1). The reason this matters becomes clear

beholden to him) in which they expressed their

in the context of Paul’s response. There were some

different opinions on some critical matters and

in Corinth who were saying that there was no such

sought Paul’s judgment (e.g., see 7:1). The letter

thing as the resurrection of bodies from the dead

had been brought by three members of the

(15:12).

church—Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus—

Paul spends most of chapter 15 demonstrating

who evidently had waited for Paul to pen a reply

that since Christ was raised bodily from the dead—

(16:15–18). The issues were of some moment;

and since he is the “first fruit” of the resurrection,

there were members of the congregation, just to

as all of the Corinthians came to believe when they

take one example, who had been teaching that it

accepted his gospel message—then there is going

was not right even for married couples to have sex.

to be a future resurrection of the dead when

One can sense the urgency of their query.

Christians come to participate in Christ’s exalted

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians to deal with the

status, that is, when they themselves are raised in

various problems and issues that had arisen.

glorious immortal bodies (15:12–23, 50–55). It is

Giving fairly straightforward answers, he deals

then that Christian believers will enjoy the full

with each problem in turn. From Paul’s perspec—

benefits of their salvation. For Paul, the end has

tive, however, one big problem evidently underlay

not come yet. Despite the claims of some, presum—

all of these specific problems.

ably some of the most “spiritual” among the

Corinthian leaders, Christians do not yet have the

full benefits of salvation; they are not yet exalted to

Paul’s Response to the Situation:

a heavenly status. Even the elect are living in a

The End as the Key to the Middle

world of sin and evil, and they will continue to do

Paul’s perspective is best seen toward the conclu—

so until the end comes.

sion of the letter. In good rhetorical style (i.e., fol—

This basic message underlies not just chapter

lowing the instructions of those who taught

15 but all of 1 Corinthians. To some extent, each

rhetoric in his day), Paul provides at the end the

of the problems experienced by this congregation

key to what has come before. We saw earlier that

is related to the basic failure to recognize the lim—

Paul begins chapter 15 by summarizing the con—

itations and dangers of Christian existence in the

tent of the gospel message that he preached to the

age before the end. The first problem that Paul

Corinthians, the message of Christ’s death and res—

attacks (in chaps. 1–4) is the divisions within the

urrection; he then draws out the implications of

church that were caused, evidently, by leaders

this message. Sometimes this chapter is misread as

claiming to be spiritually superior to one another

an attempt to prove that Jesus was raised from the

and to adhere to the teachings of various prede-

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SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 20.1 Possibilities of Existence in the Afterlife

Some interpreters have thought that Paul and his Corinthian opponents disagreed about the resurrection because they had fundamentally different understandings about the nature of human existence, both now and in the afterlife. Perhaps it would be useful to reflect on different ways that one might conceive of life after death.

Annihilation. One possibility is that a person who dies ceases to exist. This appears to have been a popular notion in the Greco-Roman world, as evidenced by a number of inscriptions on tombstones that bemoan the brevity of life which ends in nonexistence. One of the most widely used Latin inscriptions was so popular that it was normally abbreviated (like our own R.I.P. for “Rest in Peace”) as N.F.N.S.N.C.: “I was not, I am not, I care not.”

Disembodied Existence. Another possibility is that life after death is life apart from the body. In some strands of Greek thought influenced above all by Plato, the body itself was thought to be the bane of human existence, because it brought pain, finitude, and death to the soul that lived within it. These people did not think of the soul as immaterial; it was thought to be a “substance,” but a much more refined substance than the clunker of a shell that we call the body (cf. the Gnostics; see Chapter 11). The catchy Greek phrase sometimes used to express the notion that the coarse material of the body is the prison or tomb for the more refined substance of the soul was “s¯oma—s¯ema,” literally, “the body—a prison.”

For people who thought such things, the afterlife involved a liberation of the soul from its bodily entombment.

Bodily Resurrection. A third possibility is that the body is not inherently evil or problematic but has simply become subject to the ravages of evil and death. For many Jews, for example, the human body was created by God, as were all things, and so is inherently good. And what God has created he will also redeem. Thus, the body will not ultimately perish but will live on in the afterlife. How can this be, given the indisputable fact that bodies eventually decay and disappear? In this view, God will transform the physical body into a spiritual body that will never experience the ravages of evil and death, a glorified body that will never get sick and never die. As a Jewish apocalypticist Paul maintained this third view of the nature of human existence, whereas his opponents in Corinth, like many Christians after them down to our own day, appear to have subscribed to the second.

cessors (Paul, Cephas, Apollos, or Christ; 1:12).

next in the act of baptism (as suggested, possibly,

One might expect Paul to take a side in this arguin 1:14–17). The leaders themselves, who are left

ment, that is, to insist that the faction that had the

unnamed, have apparently agreed on one major

good sense to line up with him was right. Instead,

point, that wisdom and power indicate the superi—

he insists that all of the sides (even his) are in

or standing of those who have already been exalt—

error. They are in error because they have elevated to enjoy the privileges and benefits of the exalted the status of individual leaders on the basis of

ed life in Christ.

their superior wisdom and superhuman power

For Paul, though, a high evaluation of wisdom

(1:18–25), perhaps thinking that these character—

and power represents a fundamental misunder—

istics could be transferred from one person to the

standing of the gospel. The gospel is not about

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human wisdom and human power, things that may

selves in the eyes of others (chaps. 12–14). From

be impressive and attractive by normal standards.

their own vantage point they may have under—

Instead, and somewhat ironically, God works not

stood their worship activities as signs of their par—

through what appears to be wise and powerful but

ticipation in the heavenly resurrected existence

through what appears to be foolish and weak.

that is theirs in Christ. But Paul believes these

What could be more (apparently) foolish and

activities reveal something else. Those who

weak than the plan to save the world through a

engage in them have forgotten that the Spirit

crucified man (1:18–25)? According to Paul’s

gives gifts to members of the congregation so they

gospel, that is precisely what God has done; and by

can benefit and serve others, not exalt themselves

so doing, he has shown that human power and wis-

(especially chap. 12). Anyone who has all of the

dom have no part to play in the salvation of the

gifts that can be given by the Spirit but who fails

world. Paul goes on to note that the congregation

to love the brothers and sisters in Christ is still in

as a whole, and he himself, are scarcely powerful

total poverty. This is the message of 1 Corinthians

and wise by normal standards (1:26–2:5). God

13, the famous “love chapter,” which is a favorite

does not work in human ways.

passage even today, especially at Christian wed—

Paul points out that the very existence of sev—

dings. The passage, however, does not speak of

eral of the Corinthians’ problems shows that the

love in the abstract, and certainly not to modern

Corinthian believers have not been exalted to the

notions of sentiment and sexual passion.

heavenly heights. The “wise and powerful” leaders

Specifically it is about the use of spiritual gifts in

of the community, for example, have been unable

the church. If the gifts are not used to benefit oth—

to deal with the most rudimentary issues. They

ers, then they are of no use.

have not recognized how shameful it is for a man

Paul’s notion that Christian love is to guide

to sleep with his stepmother (5:1–3) or for others

ethical behavior in this evil age explains a number

to visit prostitutes (6:15–20) or for others to rely

of positions that he takes in this letter. One promion civil law courts instead of the “wise” judgment

nent example is his position on meat offered to

of those in the community (6:1–9). Moreover, by

idols. In rough outline, the historical situation is

foolishly thinking that they are already exalted

reasonably clear. Meat that was sold at the pagan

and ruling with Christ, these believers overlook

temples could be purchased at a discount. We are

the real and present dangers in their daily exis—

not altogether certain why. Possibly the meat was

tence. They do not see that there are still evil

considered as already used, since it had been

forces in the world, which will infect the congre—

offered to a god, or possibly it was left over from a

gation if allowed to enter. They do not see, to take

pagan festival. In any event, some of the

one of the most complicated of Paul’s discussions,

Corinthian Christians (those who were less edu—

that if women fail to wear head coverings during

cated, in the lower classes?) thought that to eat

church services they are susceptible to the inva—

such meat was tantamount to sharing in idolatry;

sion of evil angels who might pollute the entire

they would not touch it on any condition. Others

body of believers (11:10; see Chapter 24); nor do

(more highly educated, in the upper classes?)

they realize that those who have been united with

claimed superior knowledge in this case, pointing

Christ can infect the entire body when they

out that idols had no real existence since there

become united with a prostitute (6:15–20).

were no gods other than the one true God. Eating

In addition, the Corinthians’ sense of self-exal—

such meat could therefore do no harm and could

tation, in Paul’s judgment, has made them ulti—

actually save on much needed resources.

mately unconcerned about how to treat one

Oddly enough, even though Paul agrees that

another in this sinful and fallen world. Many have

the other gods don’t exist, he disagrees that it is

engaged in uncontrolled acts of ecstasy in their

proper to eat the meat (chaps. 8–9). His reasoning

services of worship, prophesying and speaking in

is that those who see a Christian eating such meat

tongues not to benefit others who are in atten—

may be encouraged to do so themselves, even

dance but, in Paul’s view, simply to elevate them—

while thinking that the gods do exist. They would



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F P O

Figure 20.3 Painting of the Christian celebration of the Lord's Supper from the catacomb of Priscilla (see 1 Cor 11:23–26).

be encouraged, that is, to do something that they

like Paul himself, who says that he has the “gift”

themselves think is wrong, and this could harm

(7:7)—should not go to the trouble of becoming

their conscience (8:7–10). Rather than behaving

married in the first place. In Paul’s view, his gener—

in ways that might eventually hurt somebody,

ation is living at the very end of time, and much

then, believers should do everything to help oth—

work needs to be done before Christ returns. Those

ers, even if it involves avoiding something that in

who are married are obligated to take time for their

itself is not wrong (8:11–13).

spouses and tend to their needs; those who are not

Ultimately, this is an apocalyptic view. The

can be fully committed to Christ (7:25–38). Thus,

need to love one another and to behave in ways

it is better to remain single, but if one cannot stand

that are most useful to them is directly related to

the heat, it is better to marry than to burn (7:8–9).

the fact that evil still prevails in this world. Since

Christians continue to live in an age dominated by

the forces of evil, they are not yet exalted and are

In Sum:

not altogether free to do whatever their superior

Paul’s Gospel Message to the Corinthians

knowledge permits them to do.

While we have not been able to explore the

Paul’s apocalyptic notions appear to affect his

Corinthians’ questions and problems or Paul’s

entire view of life in this world. In another example

responses in depth, we have seen what the big

drawn from this letter, Paul maintains that married

problem was from Paul’s perspective and how it

couples should not pretend that they already live as

manifested itself in so many ways in his Corinthian

angels, “who neither marry nor are given in mar—

congregation. Overall, the message that Paul had

riage” (to quote another famous person; see Mark

for the Corinthians was not so different from the

12:25). Sexual temptations are great in this age, and

message that he had for the Thessalonians. Jesus

marriage is a legitimate way to overcome them in

was soon to return when God entered into judg—

God’s eyes. Spouses should therefore grant one

ment with this world. When he did so, his follow—

another their conjugal rights (7:1–6). Those who

ers would experience a glorious salvation. Until

are able to withstand such temptations, however—

then, however, believers were compelled to live in

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this world. Their exaltation was a future event, not

When you read through the letter carefully your—

a present reality, however much it was prefigured in

self, you may be struck by the change of tone that

their community, the church.

begins with chapter 10 and continues to the end. In

The church in Corinth appears not to have been

chapters 1–9 Paul appears to be on very good terms

a happy place. Paul saw a community that was

with this congregation. He is overflowing with

divided against itself and that tolerated immoral

joy for them, almost as much as he was for the

and scandalous behavior while claiming (ironically,

Thessalonians, even though he acknowledges that

in Paul’s eyes) to enjoy an exalted standing with

their relationship has been more than a little stormy

Christ. One can sense Paul’s exasperation and dis—

in the past (see especially 2:1–11 and 7:5–12). He

belief: You are living a heavenly existence? You???

gives us some of the details. Some time before (but

Even more, one can sense his concern. This was a

after the writing of 1 Corinthians) he had paid a sec—

major church in his mission field, yet it had gone

ond visit to Corinth (the first being when he con—

astray from the basic intent of his gospel message.

verted them; 1:19). For some undisclosed reason,

He treated the Corinthians as friends (e.g., see the

over some undisclosed issue, someone in the congre—

prescript and closing) but realized that he was at

gation publicly insulted him and he departed in

odds with a number of them on significant issues.

humiliation. He indicates that he had been one

As we are going to see, the situation did not much

angry fellow when he left. Soon thereafter he wrote

improve once they received his letter.

a harsh letter that caused him great pain, in which he

upbraided the congregation severely for their conduct and views and threatened to come to them

2 CORINTHIANS

again in judgment. But now, just prior to the writing

of 2 Corinthians itself (or at least prior to the writing

One of the reasons that Paul’s letters to the

of chaps. 1–9), the bearer of the painful letter, Titus,

Corinthians are so fascinating is that they allow us

had returned and given him the good news that the

to trace his relationship with the congregation

Corinthians had repented of their poor judgment

over a period of time. In no other instance do we

and behavior, disciplined the person who had caused

have undisputed letters addressed to the same

Paul’s pain, and committed themselves once more to

community at different times (with the possible

Paul as their spiritual father in Christ (7:5–12).

exception of the church in Philippi). Paul’s rela—

Paul’s reaction could not be more appreciative:

tionship with the Corinthians continued to ebb

“He [Titus] was consoled about you, as he told us

and flow in light of events that transpired after the

of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me,

writing of 1 Corinthians. By the time he came to

so that I rejoiced still more” (7:7). Thanks to this

write 2 Corinthians his tone had changed, though

good news, Paul now bubbles with joy for their

his tune had not.

renewed relationship, despite the hardships that

he himself continues to experience: “I often boast

The Unity of the Letter

about you; I have great pride in you; I am filled

Paul’s tone changes even within his second letter,

with consolation; I am overjoyed in all our afflic—

and rather severely. Indeed, many scholars are con—

tion” (7:4). Paul is writing this conciliatory letter

vinced that 2 Corinthians does not represent a soli—

to express his gratitude for their about-face

tary letter that Paul sat down one day and wrote but

(1:15–2:4) and to explain why he was not fickle

a combination of at least two letters that he penned

when he changed his travel plans: he had chosen

at different times for different occasions. According

not to visit them a third time simply to avoid caus—

to this theory, someone else, possibly a member of

ing anyone any more pain (2:1–2).

the Corinthian congregation itself, later edited

But then, in chapters 10–13, everything seems

these letters with “scissors and paste.” The result

to change, or rather, to revert. No longer is Paul

was one longer letter, possibly designed for broader

joyful in this congregation that has returned to him.

circulation among Paul’s churches.

Now he is bitter and incensed that they have come

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to question his authority and to badmouth his per-

The History of Paul’s

son (10:2, 10–11). He threatens to come to them a

Relationship with the Community

“third” time in judgment, in which he will not be

We can map out the history of Paul’s interaction

lenient (13:1–2), and he warns the congregation

with the Corinthians in terms of a sequence of vis—

against those who oppose him, newcomers in their

its and letters. There is, of course, a good deal of

midst whom he sarcastically calls “superapostles”

information that we do not have; but what we do

(11:5). He admits that these superapostles can

have, including the bits and pieces that come from

perform miraculous deeds and spectacular signs, but

1 Corinthians, falls out along the following lines.

he nonetheless sees them as false apostles, ministers

of Satan who prey on the minds of the Corinthians

Paul’s First Visit. This was when Paul and

(11:12–14) and lead them into all sorts of disorder

Silvanus and Timothy first arrived in Corinth, set

and disobedience (12:19–21).

up shop, preached the gospel, won a number of

Is it possible that Paul could gush with joy over

converts, and provided them with some rudimen—

this congregation and at the same time threaten

tary instruction before leaving for other areas ripe

fierce retribution against it? Of course it is possi—

for mission (2 Cor 1:19).

ble, but it doesn’t seem likely. How, then, might

we explain this change of tone?

Paul’s First Letter. Paul evidently wrote a letter

One detail of the summary above may have

to the Corinthians that has been lost. He refers to

struck you: in chapters 10–13 Paul threatens to

it in 1 Corinthians 5.9. It appears to have dealt, at

make a third visit in judgment against the congre—

least in part, with ethical issues that had arisen in

gation, whereas in chapters 1–9 he indicates that

the community.

he had canceled his visit because he did not want

to cause further pain. Indeed, he intimates that

The Corinthians’ First Letter to Paul. Some of

there was no longer any need to make it. The con—

the Corinthians, either in response to Paul’s first

gregation received his angry and painful letter, and

letter or independently of it, wrote Paul to inquire

it had its desired effect (or Titus, the bearer of the

further about ethical matters, for example, about

letter, had this effect). They have come to grieve

whether Christians should have sex with their

over how they mistreated him and have now

spouses (1 Cor 7:1).

returned to his good graces.

Based on the differences between the two parts

Paul’s Second Letter: 1 Corinthians. In response

of the letter, many scholars believe that chapters

to the Corinthians’ queries and in reaction to

10–13 represent a portion of the earlier “painful”

information that he received from “Chloe’s peo—

letter mentioned in 2:4, that is, the letter that was

ple,” Paul wrote 1 Corinthians from Ephesus. In it

written soon after Paul’s public humiliation and

he announced his plans to travel through

before his reconciliation with the Corinthians, a

Macedonia south to Corinth, where he hoped to

reconciliation gratefully discussed in chapters 1–9.

spend the winter (1 Cor 16:5–7). He apparently

If so, then a later editor has combined the two letsent the letter back with Stephanas and his two

ters by eliminating the closing of one of them (the

companions, who were members of the

“thankful” or “conciliatory” letter of chapters 1–9,

Corinthian church (1 Cor 16:15–17).

which was written second) and the prescript of the

other (the “painful” letter of chapters 10–13, writ-

Paul’s Second Visit. In 2 Cor 2:1–4 Paul indicates

ten first). By doing so, the editor created one longer

that he does not want to make “another” painful

letter that embodies the ebb and flow of Paul’s rela—

visit; this suggests that his most recent visit had

tionship with the Corinthians over a relatively long

been painful. It appears, then, that after the writ—

period of time. Some scholars go even further, and

ing of 1 Corinthians, Paul fulfilled his promise to

maintain that more than two letters are embodied

come to Corinth for a second time. But he was not

here, based on the uneven flow of Paul’s argument

well received. Someone in the congregation did

throughout chapters 1–9 (see box 20.2).

something to cause him pain and possibly public

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SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 20.2 The Partitioning of 2 Corinthians

A number of New Testament scholars believe that 2 Corinthians comprises not just two of Paul’s letters but four or five of them, all edited together into one larger composition for distribution among the Pauline churches. Most of the “partition theories,” as they are called (since they partition the one letter into a number of others), maintain that chapters 1–9 are not a unity but are made up of several letters spliced together. Read the chapters for yourself and answer the following questions: • Does the beginning of chapter 8 appear to shift abruptly to a new subject, away from the good news Titus has just brought Paul (about the reconciliatory attitude of the Corinthians) to Paul’s decision to send Titus to collect money for the needy among the Christians? There is no transition to this new subject, and 8:1 sounds like the beginning of the body of a letter. Could it have been taken from a different writing?

• Do the words of 9:1 seem strange after what Paul has said in all of chapter 8?

He has been talking for twenty-four verses about the collection for the saints, and then in 9:1 he begins to talk about it again as if it were a new subject that had not yet been broached. Could chapter 9 also, then, have come from a separate letter?

• Does the paragraph found in 6:14–7:1 seem odd in its context? The verse immediately preceding it (6:13) urges the Corinthians to be open to Paul, as does the verse immediately following it (7:2). But the paragraph itself is on an entirely different and unannounced topic: Christians should not associate with nonbelievers. Moreover, there are aspects of this passage that appear unlike anything Paul himself says anywhere else in his writings. Nowhere else, for example, does he call the Devil “Beliar” (v. 15). Has this passage come from some other piece of correpondence (possibly one that Paul didn’t write) and been inserted in the midst of Paul’s warm admonition to the Corinthians to think kindly of him?

If you answered yes to all three of these questions, then you agree with those scholars who see fragments of at least five letters in 2 Corinthians: (a) 1:1–6:13; 7:2–16 (part of the conciliatory letter); (b) 6:14–7:1 (part of a non-Pauline letter?); (c) 8:1–24 (a letter for the collection, to the Corinthians) (d) 9:1–15 (a letter for the collection, to some other church?); and (e) 10:1–13:13 (part of the painful letter).

humiliation (2 Cor 2:5–11). He left, uttering dire

(as Paul calls them; 2 Cor 11:5) were of Jewish

threats that he would return in judgment against

ancestry (11:22) and appear to have appealed pre—

them (2 Cor 13:2).

cisely to that aspect of the Corinthians’ views that

Paul found most repugnant, their notion that life

The Arrival of the Superapostles. Either prior to

in Christ was already an exalted, glorified exis—

Paul’s departure or soon thereafter, other apostles

tence. For these superapostles it was; that was why

of Christ arrived in town, claiming to be true

they could do the spectacular deeds that estab—

spokespersons of the gospel. These “superapostles”

lished their credentials as apostles. Clearly they

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and Paul did not see eye to eye. At some point the

Paul’s Fourth Letter (the “conciliatory” letter,

attacks became personal: the superapostles evi-

partly embodied in 2 Cor 1–9). After hearing the

dently maligned Paul for his clear lack of power

good news from Titus, Paul wrote a friendly letter

and charismatic presence (“his bodily presence is

to express his pleasure at the Corinthians’ change

weak and his speech contemptible,” 10:10); he in

of heart (2 Cor 2:5–11; 7:5–16). He also wanted to

turn claimed that they were ministers of Satan

explain why he had not come for another visit, to

rather than apostles of Christ (11:13–15). Paul

assure them that he was not simply being fickle in

argued that his gospel message would be totally

making and revising his plans (1:15–2:4). Part of

compromised if the Corinthians accepted the

this letter (without, at least, its closing) is found in

claims of his opponents (11:4).

2 Corinthians 1–9, or possibly only chapters 1–7,

since some scholars think that chapters 8–9 are

part of another letter, or possibly even two letters

Paul’s Third Letter (the “painful” letter, partly

(see box 20.2).

embodied in 2 Cor 10–13). After his second

visit, Paul wrote a letter in which he went on the

attack against the superapostles. He continued to

The Overarching Points of the Letter

insist that the life of the believer is not the glori—

After someone edited the two (or three or four or

fied, exalted existence that Christ presently

five) letters into the one book that we call 2

enjoys. Believers live in an age of evil and suffer—

Corinthians, we lose sight of Paul’s relationship

ing, in which God’s enemy Satan is still active and

with this congregation. Thus, we can never know

in control. Those who boast of their power and

whether all the problems were solved, or whether

wisdom do not understand that the end has not

any more stormy incidents occurred. Nor can we

yet come, that this is an age of weakness in which

determine whether the Corinthians decided to

God’s wisdom appears foolish. Apostles, in partic—

adopt Paul’s point of view and reject the perspec—

ular, suffer in this age, since they are the chief

tives brought in by others from the outside.

opponents of the cosmic powers of evil who are in

Clearly, though, the basic message that Paul

charge (11:20–31). Even though apostles may

tried to convey in 1 Corinthians is very much in

have had a glimpse of the glory to come (12:1–4),

evidence in the collection of letters we are

they are still subject to pain and suffering, which

investigating here. Consider first the fragment of

keeps them from boasting of their own merits and

the painful letter (chaps. 10–13), written in part

forces them to rely totally on the grace of God for

to address the claims of superiority made by the

what they can accomplish (12:5–10). In light of

superapostles. Rather than simply attacking

these criteria, the superapostles are not apostles at

them on their own terms, for example, by argu—

all. Paul also used this letter to attack the person

ing that he could do better miracles than they,

who had publicly humiliated him and to warn the

Paul dismisses their very grounds for considering

congregation to deal with him prior to his arrival

themselves apostles. This is reminiscent of the

in judgment, for Paul himself would not be lenient

way he treated the leaders of the divisive fac—

when he came (13:1–2).

tions in 1 Corinthians 1–4, where he denies that

Part of this letter, principally the part that dealt

earthly wisdom and power are signs of the

with the superapostles, is found in what is now 2

divine. For him, the credentials of an apostle are

Corinthians 10–13. The letter was sent with Paul’s

not the glorious acts that he or she can perform,

companion Titus, and it evidently had its desired

as if this were an age of exaltation and splendor.

affect. The Corinthians punished the one who had

The true apostle will suffer, much as Christ suf—

insulted Paul (2 Cor 2:5–11), repented of the pain

fered. For the end has not yet come, and those

they had caused him, and returned to his fold (2

who rely on spectacular acts of power must be

Cor 7:5–12). Paul in the meantime canceled his

suspected of collusion with the cosmic forces

plan to make another visit to the congregation (2

that are in charge of this age, namely, Satan and

Cor 1:15–2:2).

his vile servants (11:12–15).

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This is why Paul goes to such lengths to “boast in

With this longing, however, comes the assur—

his weaknesses” in this letter (12:5), principally by

ance that in the future the hoped-for glory will

detailing all the ways that he has suffered as Christ’s

become a reality for those who have been recon—

apostle (11:17–33). It may not seem like much to

ciled to God through Christ (5:16–21). Until this

boast about—being beaten up regularly, living in

future reality makes itself known, life in this world

constant danger and in fear for one’s life—but for

is characterized by affliction and hardship. The suf—

Paul these are signs that he is the true apostle of

fering of the present age, however, is not enough to

Christ, who himself suffered the ignominious fate of

tarnish the hope of the true believer, for “this

crucifixion. In particular, Paul claims that God has

momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal

kept him weak so that he would be unable to boast

weight of glory beyond all measure” (4:17). This,

about any work that he himself has performed.

above all else, is the apocalyptic message that Paul

Anything good that comes of his ministry has nec—

seeks to convey to his Corinthian converts.

essarily been performed by God (12:6–10). The

same cannot be said of the superapostles.

Paul’s apocalyptic message stresses in the

GALATIANS

strongest terms that believers are not yet glorified

with Christ. They live in a world of sin and evil

With the letter to the Galatians we enter into an

and must contend with forces greater than them—

entirely different set of issues from those evident so

selves, until the end comes and Christ’s followers

far in Paul’s correspondence. On the one hand, there

are raised into immortal bodies to be exalted with

is no question concerning the unity of this epistle; it

him. For reasons that are ultimately unknown, the

is just one letter, written completely at one time, to

Corinthians came to agree with Paul on precisely

address one problem. But the problem itself was

this point. It is hard to imagine what changed

quite unlike anything that had arisen among the

their minds. Was Paul (or his representative Titus)

Thessalonians and the Corinthians. In brief, the

simply too persuasive to refute? Were the supera—

occasion of the letter was as follows. After Paul con—

postles discredited in some other way? We will

verted a number of Gentiles to faith in Christ in the

never know.

region of Galatia, other missionaries arrived on the

We do know that after their reconciliation Paul

scene, insisting that believers must follow parts of

wrote another letter in which, along with his grat—

the Jewish Law in order to be fully right before God.

itude for the church’s change of heart, he

Specifically, the men in these congregations had to

expressed in somewhat more subdued fashion his

accept the Jewish rite of circumcision.

basically apocalyptic view of life in this world. He

Paul was absolutely outraged at this proposal.

begins the letter, now embodied in 2 Cor 1–9 (or

Whereas other apostles to the Gentiles may have

1–7), by stressing his own suffering and the grace

looked upon circumcision as merely unnecessary,

of God that was manifest through it (1:3–11). This

as a painful operation that Gentiles would have no

is to some extent the message of the entire epistle.

reason to undergo unless they really wanted to, for

The gospel is an invaluable treasure, even though

Paul the matter was far more serious. For him,

it has not been fully manifested in this age of pain

Gentiles who underwent circumcision showed a

and suffering. The body has not yet been glorified

complete and absolute misunderstanding of the

and believers are not yet exalted. As a result, “we

meaning of the gospel. In his view, for a Gentile to

have this treasure in clay jars” (4:7). Believers

be circumcised was not simply a superfluous act; it

themselves are lowly and their bodies of little

was an affront to God and a rejection of the justi—

worth, but the gospel message that they proclaim

fication he has provided through Christ. Those

is a treasure for the ages. As Paul puts it later, in

who propose such a thing have perverted the

the body the believer groans, longing to be clothed

gospel (1:7) and are cursed by God (1:8). Paul’s

with a heavenly, glorified body (5:1–10). The pre—

anger in this letter is transparent at the outset. It

sent age is therefore one of suffering and of longis the only letter that he does not begin by thanking for a better age to come.

ing God for the congregation.

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The Occasion and Purpose of the Epistle

populated territory that was eventually linked by the

Paul addresses the letter to “the churches of Galatia”

Romans with the more populous region of the south,

(1:2). Unfortunately, we do not know, specifically,

which included the cities of Lystra, Derbe, Iconium,

where the letter was sent. Before the Roman con—

and Pisidian Antioch. The Romans called this entire

quests, Galatia was a region in the north-central por—

province Galatia, even though the name had earlier

tion of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), a sparsely

been used only to refer to its northern portion.

B L A C K S E A

S

T H R A C E

TU

N

PO

&

Byzantium

B ITHYNIA

G A L A T I A

C A P P A D O C I A

A S I A

Antioch

Iconium

Ephesus

C I L I C I A

Lystra

Colossae

Tarsus

PA

Derbe

MPHYLIA

Antioch

L Y C I A

Aegean

Rhodes

Sea

S Y R I A

Cyprus

M E D I T E R R A N E A N

S E A

Sidon

Figure 20.4 The Roman Province of Galatia in the midst of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). Some historians think that Paul wrote Galatians to churches in the southern part of the province, which are named in Acts as places of his missionary activities but which he himself never mentions (such as Derbe, Lystra, and Iconium). But since he actually calls his readers “Galatians”—an epithet that would apply only to the Celtic peoples of the northern part of the province—it appears that he addressed the letter to churches unknown to the author of Acts.

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To what then, is Paul referring when he speaks of

against Paul himself (or at least that he thought they

the churches of Galatia? Does he mean churches

did) by questioning not only his views but also his

throughout the entire Roman province, comparable

authorization to proclaim them. This would explain

to the churches of Achaia and Macedonia that he

the opening part of Paul’s response, in which he

refers to elsewhere (e.g., 1 Thess 1:7)? Or is he refer—

vehemently denies that he has perverted the mes—

ring only to churches in the northernmost region,

sage of the gospel that he received from the apostles

the region inhabited by people who would, unlike

who came before him (e.g., Jesus’ disciples in

the southerners, refer to themselves as Galatians

Jerusalem), because in fact his message didn’t come

(see Gal 3:1)? The problem is complicated by the

originally from these apostles, or from any human at

fact that the book of Acts indicates that Paul estab—

all. It came from God, in a direct revelation. It is also

lished churches in the southern region, in the cities

possible that Paul’s Galatian opponents insisted that

that I have just named. Paul himself, however,

their message was truer to the Scriptures than his;

never mentions these cities, in Galatians or any—

they may have argued that since the Jewish Bible

where else. Moreover, he claims that he founded

portrays circumcision as the sign of the covenant,

the Galatian churches in somewhat unusual cir—

any man who wants to become a full member of this

cumstances: he had taken seriously ill and was

covenant must first be circumcised.

nursed back to health by the Galatians (at least by

In basic outline, the message of Paul’s Galatian

some of them). In this context, he preached the

opponents appears similar to that proclaimed by

gospel and converted them (4:13–17). He does not

other early Christians. The implicit logic behind it

appear, then, to have established these churches as

may have been that God is totally consistent and

he passed through the region preaching in the local

does not “change the rules.” This is the Jewish

synagogues, as is recorded in Acts.

God who gave the Jewish Law, who sent the

Although we do not know to which churches

Jewish Jesus as the Jewish messiah to the Jewish

Paul sent the letter, we do know that newcomers

people in fulfillment of the Jewish Scriptures.

had arrived in Galatia preaching a gospel that Paul

Those who want to enjoy the full benefits of sal—

sees as standing at odds with his own, and the

vation, according to this view, must obviously join

Galatian Christians appear to have been persuad—

the Jewish people by being circumcised if they are

ed by them (1:6–9). We cannot be certain what

men and by practicing the Law whether they are

these opponents actually preached. All we have is

men or women (see box 20.3).

Paul’s description of their message, and we have no

Scholars dispute whether these newcomers

guarantee that he knows, understands, or presents

were Jews from birth or Gentiles who had con—

it accurately. It is clear, however, that he sees as

verted to Judaism. Galatians 5:12 may suggest the

the major point of contention the newcomers’

latter: Paul hopes that when they perform the

insistence that (male) Gentile converts to

operation of circumcision on themselves, the knife

Christianity have to be circumcised in order to be

slips. In either case, they were almost certainly

fully right before God (see e.g., 5:2–6). Paul inter—

believers in Jesus who taught others to adhere to

prets his opponents to mean that a person has to

some, or all, of the dictates of the Jewish Law. Paul

perform the works prescribed by the Jewish Law to

finds this view offensive both to his person (since

have salvation. This message is totally unaccept—

his authority is being questioned) and to his mes—

able from his point of view. According to the

sage (since his gospel is being compromised).

gospel that he preaches—and this, as he points

out, is the message that led the Galatians to faith

in Christ in the first place—a person is “justified”

Paul’s Response

(made right with God) not by doing the works of

Paul begins to make his case against his opponents

the Jewish Law but by having faith in Christ

already in the prescript of his letter; he is an apos-

(2:16). In Paul’s view, the newcomers’ message

tle who has been “sent neither by human commis—

completely contradicts his own.

sion nor from human authorities, but through

What else might these newcomers have taught?

Jesus Christ and God the Father” (1:1). That is to

It is possible that they actually took the offensive

say, he neither dreamt up his apostolic mission nor

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SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 20.3 The Logic of the Opponents' Position in Galatia

Paul’s Galatian opponents may well have appealed to the Jewish Scriptures to argue their position. For both Paul and his opponents, Gentiles had been allowed to enter into the covenant that God had made with the Jewish people. They too could stand in a unique relationship with this one who created the world and chose his people. But the Scriptures were quite clear concerning what this covenantal relationship had involved from the beginning, when God first established it with the father of the Jews, Abraham: God said to Abraham, “As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised . . . including the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.” (Gen 17:9–14) Paul’s opponents may simply have argued that while the covenant was now open to all who believed in Christ, God had not rescinded the rules of the covenant itself: it was an

“everlasting“ covenant, that is, one that would not be changed. Those who wished to belong to it must be circumcised, as God had said from the very beginning.

received it from any other human. He has been

Paul insists that his message comes directly from a

commissioned by God himself. That this self-revelation of Christ. Consider the ominous impli—

defense is occasioned by the Galatians’ acceptance

cations: what if someone disagrees with it?

of a contrary message becomes clear as Paul moves

To establish his point, Paul devotes nearly two

into the body of the letter. Instead of thanking

chapters to an autobiographical sketch of his ear—

God for these churches, Paul begins with a rebuke:

lier life. The sketch might seem odd to a reader

the Galatians have deserted God by adopting a

who is familiar with Paul’s general reluctance to

gospel that differs from the one that Paul preached

reminisce about his past, but the autobiography

to them (1:6–9). Anyone who affirms a different

bears directly on the question at hand, the relia—

gospel, however, stands under God’s curse.

bility of his gospel message. It shows that “the

In this early stage of the letter, Paul does not

gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human

indicate what this other gospel entails. He evident—

origin; for I did not receive it from a human

ly can assume that the Galatians know perfectly

source, nor was I taught it, but I received it

well what he is referring to, even though we as out—

through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:11–12).

siders do not find out until somewhat later. Rather

To demonstrate his point, Paul recounts his

than launching directly into a theological refuta—

conversion, in which he switched from being a per—

tion, he begins his counterattack by raising the

secutor of the church to being a preacher of its

question of authorization. Quite apart from what his

gospel. This conversion occurred through a direct

message is, what authority stands behind it? Did he

act of God, who “was pleased to reveal his Son to

invent his gospel message? Or did he receive it from

me, so that I might proclaim him among the

someone else and then change some of its details?

Gentiles” (1:15). Thus, the revelation of who Jesus

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really was, as opposed to who Paul had earlier

1:20). On the other hand, he may know that his

thought he was, came directly from God and for a

opponents have claimed superior authorization for

clear purpose: so Paul could take the message to the

themselves, by pointing to the Jerusalem apostles

Gentiles, that is, to non-Jews like the Galatians.

as the source of their own message. If so, then his

This message was not given by the Jerusalem

sketch shows that whatever the source of his oppo—

apostles or by anyone else: “I did not confer with

nents’ message, his own came straight from God.

any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to

To be sure, Paul does not deny that he has had

those who were already apostles before me”

some contact with the Jerusalem apostles. He

(1:16–17; contrast Acts 9:19–30). Why is Paul so

admits that three years after his conversion (i.e.,

emphatic on this point? It may be that he suspects

long after his views were set) he went to visit

that his Galatian opponents have claimed that he

Cephas for fifteen days. He does not, however,

modified the gospel that he originally learned from

indicate precisely why he went. Indeed, the term

Jesus’ earliest followers, the Jerusalem apostles. If

that he uses, which is sometimes simply translated

so, then his autobiographical sketch shows that the

“to visit” (Gal 1:18), can mean either that he went

claim is simply not true (“before God, I do not lie!”

“to learn something” or “to convey some informa—

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 20.4 Cephas and Peter

Most people naturally assume that when Paul says that he went to Jerusalem to visit Cephas, he is referring to Peter, Jesus’ closest disciple. This is because neither “Peter” nor

“Cephas” was a proper name in the Greco-Roman world, but both are translations of the word “rock” (“Peter” is Greek and “Cephas” is Aramaic). Moreover, according to the Fourth Gospel, this word was the nickname (something like our modern name “Rocky”) that Jesus bestowed upon his disciple Simon (John 1:41).

A number of Christian authors from the second to the eighth centuries, however, believed that there were two different persons, one named Peter and the other Cephas, that is, two important followers of Jesus who shared the same unusual nickname. If this ancient tradition is right, then Peter would have been Jesus’ original disciple and Cephas would have been the leader of the church in Jerusalem some years later.

Could this tradition be historically accurate? Interestingly, the only surviving author from antiquity who was personally acquainted with Cephas was the apostle Paul. Judge for yourself: when Paul speaks about Cephas, does he mean Peter the disciple? Look especially at Galatians 2:6–9 where he mentions both names, in the same breath, without indicating that he is referring to the same person. Indeed, he appears to assume that these two persons are engaged in two different kinds of activity, Cephas the head of the Jerusalem church and Peter the missionary to the Jews. It may indeed be that Paul (and his Galatian readers) knew two different apostles who went by similar nicknames—Cephas a resident of Jerusalem, who converted to faith in Jesus after seeing him raised from the dead (1 Cor 15:5) and who became prominent among the apostles (like James the brother of Jesus, who is also mentioned in these verses), and Peter, Jesus’ disciple who was engaged in missionary work outside of Jerusalem. If so, then Paul did not go to Jerusalem to learn something about the historical Jesus from his closest disciple Peter; he went to consult with the leader of the Jerusalem church, Cephas.

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tion.” It may be that he went to keep Cephas, the

sentatives of the apostle James, the brother of

chief apostle in Jerusalem at the time, apprised of

Jesus, arrived on the scene, Cephas withdrew from

his actions (see box 20.4).

fellowship with the Gentiles, and the other

Some fourteen years later Paul met with a larg—

Jewish-Christians joined with him (2:12–13). Paul

er group of apostles for a similar reason, to inform

saw this withdrawal as an act of hypocrisy and

them of his missionary activities (2:1–10). It was

openly rebuked Cephas for it. In Paul’s view,

his second trip to Jerusalem (in the book of Acts

Cephas had compromised the earlier decision not

it happens to be his third), and it represented a

to compel Gentiles to obey Jewish laws (2:14).

critical moment for the Gentile mission. One does

Scholars have different opinions concerning

not get the sense from Paul that he made this sec—

what this conflict was all about. It may be best to

ond visit because he wanted to make sure that his

assume that eating with the Gentiles somehow

gospel message was right, as if he could imagine it

required Cephas and his Jewish-Christian compan—

being wrong! (Remember, he claimed to have

ions to violate kosher food laws. They may have

received it from God himself.) Instead, Paul went

thought that this was acceptable so long as they

to convince the Jerusalem apostles that Gentiles

gave no offense to other believers, but when the

were not required to follow the Jewish Law,

representatives of James, that is, Jewish-Christians

including circumcision (the “sign of the

who perhaps continued to keep kosher, came to

covenant”) in order to be right with God, or “jus—

town, Cephas and his companions realized that

tified” (2:1–5). He met with the leaders privately

they had to decide with whom they were going to

to persuade them of his views (2:2), and he suc—

eat. They chose not to give offense to their Jewish

ceeded without qualification (2:7–10), even

brothers and sisters and so ate with them.

though others were present who argued the alter—

For Paul, this was an absolute affront because it

native perspective. Paul calls these other people

suggested that there was a distinction between Jew

“false believers” (2:4) and sees them as the prede—

and Gentile before God, whereas the agreement

cessors of his opponents in Galatia.

that had been struck in Jerusalem maintained that

The important point for Paul is that the

there was not. Jew and Gentile were on equal foot—

Jerusalem apostles agreed with him rather than

ing before God, and any attempt to suggest Jewish

with his adversaries at the conference. Even

superiority was a compromise of the gospel.

though these apostles were committed to evange—

We do not know the outcome of this confronta—

lizing Jews (2:7–9), they conceded that there was

tion, in part because we never hear Cephas’s side of

no need for Gentile converts to be circumcised.

the argument. Paul’s narration of the incident is

Emblematic of this decision was the fate of the

important, though, because it introduces the issue

Gentile Titus, who accompanied Paul to the con—

that the letter is ultimately about: the relationship

ference and who was not compelled to be circum—

of Paul’s gospel message to the Jewish Law (2:15).

cised by those who took the opposing perspective

At this stage, Paul begins to mount theoretical and

(2:3–4). By securing this agreement with the

scriptural arguments to show that the Jewish Law

Jerusalem apostles, Paul could rest assured that

has no role in a person’s right standing before God

they would give his mission their full blessing and

and that, as a consequence, his opponents in

not try to undermine it. In his words, he knew that

Galatia are in error not only for doubting his

he “was not running, or had not run, in vain” (2:2).

authorization but also for perverting his gospel.

Paul provides one other autobiographical detail

These arguments are somewhat intricate, so here I

to secure his point. After his meeting with the

will simply summarize some of the salient points.

Jerusalem apostles, one of them, Cephas, came to

spend time with him and his church in Antioch.

What Was the Basic Issue?

Paul begins in

At first, Cephas joined with Paul and the other

2:15–21 with a forceful expression of his views.

Christians of Jewish background in sharing “table

Even as a good Jew himself, he has come to realize

fellowship” with the Gentile believers (“he used to

that a person’s right standing (“justification”)

eat with the Gentiles”; 2:11–12). But when repre—

before God does not come through doing the

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works of the Jewish Law but through faith in

whether they are Jews who have the Law or

Christ (2:16). If a person could be made right with

Gentiles who don’t (3:6–9).

God through the Law, then there would have been

It is also possible that Paul makes such a

no reason for Christ to die (2:21).

lengthy appeal to the teachings of the Torah to

Not only is this the right way to understand the

show that he himself is quite capable when it

Law, according to Paul, it is also the message that

comes to interpreting the Jewish Scriptures. Not

the Law itself teaches. Now that he has come to

only was he raised Jewish and zealous for Jewish

grasp this message of the Law, he can say that

traditions prior to his conversion to Christ

“through the Law I died to the Law” (2:19). This

(1:13–14), he continues to explore the Jewish

is a difficult saying, which might be paraphrased as

Scriptures and is second to none (including his

follows: “Through the correct understanding of

opponents in Galatia) in his ability to interpret

the Law that the Law itself has provided, I have

them.

given up on the Law as a way of attaining a right

standing before God.” Once the Law is abandoned

What Is the Problem with Gentiles Keeping the

as a way to God, then, no one should pretend that

Law? Paul claims that those who do not live by

it affects one’s standing before God; or to use Paul’s

faith but by the Law, that is, those who try to

image, it is wrong to “build up” the importance of

attain a right standing before God by keeping the

the Law for salvation once its importance has

Law, are subject to God’s curse rather than his

already been “torn down” (2:18).

blessing, despite their motivation and desire. On

The matter is significant because the Galatians,

the one hand, the Torah itself curses those who do

former pagans who converted to faith in Christ,

not “obey all the things written in the book of the

have begun to adopt the view that Paul opposes,

law” (2:10). Paul does not explain why everyone

namely that doing works of the Law (in particular,

is automatically put under this curse, but it may

circumcision) is important for one’s standing

be because in his opinion no one ever does “obey

before God. Paul is incensed and incredulous:

all the things written in the law,” as he indicates

“You foolish Galatians! Who bewitched you? . . .

elsewhere (see Rom 3:9–20). Indeed, even though

Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of

he does not explicitly mention this issue, Paul

the law or by believing what you heard?” (3:1).

may be thinking that the Law itself demonstrates

his point, since a good portion of the Torah is

Why Does Paul Appeal to the Law to Dispute

devoted to describing the sacrifices that have to

This View of the Law? One of the most striking

be performed by all Jews, even the Jewish high

things about Paul’s response to the Galatians’ situ—

priest, to atone for their sins when they inadver—

ation is that he bases a good deal of his argument

tently violate the Law. If one must obey all of the

against his opponents’ emphasis on the Law on a

things in the Law or suffer its curse, and the Law

careful interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures

itself indicates that no one does so, where then

themselves. This approach may seem ironic to an

does that leave us? Clearly everyone who tries to

outside reader—Paul is citing the Jewish Law in

obey the Law stands under the curse that the Law

order to show that the Law is to play no role in a

itself pronounces.

person’s standing before God! For Paul, though,

Moreover, and this point is more clearly

this line of argument is completely sensible. He

expressed in the passage, the Law cannot place

maintains that the Scriptures themselves teach

someone in a right standing before God because

that the Law was not given in order to bring about

the Scriptures indicate that a person will find life

a right standing before God. From the very begin—

through having faith (Hab 2:6, quoted in 3:11).

ning, people have been made right with God by

Carrying out the Law, though, is not a matter of

faith, starting with the father of the Jews,

trusting God (faith); it is a matter of doing some—

Abraham himself, in Genesis, the first book of the

thing (work). If faith is the way to life, then doing

Law. For Paul, the true children of Abraham are

the Law will not satisfy the requirement. Only

those who have faith, just as Abraham had faith—

faith like the faith of Abraham, the father of all



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believers (not of Jews only), will put one in a right

do so because justification comes through faith,

standing before God.

not action.

Why Then Did God Give the Law in the First

Who Then Are the True Descendants of

Place?

The question naturally arises, then, if

Abraham? Paul understands that the Jews and

practicing the Law does not put a person into a

Gentiles who have faith like that of Abraham are

right standing before God, and it was never meant

his true descendants, as opposed to unbelieving

to do so, why was it ever given at all (3:19)? Paul’s

Jews who are simply his physical progeny. This per—

answer in 3:19–29 has caused interpreters dif—

spective is especially clear in the allegory that Paul

ficulties over the years. Perhaps it is best to under—

gives in 4:21–30. The allegory represents an origi—

stand his comments to mean that the Law was

nal and intriguing interpretation of the story of

given to provide instruction and guidance to the

Genesis 21. (You should read the story on your own

Jewish people, informing them of God’s will and

before examining again Paul’s interpretation of it.)

keeping them “in line” until God came to fulfill

In Paul’s view, Abraham’s son Isaac, born of the

his promise to Abraham to “bless his offspring”

promise, represents the Christian church (i.e., all

(3:16). This fulfillment would come in Christ,

those who believe in God’s promise), while his son

who was himself the offspring of Abraham spoken

Ishmael, born of the flesh, represents Jews who do

of in the promise (3:16). Thus the Law served as

not believe in Christ. In other words, those who

a “disciplinarian” until the arrival of Christ; it

have faith in Christ are the legitimate heirs of God’s

is called a paidogogos (to use the Greek term), i.e.,

promise. Unbelieving Jews, on the other hand, are

one who made sure the children kept on the

children born into slavery (since Hagar, the mother

straight and narrow until they reached maturity.

of Ishmael, was a slave). Those who submit to the

At no point, though, was the Law meant to put a

Jewish Law apart from faith in Christ submit to a

person into a right standing before God. It couldn’t

yoke of slavery; they correspond to the son of the

F P O

Figure 20.5 God giving the Law to Moses, from a panel of fifteenth-century bronze doors of the Baptistry in Florence, Italy, by Lorenzo Ghiberti. Unlike in this portrayal (and unlike in the book of Exodus itself), Paul claimed that the Law did not come directly from God but through angelic intermediaries, thereby lessening its divine character and eternal importance (Gal 3:19).

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slave woman. Those who do have faith will never

ing, presumably, the law to love one’s neighbor).

submit to this yoke. An amazing interpretation this:

How then can he insist that Christians fulfill the

Jews are not the children promised to Abraham, but

Law? Paul evidently believes that those who

Christians (whether Jews or Gentiles) are!

receive the Spirit of God through believing in

Christ (3:1) are empowered by the Spirit to do

Doesn’t This Teaching Lead to Lawlessness?

what the Law commands. Indeed, their lives will

Paul concludes this letter by addressing a problem

bear fruit in ways that fulfill the law, and they will

that some might think is implicit in his teaching

do those things that no law forbids (5:22–23).

that all people, Jews and Gentiles, are made right

Those who do not have the Spirit on the other

with God through faith apart from performing the

hand, that is, those who are not believers, are nec—

works of the Law. If the Law was given in order to

essarily ruled by their flesh, and by nature engage

provide direction and discipline to God’s people,

in activities that are contrary to the Law and will

but Gentile believers don’t have to keep it, aren’t

of God (5:16–21). Such persons will never inherit

they liable to turn to wild and reckless behavior?

the kingdom of God (5:21). Thus, perhaps ironi—

For Paul, nothing could be further from the

cally, those who have faith in Jesus, not those who

truth. In perhaps one of the greatest ironies in his

are circumcised, are the ones who fulfill the right—

thinking, Paul indicates that Gentile believers in

eous demands of God’s Law.

Christ, who are not obligated to keep the Law

(and therefore must not be circumcised) are to be

totally committed to one another in love because

In Sum: Paul and the Law

in so doing, they fulfill the Law! Indeed, for Paul,

This question of the relationship of faith in Christ to

Christians must be enslaved to one another in

the Jewish Law is one that continued to perplex Paul

love (5:13) precisely because “the whole law is

throughout his life. Indeed, it is one of the central

summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall

questions that he had to address as an apostle of

love your neighbor as yourself’” (5:14).

Christ, for he taught at one and the same time that

His argument raises a number of tantalizing

Christ was the fulfillment of the Law and that believ—

questions. First, how can Paul tell his converts not

ers did not have to perform the works of the Law—

to follow the Law (You must not be circumcised)

meaning, as we have seen, that they did not have to

and then require them to follow it (You must love

carry out those aspects of the Law that in outsiders’

one another so as to fulfill the Law)? Evidently—

eyes made Jews Jewish. The question proved to be of

although this is not a point that he makes explicit

ongoing importance because it related to larger ones

in any of his writings—Paul thinks that there are

that Paul’s version of the gospel compelled him to

different kinds of laws provided in the Jewish

address, including the questions of whether God had

Scriptures (compare what we found with respect to

abandoned his people Israel by making faith in

the Gospel of Matthew in Chapter 7). There are

Christ the sole means of salvation and whether God

some laws that are distinctive to being Jewish.

had as a consequence proved himself to be unfaithful

These would include circumcision and kosher food

and untrustworthy by not staying true to his promise

laws. Paul insisted that his Gentile converts not

always to be the God of Israel. These are some of the

keep these laws: indeed he claims here in Galatians

issues that Paul would explore in the fuller, and

that those who do so “have cut yourselves off from

somewhat less heated, exposition of his views of the

Christ; you have fallen from grace” (5:4). At the

gospel in his letter to the Romans (see Chapter 21).

same time, he urges his converts to keep the principle that summarizes the entire Torah; they should

love their neighbors as themselves. It is hard to

PHILIPPIANS

escape the conclusion that Paul saw some laws as

distinctively Jewish (Be circumcised) and others as

We do not know very much about the Christian

applicable to all people (Love your neighbor).

community in Philippi because Paul does not provide

Paul seems to imply in Galatians 3, however,

as many explicit reminders of their past relationship

that no one is able to keep all of the laws (includ—

as he does, for example, for the Thessalonians and

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Corinthians. There is some information provided in

he had caused. Fortunately, his health returned,

Acts 16; unfortunately, little of it can be corroborat—

and he was now set to make his journey back home

ed from Paul’s letter itself. Paul never mentions, for

to Philippi. Paul wrote this letter to keep the

example, the principal characters of Luke’s account,

Philippians informed of his situation and to

Lydia and the Philippian jailer.

express his pleasure that all had turned out well.

The city of Philippi was in eastern Macedonia,

Paul sent the letter from prison (1:7). We do not

northeast of Thessalonica, along one of the major

know where he was imprisoned or why, except that

trade routes through the region. Paul speaks in 1

it was in connection with his preaching of the

Thessalonians of being shamefully treated in

gospel. He uses the letter to comment on his adver—

Philippi prior to taking his mission to

sity and to reassure his congregation that it has

Thessalonica (1 Thess 2:1–2). We should probably

turned out for the good: as a result of his bonds,

assume that he is referring to his initial visit to the

others have become emboldened to preach

city when he founded the church there. In view of

(1:12–18). Paul uses his own situation to explain

their rough treatment, Paul and his companions

that suffering is the destiny of Christians in the

may not have spent much time there, perhaps only

present age (1:29–30)—a message comparable to

enough to make some converts, instruct them in

that which he proclaimed in the Corinthian corre—

the rudiments of the faith, and get out of town

spondence. He continues by providing some gener—

while the getting was good.

al words of admonition (as was common in friend—

We have little information about the converts

ship letters): the Philippians are to be unified,

themselves. We can probably assume that the

serving one another rather than themselves, and

Philippian church, like the other congregations

thereby following the example of Christ (2:1–11).

Paul established, consisted chiefly of converted

One of the most striking features of this letter

pagans who had been taught to worship the one

comes after these general exhortations. For the

true God of Israel and to expect the return of his

friendly and joyful tone that characterizes the let—

Son, Jesus. References to these teachings can be

ter’s first two chapters shifts almost without warn—

found throughout the epistle (e.g., 1:6, 10–11;

ing at the beginning of chapter three. Indeed, if

2:5–11; 3:20–21). Why, though, did Paul write it?

one didn’t know that there were two more chap—

The answer to this question is somewhat compli—

ters left in the book, it would appear that the let—

cated, more complicated, for example, than in the

ter was drawing to a close at the end of chapter

case of Galatians, for it appears to many scholars

two. Paul has explained his own situation, given

that different parts of this letter presuppose differ—

some admonitions, stated the purpose of his writ—

ent occasions. As was the case with 2 Corinthians,

ing, and provided his concluding exhortation:

Philippians may represent a combination of two or

“Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord”

more pieces of correspondence.

(3:1). Why does he say “finally” but then change

the subject completely and continue writing for

another two chapters? Indeed, the words that fol-

The Unity of the Letter

low are hard to understand in the immediate con—

The first two chapters of Philippians sound very

text: “To write the same things to you is not trou—

much like a friendship letter written by Paul to his

blesome to me, and for you it is a safeguard” (3:1).

converts. The occasion of the letter is reasonably

Why would anyone find his exhortation to rejoice

evident (see especially 2:25–30). The Philippians

troubling? Paul immediately launches into a vitri—

had sent to Paul one of their stalwart members, a

olic attack on people who are his enemies, pre—

man named Epaphroditus, for some reason that is

sumably in Philippi, people whom he calls “dogs,”

not disclosed (until chap. 4). While there minis-

“evil workers,” and “those who mutilate the flesh”

tering to Paul, Epaphroditus was taken ill; the

(3:2). He then defends his own understanding of

Philippians had heard of his illness and grew con—

the gospel against these false teachers (3:3–11). A

cerned. Epaphroditus in turn learned of their con—

peaceful letter of friendship has now become a

cern and became distraught over the anxiety that

harsh letter of warning.

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Moreover, the issue of unity within the

need to keep the Jewish Law (see 3:3–6), and two

Christian community takes on an additional twist

women in the congregation had argued over some—

in these chapters. We learn that there are two

thing in public (4:2–3). He wrote the Philippians

women in particular, Euodia and Syntyche, who

a letter, partially embodied now in chapters 3–4,

are at odds with one another and causing some—

thanking them for the gift, warning against the

thing of a disturbance in the community (4:2–3).

false teachers, and urging Euodia and Syntyche to

No longer does Paul deal in the abstract with the

get along.

need for unity; now he actually puts some names

After Paul sent this letter, Epaphroditus

on the problem. What is particularly interesting is

became ill, the Philippians learned of it and

that Epaphroditus is again mentioned in these

became concerned, Epaphroditus heard of their

closing chapters. If you didn’t know better,

concern and became distraught, and finally he

though, you would think that he had just arrived,

recovered. In the course of the communication

not that he had been with Paul already for an

that was obviously going back and forth, Paul

extended period of time (e.g., see 4:18, “I am fully

learned of the improved situation in Philippi.

satisfied, now that I have received from

When Epaphroditus became well enough to trav—

Epaphroditus the gifts you sent”). In any case, it is

el, Paul sent another letter back with him, a

now clear why Epaphroditus has come and why

friendship letter explaining how things now fared

Paul is penning this letter. The Philippians have

with him and providing some renewed (but gener—

sent him to bring a financial contribution, and

al) exhortations to the community to maintain

Paul is writing a thank-you note.

their unity in Christ. Most of this letter is now

The timing of his response is puzzling. If

found in Philippians 1–2. Some such scenario

Epaphroditus has been with Paul for such a long

would explain why there are such differences

period of time—long enough for him to become

between the first and second parts of the letter.

deathly ill, for the Philippians to get word of it, for

him to learn that they were distressed, and for him

then to recover—why is Paul only now writing to

The Overarching Points of the Letter

tell them that he has received the gift? Surely he

Some of the issues that we have seen Paul address

was in communication with them before this

in other letters are found here as well. Throughout

(since they have heard that Epaphroditus arrived

the Thessalonian and Corinthian correspondence,

and that he later became deathly ill).

for example, we saw Paul emphasize that prior to

Scholars differ on how to evaluate the various

the return of Christ in judgment suffering was the

pieces of this contextual puzzle. One solution is that

lot of the Christian. This is part and parcel of his

there are two or possibly even three letters that have

apocalyptic message, that even though the powers

been edited together here, letters that come from

of evil have begun to be defeated through the cross

different times and were written for different occa—

of Christ, the end has not yet come. This contin—

sions. For simplicity’s sake, I’ll assume that there are

ues to be an age under the dominion of the cosmic

two letters and explain how the theory works.

powers opposed to God, and those who stand

After Paul established the Philippian church,

against them will bear the brunt of their wrath.

he left to pursue his apostolic work elsewhere. We

Christians will necessarily suffer, but all will be

don’t know exactly where he was when he was

redeemed when Christ returns. This message con—

writing this letter, or series of letters (Rome?

tinues to find expression here in Philippians,

Ephesus?), only that he was in jail. The

where Paul again portrays himself as one who suf—

Philippians learned of his needs and sent him a gift

fers for the sake of Christ (e.g., 1:7, 17), where he

of money through the agency of one of their lead—

again emphasizes that it is the call of the Christian

ing members, Epaphroditus. Paul thankfully

to suffer (1:29), and where he again stresses that at

received the gift and learned (from Epaphroditus

Christ’s return all will be made right (3:20–21).

himself?) about two major problems in the com—

One other motif that holds the two parts of the

munity: some false teachers had begun to stress the

letter together is the need for these Christians to

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SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 20.5 The Christ Hymn of Philippians

One of the first things any pagan author said about the early Christians was that they

“sang hymns to Christ as if to a god” (Pliny the Younger’s Letter X to Trajan). Many scholars believe that several of the earliest hymns to Christ have been inserted by the authors of the New Testament in appropriate places of their writings (e.g., John 1:1–18). There are various ways to reconstruct the original form of the hymn that Paul appears to be citing in Philippians 2:6–11. The following reconstruction shows how the hymn can be broken down into two major parts, each comprising three fairly equally balanced stanzas of three lines each; the first part indicates the progressive condescension (or self-humbling) of Christ, the second his subsequent exaltation by God.

The Condescension of Christ

Though he was in the form of God,

he did not regard equality with God

as something to be grasped.

But he emptied himself

taking the form of a slave

being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

he humbled himself,

and became obedient unto death.

The Exaltation of Christ

Therefore God also highly exalted him,

and gave him the name

that is above every name.

So that at the name of Jesus,

every knee should bend,

in heaven and on earth and under the earth.

And every tongue should confess

that Jesus Christ is Lord,

to the glory of God the Father.

maintain their unity by practicing self-giving love

box 20.5). This is one of the most poetic and

for one another. The message finds its most pointed

beloved portions of all of Paul’s letters; readers have

expression in the request in chapter 4 for the two

long observed the striking cadences of the passage,

women Euodia and Syntiche to stop fighting, but it

its balanced rhythms and exalted views. It has all

is expounded at greatest length in chapter 2. Here

the marks of an early hymn sung in worship to

Paul recounts the actions of Christ on behalf of

Christ, and Paul quotes it in full because it makes an

believers, in a passage that scholars have come to

important point for his Philippian readers (cf. the

call the “Christ hymn” of Philippians (2:6–11; see

prologue of the Fourth Gospel; see Chapter 10).

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SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 20.6 Was Paul Contemplating Suicide?

In an intriguing book that discusses suicide and martyrdom in the ancient world ( A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom among Christians and Jews in Antiquity. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), Arthur Droge and James Tabor argue that the modern notion that suicide is a “sin” stems not from the Bible, but from the fifth-century Saint Augustine.

Prior to Augustine, suicide per se was not condemned by pagans, Jews, and Christians. On the contrary, in certain circumstances it was even advocated as the right and noble thing to do. Indeed, several famous classical authors spoke of self-inflicted death as a “gain” over present inflictions that should be accepted joyfully. The protagonist of Sophocles’s play Antigone, for example, says “if I am going to die before my time, I count it gain. For death is a gain to one whose life, like mine, is full of misery.” She ends up, then, taking her own life.

So too in a famous passage in Plato’s Apology, Socrates, prior to ending his life by drinking hemlock, reflects that “the state of death is one of two things: either it is virtual nothingness . . ., or it is a change and a migration of the soul from this place to another. And if it is unconsciousness, like sleep in which sleeper does not even dream, death would be a wonderful gain.”

It is striking that in Philippians, Paul indicates that for him “to live is Christ and to die is gain” (1:21). Is he contemplating suicide? Before making a snap decision that he could not have been (on the ground that suicide is a sin), it is important to remember that there were numerous instances of self-death that were “approved” in ancient texts: pagan (e.g., Socrates), Jewish (e.g., the martyrs discussed in the Maccabean literature), and Christian (e.g., early martyrs; and cf. Jesus himself, who is said in the Gospel of Mark to have “given his life” and in John to have “laid down his own life”). Even more importantly, we should notice how Paul himself talks about the possibilities of life and death in Philippians: “If it is to be life in the flesh, this would be a good work for me, and I do not know which to choose (the Greek here does not mean “prefer,” as in some modern translations, but actually “choose”!), but I am constrained by the two things, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is much better, but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for your sake”

(1:22–24).

Paul seems to be debating his options—whether to depart to be with Christ or to stay with the Christians. Some interpreters have taken this to mean that he’s deciding whether to mount a spirited defense on his own behalf when put on trial—on the assumption that failing to do so would lead to his execution. But Paul says nothing about an upcoming trial for a capital offense and seems to assume that he will be able to visit the Philippians shortly (2:24). And it may be pressing the matter too far to think that Paul could control not only his defense but also his own sentencing (and if he did think, in any event, that he could ensure that someone else would execute him, wouldn’t that simply be another way of inflicting his own death?).

Could it be, then, that when Paul debates whether he should choose life or death that he is contemplating the real benefits of taking his own life? And that he rejects that option— not because it was a sin, but because he could still accomplish some good among his followers in Christ?

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Even though many of the details of the hymn are

Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier,

hotly disputed, its basic message is reasonably clear.

and to the church in your house” (v. 2). It is clear,

Rather than striving to be equal with God, Christ

however, that the letter is really addressed to a

humbled himself, becoming human and submitting

solitary individual because Paul speaks to a single

to a death on the cross. God responded to this hum—

person in the body of the letter (“you” singular in

ble act of obedience by exalting Christ above every—

Greek, starting with v. 4 and continuing through

thing else in creation, making him the Lord of all.

v. 24). Evidently, the principal recipient is

Paul does not cite this hymn simply because it is

Philemon, since he is the first one to be named,

a powerful and moving expression of the work of

just as Paul names himself first as the sender of the

Christ. Rather, he uses it because Christ’s humble

letter, prior to mentioning his “co-author,”

obedience provides a model of action for his follow—

Timothy.

ers, who should also lower themselves for the sake

Our only clues about who Philemon was come

of others (2:1–4). Rather than seeking their own

from the letter itself. To begin with, he must have

good and working for their own glory, Christians

been a relatively wealthy Christian. He had a pri—

should seek the good and work for the glory of oth—

vate home large enough to accommodate a church

ers. You will notice that Christ is not the only

(i.e., a private gathering of Christians) and he

example of self-giving, sacrificial love in this chap—

owned slaves. Moreover, he evidently had valu—

ter. Paul also claims that he himself is willing to be

able property that could be stolen, as Paul thinks

sacrificed for his Philippian converts (2:17), that his

that Onesimus might have run off with some of it,

companion Timothy seeks the interests of others

or else embezzled some of the funds entrusted to

rather than his own (2:19–24), and that their own

his charge (v. 18). Tradition holds that Philemon

Epaphroditus has risked everything for the sake of

was a leader of the church in the town of Colossae,

others (2:25–31). The Philippians are to follow

an identification possibly suggested by the fact

these worthy examples, living in unity with one

that in verse 23 Paul conveys greetings from

another through self-sacrificing love.

Epaphras who, according to Colossians 4:12, was a

Whether this admonition had its desired effect

member of that church (although many scholars

or not is something we will probably never know.

doubt that Colossians was actually written by Paul).

After this letter (or this sequence of letters), we

Wherever Philemon was from, he appears to

hear nothing more from Paul of his relationship

have stood in Paul’s debt, as Paul not so subtly

with his converts in Philippi.

reminds him: “I say nothing about your owing me

even your own self ” (v. 19). (By claiming to say

nothing about it, of course, Paul says all that needs

PHILEMON

to be said!) For this reason, it appears likely that

Philemon was one of Paul’s converts. Apart from

The letter to Philemon is a little gem hidden away in

these things, we cannot say much about the man

the inner recesses of the New Testament. Merely a

himself. As for the occasion of Paul’s letter to

single page in length, the size of an average Greco—

Philemon, we know that Paul writes from prison

Roman letter, it is the only undisputed epistle of Paul

(v. 1). Again, we don’t know where he is or why

addressed to an individual. Rather than dealing with

he is being punished; it does appear, though, that

major crises that have arisen in the church, the letter

he anticipates being released (v. 22). While in

concerns a single man, the runaway slave Onesimus,

prison, he met and converted Philemon’s runaway

and his fate at the hands of his master, Philemon.

slave Onesimus. When he speaks of Onesimus in

verse 10 as one “whose father I have become,” the

Greek literally says “whom I begot”— the same

The Occasion and Purpose of the Letter

phrase that Paul uses in 1 Cor 4:15 to refer to his

On first reading, there may be some confusion

converts in Corinth. The letter does not explicit—

concerning the recipient of the letter since it is

ly indicate whether Onesimus himself is impris—

addressed to three individuals and a church: “To

oned, for example, for having been caught in flight

Philemon our dear friend and coworker, to

with some of his master’s goods (v. 18), or whether



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household or incurring some other kind of financial

loss for his master (v. 18). Rather than stand and

face the consequences, he flees to Paul, the apostle

who had converted his master to a new religion and

who was therefore a known and respected authority

for him. While visiting Paul, Onesimus himself

becomes converted to faith in Christ, a conversion

that proves convenient for the nasty little business

at home: Paul can now urge Philemon to receive

Onesimus back not only as a slave but as much

more, as a brother in Christ (v. 16), one who has

been “useful” to Paul and can now be “useful” to

Philemon (v. 11). Here Paul is playing with words.

Slaves were often given descriptive names, such as

the Latin Fortunatus, which means “lucky,” or

Felix, which means “happy.” The Greek name

Onesimus means “useful.”

In his mediatorial role, Paul urges Philemon

Figure 20.6 A bronze slave collar and a bronze slave plaque not to punish his slave, who has now had a change

giving the name and address of the slaves’ owners. Slaves were of heart, and to charge the apostle himself with

often forced to wear such pieces of identification, much like dog tags today, with instructions to return them home if they ran

whatever debt he has incurred. Paul appears to

away. This particular collar reads: “If captured, return me to know full well that Philemon will simply write off

Apronicanus, minister in the imperial palace, for I am a fugitive his loss, given the (spiritual) debt he owes him (vv.

slave.” It was discovered around the neck of a skeleton in Rome.

18–19). But is this all that Paul wants Philemon

to do? Scholars have long debated the real meaning of his request, some thinking that Paul wants

he has come to visit Paul in jail as a friend of his

Philemon to manumit Onesimus (i.e., release him

master. The former option seems unlikely. The

from his slavery), and others that he more specifi—

Roman empire was a big place, and to think that

cally wants him to free him to engage in mission—

Paul and the slave of one of his converts just hap—

ary work. Unfortunately, there is little in the text

pened to end up in the same jail cell, whether in a

that suggests either possibility. Even verse 16,

major urban center like Ephesus or in a small rural

which urges Philemon to receive Onesimus “no

village, simply defies the imagination. On the

longer as a slave but . . . [as] a beloved brother,” is

other hand, if Onesimus was trying to get away

concerned with how he reacts to this errant mem—

from his master, why would he have gone straight

ber of his household; it does not tell him to change

to see one of his friends?

his status. (Consider an analogy: if I were to say to

Recent studies of ancient Roman slavery law

a female acquaintance, “I love you not as a woman

may provide an answer to this question. It was a

but as a friend,” this would not be to deny her gen—

legally recognized practice for a slave who had

der!) It may be that the modern abhorrence of

incurred his or her master’s wrath to flee to one of

slavery has led interpreters to find in Paul a man

the master’s trusted associates to plea for his inter—

ahead of his time, who also opposed the practice.

vention and protection. The associate then served

Yet Paul may be asking for something else. He

as a kind of official mediator, who would try to

emphasizes that Onesimus has been useful to him

smooth out differences that had arisen through

and states quite plainly that even though he would

misunderstanding or even malfeasance. Mal—

like to retain his services he doesn’t want to do so

feasance appears to be the issue here.

without the leave of his master (vv. 12–14).

A possible scenario, then, would be something

Moreover, at the end of his short letter he asks

like the following. Philemon’s slave Onesimus has

Philemon to provide him with some kind of addi—

done something wrong, possible stealing from the

tional benefit in light of his own debt to Paul (the

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word “this” in v. 20 is not found in Greek; literal—

denounce its practice among Christians in partic—

ly the text says, “Yes, provide me with a benefit”).

ular. He never commands his convert Philemon to

What exactly is Paul looking for? Although Paul

manumit his brother in Christ, Onesimus, let

says not a word about Onesimus being set free, it

alone set free all of his other slaves. Was Paul not

appears that he would like to have him sent back.

concerned for the plight of the oppressed?

Perhaps Paul is asking Philemon to present him

Throughout his letters Paul shows a remarkable

with a gift in the person of Onesimus, the slave.

lack of concern for the social inequities of his

world (a lack, that is, from a modern perspective).

Despite his views that all people are equal in

Insights into Paul’s Apostolic Ministry

Christ—Jew and Gentile, slave and free, men and

The short letter to Philemon can provide us with

women (Gal 3:28)—Paul evidently did not see the

some important insights into Paul’s view of his

need to implement this egalitarian ideal in the

apostolic ministry. One thing to observe is Paul’s

workings of society at large. He maintained that

reciprocal relationship with his converts in this

slaves should stay enslaved, that men should

letter. In his other letters, he occasionally appears

continue to dominate women, and that Christians

to be the all-knowing and all-powerful apostle,

as a whole should stay in whatever social roles

who makes his demands and expects people to fol—

they find themselves (see especially 1 Cor

low them. On certain points that he feels strongly

7:17–24). But isn’t this a bit short-sighted?

about, such as what his congregations believe

For us today it may indeed appear short-sighted,

about his apocalyptic message and how they treat

but for Paul it was based on the long view. For this

the Jewish Law, he is altogether adamant. But on

evident lack of concern for a person’s standing in

other issues he falls short of making demands. In

society was related to his notion that the history of

the present instance, he expresses his desire as a

the world as we know it was soon going to come to

request, although, to be sure, he phrases it in such

a crashing halt when God entered into judgment

a way that it would seem impossible for Philemon

with it. Soon the wrath of God would strike, anni—

to turn him down. Even here, that is, while claim—

hilating the forces of evil and bringing in his king—

ing not to assert his apostolic authority, Paul in

dom, in which there would be no more pain or suf—

fact appears to be doing so (cf. vv. 17–19).

fering or injustice or inequity. The equality that

A more important point to be gleaned from this

Paul sought was not one to be effected by social

letter relates specifically to its subject matter. It

change; it was one to be brought by God himself,

may come as a shock to modern readers that Paul

when he destroyed this evil age and set up his

did not use this occasion to lambaste the evils of

kingdom on earth. Little did Paul know that the

the institution of slavery. Not only does Paul fail

faithful would still be around some nineteen cen—

to condemn slavery in general, but he does not

turies later to ponder his words.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

See the suggestions at the end of Chapter 18.

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# CHAPTER 21

The Gospel according to Paul:

The Letter to the Romans

No book of the New Testament has proven to be

THE OCCASION AND

more influential in the history of Christian

PURPOSE OF THE LETTER

thought than Paul’s letter to the Romans. One of

the most frequently quoted pieces of Christian lit—

In one important respect the letter to the Romans

erature during the early centuries of the church, it

is unlike all of Paul’s other letters: it is written to a

was awarded pride of place in the orthodox canon

congregation that Paul did not establish, in a city

of Scripture as the first, and longest, of Paul’s epis—

that he had never visited (see 1:10–15). Given

tles. At the end of the fourth century it was instru—

what we have already seen about Paul’s sense of his

mental in the conversion of Saint Augustine, a

apostolic mission, this circumstance should give us

man whose own writings, based in large measure

pause. Paul’s other letters were written to deal with

on his understanding of Romans, shaped the

problems that had arisen among those whom he

thinking of theologians throughout the Middle

had converted to faith in Christ. That clearly is

Ages. It stood at the center of the debates between

not the case here (see box 21.1)

Protestants and Catholics during the sixteenth—

Even more strikingly, Paul does not appear to be

century Reformation, when Protestant leaders

writing to resolve problems that he has heard about

such as Martin Luther, Philip Melanchton, and

within the Roman church. The issues that he dis—

John Calvin saw it as the clearest exposition of

cusses appear to relate instead to his own preaching

Christian doctrine in the writings of the apostles.

of the Christian gospel. This is clearly the case in

And the book continues to influence and inspire

chapters 1–11, but even his exhortations in chap—

Christian readers in many lands and many lan—

ters 12–15 are general in nature, not explicitly

guages today, theologians and laypeople alike, who

directed to problems specific to the Christians in

cherish its words and puzzle over their meaning.

Rome. Nowhere, for example, does he indicate that

What, then, is this book that has inspired so

he has learned of their struggles and that he is writ—

much reflection and spawned so much controver—

ing to convey his apostolic advice (contrast all of

sy? The short answer is that it is a letter by Paul to

his other letters). Possibly, then, he simply wants to

the Christian congregation in Rome. The histori—

expound some of his views and explain why he

an who comes to the task of interpreting this let—

holds them. But why would he want to do so for a

ter cannot allow him-or herself to be so overawed

church that he has never seen?

by its historical significance as to lose sight of this

There may be some clues concerning Paul’s

simple fact. This was a letter that Paul wrote to a

motivation at the beginning and end of the letter.

particular church. As with all of his letters, this

At the outset he states that he is eager to visit the

one had an occasion and was written for a reason.

church to share his gospel with them (1:10–15).

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One might think, then, that Paul is preparing the

my journey and to be sent on by you, once I have

Romans for his visit, giving them advance notice

enjoyed your company for a little while. (15:23–24)

about what he is up to; but at the end of the letter

a fuller agenda becomes more evident. In his closing, Paul indicates that he has completed the work

In light of these comments, it appears that Paul

that he has to do where he is—probably Achaia

is interested in more than simply meeting with

(in Corinth itself?), since according to 16:1 the

the Roman Christians. He evidently wants them

person carrying the letter, Phoebe, is a deacon of

to provide support, moral and financial, for his

the church in Cenchreae, Corinth’s nearby port.

westward mission; possibly he would like to use

Moreover, he says he is eager to extend his mission

Rome as the base of his operation to the regions

into the western regions, specifically Spain, and

beyond. But why would he need to provide such a

wants to visit Rome on the way:

lengthy exposition of his views in order to get

their support? Don’t they already know who he

But now, with no further place for me in these

is—the apostle to the Gentiles? And wouldn’t

regions, I desire, as I have for many years, to come to

they readily undertake to provide him with what—

you when I go to Spain. For I do hope to see you on

ever assistance is needed?

SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 21.1 The Beginnings of the Roman Church

The Christian church was already established in Rome by 57 or 58 C.E., the probable date of Paul’s letter, but no one knows for certain how and when it first arrived there. One ancient tradition states that the apostle Peter established the church in Rome some fifteen years earlier and became its first bishop (i.e., the Pope). The earliest books known to be written by members of the Roman church, however, 1 Clement and The Shepherd of Hermas, say nothing about Peter starting the church there or being its first bishop. Moreover, Paul’s letter to the Romans, itself the earliest record of a Christian presence in the capital, greets twenty-eight different people in the community by name (chap. 16) but says nothing about Peter’s presence among them.

Some scholars have suggested that the writings of the Roman historian Suetonius provide evidence of the presence of Christianity in Rome at least a decade before Paul’s letter.

Suetonius claims that the emperor Claudius had expelled the Jews from Rome in the year 49

C.E. because of riots instigated by a man named Chrestus ( Life of Claudius 25). It is possible that Suetonius slightly muddled his facts and meant to say that the riots resulted from conflicts over “Christ” (for possible supporting evidence, see Acts 18:2). If so, then Jewish Christians would have been active there sometime in the mid-40s. On the other hand, it may be that Suetonius is not referring to Christ or the Christians at all but to some Roman Jew named Chrestus (a name that is otherwise well attested).

One thing we can say about the early history of Roman Christianity is that, at least by the 50s, it was largely made up of Gentiles. This is presupposed by Paul himself (see 1:5–6, 13; 11:13, and 28), who was personally acquainted with a number of Christians there (thus the greetings in chap. 16). How, though, did this predominantly Gentile church begin?

Most scholars, realizing that we can never know for certain, simply assume that Christianity was brought to the imperial capital either by travelers who had converted to the faith while abroad (see, e.g., Acts 2:8–12), or by Christians who decided for one reason or another to relocate there, or by another missionary.

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Paul’s lengthy discourse suggests that the

but an earlier jaunt to Jerusalem. Paul has col—

Romans have only a dim knowledge of who he is

lected funds for the poor Christians of Judea

or, even more likely, that they have heard a great

from his Gentile converts in Macedonia and

deal about him and that what they have heard has

Achaia (15:25–27) and appears uneasy over his

made them suspicious. If this is the case, or at least

upcoming trip to deliver them (15:30–32). He is

if Paul believes that it is, then presumably their

openly fearful of “unbelievers” in Judea (presum—

suspicions would relate to the issues that Paul

ably Jews who don’t take kindly to his faith in

addresses throughout the letter, issues such as

Jesus) and apprehensive of his reception by the

whether Gentiles and Jews can really be thought

“saints” (presumably Jewish-Christians who

of as equal before God, and, if they can, (a)

have not warmed to his law-free gospel to the

whether God has forsaken his promises that the

Gentiles). Some scholars have suspected that his

Jews would be his special people and (b) whether

letter to the Romans is a kind of trial run for pre—

Paul’s “law-free gospel” to the Gentiles leads to

senting his views, an attempt to get his thoughts

lawless and immoral behavior (cf. Galatians).

organized on paper before having to present

The tone and style of this letter support the

them to a hostile audience in Judea.

view that Paul wrote it to explain himself to a con—

There may be some truth in this, but chiefly the

gregation whose assistance he was eager to receive.

letter appears to be directed to the situation that

When reading through Romans carefully, one gets

Paul expects to find where he addresses it, in

the sense that Paul is constantly having to defend

Rome. He wants to use this church as his base of

himself and to justify his views by making careful

operation and knows (or thinks) that he has some

and reasoned arguments (e.g., see 3:8; 6:1, 15; 7:1).

opposition. He writes a letter to persuade this con—

Moreover, he makes this defense in a neatly craft—

gregation of the truth of his version of the gospel.

ed way, following a rhetorical style known in antiq—

This gospel insists that Jews and Gentiles are on

uity as the “diatribe.” This involved advancing an

equal footing before God: both are equally alienat—

argument by stating a thesis, having an imaginary

ed from God and both can be made right with God

opponent raise possible objections to it, and then

only through Christ’s death and resurrection.

providing answers to these objections. Consider

Moreover, the salvation that is offered in Christ

the following rhetorical questions and answers:

comes to people apart from adherence to the

Jewish Law, even though the Law itself bears wit—

Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the

ness to this faith as the only means of salvation.

value of circumcision? Much in every way. For in the

Indeed, Christ is the goal of this Law. Above all

first place the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of

else, the gospel shows that God has not gone back

God. (3:1–2)

on his promises to the Jews and has not rejected

them as his people. In Christ, all of the promises of

What then? Are we any better off? No, not at all; for

God have come to fruition. Furthermore, the

we have already charged that all, both Jews and

Greeks, are under the power of sin. (3:9)

Romans can rest assured that this gospel does not

lead to moral laxity: Paul is himself no moral

What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin

reprobate and he does not urge his converts to

in order that grace may abound? By no means! How

engage in wild and lawless activities.

can we who died to sin go on living in it? (6:1–2)

Since the author both asks and answers the

THE THEME OF THE EPISTLE

questions, the diatribe is remarkably effective in

showing that he knows what he is talking about

Paul begins his letter to the Romans in his usual

and that he is always right. By employing this

way, with a prescript naming and describing him—

style, Paul could effectively counter arguments

self and his addressees, in which he anticipates the

that others had made against his teachings.

central concern of his letter, the meaning of his

It should be noted that Paul’s travel plans

gospel (1:1–7; see box 21.2). The prescript is fol—

include not only the trip through Rome to Spain

lowed by a thanksgiving to God for this congrega-



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F P O

Figure 21.1 Reconstruction of central city Rome, roughly as it would have looked in Paul's day.

tion (1:8–15), in which he announces his plans to

that he proclaims, perhaps in light of the par—

visit the congregation in order to share his gospel

tial and inaccurate report that he suspects they

with them. Paul then gives a brief delineation of

have already heard. He begins by assuring

his gospel in two verses that scholars have long

them that this message brings him no shame.

recognized as setting out the theme of the epistle:

2. Paul’s gospel is God’s powerful means of sal-

vation. The gospel that Paul preaches repre—

For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of

sents God’s powerful act of salvation to the

God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the

Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the right—

world, it is the way God has chosen to save

eousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as

those who are headed for destruction. The

it is written, ‘The one who is righteous will live by

implication is clear: apart from this gospel,

faith.’ ” (1:16–17)

there would be no salvation.

3. This salvation comes to those who have

As he is occasionally wont to do, Paul has packed

faith. The English noun “faith” ( pistis) and

a great deal into these two verses. To help us

the verb “believe” ( pisteuein) are translations

understand the letter as a whole we should spend

of the same Greek root. For Paul faith (or

a few moments unpacking them.

believing) refers to a trusting acceptance of

1. Paul is not ashamed of the gospel. Paul may

God’s act of salvation. It does not refer simply

be writing the Romans to provide a relatively

to intellectual assent (as in “I believe you are

full and accurate account of the gospel message

right”) but implies a wholehearted conviction

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SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 21.2 Paul’s Gospel to the Romans

Scholars have long maintained that Paul’s opening comments in Romans 1:3–4 are not his own words but those of an old Christian creed that he is quoting, perhaps one that was commonly confessed by Christians when they came to be baptized (cf. the Philippians hymn; see box 20.5). One reason for thinking this is that Paul expresses himself here in ways that are quite uncustomary for him, judging from his other undisputed letters. Nowhere else, for example, does he refer to Jesus as “descended from David according to the flesh,” nowhere else does he call the Holy Spirit “the spirit of holiness,” and nowhere else does he claim that Jesus was “declared to be Son of God” at his resurrection. Why though would Paul begin his letter in such an unusual way?

If it is true that Paul was writing this letter to correct any misunderstanding about his gospel message, it may be that he wanted to begin by affirming a confessional statement that he knew was familiar to his audience, so that they would recognize that his gospel was not “off base” but was the same gospel they had come to believe when they joined the Christian church. If so, then we have another indication that this is a letter that Paul spent some considerable care in constructing, giving thought to how he might best win over this important church to support his Gentile mission (see 1:5–6).

and commitment. Throughout this letter Paul

5. The gospel reveals the righteousness of God.

will insist that a person is put into a right rela—

Is it right that God should not give preference

tionship with God not by adhering to the dicto his own people? Paul’s gospel insists that

tates of the Jewish Law but by trusting God’s

God is unequivocally right in the way he

act of salvation, that is, by believing in Christ’s

brings about salvation; that is, he is “righteous”

death and resurrection.

in the way that he makes all people, Jew and

4. Salvation comes first to the Jew and then to

Gentile, “right” with himself. This indeed is a

the Greek. By “Greek” Paul simply means

major theme of Romans: God has not gone

“Gentile” (since it stands in contrast to “Jew”).

back on his promises and has not rejected his

The salvation given in the gospel comes to

people the Jews. The death and resurrection of

both Jews and Gentiles. Jews received it first,

Jesus are the fulfillment of these promises, and

since God is the God of the Jews who sent his

faith in him is given first to Jews, and through

Son to the Jewish people in fulfillment of the

them to the entire world.

Jewish Scriptures (as Paul indicates both in

6. The Scriptures proclaim the gospel. Paul

Romans and throughout his writings); but it

claims that God has been perfectly fair and

also comes to the Gentiles. Indeed, one of

consistent (“righteous”) in his treatment of the

Paul’s overarching points throughout this let—

Jews and of all people because the Scriptures

ter is that despite the advantages of the Jews

themselves teach that salvation is based com-

(for example, having the Scriptures in which

pletely on faith (“through faith for faith”),

the promises of God are given), Jew and

rather than on doing the works prescribed in

Gentile are on equal footing before God. All

the Jewish Law. Quoting the prophet

have sinned against God and all can be made

Habakkuk, Paul emphasizes that a right stand—

right with God only by faith in Christ.

ing before God, a standing that provides life,

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comes only through faith: “The one who is

sive of one another; on the contrary, he sometimes

righteous will live by faith.” To paraphrase:

combines different conceptualities in one state-

“the one who is made right with God through

ment. For our immediate purposes, however, it will

faith will find life.”

be useful to see how the models work in isolation

from one another. Both models understand that

Paul wants to emphasize that his gospel mes—

human beings are somehow alienated from God

sage is not something that he has made up himself.

and that Christ’s death and resurrection somehow

We saw in Galatians that he claimed to have

work to resolve that problem. The nature of the

received it through a revelation from God. We are

problem and the way Christ has solved it, howev—

going to see in Romans (as we saw in Galatians as

er, are expressed differently in the two models.

well) that he also thinks that it is rooted in the

Jewish Scriptures. In large measure, Romans is an

extended argument that Paul’s gospel of salvation,

The Judicial Model

that is, his message of how a person, Jew or

Paul sometimes understands the human problem

Gentile, comes into a right standing before God,

with respect to God and the divine solution to the

derives from these sacred books.

problem in legal or judicial terms. In his mind

there appears to be a rough analogy between the

act of salvation and the human judicial process.

PAULINE MODELS

The way it works, in simple terms, is as follows.

FOR SALVATION

God is a lawmaker who has made laws for people to follow (all people, not just Jews); everyone,

Rather than launching into a passage-by-passage

though, has broken these laws. God is also the

exposition of Romans, it may prove to be more

judge before whom people appear as lawbreakers.

useful for us to reflect in broader terms on what

The penalty for breaking God’s laws is death, and

Paul has to say in this letter about his central

everyone is found to be guilty as charged. This is

theme, the gospel. (Remember: Paul is not speak—

the human problem. In Paul’s words, “everyone

ing about a Gospel book that contains a record of

has sinned” (i.e., broken God’s laws, see Rom

Jesus’ words and deeds but about his own gospel

3:23), and “the wages of sin is death” (i.e., death is

message.) Paul has a variety of things to say about

the penalty for all who have sinned, Rom 6:23).

it, and it is easy at places to become confused and

The divine solution to this problem is again

wonder if Paul is being consistent with himself. In

conceived in judicial terms. Jesus is one who does

most instances (I’m not sure I can vouch for all of

not deserve the death sentence; he dies to pay the

them), Paul is not inconsistent and is not himself

penalty for others. God shows that he is satisfied

confused. The difficulty is that he discusses God’s

with this payment by raising Jesus from the dead

act of salvation in a number of different ways and

(Rom 3:23–24; 4:24–25). Humans can avail them—

sometimes does not clearly indicate which way he

selves of Christ’s payment of their debt simply by

is thinking about. In other words, Paul has various

trusting that God will find it acceptable. It is not a

modes of understanding, various conceptual mod—

payment they have either earned or deserved; it is

els, of what it means to say that God brought

a beneficent act done on their behalf by someone

about salvation through Jesus’ death and resurrec—

else, an act that can be either accepted or rejected

tion.

(3:27–28; 4:4–5). Those who accept it are then

There are at least two major models that Paul

treated as if they are “not guilty” (even though they

uses for understanding the importance of Christ’s

are in fact completely guilty), because someone

death in the letter to the Romans (see box 21.4).

else has accepted their punishment for them.

I will call these the judicial and the participation—

This, then, is the judicial model for under—

ist models (these are not, of course, Paul’s own

standing how salvation works. The problem is sin,

terms). Paul does not see these as mutually exclu—

which is understood to be a transgression of God’s

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# CHAPTER 21

## THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO PAUL

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SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 21.3 Two Paths of Salvation in Paul?

Some modern scholars have been struck by Paul’s two-fold insistence that (a) he himself continues to worship the Jewish God and (b) that the Jewish Law can have no bearing on one’s standing before God. How, ask these scholars, can he seriously propose (b) if he really means (a)? To our knowledge, all ancient Jews maintained that the Law was given by God precisely in order to show his people how to maintain their close, covenantal relationship with himself. How could someone abandon the Law—indeed, insist that the Law be abandoned—and yet still claim to follow this God?

One particularly interesting solution proposed in recent years is that we need to take seriously Paul’s self-presentation as an apostle to the Gentiles. According to this view, Paul’s letters were written not to Jews (whether Christian or non-Christian) but to Gentile followers of Jesus. It was to these people, and only to these people, that Paul maintained that adherence to the Law of the Jews would have no bearing on one’s standing before God. Such people did not have to become Jews in order to enjoy a covenantal relationship with God; for them it was Christ’s death that brought them into this relationship. This does not mean, however, according to this view, that Jews were themselves to abandon the Law—or even, according to the most radical representations of this view, that they were to believe in Christ. Why would they need Christ if they were already standing in a covenantal relationship with God? There were, in short, two different paths of salvation: for Jews, salvation came through the Law; for Gentiles, it came through Christ. But since Paul’s letters were addressed only to Gentiles, we learn there of only one of the two ways.

This is an intriguing and attractive hypothesis, argued at times with skill and erudition.

But other interpreters of Paul have not been convinced. Perhaps the biggest problem is that Paul himself emphatically claims that everyone, Jew and Gentile, is equally guilty of sin before God, and that all (including Paul—a Jew himself!) are therefore justified equally—by faith in Christ and not by doing works of the Law (see especially Rom 3:9, 20, 23–26; Gal 2:15).

law; the solution is Christ’s death and resurrec—

the death of Jesus, a payment of the penalty owed

tion, which are to be received by faith. A person

by others.

who has faith is restored to a right standing before

God. Sometimes this way of looking at things is

called Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith. In

The Participationist Model

this model the Jewish Law plays no role in salva—

Most of us today have no trouble understanding

tion. Those who have broken the Law and

how the act of salvation can be seen as analogous to

incurred the sentence of death cannot remove

a judicial process. The participationist model, how—

their guilt simply by obeying a number of other

ever, is much harder to get our minds around. This

statutes, just as a convicted embezzler will not be

is partly because it involves a way of thinking that

set free by pleading that he has obeyed all of the

is no longer prevalent in our culture. Under this

traffic laws. The only way to be restored to a right

second model, the human problem is still called sin,

standing before God (to be “justified”) is through

sin is still thought to lead to death, and Christ’s



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death and resurrection still work to resolve the

a disobedient action against God, a transgression

problem; but sin, death, and Jesus’ death and resur—

of his laws. It is instead a kind of cosmic power, an

rection all mean something different from what they

evil force that compels people to live in alienation

mean under the judicial model.

from God. The human problem under this model

Consider the following uses of the word “sin” in

is that people are enslaved to this demonic power

the book of Romans:

and are unable to break free from their bondage.

• Sin is in the world. (5:13)

The power of sin is related to another power, the

power of death. In the participationist model, death

• Sin rules people. (5:21; 6:12)

is not simply something that happens when a person

• People can serve sin. (6:6)

stops breathing. It is a cosmic force that is intent on

• People can be enslaved to sin. (6:17)

enslaving people; when it succeeds, it totally

removes a person from the realm of God. Here again

• People can die to sin. (6:11)

the situation is desperate; all people are subject to

• People can be freed from sin. (6:18)

the overpowering force of death, and there is nothing that they can do to set themselves free.

It should be reasonably clear that sin in these

As in the judicial model, the solution has to

verses is not simply something that a person does,

come from God himself, and it takes the form of

Figure 21.2 Baptism was an important Christian ritual for Paul’s churches (see Rom 6:1–6), and continued to be significant down through the centuries. Pictured here is the baptistry of the oldest surviving Christian church (in the city of Dura, Syria), from about two centuries after Paul.

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Jesus’ death and resurrection. If the problem is

participated fully in Christ’s victory over the

enslavement to alien powers, then the solution

power of sin, he evidently did not believe that

must be liberation. Christ’s death and resurrection

such a person had yet been “raised” with Christ,

provide freedom from the powers of sin and death

that is, set completely free from the power of

that have subjugated the human race. How,

death. Paul knew full well that this had not yet

though, does this liberation happen?

occurred since people, even believers, continued

As an apocalypticist Paul knew that the cosmic

to die! So he is quite emphatic that Christians

force of sin was present in this world, but he came

have died with Christ but that they have not yet

to believe that Christ’s death had conquered the

been raised with him (6:5, 8). They will be raised

power of sin. He evidently came to believe this

only when Christ returns and brings about the res—

after he believed that Jesus had been raised from

urrection at the end of time. (You may recall that

the dead. For Paul, Jesus’ resurrection showed

the major problem at Corinth was that some peo—

beyond any doubt that Jesus was no longer subject

ple believed that they had already been raised with

to the power of death, the most dreaded of all cos—

Christ, and Paul had to insist that this was simply

mic forces of evil. Jesus had conquered death

not so.) Until then, to be sure, Christians live in

through his resurrection; thus, reasoning back-

“newness of life” (Rom 6:4), because they are no

wards, at Jesus’ death he must have defeated the

longer subject to the power of sin. But their salva—

related powers (including the Devil and his agent,

tion is not yet complete, for the end has not yet

sin). Furthermore, Jesus’ victory can lead to the

come. Only when it does come will they “be unit—

salvation of others. That is to say, a person can

ed with him in a resurrection like his” (6:5).

participate with Christ in his victory (Rom 6:5–8):

hence the name I have given this conceptual

model. A person participates in this victory by

Comparison and Contrast

being united with Christ in his death and resur-

of the Two Models

rection. According to Paul, this happens when a

The two models of salvation we have been looking

person is baptized (Rom 6:3–4).

at are ways of understanding something. They are

Baptism was a rite that had been practiced

not the thing itself. Paul’s gospel is not “justifica—

among the Christians from the earliest of times. In

tion by faith” or “union with Christ.” These are

the early years of the religion, of course, no one

ways of reflecting on or thinking about his gospel.

was “born” a Christian; new members of the reli—

His gospel is God’s act of salvation in Christ; the

gion converted to it either from Judaism or from

models are ways of conceptualizing how it worked.

loyalty to one of the other cults. Those who con—

The way salvation worked differed according to

verted were initiated into the church through the

which model Paul had in mind. In both of them,

ritual of baptism. Baptism involved being

the problem is “sin,” but in one model, sin is an act

immersed in water (later sources suggest that run—

of disobedience that a person commits, whereas in

ning water was to be preferred) while an officiant

the other it is a cosmic force that works to enslave

pronounced sacred words to indicate the signifi—

people. In both models, the solution is provided by

cance of the act. For Paul the act was not simply

Christ’s death and resurrection, but in one Christ’s

significant as a symbolic statement that a person’s

death pays the penalty for human disobedience,

sins had been cleansed or that he or she had

and in the other it breaks the cosmic power of sin.

entered into a new life; the act involved some—

In both models a person has to appropriate the

thing that really happened. When people were

benefits of Christ’s death, but in one this is done

baptized, they actually experienced a union with

through faith, that is, a trusting acceptance of the

Christ and participated in the victory brought at

payment, whereas in the other it occurs through

his death (in the immersion under the water; see

baptism, a ritual participation in the victory.

especially Rom 6:1–11).

As you read through Romans on your own, you

Although Paul believed that a person who had

can see that Paul does not neatly differentiate

been baptized had “died” with Christ, that is, had

between these two models. Even though he uses

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SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 21.4 Judicial and Participationist

Models of Salvation in Paul

The Judicial Model

The Participationist Model

Sin—human disobedience that brings a

Sin—a cosmic power that enslaves people

death penalty

Jesus’ Death—payment of the penalty

Jesus’ Death—defeat of the power of sin

of sin

Appropriation—acceptance of the pay—

Appropriation—participation in Christ’s

ment through faith, apart from works

victory through baptism

of the Law

the judicial model more consistently in chapters

gression or a cosmic power? When he refers to the

1–4 and the participationist model in chapters 6–8

effects of Christ’s death and resurrection, is he

(to choose the clearest places), he does not ever

thinking of a payment of a debt or liberation from

think of them as conflicting with one another, and

bondage? In this connection, I should point out

he regularly combines the two in the things he

that these are not the only models that Paul uses to

says. He would never have thought, for instance

conceptualize what Christ has done for salvation

(so far as we can tell), that someone could be bap-

(see box 21.5). They are, however, the two that

tized and so participate in Christ’s death without

appear most prominently throughout the book of

also having faith and so trusting Christ’s payment

Romans, as can be seen in the following section—

for sin. The two models go hand in hand; they are

by-section synopsis of the letter.

not so much confused as combined. Their coales—

cence is clear at a number of points in Paul’s discussion. Why, for example, does Paul maintain

that everyone is guilty before God? Because every-

THE FLOW

one has sinned, that is, committed acts of trans-

OF PAUL’S ARGUMENT

gression (the judicial model, 3:23). Why has

• The Human Dilemma: All Stand Condemned

everyone sinned? Because everyone is enslaved to

before God (1:18–3:20). Paul’s gospel follows

the power of sin (the participationist model, 3:9).

Why is everyone enslaved to the power of sin?

a “bad news, good news” scheme that is

Because Adam committed an act of disobedience

designed to show the reader how desperate

(judicial model), which allowed the power of sin

the situation is for all people, Gentiles and

to enter into the world (participationist model;

Jews. Gentiles have abandoned their knowl—

5:12). And so it goes.

edge of the one true God to worship idols,

Despite the fact that these two models neatly

resulting in wild and rampant immorality

dovetail in Paul’s own thought, it is often useful for

(1:18–32). Jews are no better, for even

readers to keep them conceptually distinct when

though they have the Law and the sign of

reading through his letters, especially the letter to

circumcision, they do not practice the Law

the Romans. Therefore, when you find Paul speak—

and so also stand condemned (2:1–29).

ing of “sin” in any given verse, you should ask what

Indeed, all people, Jews and Gentiles, have

he means by it. Is he referring to an act of trans—

sinned against God (the judicial notion;

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# CHAPTER 21

## THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO PAUL

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3:1–8), for all are under the power of sin (the

they can, therefore, and should, serve the

participationist notion; 3:9). This view that

new power that is over them in Christ, the

Jew and Gentile are equally condemned

divine power of righteousness (6:1–23).

before God does not at all represent a rejec—

Before a person was united with Christ he

tion of Judaism, however, for according to

or she was compelled by the power of sin to

Paul it is the teaching of the Jewish

violate the good Law that God had given,

Scriptures themselves (3:10–20).

so that the Law led to condemnation rather

• The Divine Solution: Salvation through

than to salvation (7:1–25). But now the

Christ’s Death (3:21–31). The Jewish Law

part of the self that was subject to sin, the

gives the knowledge of sin but not the solu—

flesh, has been put to death in Christ, so a

tion to sin. The solution comes in the ful—

person no longer needs to submit to its

fillment of this Law in the death of Jesus, a

cravings and violate the Law (8:1–17).

sacrifice for the sins of others to be received

Those who have been united with Christ

through faith. Performing the works of the

will eventually experience the complete

Jewish Law does not contribute to this sal—

salvation that will come when God redeems

vation through faith, so Jews have no

this fallen world (8:18–39).

grounds for boasting of a special standing

before God. Jews and Gentiles are on equal

• The Gospel Message Is Consistent with God’s

footing, all are made right with God

Dealings with Israel and Represents a Fulfill-

through faith in the death of Jesus.

ment of His Promises (9:1–11:36). Paul now

deals with the major questions that have

• The Gospel Message Is Rooted in the Scripture

been simmering beneath the surface of the

(4:1–25). The Father of the Jews, Abraham

letter all along. If what he says is true, that

himself, shows that being made right with

God’s act of salvation comes equally to Jew

God comes through faith rather than by

and Gentile alike, with no distinction, hasn’t

doing the works of the Law. He himself was

God gone back on his promises to Israel

justified (made right with God) by trusting

(9:6)? On the contrary, for Paul, God’s deci—

in God’s promise before he was given the

sion to save Gentiles and Jews by faith is a

sign of circumcision (a “work” of the Law).

fulfillment of his promises and is consistent

His true descendants are those who contin—

with how he has always worked, as is evi—

ue to trust in God and in the fulfillment of

dent from the Jewish Scriptures themselves.

his promises, which has now occurred in

God has always chosen people not on the

the death and resurrection of Jesus.

basis of their actions (“works”) but on the

• Christ’s Death and Resurrection Bring

basis of his own will (9:6–18). Indeed, the

Freedom from the Powers Opposed to God

Jewish prophets indicate that God shows

(5:1–8:39). Those who believe in Christ

mercy on whom he chooses and that he had

have been made right with God and will be

planned from ages past to make a people

saved from the wrath of God that is coming

who were not his own (the Gentiles) into

upon this world (5:1–11). They will also be

his own, whereas many of the Jews would be

delivered from the reign of God’s mortal

rejected (9:19–29). The failing lies not in

enemy, death, which entered into the world

God but in the Jews who have not accepted

through the disobedience of Adam, Christ’s

Christ, for they have mistakenly supposed

counterpart, but which has now been con—

that God gave them the Law as a means for

quered by Christ’s own act of obedience

attaining a right standing before him,

(5:12–21). Moreover, those who have been

whereas the Law itself points to Christ

united with Christ in his death have partic-

(9:30–10:4). A right standing before God

ipated in his victory over the power of sin;

therefore comes exclusively through faith

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SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 21.5 Other Models of Salvation in Paul

In addition to the judicial and participationist models, Paul has other ways of conceptualizing God's act of salvation in Christ, even though he rarely explains how the analogies work in detail. Consider, for instance, the following.

• Sometimes Paul likens salvation to a reconcilation in which two people have had a falling out. A mediator (Christ), at a sacrifice to himself, intervenes and restores their relationship (e.g., see Rom 5:10 and 2 Cor 5:18–20).

• Paul often describes salvation as a redemption, in which a person's life is “purchased” by God through the price of Christ's blood, much as a slave might be purchased by gold (Rom 3:24; 8:23). Never does he explain, however, from whom or what the person is being purchased (the cosmic forces? the devil? sin?).

• Paul sometimes portrays Christ's death as a sacrifice that, like the sacrifices of animals in the Jewish Temple, was designed to bring atonement with God. This view embodies the ancient view that the blood of a sacrifice “covers over” the sins of the people: the technical term for this act of covering is “expiation” (Rom 3:25).

• At other times Paul compares salvation to a rescue from physical danger, in which a person is confronted with peril and certain death only to be saved by someone who heroically intervenes at the cost of his own life (see Rom 5:7-8).

These models are not at mutually exclusive; sometimes Paul applies several of them even within the same passage. Consider for yourself the theologically packed statement of Romans 3:21–26, where Paul uses the judicial, participationist, redemptive, and sacrificial models at one and the same time!

in Christ, and many of the Jews have been

new cultic act of worship that fulfills the old

faithless (10:5–21). God himself, however,

cultic acts of sacrifice (12:1–21). Believers

is faithful. He has remained true to his

in Christ are to be obedient to civil author—

promises to the Jews, saving a remnant of

ities (13:1–7), to follow the core of the

them and using the salvation of the

Torah by loving others as themselves

Gentiles to bring about his ultimate pur-

(13:8–10), to lead moral, upright lives in

pose, the salvation of all of Israel. Gentiles

view of their coming salvation (13:11–14),

who have been added to the people of God

and to refrain from passing judgment or

must not therefore vaunt themselves

doing things that offend others (14:1–15:6).

against Jews; Israel is still the people of

Paul’s law-free gospel, in other words, will

God’s special calling, and he will once again

not lead to lawless activities.

bring them all to faith (11:1–36).

• Close of the Letter (15:14–16:27). Paul indi-

• The Law-Free Gospel Does Not Lead to

cates his reasons for writing (15:14–21),

Lawless Behavior (12:1–15:13). Those who

discusses his travel plans (15:22–33), and

believe in Christ give themselves to others

sends greetings to a large number of persons

in self-sacrificing love. Indeed, this is the

in the congregation (16:1–27). Indeed, he

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## THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO PAUL

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greets so many people by name (twenty—

Rome prior to his arrival; indeed, as customarily

eight altogether) that some scholars have

happens everywhere Paul goes in Acts, he ends up

questioned whether this final chapter origi—

spending his days not with Christian believers but

nally belonged to the letter, since it was

with recalcitrant Jewish leaders and, evidently,

written to a congregation Paul had never

with anyone else who would come to hear him

visited. If the chapter is original to the

preach while under house arrest (Acts 28:16–31).

book, it indicates that a number of people

There are later traditions that indicate that Paul

whom Paul had come to know in other con—

was eventually martyred in Rome; a member of the

Roman church, writing sometime around 95

texts had moved to Rome or were known to

C.E.,

mentions Paul’s death during the tyrannical perse—

be visiting there.

cution of the Christians during the reign of Nero

(ca. 64 C.E.). This writing, traditionally attributed

to the bishop of Rome, Clement, may indeed pre-

CONCLUSION:

serve a historical recollection (see Chapter 27).

Even though we cannot gauge whether Paul

PAUL AND THE ROMANS

succeeded in his Western mission, or indeed,

We do not know for certain whether Paul’s plans

whether he ever gained a following among the

to visit the congregation en route to Spain ever

Christians in Rome, we can say for certain that he

came to fruition. According to the book of Acts,

succeeded in one respect. Romans is the most

Paul was arrested in Jerusalem before he could

closely reasoned letter that survives from his pen,

make the trip and was then, almost coincidentally,

one that continues to intrigue scholars and to

sent to Rome to stand trial before the Roman

inspire believers. It lays out in the clearest terms

emperor for his alleged crimes (Acts 21–28). The

he could muster important aspects of Paul’s gospel,

author of Acts does not seem to know of any con—

namely God’s power that brings salvation for both

tact between Paul and the Christians living in

Jew and Gentile.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

See also the suggestions at the end of Chapter 18.

view that Paul’s gospel of justification by faith in

Christ apart from the works of the Law did not apply to Jews; for more advanced students.

Donfried, Karl P. ed. The Romans Debate. 2d ed. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrikson, 1991. A collection of significant

essays by eminent New Testament scholars, who dis—

Wedderburn, A. J. M. The Reasons for Romans. Edinburgh: cuss (and disagree over) the occasion and purpose of

T & T Clark, 1988. The most complete book-length

Paul’s letter to the Romans.

discussion of the reasons that Paul wrote his letter to

the Romans: it was to explain his law-free gospel to the

Gaston, Lloyd. Paul and the Torah. Vancouver, B.C.:

predominantly Gentile Roman community in light of

University of British Columbia Press, 1987. A collec—

the tensions between Jews and Gentiles there and in

tion of significant essays by a leading proponent of the

view of his own imminent journey to Jerusalem.

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# CHAPTER 22

Does the Tradition Miscarry?

Paul in Relation to Jesus, James, Thecla, and Theudas

Jesus urged his fellow Jews to repent and to keep

perspective. Having examined all of the early

the Law of God, in preparation for the imminent

Gospels, the teachings of Jesus himself, and the

appearance of a cosmic judge from heaven, the

undisputed writings of Paul, we have arrived at a

Son of Man. Paul claimed that salvation came

good stage to take a step back and consider in some—

apart from the Jewish Law and urged Gentiles to

what broader terms the nature of early Christianity

trust in Jesus’ death and resurrection, in anticipa—

and its diversity. Since we have just completed our

tion of his imminent return from heaven. Did

study of Paul, we can pursue our questions by using

Jesus and Paul represent the same religion?

his epistles as a fulcrum, evaluating how Paul’s form

The writers of the Gospels maintained that

of Christianity related to some of what came before

God had brought salvation to this world through

and to some of what came after.

the words and deeds of Jesus. The apostle Paul also

wrote about salvation, but he said almost nothing

about Jesus’ words and deeds (apart from the deeds

PAUL IN RELATION

of his death and resurrection). Did the Gospel

TO WHAT CAME BEFORE

writers and Paul share the same religion?

Some members of Paul’s congregations claimed

Prior to the writing of the Gospels, Christians

his support for views that he himself found outra—

throughout the Mediterranean were telling stories

geous (cf. 1 Cor 1:12). After his death, Marcionites,

about Jesus, about the things that he said, did, and

Gnostics, and Proto-orthodox Christians all sub—

experienced. Did Paul tell these stories?

scribed to beliefs that they argued came from his

writings. Was there one form of Pauline Christianity

or several forms? To expand the question yet further:

Paul and the Traditions about Jesus

was there one thing that could be called Christianity

We can be relatively certain that members of

in the first two centuries of the Common Era or sev—

Paul’s churches told stories about the earthly Jesus.

eral different things? Should we speak of early

The author of the book of Acts, after all, belonged

Christianity or of early Christianities? Did any of the

to one of these churches (at least we can assume so

forms of early Christianity coincide with the religion

since Paul was the hero of his narrative), and he

advocated by Jesus himself? Or at some point, even

also wrote a Gospel. But Luke was writing some

a number of points, did the tradition miscarry?

thirty years after Paul’s active ministry. Did these

These are perplexing and complex questions, but

traditions about Jesus circulate in Paul’s churches

ones that we need to ask if we are to approach the

during his own day? Did Paul teach his converts

writings of the New Testament from a historical

these stories? Did he know them himself?

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# CHAPTER 22

DOES THE TRADITION MISCARRY?

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These questions themselves may come as a

death and resurrection and his imminent return

shock—they have never occurred to most people

from heaven, but in terms of historical informa—

who read the New Testament—but they are a

tion, what I’ve listed above is about all that we can

source of endless fascination for the historian of

glean from his letters. We hear nothing here of the

early Christianity. Paul scarcely says anything

details of Jesus’ birth or parents or early life, noth—

about the historical Jesus, that is, about the things

ing of his baptism or temptation in the wilderness,

that Jesus said, did, and experienced between the

nothing of his teaching about the coming kingdom

time of his birth and the time of his death. You can

of God. We have no indication that he ever told a

see this for yourself by rereading Paul’s letters and

parable, that he ever healed anyone, cast out a

listing everything that he says about Jesus’ life, up

demon, or raised the dead. We learn nothing of his

to and including his crucifixion. Part of the surprise

transfiguration or triumphal entry, of his cleansing

is that you won’t need an entire sheet of paper.

of the Temple, of his interrogation by the

Paul gives the following information. He says

Sanhedrin or trial before Pilate, of his being reject—

that Jesus was born of a woman (Gal 4:4; this is

ed in favor of Barabbas, of his being mocked, or

not a particularly useful datum; one wonders what

flogged, and so on. The historian who wants to

the alternative may have been!) and that he was

know about the traditions concerning Jesus, or

born a Jew (Gal 4:4), reputedly from the line of

indeed, about the historical Jesus himself, will not

King David (Rom 1:3). He had brothers (1 Cor

be much helped by the surviving letters of Paul.

9:5), one of whom was named James (Gal 1:19).

Why does Paul not remind his congregations of

He had twelve disciples (1 Cor 15:5) and con—

the things Jesus said and did? Does he think that

ducted his ministry among Jews (Rom 15:8). He

they are unimportant or irrelevant? Does he

had a last meal with his disciples on the night on

assume that his readers already know them? Does

which he was betrayed (1 Cor 11:23; it is possible,

he know them? How could he not know? Let me

however, that Paul is not referring here to Judas

explore three lines of thought that scholars have

who “betrayed” Jesus, since the Greek word he

pursued over the years, as a way to stimulate your

uses literally means “handed over” and more com—

own thinking on these matters.

monly refers to God’s action of handing Jesus over

to his death, as in Rom 4:25 and 8:32). Paul knows

Option One. Paul knew a large number of tradi—

what Jesus said at this last meal (1 Cor 11:23–25).

tions about Jesus but never spoke of them in his

Finally, he knows that Jesus died by being crucified

surviving letters because he had no occasion to do

(1 Cor 2:2). He also knows of Jesus’ resurrection,

so. This is perhaps the easiest way to explain why

of course, but here we are interested only in what

Paul scarcely ever mentions the events of Jesus’

he tells us about Jesus’ life prior to his death.

life. Someone who takes this line could point out

In addition to the words spoken at the Last

that Paul evidently knew other apostles (cf. Gal

Supper, Paul may refer to two of the sayings of

1–2) who must have told him stories about Jesus;

Jesus, to the effect that Christians shouldn’t get

moreover, it would make sense that when he

divorced (1 Cor 7:11; cf. Mark 10:11–12) and that

founded his churches he must have told them

they should pay their preacher (1 Cor 9:14; cf.

something about the man whom he proclaimed as

Luke 10:7). Still other teachings of Paul sound

the Son of God who died and was raised from the

similar to sayings of Jesus recorded in the

dead. Who exactly was he? What did he do? What

Gospels—for instance, he says that Christians

did he teach? How did he die? Surely questions

should pay their taxes (Rom 13:7; cf. Mark 12:17)

such as these must have occurred to Paul’s con—

and that they should fulfill the Law by loving their

verts, and surely he must have answered them. If

neighbors as themselves (Gal 5:14; cf. Matt

so, then we might conclude that Paul never men—

22:39–40)—but Paul gives no indication that he

tioned these traditions in his letters because he

knows that Jesus himself spoke these words.

knew that his converts already knew them.

Paul, of course, has a lot to say about the impor-

You may, however, detect a flaw in this reason-

tance of Jesus, especially the importance of his

ing. Paul spends a good amount of time in his let-

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ters reminding his converts of what he taught

and that this brought about a right standing before

them when he was among them. If he had taught

God (as evidenced in his resurrection).

them about the historical Jesus, why would he not

In considering this option, it is not adequate to

remind them of these stories also? Moreover, on

claim that it can’t be right because the words and

occasion, though relatively rarely, Paul does use

deeds of Jesus must have been important to Paul.

one of the traditions about Jesus to convince his

This is like saying that the traditions must have been

converts of a necessary course of action. For

important to Paul because they must have been

instance, when the Corinthians were celebrating

important. Rather than simply presupposing our con—

the Lord’s Supper in a way that Paul found offen—

clusion we have to provide evidence for it. There is,

sive, he reminded them of how Jesus instituted it

in fact, at least one serious problem with this view. If

among his disciples. In other words, when the

it were true that Paul did not consider the words and

need arose, Paul was inclined to cite stories of

deeds of Jesus to be important, we would be unable to

Jesus to authorize his views as those promoted by

explain why Paul sometimes does appeal to these

Jesus himself, the ultimate Lord of the community.

words and deeds when he is insisting on proper

If Paul was demonstrably inclined to use the

behavior among his congregations (e.g., in 1

traditions about Jesus in this way, why does he not

Corinthians alone, see 7:11, 9:14, and 11:23–25).

do so more often? The problem with this first

Thus, even granting the central importance of Jesus’

option is that Paul had plenty of occasions to men—

death and resurrection for Paul, he must have taught

tion traditions about Jesus to buttress his views,

his churches something more than the events at the

but he scarcely ever took the opportunity. When

end of Jesus’ life—if, that is, he knew more.

he told the Romans to pay their taxes (Rom

13:6–7), why didn’t he say: “Remember the words

Option Three. Paul didn’t mention more about

of the Lord Jesus, that we should render unto

Jesus’ words and deeds because he didn’t know very

Caesar the things that are Caesar’s”? When he told

much more. According to this theory, the life of Jesus

the Galatians that they should love one another so

was not only unimportant to Paul when he estab—

as to fulfill the Law (Gal 5:13–14), why didn’t he

lished his churches and addressed their problems, but

point out that this was what Jesus himself had

it was also unimportant to him personally. He never

said? When he spoke of the sufferings of the

inquired further into the things Jesus said and did,

present age to the Corinthians (2 Cor 4:7–18,

and possibly never even thought about inquiring fur—

11:23–29), why didn’t he remind them of the

ther, because he simply wasn’t interested.

details of Jesus’ own passion or of Jesus’ call to take

Is this plausible? According to Paul, Jesus him—

up one’s cross and follow him? It is hard to explain

self appeared to him at his conversion; but Paul

why if Paul, in fact, knew more than he said.

never indicates that Jesus gave him a crash course

in all that he had said and done prior to his death.

Option Two. Paul knew more of the traditions of

Also, Paul evidently knew some of Jesus’ apos—

Jesus but considered them irrelevant to his mission.

tles—his brother James and some of his former dis—

This option is similar to the one preceding with a

ciples in Jerusalem (but see box 20.4)—but he

major difference. In this case, Paul knew many of

indicates that they spent very little time together

the traditions about what Jesus said and did, but he

and suggests that when they did meet they dis—

did not refer to them extensively either in person

cussed the future of the Gentile mission rather

or in writing because he considered them irrelevant

than the words and deeds of Jesus (Galatians 1–2).

to his message of Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Possibly the other apostles told him something, but

Support for this view can be found in a passage like

if so, we are left with the problem that Paul some—

1 Corinthians 2:2, where Paul insists that the only

times uses Jesus’ words as an authority for his own

thing that mattered to him during his entire stay

views but usually does not. If he knew more and

among the Corinthians was “Christ, and him cru—

taught his congregations more, and if these traditions

cified” (cf. 1 Cor 15:3–5). That is to say, what Jesus

were of central importance to Paul’s Gospel and his

said and did prior to his death was of little rele—

converts’ faith, why does he scarcely ever refer to

vance; what mattered was that he died on the cross

them in his surviving writings or remind his readers

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# CHAPTER 22

DOES THE TRADITION MISCARRY?

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SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 22.1 Jesus and Paul: Some of the Similarities

The Historical Jesus

The Apostle Paul

Born and raised Jewish, and never saw self

Born and raised Jewish, and never saw self

as departing from the truth of Judaism

as departing from the truth of Judaism

and the Jewish God

and the Jewish God

Proclaimed an apocalyptic form of

Proclaimed an apocalyptic faith in

Judaism

Christ

Expected the Son of Man to come from

Expected Jesus to come from heaven in

heaven in judgment during the life—

judgment during his (Paul’s) own lifetime of his own disciples

time

Dismissed the Pharisaic concern for

Dismissed the need to observe the prac—

scrupulous observance of the Law in

tices of the Jewish Law in order to

order to have salvation

have salvation

Taught the need for faith in God and saw

Taught the need for faith in Christ and

the love of one’s neighbor as the sum—

saw the love of one’s neighbor as the

ming up of the Law

summing up of the Law

that he has told them about them before? I’m afraid

very basic issues as two first-century Jewish men (see

that I must leave this dilemma for you to resolve.

further box 22.1). They both subscribed, for example, to the belief in the one God who had created

the world, who made a covenant with his people

Paul and the Historical Jesus

Israel, and who revealed his will through the Jewish

Whereas the preceding problem (did Paul know

Scriptures. Moreover, they were both apocalypticists

more about the traditions about Jesus and, if so, why

who thought that they were living at the end of time

didn’t he utilize them in his letters?) was largely a

and that God was soon going to intervene in histo—

matter of speculation, it is possible to take the ques—

ry by sending a cosmic redeemer from heaven to

tion of Paul’s relationship to Jesus in a different direc—

overthrow the forces of evil that plague this world.

tion by asking whether the religious points of view

Despite such fundamental similarities, Jesus and

that these two men represented were identical, simi—

Paul also differed on a number of points (see box

lar, or different. Even this question is not completely

22.2). First, while both expected the imminent

straightforward, of course. We do not have any writ—

appearance of a cosmic judge from heaven, for Jesus

ings from Jesus and therefore have to reconstruct his

this divine figure was to be the Son of Man antici—

teachings on the basis of later traditions that are not

pated by the prophet Daniel; for Paul it was to be

always historically accurate. Moreover, even though

Jesus himself. Both Jesus and Paul maintained that

we do have writings from Paul, these are occasional

strict adherence to the laws of Torah, particularly as

pieces of correspondence, not systematic expressions

interpreted by the Pharisees, would not contribute to

of his thought. Still, we have devoted some considera person’s salvation on the day of judgment, but they

able effort to establishing the teachings of Jesus and

disagreed on what would make a difference. For Jesus, highlighting the views of Paul, so we have some basis

people needed to repent of their sins and keep the

for making a comparison.

central teachings of the Torah by loving God with

The first point to emphasize is perhaps too easily

their entire being and their neighbors as themselves.

overlooked. Jesus and Paul agreed on a number of

For Paul, no amount of obedience to the Law would

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SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 22.2 Jesus and Paul: Some of the Differences

The Historical Jesus

The Apostle Paul

The coming judge of the earth is the Son

The coming judge of the earth is Jesus

of Man.

himself.

To escape judgment, a person must keep

To escape judgment, a person must

the central teachings of the Law as

believe in the death and resurrection

Jesus himself interpreted them.

of Jesus, and not rely on observance of

the Law.

Faith involves trusting God to bring his

Faith involves believing in the (past)

(future) kingdom to his people.

death and resurrection of Jesus.

Jesus’ own importance lies in his procla—

Jesus’ importance lies in his death and

mation of the coming of the end and

resurrection for sins.

in his correct interpretation of the

Law.

The end of the age began in the lives of

The end of the age began with the defeat

Jesus’ followers, who accepted his

of the power of sin at the cross of

teachings and began to implement

Jesus.

them in their lives.

help when God’s judgment came; salvation would

everything to live lives of faith in God and of love

come only to those who trusted in Christ’s death and

toward their neighbors. For Paul, it started with

resurrection as God’s act of deliverance from sin.

Jesus’ victory over the powers of sin and death at

Both men did understand that Jesus himself was

the cross, the beginning of the defeat of God’s cos—

of central significance for those who would be saved

mic enemies. Christians could participate in this

on that day, but Jesus appears to have thought that

victory by being baptized into Christ’s death and

his own importance lay in his teaching about the

sharing in the Spirit of God who now dwelt among

end time, in his prophetic call for repentance, and

his people, prior to the end when Christ returned.

in his correct interpretation of the will of God as

In light of these similarities and differences, do

revealed in the Scriptures. His followers were those

Jesus and Paul represent the same religion? Again,

who gave up everything to adhere to his teachings.

I must leave that for you to decide.

Paul, on the other hand, scarcely mentions any of

these things. For him, what ultimately mattered was

Jesus’ sacrificial death and vindication by God at

PAUL IN RELATION

the resurrection. Those who would be saved were

TO WHAT CAME AFTER

those who had committed themselves in faith to

the Christ who died and rose again.

Up to this point we have looked at Paul’s relation—

Finally, both Jesus and Paul maintained that in

ship to some aspects of the Christian religion that

some sense the end had already begun, but they

preceded him. It would also be beneficial to consid—

disagreed as to how it began. For Jesus it began in

er Paul’s relationship to other authors we have con—

the community of his followers, who abandoned

sidered, for example the Gospel writers who pro-

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# CHAPTER 22

DOES THE TRADITION MISCARRY?

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duced their accounts some years later. Indeed, you

appeal to Abraham in support. Paul maintains that

should make such comparisons and contrasts for

“if Abraham was justified by works, he has some—

yourself. Imagine, for instance, comparing Paul with

thing to boast about, but not before God. . . .

Matthew on the subject of Torah observance: are

Therefore his faith was reckoned to him as right—

Jesus’ followers required to follow the Law or not?

eousness” (Rom 4:2, 22); James, on the other

Here, however, we will consider Paul’s relation—

hand, argues that “our ancestor Abraham was jus—

ship to the tradition that he himself, in some sense,

tified by works” (2:21). Yet more peculiarly, each

started. Just as Jesus began a tradition that eventuat—

author claims that Genesis 15:6 (“Abraham

ed in Gospels, which varied both among themselves

believed God, and it was reckoned to him as right—

and from the things that Jesus himself had said (con—

eousness”) supports his own interpretation of the

trast the teachings, for example, in Mark, John, and

relationship of faith and works to justification

Thomas), so Paul stood at the head of a tradition of

(Rom 4:1–5; Gal 3:6; James 2:23).

Pauline Christianity, a form of Christianity that

Thus, at least on the surface, it appears that

developed in ways that some Christian believers

Paul and James are fundamentally at odds with

found inspiring and others repugnant.

one another. Paul claims that faith in Christ is all

one needs to be justified, and James argues that

one needs more than faith. Paul rejects works of

Paul and James

the Law as a prerequisite for justification and

One form of Pauline Christianity appears to lie

James insists that works are absolutely necessary.

behind the opinions attacked by the New

Nonetheless, most modern scholars have come to

Testament book of James. This book provides

think that the differences between James and Paul

an extended set of admonitions to unnamed

are only skin deep, because James and Paul do not

Christians living outside of Palestine, who are call

appear to mean the same things when they speak

“the twelve tribes in the Dispersion” (1:1, which

about “faith” and “works.” (If they use the terms in

some scholars have taken as a reference to

different ways, then they can scarcely be contradict—

Jewish-Christians but other scholars as a symbolic

ing one another when one of them insists on faith

title of all Christians as the “new Israel”). In

without works and the other on both faith and

Chapter 27 we will look at the book at greater

works.) For Paul, as we have seen, “faith” means a

length, discussing the identity of the author, the

trusting acceptance of Christ’s death to put one into

nature of his writing, and its overarching themes.

a right relationship with God. “Works” for him are

For our immediate purpose, it is enough to focus

the works of the Jewish Law, that is, aspects of the

on the most famous passage of the book, 2:14–26,

Law that make Jews distinctive as the people of

a text that has been much-cited since the

Israel (e.g., circumcision, the Sabbath, kosher food

Protestant Reformation, when Martin Luther

laws). When James, on the other hand, speaks of

made the unequivocal claim that it contradicts

“faith” in 2:14–26, he appears to mean “intellectual

the gospel proclaimed by Paul and so should have

assent to a proposition.” He points out, for example,

only a secondary standing in Scripture.

that “even the demons believe” that “God is one . .

James (in this passage) and Paul cover much of

. and shudder” (2:19). Presumably these demons are

the same ground. Both discuss justification, both

not committed to this belief; they simply acknowl—

consider the relationship between faith and works,

edge it. This kind of intellectual acknowledgment,

and both use the Old Testament figure of

according to James, cannot justify anyone. Paul, of

Abraham to establish their points. The points they

course, would not disagree; he simply doesn’t mean

make, however, are different. For Paul, as we have

this when he uses the term “faith.”

seen, “a person is justified by faith apart from the

Moreover, James insists that those who have true

works prescribed by the law” (Rom 3:28); for

faith will do “works,” by which he appears to mean

James, however, “a person is justified by works, not

“good deeds,” such as feeding the hungry and help—

by faith alone” (James 2:24). Given their different

ing the destitute (2:14–16). Those who fail to do

perspectives, it is odd that both Paul and James

such works do not have real faith, or as James him-

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self puts it, their faith is “dead” (2:17). Again, when

other Christians who saw themselves as adherents

the matter is put in this way, Paul would scarcely

of the teachings of Paul. Scholars have long

disagree: he too expects believers to behave in cer—

known of a letter, written pseudonymously in the

tain ways (cf. Gal 5:16–26; 1 Cor 6:9–12).

name of Paul’s companion Titus, that endorses a

Paul and James appear, then, to be referring to

strict ascetic life involving, among other things,

different things when they speak of faith and

the total renunciation of the joys of sex. In his

works. Yet surely it cannot be a coincidence that

own letters even Paul urged celibacy for the sake

they both address the issue of justification by faith

of the gospel. If possible, Christians were to refrain

and works, that they both use Abraham as an

from marriage and the fleeting pleasures of conju—

example to prove their points, and that they both

gal bliss; it was better for them to devote them—

quote Genesis 15:6 on this matter. How, then, did

selves completely to the Lord, since the time of

this come about?

the end was near (1 Corinthians 7). Never,

We don’t know exactly when the book of James

though, does Paul make salvation contingent

was written. But if it was produced sometime late in

upon total abstinence.

the first century, it is not difficult to imagine a sce—

The end that Paul anticipated never came, of

nario that could explain its strong case against jus—

course, but his teachings concerning celibacy sur—

tification by faith alone. It may have happened like

vived, and indeed took on a life of their own.

this. Paul himself had insisted that a person was jus—

Some of the most interesting pieces of early

tified by a trusting acceptance of Christ’s death, not

Christian literature are narratives composed

by works of the Law. When Paul passed from the

around the person of Paul and modeled, to a lim—

scene, according to this scenario, his words became

ited extent, on the book of Acts, the only narra—

a kind of catch phrase among his congregations:

tive about him to be included in the New

“faith, not works.” Some Christians took this to

Testament. Of the noncanonical accounts, per—

mean that it mattered only what you believed, not

haps the best known are those that relate the

what you did. (Indeed, some people may have

exploits of Paul and his female disciple, Thecla. In

understood Paul this way even while he was still

these and similar accounts, Paul is portrayed as a

alive; see Rom 3:8.). Word of this notion got around

hard-core advocate of sexual renunciation, an

to an author living in another community who took

apostle who preaches the joys of abstinence to

serious exception to its implications. He wrote a

audiences eager to escape the drudgeries of

tractate that gave a long series of admonitions to

arranged marriages and to evade oppressive social

believers, including the admonition to put their

arrangements that appear in the guise of estab—

faith to work in their lives. Despite what Paul had

lished family structures (see further Chapter 24).

said, or rather, despite what some people claimed

Not surprisingly, those who take Paul’s words to

Paul had said, faith needed to be practiced in order

heart are usually women, destined otherwise to

to be genuine. For as Abraham himself showed, a

live under the oppressive yokes of their future hus-

“person is justified by works and not by faith alone.”

bands. Thecla’s story is typical of these narratives.

Paul’s words thus may have taken on a life of

Engaged to a wealthy man of the upper classes, she

their own as they were used in new contexts, gain—

hears Paul’s disquisition and breaks her engage—

ing a meaning that was independent of what they

ment. She leaves home to follow the apostle and

originally meant when he proclaimed them to his

enjoy the freedom of one liberated from the con—

converts. Interestingly, the distortion of Paul’s mes—

cerns of the body and the domination of a hus—

sage is explicitly recognized as a problem even with—

band. Her estranged fiancé, as you might imagine,

in the pages of the New Testament (2 Pet 3:16).

is not amused.

Thecla’s exploits are recounted in a second-century novelistic work called The Acts of Paul and

Paul and Thecla

Thecla. As the plot develops, her fiancé (in

Something similar seems to have happened in a

cahoots with her mother, who is set to lose a pros—

series of stories that we know were in circulation

perous retirement from the deal) turns on her and

at the beginning of the second century among

prosecutes her, eventually seeking her execution.



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# CHAPTER 22

DOES THE TRADITION MISCARRY?

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Figure 22.1 Portrayal of Paul preaching his gospel, seated by a tower, from which his soon-to-be disciple Thecla listens with rapt attention, from an ivory panel of the fifth century.

She is miraculously delivered, however, by the

Paul and Theudas

God who protects those who have forsaken all to

Still other versions of Paul’s teachings were in cir—

adhere to his will of sexual renunciation. In sever—

culation at roughly the same time. In these veral related adventures, this divine protection and

sions his chief concerns were only indirectly, if at

Thecla’s fidelity to her cause are put to the test. In

all, related to sexual renunciation. We have

every instance, the God proclaimed by Paul deliv—

already touched on the understanding of Paul pro—

ers his faithful servants from those who are deter—

mulgated by the second-century Christian

mined to make them compromise.

Marcion (see Chapter 1), whose views differed on

Taking the historian’s view, one might ask

a number of counts from those advanced in the

whether the historical Paul himself would have rec—

tales of Thecla. They appear to have differed as

ognized this version of his own proclamation.

well from those passed along by a shadowy figure

Whatever the apostle would have made of it, the

of the early second century by the name of

stories about Paul and Thecla enjoyed a wide popu—

Theudas. We know of this person only because

larity in certain circles, perhaps chiefly, as some

later proto-orthodox Christians maintained that

scholars have suggested, among Christian women

he was the teacher of the infamous Gnostic

who, as converts, enjoyed a certain liberation from

Valentinus. Valentinus developed a Christian

the constraints of marriage and enforced sub—

Gnostic theology quite similar to the account that

servience. This liberation received an apostolic

I described in Chapter 11. He evidently claimed to

sanction in the ascetic message proclaimed by the

have acquired his knowledge of this theology from

missionary to the Gentiles himself (see Chapter 24).

Theudas, possibly in the city of Alexandria, where

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Valentinus was educated. Theudas was said to

stand in the Pauline tradition and to have derived

have been a disciple of Paul.

their views from the apostle himself through his

As we have seen, Gnostics claimed to have

faithful disciple Theudas.

secret knowledge about the truths of the universe,

knowledge not accessible to just anyone, indeed,

not even to ordinary Christians (see Chapter 11).

CONCLUSION:

Some Gnostic Christians appealed to Paul as their

PAULINE CHRISTIANITIES

ultimate authority. Had not Paul himself indicated

that he could not speak to some believers “as spir—

We have again moved full circle back to where we

itual people, but rather as people of the flesh” (1

began. Whether we consider the traditions that

Cor 3:1)? Did he not differentiate between those

began with the sayings of Jesus or those that began

who were spiritual and those who were not (1 Cor

with the teachings of Paul, we discover a wide

2:14–15)? Did he not allude to the “mystery” of

diversity within early Christianity. This diversity is

the gospel that was “hidden” from the rulers of this

so pervasive that some scholars prefer to speak of

age and the “wisdom, secret and hidden” that was

early Christianities rather than early Christianity,

only for those who were “mature” (1 Cor 2:6–7)?

and of Pauline Christianity not as one subset of

The Gnostics’ claim to Paul may strike the histo—

this larger whole (or wholes) but as a number of

rian as odd, since they were polytheists who

subsets—Pauline Christianities. We have already

denied that there was only one God, the creator of

seen that a good deal of this diversity, though not

heaven and earth. They also typically maintained

nearly all of it, can be found within the pages of

that Jesus Christ was two persons, one divine and

the New Testament. We will see more of this

one human, and they denied that the human body

diversity now, as we examine several writings that

(much less this material world) was to be

scholars have come to doubt as having come from

redeemed at the resurrection. Yet they claimed to

the pen of their reputed author, the apostle Paul.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Davies, Stevan. The Revolt of the Widows: The Social World MacDonald, Dennis. The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle

of the Apocryphal Acts. Carbondale, Ill.: Southern

for Paul in Story and Canon. Philadelphia: Westminster, Illinois University Press, 1980. An interesting socio-1983. A fascinating account that argues that the

historical investigation that argues that the apocryphal

Pastoral epistles were written pseudonymously in Paul’s

Acts, including the Acts of Paul and Thecla, were

name to counter views attributed to Paul in the apoc—

authored by women in order to counter views that

ryphal Acts.

came to be canonized in the New Testament.

Pagels, Elaine. The Gnostic Paul: Gnostic Exegesis of the

Elliott, J. K. The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Pauline Letters. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975. A full dis-Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation.

cussion of the ways Gnostic interpreters understood

Oxford: Clarendon, 1993. An excellent one-volume

each of Paul’s letters, appropriate for students familiar

collection of noncanonical works, including the apoc—

with the basic issues.

ryphal Acts, in a readable English translation with

nice, brief introductions.

Wenham, David. Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of

Furnish, Victor Paul. Jesus according to Paul. Cambridge: Christianity? Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995. A

Cambridge University Press, 1993. An introductory

recent attempt to show that the views of Paul and Jesus

discussion of Paul’s understanding of Jesus that raises

were closely connected, and that Paul did not, there—

the question of how much Paul actually knew about

fore, radically alter the religion that he inherited

Jesus’ life; ideal for beginning students.

through the Christian tradition.

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# CHAPTER 23

In the Wake of the Apostle:

The Deutero-Pauline and Pastoral Epistles

None of the New Testament writings that we have

such books—the three Deutero-Pauline epistles and

studied to this point can rightly be called pseudo—

the three Pastorals—I will set the stage a bit further

nymous. A pseudonymous writing, or “pseude—

by discussing the broader phenomenon of pseudo—

pigraphon,” to use the technical term (plural

nymity in the ancient world.

“pseudepigrapha”), is a book whose author writes

under a false name, claiming to be someone other

than he or she really is. None of the New

Testament Gospels or the Johannine epistles or

PSEUDONYMITY

the book of Acts makes any such claim. As we

IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

have seen, these books were all written anonymously, only later to be attributed to persons

In the modern world, there are two kinds of pseu—

named Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The book

donymous writing. On the one hand, some authors

of James is in a somewhat different category since

assume a pen name simply to keep their identity

its author gives his name. If the author had

secret (sometimes, a transparent secret); this was

claimed to be James the brother of Jesus, then we

the case when Samuel Clemens wrote as Mark

could rightly call his book pseudonymous, if we

Twain and when Marian Evans wrote as George

could show that he was not who he said he was.

Elliot. On the other hand, some authors decep—

But James was a common name in antiquity, and

tively claim to be someone famous. This hap—

as we will see in Chapter 27, this particular James

pened, for example, some years ago when the so—

does not actually claim to be Jesus’ brother. Rather

called Hitler diaries turned up. These were forged

than being pseudonymous, then, his book is prob—

to look like journals kept by Adolf Hitler through

ably better considered “homonymous,” that is,

the Second World War. At first, the forger’s craft

written by someone with the same name as a

fooled just about everyone, but before long experts

famous person.

determined beyond any doubt that the books were

We have found examples of pseudonymous writ—

not authentic. They were then relegated to the

ings outside of the New Testament, however, in

trash heap of historical curiosities.

such works as the Gospels of Thomas and Peter, the

Thus, in the modern world, a “forgery” is a kind

Pseudo-Pauline letter of 3 Corinthians, and Pseudo-of pseudonymous writing in which an author false-

Titus. Is it conceivable that any books of this sort

ly claims, for one reason or another, to be a famous

came to be included in the New Testament canon?

person. Antecedents for this kind of pseudony—

The consensus among critical scholars is a resound—

mous writing can certainly be found in the ancient

ing yes. Before launching into a discussion of six

world. Indeed, forgery was a relatively common

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and widely recognized practice in antiquity. This

Perhaps the most common reason to forge a

was a world in which there were no copyright laws

writing in antiquity was to get a hearing for one’s

and, in fact, no legislation of any kind to guaran—

own views. Suppose that you as an amateur

tee literary ownership. Nor were means available

philosopher wanted to present your ideas to the

for the mass production of literature; authors could

world, not to make yourself rich or famous but sim—

not count on the worldwide dissemination of their

ply because, in your judgment, the world needed

books or assume that the kind and quality of their

to hear them. If you wrote in your own name

work would be widely known. Books were manu-

(Mark Aristides, or whatever), no one would be

factured one at a time, by hand. New copies were

much intrigued or feel compelled to read what you

ponderously and painstakingly made from old ones

had to say, but if you signed your treatise “Plato,”

and disseminated slowly and sporadically at best.

then it might have a chance.

Libraries were rare, and most people could not

Someone who wrote in the name of a famous

read in any case. For most people, reading a book

person was therefore not necessarily driven by

meant hearing someone else read it aloud.

wicked intent. Sometimes the writer’s motive was

We know that forgery was relatively widespread

pure as the driven snow, at least in his or her opin—

in this world because the ancients themselves say

ion. For example, the Christian caught red-hand—

so. Authors throughout Greek and Roman antiqui—

ed in the act of forging 3 Corinthians and other

ty make numerous references to the practice and

“Pauline” works claimed that he had done it out of

issue frequent warnings against it. Some authors

“love of Paul,” according to the church father

even mention books that were falsely written in

Tertullian, who recounts the incident (see box

their own names. One famous author from the sec—

23.1). Presumably he meant that he wanted to

ond century C.E., the Roman physician Galen, went

show what Paul would have written from beyond

so far as to write a book explaining how his authen—

the grave, had he been able to address the prob—

tic writings could be distinguished from those

lems that had arisen in the church. Other

forged by others. Sometimes the forger himself was

Christians and Jews may have been similarly moti—

caught in the act, as happened with the author of 3

vated, including, for example, the author of the

Corinthians (see box 23.1). More commonly, literary

canonical book of “Daniel,” who lived in the sec—

people had to judge whether a book was authentic

ond century B.C.E. but wrote in the name of the

or not on the basis of its writing style and contents.

famous wise man of four centuries earlier.

A number of factors motivated ancient authors

Ancient forgers used some fairly obvious and

to produce documents in someone else’s name. For

standard techniques to convince their readers that

some forgers, there was the profit motive. If a new

they were who they said they were. To begin with,

library began collecting old books and advertised

the mere claim to be somebody carries a lot of

its willingness to pay good gold for original copies,

weight with most readers, ancient and modern. If

an amazing number of “originals” could show up

a book begins with the words “I Moses write to you

(sometimes of works that no one had ever heard of

these words” or “The vision which I, Abraham,

before!). A different motivation was at work in the

had” or “Paul an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the

philosophical schools, where authors sometimes

saints who are in Ephesus,” then most readers will

wrote in the name of their teacher, not in order to

simply assume that the alleged author is the actu—

sell their works for a profit but as an act of humil—

al author, barring the presence of something obvi—

ity. In the Pythagorean school, for example, some

ous in the text to discourage the assumption. The

writers were quite forthright in this view: since

trick of the forger was to make sure that nothing of

everything they thought and believed was ulti—

the sort could be found. Forgers, therefore, typical—

mately derived from the philosophy of their

ly tried to imitate the writing style of the author

founder Pythagoras, it would be the height of arro—

they were claiming to be. Of course, some forgers

gance for them to lay claim to any originality.

made a more strenuous effort along these lines

Such persons attributed the treatises they wrote to

than others, and some were more gifted at it. Such

Pythagoras and considered it a virtue.

imitation was actually an art that was taught in

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CHAPTER 23

IN THE WAKE OF THE APOSTLE

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SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 23.1 Paul's Third Letter to the Corinthians

We have already seen a sample of a Pauline pseudepigraphon in the forged correspondence between the apostle and the Roman philosopher Seneca. Another example is the third letter that Paul allegedly wrote to the Christians of Corinth to oppose heretics who had arisen in their midst. As the following extract shows, the letter was in fact produced after Paul’s death, to attack views that proto-orthodox Christians of the mid second century considered heretical, including the docetic view that Jesus did not have a real fleshly body and the adoptionist view that his mother was not a virgin. Interestingly enough, these are issues that Paul himself never explicitly addresses in his authentic letters. Does the author wish he had?

Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ, to the brethren in Corinth—greeting! Since I am in many tribulations, I do not wonder that the teachings of the evil one are so quickly gaining ground. For my Lord Jesus Christ will quickly come, since he is rejected by those who falsify his words. For I delivered to you in the beginning what I received from the apostles who were before me, that . . . God, the almighty, who is righteous and would not repudiate his own creation, sent the Holy Spirit through fire into Mary the Galilean, who believed with all her heart, and she received the Holy Spirit in her womb that Jesus might enter into the world, in order that the evil one might be conquered through the same flesh by which he held sway, and convinced that he was not God. For by his own body, Jesus Christ saved all flesh. . . . (3 Cor 1:1–4, 12–14) the schools of higher learning as part of rhetorical

have been written pseudonymously; who would

training. Advanced students were regularly

suspect such an author to be a forger himself? An

required to compose a speech on a set theme imi—

intriguing example occurs in a Christian book of

tating the style of a great orator of the past.

the fourth century called the Apostolic

Forgers typically added elements of verisimili-

Constitutions,

a set of church instructions allegedly

tude to their works, that is, comments designed to

written by the apostles after Jesus’ resurrection.

make the writing appear to have come from the

The book admonishes its readers not to read books

pen of its alleged author. In a forged epistle, for

that falsely claim to be written by the apostles!

example, such comments might include off-the—

This final ploy can tell us something about the

cuff references to an event that the reader could be

attitudes toward forgery among people in antiqui—

expected to recognize as having happened to the

ty. Some modern scholars have argued that the

alleged author, personal requests of the recipient

practice was so widespread that nobody passed

(why would anyone other than the real author ask

judgment on it; others have claimed that forgeries

his reader to do something for him?), or even an

were so easily detected that everyone could see

emphatic insistence that he himself really is the

through them and simply accepted them as literary

author, sometimes making it appear that the author

fictions. The ancient sources themselves suggest

“doth protest too much.” One of the most interest—

that both views are wrong. Forgers were common—

ing ploys along these lines is when a pseudonymous

ly successful because people did not always see

author insists that his readers not read books that

through them. When they did see through them,

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they were usually not amused. Indeed, despite its

may well have been upright individuals who had

common occurrence, forgery was almost universal—

good reasons for doing what they did, or at least

ly condemned by ancient authors (except among

thought they did. If they wrote in the name of some

members of some of the philosophical schools).

other famous person, however, they were still pro—

Scholars in the ancient world went about

ducing a forged document. This is no less true for

detecting forgeries in much the same way that

the canonical letter allegedly to Titus than for the

modern scholars do. They looked to see whether

noncanonical letter allegedly from Titus.

the ideas and writing style of a piece conformed

What now can we say about the Deutero-Pauline

with those used by the author in other writings,

epistles of 2 Thessalonians, Colossians, and

and they examined the text for any blatant

Ephesians, and the Pastoral epistles of 1 and 2

anachronisms, that is, statements about things

Timothy and Titus? What are these letters about,

that could not have existed at the time the alleged

and did Paul, their alleged author, really write them?

author was writing (like the letter reputedly from

an early seventeenth-century American colonist

that mentions “the United States”). Arguments of

this kind were used by some Christian scholars of

THE

the third century to show that Hebrews was not

DEUTERO-PAULINE EPISTLES

written by Paul or the Book of Revelation by John

the son of Zebedee. Modern scholars, as we will

see, concur with these judgments. To be sure, nei-

2 Thessalonians

ther of these books can be considered a forgery.

We can begin with the letter whose authorship

Hebrews does not claim to be written by Paul (it is

remains in greatest doubt, 2 Thessalonians. As was

anonymous), and the John who wrote Revelation

the case with 1 Thessalonians, this letter claims to

does not claim to be the son of Zebedee (it is

be written by “Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy to the

therefore homonymous). Are there other books in

church of the Thessalonians” (1:1). Whoever the

the New Testament, though, that can be consid—

actual author of the letter was, its occasion appears

ered forgeries?

to be reasonably clear. It was written to a group of

The question itself brings us up against a prob—

Christians who were undergoing intense suffering

lem of terminology. Many scholars are loath to

for their faith (1:4–6). We do not know how this

talk about New Testament “forgeries” because the

suffering manifested itself—whether there was

term seems so loaded and suggestive of ill intent.

some kind of official governmental opposition to

But the word does not have to be taken that way.

these people, or hostility from the local popula—

It can simply refer to a book written by an author

tion, or something else. We do know that the

who is not the famous person that he or she claims

author wrote to assure his readers that if they

to be. It is striking that few scholars object to using

remained faithful, they would be rewarded when

the term “forgery” for books, even Christian

Christ returned in judgment from heaven. At this

books, that occur outside of the New Testament.

“parousia” of Jesus, those who opposed them and

This may suggest that the refusal to talk about

rejected their message would be punished with

New Testament forgeries is not based on historical

“eternal destruction,” but the saints would enter

grounds but on faith commitments (either of the

into their glorious reward (1:7–12).

scholars or of their audiences), that is, it represents

A second reason for the letter was that some

a theological judgment that the canonical books

members of this Christian community had come to

need to be granted a special status. A historical

believe that the end of time had already come upon

introduction to these books should not, however,

them, that is, that the day of judgment was going

be so bashful.

to happen not in the indefinite future but right

Neither, of course, should it be bashing. When I

away (2:1–2). Some of those who thought this

use the term “forgery,” I do not mean it in a deroga—

found confirmation in prophecies spoken by mem—

tory sense. The authors of these forged documents

bers of the congregation and, still more interest-

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ingly, in a letter that was reputedly written by Paul

The question is: was this author actually Paul?

(2:2). The author of 2 Thessalonians, claiming to

It must be admitted that in places, at least, he

be the real Paul, warns his readers not to be

sounds like Paul, for instance, in the prescript,

deceived. Whatever an earlier forger may have

which is very close to the opening of 1

asserted, the end had not yet come because there

Thessalonians, and in the recollection of Paul’s

were certain events that had to transpire first (2:3).

toil among the Thessalonians when he was first

The author describes these events in an apoca—

with them. And a number of Pauline themes are

lyptic scenario that sounds very much like what

sounded throughout the epistle. These include the

we find in the Apocalypse of John (see Chapter

necessity of suffering, the expectation of ultimate

28). A kind of antichrist figure is to be revealed on

vindication, and the apocalyptic hope that stood

earth before Christ returns; this “lawless person” is

at the core of Paul’s gospel.

ultimately “destined for destruction” (2:3).

But do these similarities mean that Paul wrote

Exalting himself above every other “so-called god

the letter? The problem from a historian’s point of

or object of worship,” he will eventually take his

view is that someone who had decided to imitate

seat in God’s Temple in Jerusalem, “declaring him—

Paul would no doubt try to sound like Paul. If both

self to be God” (2:4). The author reminds his read—

Paul and an imitator of Paul could sound like Paul,

ers that he fully informed them of this scenario

how could we possibly know whether we are dealing

when he was with them (2:5); moreover, it has

with the apostle himself or one of his later followers?

obviously not yet occurred, since no one has yet

There is, in fact, a way to resolve this kind of

come forward to assume the grandiose role of this

historical whodunit, and it involves looking at the

antichrist. Indeed, the author mysteriously indi—

other side of the coin, that is, at the parts of the

cates that there is some supernatural force

this letter that do not sound like Paul. These pecu—

restraining the lawless one for the time being, but

liar features provide the best indicators of whether

once this force is removed, he will make his

the letter is authentic or was written by a member

appearance, setting in motion the final confronta—

of one of Paul’s churches after the apostle himself

tion between Christ and the forces of evil headed

had passed from the scene. Such negative evi—

by Satan (2:6–12).

dence is useful because we would expect an imita—

In large measure, then, this letter was written to

tor to sound like Paul, but we would not expect

assure this congregation of Christians that the end

Paul not to sound like Paul. It is, therefore, the dif—

was not yet upon them. As “Paul” fully instructed

ferences from Paul that are most crucial for estab—

them previously (2:5), Christ would not return

lishing whether Paul wrote this, or any other, dis—

until this apocalyptic scenario played itself out.

puted letter.

We discover in the final chapter of the book that

With respect to 2 Thessalonians, the most

the problem in the congregation was not simply one

intriguing issue is one that I have already alluded

of establishing an appropriate timetable for upcom—

to: the author writes to assure his readers that even

ing events. Some members of this church were so

though the end will be soon it will not come right

persuaded that the end was absolutely imminent

away. Other things must happen first. They should

that they had quit their jobs and were simply wait—

therefore hold on to their hopes and their jobs, for

ing for it to happen (3:6–15). Their decision had

there is still time left. Does this sound like the

grave social implications. Those who kept their jobs

same person who urged the readers of his first let—

were having to feed those who hadn’t, and this sitter to stay alert so as not to be taken by surprise

uation of apocalyptic freeloading was a source of

when Jesus returns (1 Thess 5:3, 6), since the end

tension in the congregation. In terms quite reminis—

would come with no advance warning, “like a thief

cent of 1 Thessalonians, the author reminds his

in the night” (1 Thess 5:2), bringing “sudden

readers how he and his companions had lived

destruction” (1 Thess 5:3)? According to 2

among them, working for their own meals and

Thessalonians there will be plenty of advance

refusing to be a burden on others (3:7–10). He

warning. That which is restraining the man of law—

insists that they do likewise (3:11–15).

lessness will be removed, then the antichrist figure

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will reveal himself, exalt himself above all other

assume that he wrote sometime after Paul had

objects of worship, establish his throne in the

died, possibly near the end of the first century,

Jerusalem Temple, and declare himself to be God.

when writing letters in Paul’s name became both

Only then will Christ return. How is this like a

more feasible and, from what we can tell, more

thief in the night who comes when people least

popular. Moreover, we know that during the peri—

expect it?

od some Christian groups were beginning to face

It is particularly interesting that the author

increased hostilities within their social contexts

claims to have taught the Thessalonians these

and that some of them were turning to a renewed

things while he was with them (2:5). If he had

hope in the return of Christ in light of these condone so, one might wonder why he did not appeal

flicts.

to this knowledge of upcoming events in his first

Thus the author must have been a Christian

letter, when he answered the Thessalonians’ ques—

from one of the churches that Paul established,

tion about “those who have fallen asleep”—for

who evidently had read 1 Thessalonians (hence,

example, by pointing out that of course some peo—

for example, the similar prescript). He wrote to

ple would die before the end since it was not immi—

help resolve the problems that Christians of his day

nent. In 1 Thessalonians, however, Paul does not

were facing, choosing to do so in the name of Paul,

say, “Remember that the day of the Lord is not

the founder and hero of his church, one whose

already here; first the man of lawlessness must be

words would be heard and heeded. Writing as the

revealed.” Indeed, if the Thessalonians had

apostle himself, he urged his readers to keep the

already been fully apprised of this future course of

faith and to maintain their hope but not to expect

events at the time of the first letter, one might

the end of the age in the immediate future. God’s

wonder why they were surprised by the death of

plan for the end was in the process of being imple—

some of their members in the first place.

mented, but believers must not be too eager, living

Finally, if the future appearance of the

only for tomorrow and not tending to the needs of

antichrist actually was a central component of

today. They must suffer boldly and wait faithfully

Paul’s teaching, as intimated in 2 Thess 2:5, it is

for the day of judgment in which their longings

very strange that he never says a word about it in

would be fulfilled and their afflictions vindicated.

any of his other letters. These difficulties make it

hard to see how Paul could have written both of

the letters to the Thessalonians. One of the most

Colossians

interesting things about the second one is how it

As is the case with 2 Thessalonians, scholars con—

ends: “I, Paul, write this greeting with my own

tinue to debate the authorship of Colossians,

hand. This is the mark in every letter of mine; it is

although here there is an entirely different set of

the way I write” (3:17). This means that “Paul”

problems to consider. There is no real problem,

dictated the letter to a scribe but then added his

however, in understanding the ostensible occasion

own signature to it, as he did, for example, in

of the letter. “Paul” is in prison for preaching the

Galatians (see Gal 6:11). What is peculiar is that

gospel (4:3). While there, he has heard news of the

he claims this to be his invariable practice, even

church in Colossae (1:3), a small town in western

though he does not appear to have ended most of

Asia Minor not far from the larger cities of

his other letters this way, including, 1

Hierapolis and Laodicea. “Paul” did not establish

Thessalonians! The words are hard to account for

this church, but his coworker and companion

as Paul’s, but they make perfect sense as the words

Epaphras, a citizen of the place, did (1:7–8, 4:3).

of an imitator of Paul who wants his readers to be

The news that “Paul” has learned about the

assured that despite the fact that they have

Colossians is mixed. On the one hand, he is excit—

received at least one letter that was forged in

ed and pleased to learn that they have converted to

Paul’s name (2:2), this is not another one.

faith in Christ and have committed themselves to

We obviously don’t know who actually wrote

his gospel through the work of Epaphras (1:7–8).

this letter if it wasn’t Paul and can only speculate

On the other hand, he has learned that there are

about when the real author was living. We can

false teachers among them who are trying to lead

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them into a different kind of religious experience

created by and made subservient to Christ himself:

(2:4). He is writing to address the situation.

“For in him all things in heaven and on earth were

The author of the letter alludes to his oppo—

created, things visible and invisible, whether

nents’ notions but does not give a detailed descrip—

thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all

tion of them, on the assumption, we might sup—

things have been created through him and for

pose, that his readers already knew full well what

him” (1:16). Moreover, Christ alone is responsible

he was talking about. He labels this new teaching a

for the ultimate benefits bestowed upon the

“philosophy and empty deceit” (2:8) and counters

believer. It is Christ who has reconciled all people

it by indicating that believers have already experi—

to God (1:21–22; 2:13–15). When he did so, he

enced a “spiritual circumcision” (2:11). Moreover,

destroyed everything that brought alienation,

he insists that since Christ has erased the require—

including the Law with all of its “legal demands”

ments of the Jewish Law for believers through his

(2:14). What sense is there, then, in returning to

death, they need not follow regulations concerning

the adherence to the Law? For this author, Christ

what to eat and concerning what special days to

destroyed the need to do so, and those who are in

keep as religious festivals (2:13–17). These passages

Christ can enjoy the full benefits of the divine

make it appear that the false teachers were advo-

(2:10, 14–19).

cating some form of Judaism, perhaps like the

These benefits, which are conferred only

opponents of Paul in Galatia. But they also insist—

through Christ, include an exalted status that is

ed on “self-abasement and the worship of angels,”

already available to the believer. This author

basing their appeal on special visions that they

maintains that there is no need for physical cir—

have had (2:18–19). This suggests that they advo—

cumcision for those who have experienced the

cated an ascetic lifestyle and possibly the ecstatic

real, spiritual circumcision that comes through

adoration of higher beings.

faith in Christ (2:9–10), or for ecstatic worship of

Scholars have debated the precise nature of this

angels for those who have already been raised up

false teaching for many years. In general terms

to the heavenly places in Christ (2:12; 3:1–3), or

“Paul’s” opponents were evidently promoting some

for human regulations of what to handle and what

kind of Jewish mysticism, comparable to that

to eat, which give only the appearance of piety, for

known from other ancient texts, in which people

believers in Christ who have a full experience of

were encouraged to experience ecstatic visions of

the divine itself (2:20–23). Indeed, all that the

heaven and thereby be transported to the divine

Colossians have sought through their mystical

realm where they would find themselves filled

experiences is already theirs in Christ, so long as

with the joy and power of divinity. Such people

they do not depart from the gospel message they

were commonly ascetic, urging that bodily desires

have heard (2:23).

must be avoided if one wanted to escape the body

The Colossians are therefore to enjoy the full

and enjoy the pleasures of the spirit. If these per—

experience of the divine as those who have been

sons were Jews, they may well have rooted their

raised to the heavenly places in Christ (3:1). This

asceticism in the Jewish Scriptures and so, per—

does not mean, however, that they can neglect

haps, urged their followers to keep kosher food

their physical lives in this world or behave as

laws, observe the Sabbath, and if they were males

though their bodies no longer matter. Indeed, they

to be circumcised.

must go on living in this world until Christ

In response to these views, the author of

returns. This means maintaining moral and

Colossians insists that Christ himself is the fullest

upright lives. Thus the author gives a number of

expression of the divine. In his words, Christ is the

moral exhortations concerning vices to avoid (for—

very “image of the invisible God, the firstborn of

nication, passion, greed, and the like; 3:5–11) and

all creation” (1:15). There is little reason for

virtues to embrace (compassion, kindness, humili—

Christian believers to worship angels when they

ty, and the like; 3:12–17). In addition, he gives

can worship the one “in whom all the fullness of

advice to different social groups within the con—

God was pleased to dwell” (1:19). Indeed, the

gregation concerning their interactions with one

other invisible beings are said to have been both

another, addressing wives and husbands

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(3:18–19), children and fathers (3:20–21), slaves

consists of just one sentence in Greek. The prob—

and masters (3:22–4:1).

lem is not that this is bad or unacceptable Greek

The letter closes with some final instructions

but that Paul wrote in a different style (just as

(4:2–6), greetings to members of the Colossian

Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner both

church, both from “Paul” and those with him

wrote correct English, but in very different ways).

(4:7–17), and his own signature and final benedic—

This kind of evidence has convinced a large num—

tion (4:18). But was this actually Paul’s signature?

ber of linguistic specialists that Paul did not write

In a number of ways, this letter looks very much

the letter.

like those that Paul himself wrote. The prescript

Other arguments can be more readily evaluated

written in the names of both Paul and Timothy,

just from the English text. The most striking is one

the basic layout of the letter, and the closing all

that you may have already surmised: this author

sound like Paul, and a number of important

believes that Christians have participated with

Pauline themes are sounded throughout: the

Christ not only in his death but also in his resur—

importance of suffering in this world, Jesus’ death

rection. He is, in fact, quite emphatic on this crit—

as a reconciliation, and the participation of believ—

ical point: believers have already been raised with

ers in Jesus’ death through baptism. Paul may well

Christ “in the heavenly places” to enjoy the full

have written this letter.

benefits of salvation (2:12; 3:1). Paul himself,

Over the past century, however, scholars have

however, is equally emphatic: even though

put forward a number of arguments against the

Christians have “died” with Christ in their bap—

authenticity of Colossians. Some of these argu—

tism, they have not yet been raised with him. And

ments, frankly, are not very strong. Some scholars,

they will not be raised until the very end, when

for instance, have claimed that the vocabulary is

Christ returns (see box 23.2). Not only does Paul

largely non-Pauline, despite the fact that the num—

stress this point in his most explicit discussion of a

ber of unusual words here is about the same as in

baptized person’s participation with Christ in his

Philippians, an undisputed epistle of comparable

death in Romans 6, he also argues precisely this

size. Others have insisted that there is no trace of

point against his opponents in Corinth, who

Paul’s apocalyptic views here, apparently ignoring

claimed already to have experienced the resurrec—

such passages as 3:1–6. Still others have asserted

tion and so to be ruling with Christ.

that Paul would not have written to a congrega—

How is it that Paul in his undisputed letters can

tion that he didn’t found himself, overlooking,

be so emphatic that believers have not yet experi—

evidently, his letter to the Romans! The situation

enced the resurrection with Christ, whereas the

is different in Romans, of course, but at least in

author of Colossians can be equally emphatic that

Colossians “Paul” is writing to a congregation that

they have? It is certainly possible that Paul

he could consider his own, in that his companion

changed his mind, either because he genuinely

Epaphras supposedly founded it.

thought better of it later (although this seems

There are, however, more solid grounds for

unlikely given his vehemence on the point) or

questioning Paul’s authorship of this letter. One of

because when attacking a different heresy, he had

the most compelling arguments depends on a

to take a different approach, either consciously

detailed knowledge of Greek, for the writing style

misrepresenting his views or forgetting what he

of Colossians differs markedly from that found in

had earlier said. It seems more plausible, though,

Paul’s undisputed letters. Whereas Paul tends to

that Paul went to his grave believing, and consis—

write in short, succinct sentences, the author of

tently insisting, that Christians had not yet been

Colossians has a more complex, involved style.

raised with Christ. If so, it is hard to accept that he

The difference is not easily conveyed in English

wrote the letter to the Colossians.

translation, in part because the long complicated

This conclusion is supported by the fact that

Greek constructions have to be broken up into

the author of Colossians has a different writing

smaller sentences to avoid making them appear

style from Paul’s. It also makes sense of other

too convoluted. Colossians 1:3–8, for example,

anomalies in the letter, two of which I will men-

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SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 23.2 The Resurrection of Believers in Paul and Colossians

If Paul did write Colossians, then his views about the time and significance of the resurrection of Christians changed, for here believers are said already to “have been raised with Christ” (3:1). Recall that 1 Corinthians was written in large measure against those who believed that Christians had already come to enjoy the blessings of the resurrected existence (see 1 Corinthians 15). The contrast in the verb tenses of Romans 6:4 and Colossians 2:12

(see italics) is also telling.

Rom 6:4

Col 2:12

For if we have been united with him in a

When you were buried with him in bap—

death like his, we will certainly be united

tism, you were also raised with him

with him in a resurrection like his. . . .

through faith in the power of God, who

But if we have died with Christ, we

raised him from the dead.

believe that we will also be raised with

him.

The question many interpreters have raised over the years is: which is it? Have Christians already been raised or not?

tion here. For one thing, the author is particularly

ing the Jewish Law as simply passé and unneces—

concerned with the interactions of believers in

sary. Does this attitude jibe with the rip-roaring,

their social arrangements, as wives and husbands,

white-hot anger that Paul spewed forth when a

children and fathers, slaves and masters. You won’t

similar problem emerged elsewhere?

find such things emphasized in Paul’s undisputed

You will have to evaluate these arguments for

letters, possibly because Paul did not look upon his

yourself. If Paul wrote the letter, then the ostensi—

churches as being in this world for the long haul

ble occasion set forth at the outset of this discus-

(see the discussion of Philemon). For Paul, social

sion was the real occasion, and Paul adopted a dif—

arrangements were what they were, and there was

ferent writing style, advocated different views, and

no need for Christians to go out of their way to dis—

assumed a different tone from his other letters. On

rupt or sustain them. Since the end was near,

the other hand, if these changes do not seem plau—

believers were to put their energies into preparing

sible, then we must conclude that Paul did not

for it rather than bothering themselves with the

write the letter.

rules and standards of society (see 1 Cor 7:17–31).

Who wrote the letter if Paul did not? We will

The household rules given in Colossians, on the

never know, but he must have been a member of

other hand, show that this author expected the

one of Paul’s churches who saw the apostle as an

church to be around for a long time.

ultimate authority figure. This person wrote a ficIn addition, we should consider the nature of

titious letter to deal with a real problem that he

the false teaching in Colossae. If the false teachers

had come to know about, possibly within his own

there were urging Gentiles to be circumcised and

congregation. If this is what happened, though,

to keep parts of the Law, as suggested by 2:8–19,

then the address to the “Colossians” is itself prob—

why isn’t “Paul” totally outraged and incensed, as

ably a fiction, for the town, and any church that

he was in Galatians? Here he is positive and

happened to be there, was destroyed by an earth—

upbeat, trying to show them a better way, portray—

quake around the year 61 C.E. It may well be that

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SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 23.3 The “Household Rules” in Colossians and Ephesians

Two of the most complete sets of “household rules” (the technical German name is Haustafeln) in the New Testament can be found in Col 3:18–4:1 and Eph 5:21–6:9 (see also 1

Pet 2:13–3:12). These rules are concerned with reciprocal duties in social arrangements that involve one person having power over another: (a) wives and husbands, (b) children and fathers, (c) slaves and masters. Given the circumstance that both of these letters claim to be written by Paul, it is interesting to note that Paul himself never gives such set rules. Is that because he, like Jesus, did not expect social relations to last much longer, since the end of the age was imminent?

Scholars continue to debate why such rules for the household came to be emphasized by the second generation of Christianity. The following are among the more interesting theories: (a) since Christians stopped believing that the end was coming right away, they needed to devise better rules for how they could continue to function in their social arrangements with one another; (b) some Christians were claiming that all people had an equal standing in Christ (see Gal 3:28) and had begun to urge a radical egalitarian form of community, in which no one had precedence over anyone else (i.e., men and women / slaves and masters were all on equal footing); the household rules were intended to put a halt to this way of thinking; (c) Christians began to experience severe persecution from those who were outside, and needed to formulate stronger social bonds with one another, so as to provide a more cohesive front with which to withstand the barrage of persecution; (d) Christians had been accused of social improprieties (see box 19.2) and needed to demonstrate to the world that they were socially respectable and free from any radical tendencies.

These options are not, of course, mutually exclusive; the real solution may be a combination of several, or all, of them. What is clear, though, is that each explanation makes best sense if the Christian church had already been around for a while and anticipated having to function in society over the long haul.

this unknown author had access to one or more of

ter to the Ephesians the matter is even more clear

Paul’s other letters, including almost certainly the

cut. The majority of critical scholars are convinced

letter to Philemon, since the same names appear

that Paul did not write this letter. To say that schol—

in the greetings of the two letters. Using these

ars are convinced of this position, however, is not to

other letters as models, he penned an authorita—

say that it has been proven. Scholarly opinion, after

tive denunciation of a false philosophy that had

all, is still opinion, not fact. For this reason, you will

begun to spread, putting this pseudonymous writ—

need to evaluate the evidence for yourself (at least

ing into circulation as an authentic letter of the

as much of the evidence as I can present here) and

apostle Paul.

make your own judgment.

Before jumping to the question of authorship,

we should begin once more with the ostensible sit-

Ephesians

uation lying behind the epistle. Unlike with the

While the arguments against the Pauline author—

other letters of the Pauline corpus, the occasion

ship of 2 Thessalonians and especially of Colossians

for Ephesians is notoriously difficult to determine.

have persuaded a number of scholars, with the let—

We do learn that “Paul” was writing from prison to



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Gentile Christians (3:1). There is some question,

though, concerning where the epistle was sent and

for what reason.

Most English translations indicate that the

addressees are “the saints who are in Ephesus”

(1:1), but the words “in Ephesus” are not found in

F P O

the earliest and best Greek manuscripts of this letter. Most textual experts think that the words were

not in the letter originally but were added by a

scribe after it had already been in circulation for a

time. If so, then Ephesians was written as a kind of

Figure 23.1 The first page of Ephesians in Codex Sinaiticus,

“circular letter,” designed to make the circuit of a

the oldest complete manuscript of the New Testament. Notice

number of Pauline churches, sent to “the saints

that the first verse has been corrected in the margin. The letter who are faithful” but not to the saints of any par-was originally addressed “to the saints,” but a later scribe made ticular location. Such a letter would have been the address more specific by inserting the phrase “who are in

Ephesus.” For a discussion of such scribal changes of our man-copied in several of the places that it was received,

uscripts, see Chapter 29.

including the city of Ephesus. It appears that the

copyist in Ephesus decided to personalize the letter by adding the words “in Ephesus” to the

heavenly existence (2:1–10). Thus Jew and

addressees, so that when the Ephesian Christians

Gentile are unified with one another and with

read it they would think that it was written partic—

God. This is the “mystery” of the gospel that was

ularly to them. Then, both this scribe’s copy of the

concealed from earlier generations but has now

letter and other copies that lacked the words “in

been revealed to “Paul” and through him to the

Ephesus” were used by later copyists who repro—

world (3:1–13).

duced the letter. This would explain why some of

The second half of the letter (chaps. 4–6) con—

our surviving manuscripts have the words “in

sists of exhortations to live in ways that manifest

Ephesus” and others don’t. (We will discuss the

this unity. It is to be evident in the life of the

interesting business of how and why Christian

church (4:1–16), in the distinctiveness of the

scribes changed their texts in Chapter 29.)

believers from the rest of society (4:17–5:20), and

Originally, then, the letter may not have been

in the social relations of fellow Christians, that is,

sent to a particular congregation but to a number

in their roles as wives and husbands, children and

of congregations, for example, throughout Asia

fathers, slaves and masters (5:21–6:9). The letter

Minor. The overarching purpose of Ephesians is to

closes with an exhortation to continue to fight

remind its Gentile readers that even though they

against the forces of the devil that are trying to dis—

were formerly alienated from God and his people,

rupt the life of the congregation (6:10–20) and

Israel, they have now been made one through the

then “Paul’s” final closing statement and benedic—

work of Jesus—one with the Jews through Jesus’

tion (6:21–24).

work of reconciliation and one with God through

Once again, however, we must ask the critical

his work of redemption (2:1–22). More specifical—

question: was this letter actually sent by Paul?

ly, Jesus’ death has torn down the barrier that pre—

Broadly speaking, Ephesians may sound like some—

viously divided Jew and Gentile, that is, the

thing that Paul could have written. Allowance

Jewish Law, so that both groups are now absolute—

must be made, of course, for its character as a

ly equal; Jews and Gentiles can live in harmony

circular letter, in which the author addresses no

with one another without the divisiveness of the

specific problem, such as moral improprieties or

Law (2:11–18). Moreover, Christ has united both

false teachings, and therefore offers no specific res—

Jew and Gentile with God (2:18–22). Believers

olutions. Some scholars have argued that Paul

have not only died with Christ, they have also

would not have written such a letter, but how

been raised up with him to enjoy the benefits of a

could we know?

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The real difficulty with Ephesians is not with its

longer undisputed letters: in the first four chapters

occasion or broad scope but with the details of

of Romans there are 581 sentences, only three of

what the author actually says and the way in

which are over fifty words; in the first four chapters

which he says it (as was also the case with 2

of 1 Corinthians, there are 621 sentences, with

Thessalonians and Colossians). Whereas the writ—

only one over fifty words. Paul tended to write in a

ing style of Colossians appears to be non-Pauline,

succinct style. The author of Ephesians did not.

the style of Ephesians is even more so. No one who

In addition, this author uses a total of 116

reads this letter in Greek can help being struck by

words that are not found in any of Paul’s undisput—

its incredibly long sentences when measured

ed letters. To be sure, Paul uses unique words in all

against Paul. In Greek, the opening thanksgiving

of his letters, depending on what he happens to be

of 1:3–14 (twelve verses) is one sentence. Again,

talking about, but 116 non-Pauline words seems

this is not bad writing style; it simply isn’t Paul’s.

inordinately high compared with what we find

Some scholars have demonstrated this point in

elsewhere. For example, the book of Philippians, a

convincing terms (see the article on Ephesians by

letter of comparable, but slightly shorter, length,

Victor Furnish in the Anchor Bible Dictionary II.

has one of the highest number of unique words (in

535–42). There are something like a hundred com—

proportion to the total number of words) among

plete sentences in this book, nine of them over fifty

Paul’s undisputed epistles, but the total there is

words in length. Contrast this with what you find

only 76.

in Paul’s undisputed letters. Philippians and

When taken in combination with what the let—

Galatians, for example, are roughly the same

ter of Ephesians actually says, these differences in

length as Ephesians; Philippians has 102 sentences,

style and vocabulary suggest that someone other

but only one of them is over fifty words, and

than Paul wrote it, someone imitating the letters

Galatians has 181 sentences, with only one over

of Paul but without complete success. To examine

fifty words. Or consider these portions of the

the contents of Ephesians, we can look at one

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 23.4 The Vocabulary of Salvation in Paul and Ephesians

One of the subtle contrasts between Ephesians and the undisputed Pauline epistles involves a technical difference in the language they use to describe salvation. In earlier chapters, we discussed Paul’s view of salvation, that is, his general view of how a person enters into a restored relationship with God. Strictly speaking, however, Paul uses the actual term “salvation,” and the verb “save,” only in the future sense. For Paul, being saved refers to what will happen when Christ returns and delivers his followers from the wrath of God that will soon hit this world (e.g., see Rom 5:9–10; 1 Cor 3:15; 5:5). Odd as it might seem to many people today, Paul would have been puzzled by the question that you yourself may have been asked at some time: “Have you been saved?” His reply would have been, “Of course not,” by which he would have meant that salvation, strictly speaking, is something that is going to happen at the parousia, not something that already has happened.

For the author of Ephesians, however, salvation is something that has already taken place.

Just as Christians have already been raised up with Christ, they have also already been saved:

“By grace you have been saved” (2:5). Could Paul have written this? Of course, he could have, but is it likely, given the way he regularly speaks elsewhere?

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particular passage that is central to the overarch—

Another interesting difference from Paul’s

ing theme of the book and whose ideas appear to

own letters is the way the author of Ephesians

resemble those that Paul sets forth in some of his

2:1–10 conceptualizes “works.” In Paul’s gospel,

undisputed letters. Once we move beneath the

Gentiles are made right with God not by doing

surface, however, these resemblances begin to

the works of the Law but through faith in

evaporate.

Christ’s death. Thus, when Paul speaks about

Ephesians 2:1–10 discusses the conversion of its

works, he is referring to doing those aspects of

Gentile readers from their earlier lives to the sal—

the Law that make Jews distinctive as the people

vation they have experienced in Christ. There are

of Israel (e.g., circumcision and kosher food

a number of important Pauline themes here: a per—

laws). Ephesians, however, no longer refers to

son’s separation from God before being converted

the Jewish Law, but speaks instead of “good

to Christ is spoken of as “death” (vv. 1–2), the

deeds” (see 2:8–10). Interestingly, as we found in

devil is designated as “the ruler of the power of the

the previous chapter, the author of James coun—

air” (v. 2), the grace of God brings salvation

tered a later version of Paul’s gospel that insisted

through faith, not works (vv. 8–9), and the new

that faith without doing good deeds was ade—

existence leads to a moral life (v. 10). Surely this

quate before God. It appears that the author of

is Pauline material.

Ephesians understands “works” in this later, non—

There are peculiarities here as well, however, as

Pauline, sense.

we can see when we dig deeper into the text. The

Just as the notion of “works” appears to have

first and most obvious problem concerns the status

lost its specifically Jewish content, so too does the

of the believer, which is described in a way that is

author’s own former life in which he engaged in

strikingly similar to what we found in Colossians.

these works. Paul himself spoke proudly of his for—

Even though Paul’s undisputed letters are quite

mer life as one in which he had kept the Jewish

emphatic that the resurrection of believers (even

Law better than the zealous Pharisaic companions

in a spiritual sense) has not yet happened, the

of his youth. In his own words, “with respect to the

author of Ephesians pronounces that “God . . .

righteousness found in the Law, I was found to be

made us alive together with Christ . . . and raised

blameless” (Phil 3:6). Paul’s conversion was not

us up with him and seated us with him in the

away from a wild and promiscuous past to an

heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (vv. 5–6). This

upright and moral present; it was from one form of

view of the Christian believer is even more exalt—

rigorous religiosity to another. What about the

ed than the one in Colossians; the words the

author of Ephesians? Evidently, he did not con—

author uses of the believer’s status mirror those he

ceive of Paul’s past in this way, for according to

uses of Christ himself:

him “all of us once lived among them (i.e., the

pagans) in the passions of our flesh, following the

God put this power to work in Christ when he raised

desires of flesh and senses” (2:3). It is true that

him from the dead and seated him at his right hand

Paul himself occasionally speaks of having been

in the heavenly places, far above all rule and author—

subject to the law of sin and of having done the

ity and power and dominion, and above every name

things that he knew he ought not to have done

that is named, not only in this age but also in the age

to come. And he has put all things under his feet and

(Romans 7); but in his undisputed letters the

made him the head over all things for the church.

extent of his transgression involved such things as

(vv. 20–22)

“coveting” (Rom 7:7–8), not the wild and dis—

solute lifestyle of the pagans that he sometimes

According to Ephesians 2, believers are seated

maligned (e.g., see Rom 1:18–32). In terms of his

with Christ in the heavenly places, above every—

lifestyle, Paul lived “blamelessly.” Not so the

thing else. Can this be the same author who casti—

author of Ephesians.

gated the Corinthians for maintaining that they

Who, then, was this author and why did he write

had already come to be exalted with Christ and

the letter? Once again, our historical curiosity is

were therefore already ruling with him?

stymied by a lack of evidence. Clearly the author

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was a member of a church that was committed to

the Pastoral epistles, we should note their ostensi—

Paul’s understanding of the gospel, but he evidently

ble occasion and overarching points, both as a

lived at a later time, perhaps near the end of the

group (since most scholars are reasonably certain

first century, when some of Paul’s views had devel—

that they all came from the same pen) and indi—

oped in directions that Paul himself had not taken

vidually. These letters are grouped together as pas—

them, for example with respect to what it meant to

toral epistles because each claims to be written by

be saved apart from works. This author may well

Paul to a person he has appointed to lead one of

have had access to other letters written under Paul’s

his churches: Timothy, his young companion left

name. Scholars have long noted, for example, a

to minister among the Christians in Ephesus, and

number of similarities between Ephesians and

Titus, his companion left on the island of Crete.

Colossians, including their openings and closings,

Moreover, these epistles contain pastoral advice,

their views of being raised already with Christ, and

that is, advice from the apostle to his appointed

their instructions to wives and husbands, children

representatives concerning how they should tend

and fathers, slaves and masters.

their Christian flocks.

Possibly, then, an unknown author concerned

Each of these epistles presupposes a slightly dif—

with tensions that had erupted between Gentiles

ferent situation, but the overarching issues are the

and Jews in the churches that he knew (in Asia

same. The problems involve (a) false teachers who

Minor?) wrote to reaffirm what he saw to be the

are creating problems for the congregations and

core of Paul’s message, that Christ brought about a

(b) the internal organization of the communities

unification of Jew and Gentile and a reconcilia—

and their leaders. “Paul” urges his representatives

tion of both with God, and that all members of the

to take charge, to run a tight ship, to keep every—

Christian church should respond to their new

one in line, and above all to silence those who

standing in Christ by embracing and promoting

promote ideas that conflict with the teachings

the unity provided from above.

that he himself has endorsed.

THE PASTORAL EPISTLES

1 Timothy

1 Timothy presupposes that Paul and Timothy vis—

Up to this point I have tried to show why scholars

ited Ephesus on the way to Macedonia (1:3) and

continue to debate the authorship of the Deutero—

that Paul decided to leave Timothy behind to

Pauline epistles, but when we come to the Pastoral

bring the false teachers under control (1:3–11), to

epistles, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, there is

bring order to the church (2:1–15), and to appoint

greater scholarly unanimity. These three letters are

moral and upright leaders to keep things running

widely regarded by scholars as non-Pauline. In dis—

smoothly (3:1–13). Most of the letter consists of

cussing the authorship of the Pauline epistles, we

instructions concerning Christian living and

should constantly remember that we are not ask—

social interaction, for instance on how Christians

ing whether or not Christians in the first or second

ought to pray, how they ought to behave towards

century would have forged documents in Paul’s

the elderly, the widows, and their leaders, and

name. We know for a fact that some did: 2

what things they ought to avoid, namely, point—

Thessalonians alludes to a forged letter (2:2), and

lessly ascetic lifestyles, material wealth, and

a proto-orthodox Christian confessed to forging 3

heretics who corrupt the truth.

Corinthians. Moreover, everyone agrees that some

The nature of the false teaching that the author

of the writings that survive in Paul’s name are

disparages is somewhat difficult to discern. Some

Christian forgeries (e.g., the correspondence

members of the congregation have evidently

between “Paul” and the philosopher Seneca and

become enthralled with “myths and endless

the apocalypse written by “Paul”). What we are

genealogies” (1:4). This phrase has struck a chord

asking, then, is whether any given document that

with modern interpreters familiar with various

claims to be written by Paul can sustain its claim.

strands of Christian Gnosticism. Recall from our

Before addressing the issue of the authorship of

discussion in Chapter 11 that Gnostic Christians



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F P O

Figure 23.2 Picture of a woman officiating at the Lord’s Supper, an activity that the author of the Pastorals would no doubt have disapproved of. (Some viewers have suggested that the participants in the meal look astonished in this painting.) developed elaborate mythologies that traced the with a final exhortation to “avoid the profane

genealogies of divine beings all the way back to

chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called

the one true God. Some strands of Gnosticism

knowledge” (6:20). The Greek word for “knowl—

were deeply rooted in Judaism; the Jewish

edge,” of course, is gnosis; those who were gnostics

Scriptures themselves, especially the first chapters

claimed to know what was not available to the

of Genesis, proved to be a limitless resource for

general public, not even to their fellow Christians.

speculation about how the world and the super—

It seems altogether reasonable, then, to assume

natural beings who rule it came into existence. It

that this letter was directed against an early form

is striking in this connection that the author of 1

of Christian Gnosticism.

Timothy goes on to attack those who want to be

The author does not attack the views of his

“teachers of the law” (1:7).

opponents head-on but instead urges Timothy not

Most of the Gnostic groups that we know about

to heed their words and, if possible, to bring them

were rigorously ascetic. Wanting to escape the

into submission (1:3). As we will see later, many of

material world, they chose to punish their bodies

the instructions that the author gives to the leader—

so as not to be enslaved by them, refraining from

ship of the church may represent an effort to

sexual relations and insisting on strict and unin—

become organized in order to face these opponents

teresting diets. The author of 1 Timothy corre—

with a unified front. In any event, the qualifications

spondingly lambastes false teachers because they

of those who are to be appointed leaders of the

“forbid marriage and demand abstinence from

church, the bishops and deacons, whose duties are

foods” (4:3). Moreover, he concludes his letter

never spelled out, soon take center stage. For this

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author, only men are allowed to occupy these posi—

those who lead the saints astray with their idle talk

tions, and they are to be morally upright and strong

and corrupt lives (2:16–18, 23–26; 3:1–9; 4:3–5).

personalities who can serve as models to the com—

There is even less evidence concerning the

munity and command respect in the world outside

nature of the false teaching here than in 1

the church.

Timothy. Two of the opponents are specifically

The tight organization of the church is impor—

said to have claimed that “the resurrection has

tant not only for addressing the problems posed by

already taken place” (2:17), a claim that sounds

false teachers but also for monitoring the inner

familiar from other Pauline writings we have

workings of the community itself. In particular,

examined. But mostly the author attacks his oppo—

the author is concerned about the role women

nents with general slander, providing no specifics

should play in the congregation (not much of one;

concerning what they actually said. Thus, the

see especially 1 Tim 2:11–15) and about the posi—

opponents are called

tion and activities of “widows,” who appear to be

enrolled by the church and provided with some

lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, arro—

kind of material support in exchange for their

gant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrate—

pious deeds (5:4–16). The author evidently thinks

ful, unholy, inhuman, implacable, slanderers, profli—

gates, brutes, haters of good, treacherous, reckless,

that women in general and widows in particular

swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than

have stirred up problems and are not to be trusted

lovers of God, holding to the outward form of godli-

(e.g., 5:11–13; see Chapter 24).

ness but denying its power. (3:2–5)

They may well have been all these things and

more, but the passage provides no clue about what

2 Timothy

they actually taught or stood for. Timothy, in any

The second Pastoral epistle presupposes a somewhat

event, is to oppose them with all his strength, and

different situation. It too is written by “Paul” to

to continue the ministry that “Paul” has assigned

Timothy (1:1). Now, however, “Paul” is in prison in

to him until he comes to see the apostle in his

Rome (1:16–17; his location in 1 Timothy was not

bondage in Rome.

specified), and he is clearly expecting to be put to

death soon (4:6–8), after a second judicial proceeding (the first one evidently did not go well; 4:17).

Titus

He writes to Timothy not only to encourage him to

The book of Titus is far more like the first Pastoral

continue his pastoral ministry and to root the false

epistle than the second. Indeed, the letter seems

teachers out of his church but also to ask him to

something like a Readers’ Digest version of 1

join him as soon as possible (4:21), bringing along

Timothy, with its list of qualifications for church

some of his personal belongings (4:13).

leaders and its moral instructions for members of the

In this letter we learn something more about

congregation in their relations with one another.

Timothy himself. He is portrayed as a third-gener—

The presupposed situation is that “Paul” has

ation Christian, having been preceded in the faith

left his trusted comrade Titus on the island of

by his mother Eunice and grandmother Lois (1:5).

Crete as an apostolic representative to the church

He was trained in the Scriptures from his child—

there (1:4–5). In particular, Titus was supposed to

hood (3:15) and as an adult became a companion

appoint elders, or bishops, in the churches of every

of “Paul,” collaborating with him in his mission to

town (1:5–9). “Paul” is now writing in order to

some of the cities of Asia Minor (3:10–11). He

urge Titus to correct the false teachings promoted

was ordained to Christian ministry through the

by Jewish-Christian believers, which appear to

ritual of laying on of hands (1:6; 4:1–5). As the

involve both complicated “mythologies” that con—

author’s faithful representative in Ephesus (one of

fuse the faithful (1:10–16) and “genealogies and

the few anywhere, evidently, see 1:16–17;

quarrels about the law” (3:9). As in 1 Timothy, the

4:10–18), Timothy is charged with overcoming

false teaching may therefore involve Gnostic spec-

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ulation. Titus is not to argue with these people; he

Assuming, then, that all three letters come

is to warn them twice to change their views and

from the same hand (even granting 2 Timothy’s

afterwards simply ignore them, “since you know

different occasion and content), was that hand the

that such a person is perverted and sinful, being

apostle Paul’s? By pursuing this question, we can

self-condemned” (3:11). The errant parties them—

learn a good deal about these epistles, particularly

selves, needless to say, probably thought otherwise.

about the historical situation that they presup—

A good portion of the epistle contains the

pose. Here I will set forth the arguments that have

apostle’s sage advice to various social groups with—

struck most scholars as decisive in showing that

in the congregation: older men (2:2), older

Paul did not write them.

women (2:3), younger women (2:4–5), younger

At the outset, we should consider the unusual

men (2:6–8); and slaves (2:9–10). Near the end,

vocabulary used throughout these letters. Before

the advice becomes more general in nature,

adducing the data themselves, let me first explain

involving basic admonitions to engage in moral

their significance. Suppose (to imagine a relative—

behavior in light of the new life for those who

ly bizarre situation) that someone were to uncover

have been saved (3:1–7, especially v. 5). The let—

a letter allegedly written by Paul that urged its

ter concludes with several greetings and a request

readers to attend mass every Saturday night, to go

for Titus to join the apostle in the city of

to confession once a week, and to say three Hail

Nicopolis, where he plans to spend the winter

Marys for every unintentional sin they committed.

(3:12). There were several cities of this name in

What would you make of such a letter? Some of its

Asia Minor and elsewhere in the empire; it is not

words would indicate Christian practices and

clear to which of these the author refers.

beliefs that developed long after Paul had died

(e.g., mass, Hail Marys). Others were used by Paul,

but not in the same way (e.g., confession). With

THE HISTORICAL SITUATION

the passage of time, significant words in any lan-

AND AUTHORSHIP OF THE

guage are invested with new meanings and new

words are created, which is why Shakespearean

PASTORAL EPISTLES

English sounds so strange to many people today

Most scholars are reasonably convinced that all

and why our language would have struck

three Pastoral epistles were written by the same

Shakespeare as peculiar. The vocabulary of this

author. With 1 Timothy and Titus there can be lit—

hypothetical letter alone would show you that the

tle doubt. The writing style, subject matter, and

apostle Paul did not write it.

specific content are altogether similar. If they were

With the Pastoral epistles, of course, we find

not written by the same person, we would have to

nothing so blatant, but we do find an inordinate

suppose that one of them was used by an imitator

number of non-Pauline words, most of which do

as the model for the other, but there appears to be

occur in later Christians writings. Sophisticated

no reason to think that this is what happened. The

studies of the Greek text of these books have come

question of 2 Timothy has proven somewhat more

up with the following data (see the works cited in

complicated since its content is different. Yet even

the suggestions for further reading): apart from per—

here the vocabulary and writing style are closely

sonal names, there are 848 different words found in

aligned with the other two. The salutation of the

the Pastorals; of these, 306 occur nowhere else in

letter matches that of 1 Timothy: “To Timothy, my

the Pauline corpus of the New Testament (even

. . . child . . . : Grace, mercy, and peace from God

including the Deutero-Paulines). This means that

the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord” (1 Tim 1:2;

over one-third of the vocabulary is not Pauline.

2 Tim 1:2). No other Pauline letter has the same

Strikingly, over two-thirds of these non-Pauline

wording. Moreover, many of the same concerns

words are used by Christian authors of the second

are clearly to the fore in both letters, especially the

century. Thus, it appears that the vocabulary repre—

concern for the administration of the church and

sented in these letters is more developed than what

the weeding out of false teachers.

we find in the other letters attributed to Paul.



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Figure 23.3 Even though the author of the Pastoral epistles, and many of his male contemporaries, believed that women should not be involved with business outside the home, many women had to work in order to survive in the ancient Roman world, as seen in this funerary monument portraying two women working in a poultry/butcher shop.

Moreover, some of the words that Paul does use

problems that the letters address. If the major form

in his own letters take on different meanings in

of false teaching being attacked was some kind of

the Pastorals. As brief examples, Paul’s word for

Christian Gnosticism, then one might ask when

“having a right standing before God” (literally,

this kind of religion can be historically document-

“righteous”) now means “being a moral individed. In fact, the first Christian Gnostics that we

ual” (i.e., “upright”; Tit 1:8) and the term “faith,”

know by name lived in the early to mid second

which for Paul refers to a trusting acceptance of

century. To be sure, the second-century Gnostics

the death of Christ for salvation, now refers to the

may have had some predecessors near the end of

body of teaching that makes up the Christian reli—

the first century (as we discussed in Chapter 11),

gion (e.g., Tit 1:13).

but there is almost no evidence to suggest that they

Of course, the argument from vocabulary can

were spouting “myths and endless genealogies” that

never be decisive in itself. Everybody uses different

sanctioned strictly ascetic lifestyles or that they

words on different occasions, and the Christian

were otherwise plaguing the Christian congrega—

vocabulary of Paul himself must have developed

tions during the lifetime of Paul himself. Not even

over time. The magnitude of these differences must

Paul’s adversaries in Corinth were this advanced.

give us pause, however, particularly since they

Of even greater importance is the way in which

coincide with other features of the letters that sug—

these false teachings are attacked in the Pastorals,

gest they were written after Paul had passed off the

for the author’s basic orientation appears to be

scene. To begin with, there is the nature of the

very much like what we find developing in sec-

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ond-century proto-orthodox circles. From our ear—

tighter ship? Quite simply because there was no

lier discussions, you may have wondered how one

such person there.

form of the widely diversified Christian movement

Paul’s churches were “charismatic” communi—

ended up becoming dominant. How did it happen

ties, that is, congregations of people who believed

that from all the variety that we have seen within

that they had been endowed with God’s Spirit and

early Christianity, only the Roman Catholic

so been given “gifts” (Greek charismata) to enable

Church emerged, the church from which the

them to minister to one another as teachers,

Eastern orthodox and Protestant churches of today

prophets, evangelists, healers, almsgivers, tongues—

also derive? The story is far too long to narrate in

speakers, tongues-interpreters, and so on. There

full here, interesting as it is. For our purposes, it is

was nobody ultimately in charge, except the apos—

enough to indicate that the group that I’ve called

tle (who wasn’t on the scene), because everyone

the proto-orthodox was successful in countering

had received an equal endowment of the Spirit,

the claims of other groups, and therefore in

and so no one could lord it over anyone else. At

attracting more converts to its own perspectives,

least that is how Paul thought the church ought to

by forming a unified front that claimed a threefold

be (see 1 Corinthians 12–14).

authorization for its understanding of the religion.

What happens, though, when everyone feels

This unified front involved (a) developing a rigor—

Spirit-led but not everyone agrees on where the

ous administrative hierarchy that protected and

Spirit leads? In such a situation, who is to say that

conveyed the truth of the religion (eventuating,

one person’s teaching is of the Spirit and another’s

for example, in the papacy), (b) insisting that all

is not? Who is to decide how the church funds

true Christians profess a set body of doctrines

should be used? Who is to reprimand a brother or

promoted by these leaders (the Christian creeds),

sister involved in dubious personal activities? At

and (c) appealing to a set of authoritative books of

the start, Paul evidently did not find these issues of

Scripture as bearers of these inspired doctrinal

local leadership pressing, since he believed that the

truths (the “New” Testament; see Chapter 1). Or

end was soon to arrive and that the Spirit was sim—

to put the matter in its simplest and most allitera—

ply a sort of down-payment of what was to come, a

tive terms, the proto-orthodox won these conflicts

kind of interim guide to how life would be in the

by insisting on the validity of the clergy, the creed,

kingdom. But what happens when the end does not

and the canon.

arrive and there is no one person or group of per—

These forms of authorization were not in place

sons to take charge? Presumably, as in the church

during Paul’s day. They are in the process of devel—

in Corinth, what happens is a fair bit of chaos.

opment, however, in the Pastoral epistles.

The developments within the Pauline communities appear to have taken place in response to

The Clergy.

The one Pauline community

this chaos. With the passing of time, Paul’s

whose inner workings we know in some detail,

churches developed a kind of hierarchy of author—

thanks to the apostle’s extended correspon—

ity in which church leaders emerged and began to

dence with it, is the church in Corinth. This

take control of the congregations. To a limited

was a troubled church, one that was rife with

extent, this development began in the later years

inner turmoil, characterized by what Paul con—

of Paul’s ministry: in the letter to the Philippians,

sidered to be personal immorality, and subject

for example, he mentions “overseers and deacons”

to what he regarded to be false teaching. How

as among his recipients (1:1). But Paul assigns no

did Paul deal with the problems, or rather, to

special roles to these persons nor does he assume

whom in the church did he appeal when he

that they can deal directly with the issues that he

decided to deal with them? If you’ll recall he

addresses.

wrote to the entire church, pleading with them

Some fifty years or so after Paul had died, how—

to adhere to his advice. Why didn’t he address

ever, these offices had developed considerably in

his concerns to the person in charge, the elder

proto-orthodox circles. Each Christian locality

or overseer who could make decisions and run a

had a clear-cut leader called a “bishop” (the Greek

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word is episkopos, literally meaning “overseer,” as

hence the name of the most famous of these state—

in Phil 1:1), under whom served “presbyters”

ments of faith, devised in the fourth century and

(Greek for “elders”), who appear to have tended to

known today as the Apostles’ Creed.

the spiritual needs of the communities, and “dea—

The proto-orthodox creeds affirmed beliefs that

cons” (Greek for “ministers”), who may have

were denied by other groups who claimed to be

focused on their material needs. In the early sec—

Christian, and they repudiated beliefs that these

ond-century writings of Ignatius, for example, we

other groups affirmed. For example, Gnostic

find churches in Asia Minor with a solitary bishop

Christians claimed that there were many gods, not

in charge and a board of presbyters and deacons

just one, and that the true God had never had any

under him (see box 23.5 and, more fully, Chapter

contact with the material world, which had been

26). Above all, the bishops were to root out all

created by a lesser, evil deity. In response, the proto—

traces of heretical teaching.

orthodox creed proclaimed: “We believe in One

Later on in the second century, when we come

God, the Father, the Almighty, Maker of Heaven

to such proto-orthodox authors as Irenaeus and

and Earth” (as stated in its somewhat later formula—

Tertullian, we find explicit arguments for what is

tion, the Nicene creed). Many of the Gnostics,

sometimes called the “apostolic succession.”

moreover, claimed that Jesus was one person and

According to these authors, the apostles established

Christ was another. The orthodox creed, however,

a single bishop over each of the major churches in

maintained, “We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ.”

Christendom; these bishops in turn hand-picked

Other groups of Christians denied that Jesus was a

their own successors and ordained them to ministry,

real man who had actually been born, while still

and so forth down to the writers’ own day. These

others denied that his birth had been at all special

authors considered the bishops of these churches to

or that his mother had been a virgin. In response,

be the rightful heirs of the apostles. Needless to say,

the proto-orthodox creed affirmed that he “was

they were also the bishops who subscribed to the

born of the Virgin Mary and made man.”

proto-orthodox points of view.

The Christians who devised and affirmed these

With the passing of time, then, a church hierar—

orthodox creeds portrayed Christianity as a reli—

chy developed out of the loosely organized, charis—

gion devoted to a set of doctrinal truth statements,

matic churches established by Paul and presumably

containing ideas or notions that were to be

by other missionaries like him. Where do the

acknowledged by all believers as true. For them,

Pastoral epistles stand in this line of development?

“the faith” referred to the body of Christian teachIn these letters “Paul” writes to his officially desig—

ings that were to be affirmed. As we have seen,

nated representatives, ordained by the laying on of

this contrasts with Paul’s own usage, in which

hands, instructing them to appoint bishops and

“faith” is not a propositional term but a relational

deacons who are suitable for the governance of the

one, signifying a trusting acceptance of the death

church and to pass along to them the true teaching

of Christ to bring about a restored relationship

that the apostle himself has provided. The clerical

with God. Significantly, in the Pastoral epistles

structure of these letters appears far removed from

what is of critical importance is “the teaching,”

what we find in the letters of Paul, but it is closely

that is, the body of knowledge conveyed by the

aligned with what we find in proto-orthodox

apostle, sometimes simply designated as “the faith”

authors of the second century.

(e.g., see 1 Tim 1:10; Tit 1:9, 13). These epistles,

then, appear to represent a form of Christianity

The Creed. Proto-orthodox Christians of the sec—

that arose in the wake of Paul’s own ministry.

ond and third centuries felt a need to develop a set

of doctrines that were to be subscribed to by all

The Canon. I have already talked about the

true believers. As was the case with the proto—

development of the Christian canon of Scripture

orthodox clergy, the proto-orthodox creed was

in Chapter 1. We do not find proto-orthodox

acclaimed as a creation of the apostles themselves;

authors endorsing a specific collection of distinc-

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CHAPTER 23

IN THE WAKE OF THE APOSTLE

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SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 23.5 Church Hierarchy in Ignatius

The undisputed letters of Paul contain nothing like the structured hierarchy that begins to make itself evident in the works of later writers such as Ignatius, who urges that the solitary bishop of the church should hold complete sway over his congregation and that the presbyters and deacons should also be given special places of authority (cf. the Pastorals). As Ignatius says to the Christians of Smyrna: Let all of you follow the bishop, as Jesus Christ follows the Father; and follow the presbytery as you would follow the Apostles. And respect the deacons as you respect the commandment of God. Let no one do anything that relates to the church apart from the bishop. The only eucharist that is valid is the one performed by the bishop or by the person that he appoints. Wherever the bishop happens to be, consider this the entire congregation, just as where Jesus Christ is, there you will find the whole church. It is not fitting for anyone to perform a baptism or to celebrate the Lord’s Supper if the bishop is not present. But whatever the bishop should approve, this also is pleasing to God. . . . The one who honors the bishop has been honored by God; the one who does anything apart from the knowledge of the bishop serves the devil.

(Ign. Smyr. 8–9)

tively Christian books until near the end of the

CONCLUSION: THE POST-

second century. The movement toward a canon

PAULINE PASTORAL EPISTLES

was already afoot somewhat earlier, however, in

writers who quoted the words of Jesus and the

There are other aspects of the Pastoral epistles

writings of the apostles as authoritative in matters

that make them appear to date after the death of

pertaining to doctrine and practice. These words

the apostle Paul: their preoccupation with social

were not understood simply as pieces of good

arrangements in this world and the Christians’

advice; they came to be seen as standing on a par

respectability in the eyes of outsiders rather than

with the Jewish Scriptures themselves, which the

with the apocalypse that is soon to come, their

Christians continued to revere and study (cf. 2

insistence that the leaders of the church be mar—

Tim 3:16).

ried rather than single and celibate (which was

There is scant evidence that this had already

Paul’s own preference for both himself and his

happened by the time the Pastoral epistles were

converts), their assumption that Timothy is a

written, but the little that does exist is intriguing.

third-generation Christian preceded in the faith

The first book of Timothy quotes a passage from

by both his mother and grandmother, and their

the Torah and sets it next to a saying of Jesus

concern to silence women who have, in the

(5:18). Strikingly, the author labels both sayings as

author’s view, gotten out of hand (a matter we will

Scripture. We appear to be headed down the path

explore in the following chapter). But the most

that will eventuate in the proto-orthodox canon.

compelling reason for thinking that they were

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written near the end of the first century, or some—

the stances that this anonymous author took

what later, is that their vocabulary and concerns

differed not only from those promoted by Paul

reflect what was transpiring among proto-ortho—

himself in his undisputed letters but also from

dox Christians a generation or two after Paul’s

those advanced by other Pauline Christians.

death. These Christians were less concerned with

The differences are particularly evident in the

the imminent end of the world than with the

author’s attacks on gnosis, on women’s involve—

problems confronting a church that was to be here

ment in the church (see pp. 368–71), and on

for a long time to come. This was a church that

strictly ascetic lifestyles. As we have seen, on these

needed to strengthen itself through tighter organi—

subjects the author of the Pastorals stood at odds

zation and to ward off false teachings that had pro—

with what other Christians believed, even though

liferated with the passing of time.

they also appealed to the apostle in supporting

An unknown author within a church that

their own views (see 2 Pet 3:15–16).

subscribed to Paul’s authority took up his pen,

The church that the apostle Paul left behind

perhaps some thirty or forty years after the

thus developed in complex and unpredictable

apostle himself had died, to do what some

ways. As a result, Pauline Christianity, like all

Pauline Christians had done before him and

other forms of early Christianity, was a remarkably

what others would do afterwards: compose writ—

diverse phenomenon, whose manifold forms of

ings in the name of the apostle to address the

expression would not be unified until the triumph

crushing problems of his day. Not surprisingly,

of proto-orthodoxy in later centuries.

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# CHAPTER 24

From Paul’s Female Colleagues

to the Pastor’s Intimidated Women:

The Oppression of Women in Early Christianity

Women played a prominent role in the earliest

Romans, in which he sends greetings to and from a

Christian churches, including those associated

number of his acquaintances (chap. 16). Although

with the apostle Paul. They served as evangelists,

Paul names more men than women here, the

pastors, teachers, and prophets. Some were

women in the church appear to be in no way infe—

wealthy and provided financial support for the

rior to their male counterparts. There is Phoebe, a

apostle; others served as patrons for entire church—

deacon (or minister) in the church of Cenchreae

es, allowing congregations to meet in their homes

and Paul’s own patron, entrusted by Paul with the

and supplying them with the resources necessary

task of carrying the letter to Rome (vv. 1–2). There

for their gatherings. Some women were Paul’s cois Prisca, who along with her husband Aquila, is

workers on the mission field. Why, then, do most

largely responsible for the Gentile mission and who

people today think that all of the early Christian

supports a congregation in her own home (vv. 3–4;

leaders were men?

notice that she is named ahead of her husband).

This question has generated a number of inter—

There is Mary, Paul’s colleague who works among

esting studies in recent years. Here I will present

the Romans (v. 6). There are Tryphaena, Tryphosa,

one of the persuasive perspectives that has

and Persis, women whom Paul calls his “co-work—

emerged from these studies: despite the crucial role

ers” for the gospel (vv. 6, 12). And there are Julia

that women played in the earliest Christian

and the mother of Rufus and the sister of Nereus,

churches, by the end of the first century they faced

all of whom appear to have a high profile in this

serious opposition from those who denied their

community (vv. 13, 15). Most impressively of all,

right to occupy positions of status and authority.

there is Junia, a woman whom Paul names as “fore—

This opposition succeeded in pressing Christian

most among the apostles” (v. 7). The apostolic

women into submission to male authority and

band was evidently larger—and more inclusive—

obscured the record of their earlier involvement.

than the list of twelve men most people know

about.

Other Pauline letters provide a similar impres-

WOMEN IN PAUL’S CHURCHES

sion of women’s active involvement in the

Christian churches. In Corinth women are full

Despite the impression that one might get from

members of the body, with spiritual gifts and the

such ancient Christian writings as the Pastoral

right to use them. They actively participate in ser—

epistles, women were not always a silent presence

vices of worship, praying and prophesying along—

in the churches. Consider Paul’s letter to the

side the men (1 Cor 11:4–6). In Philippians the

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only two believers worth mentioning by name are

leaders and spokespersons. Other evidence comes

two women, Euodia and Syntyche, whose dissen—

from groups associated with the prophet Montanus

sion concerns the apostle, evidently because of

and his two women colleagues, Prisca and

their prominent standing in the community (Phil

Maximillia, who had forsaken their marriages to

4:2). Indeed, according to the narrative of Acts,

live ascetic lives, insisting that the end of the age

the church in Philippi began with the conversion

was near and that God had called his people to

of Lydia, a woman of means whose entire house—

renounce all fleshly passions in preparation for the

hold came to follow her lead in adopting this new

final consummation.

faith. She was the head of her household when the

How is it that women attained such a high sta—

apostle first met her and soon became head of the

tus and assumed such high levels of authority in

church that gathered in her home (Acts 16:1–15).

the early Christian movement? One way to answer

Even after the period of the New Testament,

the question is by looking at the ministry of Jesus

women continued to be prominent in churches

himself, to see whether women enjoyed a high

connected with Paul. The tales connected with

profile from the very outset of the movement.

Thecla, recounted in Chapter 22, appear to have

struck a resonant chord with such people. Here

were stories of women who renounced sexual relations and thereby broke the bonds of patriarchal

WOMEN ASSOCIATED

marriage, that is, the laws and customs that com-

WITH JESUS

pelled them to serve the desires and dictates of

their husbands. Joining the apostle, these women

Most of the studies of women in early Christianity

came to experience the freedom provided by an

have been less than rigorous when it comes to

ascetic life dedicated to the gospel. These narra—

applying historical criteria to the traditions about

tives portray Paul as one who proclaimed that the

Jesus that describe his involvement with women.

chaste will inherit the kingdom, with women in

We ourselves should not fall into the trap of

particular being drawn to his message.

accepting traditions as historical simply because

Even though the stories themselves are fictions,

they coincide with an agenda that we happen to

they appear to contain a germ of historical truth.

share, feminist or otherwise. So I will begin my

Women who were associated with Paul’s churches

reflections by applying the historical criteria estab—

came to renounce marriage for the sake of the

lished at an earlier stage of our study (Chapter 13)

gospel and attained positions of prominence in

to find out what we can know with relative cer—

their communities. Recall that letters later written

tainty about women in the ministry of Jesus.

in Paul’s name speak of such women and try to

To begin with, we can say with some confi—

bring them into submission. Some of these women

dence that Jesus associated with women and min—

were “widows,” that is, women who had no hus—

istered to them in public. To be sure, his twelve

band overlord (whether they had previously been

closest disciples were almost certainly men (as one

married or not). Such women are said to go about

would expect of a first-century Jewish rabbi). It is

telling “old wives tales” (1 Tim 4:7 and 5:13), pos—

largely for this reason that the principal characters

sibly stories like The Acts of Paul and Thecla that

in almost all of the gospel traditions are men. But

justified their lifestyles and views. Even in writings

not all of them are. In fact, the importance of

that oppose them, such women are acknowledged

women in Jesus’ ministry is multiply attested in

to be important to the church because of their full—

the earliest traditions. Both Mark and L (Luke’s

time ministry in its service (1 Tim 5:3–16).

special source), for example, indicate that Jesus

There is still other evidence of women enjoying

was accompanied by women in his travels (Mark

prestigious positions in churches, well into the late

15:40–41; Luke 8:1–3), a tradition corroborated by

second century. Some of this evidence derives

the Gospel of Thomas ( Gosp. Thom. 114). Mark

from Gnostic groups that claimed allegiance to

and L also indicate that women provided Jesus

Paul and that were known to have women as their

with financial support during his ministry, evi-

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# CHAPTER 24

## WOMEN IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

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SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 24.1 Mary Magdalene

Undoubtedly the most famous early Christian woman was Mary Magdalene, who is mentioned in all four of the canonical Gospels as a witness to Jesus’ death and resurrection (see, e.g., Matt 27:56, 61; 28:1; Mark 15:40–41, 47; 16:1; Luke 23:49, 55–56; 24:1-9; John 19:25; 20:1–2, 11–18). The epithet “Magdalene” identifies her as coming from the city of Magdala, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, and is used to differentiate her from the other Mary’s named in the New Testament (e.g., Jesus’ mother and the mother of James; see Matt 24:10).

In addition to her presence with Jesus during his last week, and her observation of the crucifixion and empty tomb, we learn from the Gospel of Luke that Mary Magdalene had been exorcized of seven demons and was one of the women who traveled with Jesus around Galilee, supplying him and his disciples with the funds they needed to live (Luke 8:2–3).

Apart from that, not much is said about her in the New Testament. Most people today, of course, think of her as a prostitute, even though there is not a word about this in the New Testament itself (from the biblical epics produced in Hollywood, you would think this was the major point!). Her depiction as a completely disreputable figure does not emerge until nearly 500 years after the New Testament, when she began to be identified as the “sinful woman” who anoints Jesus in Luke 7:36-50. Luke himself does not make this identification, however—even though he had ample opportunity to do so, given the fact that the story occurs immediately before his reference to Mary Magdalene!

Other later traditions also build on what the New Testament says about Mary Magdalene.

In particular, it came to be thought that since she was the first to see Jesus raised from the dead, she must have stood in a particularly close relationship with him. Thus, some gnostic Gospels indicate that after his resurrection Jesus singled her out for special revelations of the truth that would bring salvation. Some texts go even further, suggesting that the two of them had a rather intimate relationship. In particular, the Gospel of Philip indicates that the male disciples were jealous of Mary Magdalene and asked Jesus why he loved her more than them. The precise reason for their dismay? Unfortunately, the details are hard to uncover, since the only copy of this Gospel is full of holes at critical junctures. But it is intriguing to note the sentence immediately prior to the disciples’ dismay ( Gosp. Phil. 63): “And the companion of the [MISSING WORDS] Mary Magdalene. [MISSING WORDS . . . loved] her more than all the disciples, and used to kiss her often on the [MISSING WORD].

What one might give to know those missing words!

dently serving as his patrons (Mark 15:40–41;

account this is an unnamed woman in the house of

Luke 8:1–3). In both Mark and John, Jesus is said

Simon, a leper; in John’s account it is Mary the sis—

to have engaged in public dialogue and debate

ter of Martha and Lazarus, in her own home.

with women who were not among his immediate

In all four of the canonical Gospels, women are

followers (Mark 7:24–30; John 4:1–42). Both

said to have accompanied Jesus from Galilee to

Gospels also record, independently of one anoth—

Jerusalem during the last week of his life and to

er, the tradition that Jesus had physical contact

have been present at his crucifixion (Matt 27:55;

with a woman who anointed him with oil before

Mark 15:40–41; Luke 23:49; John 19:25). The ear—

his Passion (Mark 14:3–9; John 12:1–8). In Mark’s

liest traditions in Mark suggest that they alone

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remained faithful to the end: all of his male disci—

make them independent of their fathers or hus—

ples had fled. Finally, it is clear from the Synoptics,

bands. One consideration that might make the

John, and the Gospel of Peter that women follow—

traditions about Jesus’ association with women

ers were the first to believe that Jesus’ body was no

credible, however, is the distinctive burden of

longer in the tomb (Matt 28:1–10; Mark 16:1–8;

his own apocalyptic message. Jesus proclaimed

Luke 23:55–24:10; John 20:1–2; Gosp. Pet.

that God was going to intervene in history and

50–57). These women were evidently the first to

bring about a reversal of fortunes: the last

proclaim that Jesus had been raised.

would be first and the first last; those who were

There are other interesting traditions about

rich would be impoverished and the poor would

Jesus’ contact with women that do not pass the

be rich; those who were exalted now would be

criterion of multiple attestation, including the

humbled and the humble would be exalted.

memorable moment found only in Luke’s Gospel

Jesus associated with the outcasts and down—

when Jesus encourages his friend Mary in her deci—

trodden of society, evidently as an enactment of

sion to attend to his teaching rather than busy

his proclamation that the kingdom would

herself with “womanly” household duties (Luke

belong to such as these. If women were general—

10:38–42). Since Luke, however, appears to be

ly looked down upon as inferior by the men

especially concerned with highlighting the promi—

who made the rules and ran the society, it does

nence of women in Jesus’ ministry (see Chapter 8),

not seem implausible that Jesus would have

it is difficult to accept this tradition as historical.

associated freely with them, and that they

Indeed, it is difficult in general to apply the crite—

would have been particularly intrigued by his

rion of dissimilarity to the traditions about Jesus’

proclamation of the coming kingdom.

involvement with women. As we have already

Some recent scholars have proposed that Jesus

seen, some early Christians were committed to ele—

did much more than this, that he preached a radi—

vating the status of women in the church; people

cally egalitarian society. According to this view, he

such as this may have invented some such tradi—

set about to reform society by inventing a new set

tions themselves.

of rules to govern social relations, aiming to create

As for the contextual credibility of these tradi—

a society in which men and women would be

tions, it is true that women were generally viewed

treated as absolute equals. This, however, may be

as inferior by men in the ancient world, but there

taking the evidence too far and possibly in the

were exceptions. Philosophical schools like the

wrong direction. As we have seen, there is little to

Epicureans and the Cynics, for example, advocat—

suggest that Jesus was concerned with transformed equality for women. Of course, there were not

ing society in any fundamental way, let alone in

many Epicureans or Cynics in Jesus’ immediate

terms of gender relations. In his view, society, with

environment of Palestine, and our limited sources

all of its conventions, was soon to come to a

suggest that women, as a rule, were generally even

screeching halt, when the Son of Man arrived

more restricted in that part of the empire with

from heaven in judgment on the earth. Far from

respect to their ability to engage in social activities

building a new society, a community of equals,

outside the home and away from the authority of

Jesus was preparing people for the destruction and

their fathers or husbands. Is it credible, then, that

divine recreation of society.

a Jewish teacher would have encouraged and pro—

All the same, even though Jesus may not have

moted such activities?

urged a social revolution in his time, it would be

We have no solid evidence to suggest that

fair to say that his message had revolutionary

other Jewish rabbis had women followers during

implications. In particular, we should not forget

Jesus’ day, but we do know that the Pharisees

that Jesus urged his followers to begin to imple—

were supported and protected by powerful

ment the ideals of the kingdom in the present in

women in the court of King Herod the Great.

anticipation of the coming Son of Man. For this

Unfortunately, the few sources that we have say

reason, there may indeed have been some form of

little about women among the lower classes,

equality practiced among the men and women

who did not have the wealth or standing to

who accompanied Jesus on his itinerant preaching



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# CHAPTER 24

## WOMEN IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

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Figure 24.1 Women were allowed places of equality in some of the Greco-Roman philosophical schools, as depicted in this sarcophagus scene in which the pagan philosopher Plotinus is flanked by female disciples.

ministry—not as the first step toward reforming

PAUL’S UNDERSTANDING

society but as a preparation for the new world that

OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

was soon to come.

It is possible that the position of women among

The apostle Paul did not know the man Jesus or,

Jesus’ followers while he was alive made an impact

probably, any of his women followers. Moreover, as

on the status of women in the Christian church

we have seen at some length, many of the things

after his death. This would help explain why

that Paul proclaimed in light of Jesus’ death and

women appear to have played significant roles in

resurrection varied from the original message

the churches connected with the apostle Paul, the

heard by the disciples in Galilee. For one thing,

early Christian churches that we are best informed

Paul believed that the end had already com—

about. But it would explain these significant roles

menced with the victory over the forces of evil

only in part. For a fuller picture, we should return

that had been won at Jesus’ cross and sealed at his

to Paul to consider not only the roles that women

resurrection. The victory was not by any means yet

played in his churches but also his own view of

complete, but it had at least begun. This victory

these roles.

brought newness of life, the beginning if not the

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fulfillment of the new age. For this reason, every—

coverings when they prayed and prophesied in the

one who was baptized into Christ was “a new cre—

congregation (1 Cor 11:3–16). A number of the

ation” (2 Cor 5:16). And a new creation at least

details of Paul’s arguments here are difficult to

implied a new social order: “As many of you as

understand and have been the source of endless

were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself

wrangling among biblical scholars. For example,

with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek,

when he says that women are to have “authority”

there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer

on their heads (the literal wording of v. 10), does

male and female; for all of you are one in Christ

he mean a veil or long hair? Why would having

Jesus” (Gal 3:27–28).

this “authority” on the head affect the angels (v.

No male and female in Christ—this was a rad—

10)? Are these good angels or bad? And so on.

ical notion in an age in which everyone knew that

Despite such ambiguities, it is quite clear from

males and females were inherently different. The

Paul’s arguments that women could and did par—

notion, though, was deeply rooted in the Pauline

ticipate openly in the church alongside men—but

churches. Modern scholars have recognized that

they were to do so as women, not as men. Nature

in Galatians 3:28 Paul is quoting words that were

taught that men should have short hair and

spoken over converts when they were baptized. No

women long (at least, that’s what nature taught

wonder there were women leaders in the Pauline

Paul!), so women who made themselves look like

churches. Women could well have taken these

men were acting in ways contrary to nature and

words to heart and come to realize that, despite

therefore contrary to the will of God.

widespread opinion, they were not one whit infe—

For Paul, therefore, even though men and

rior to the men with whom they served.

women were equal in Christ, this equality had not

Like Jesus himself, however, Paul does not seem

yet become a full social reality. We might suppose

to have urged a social revolution in light of his

that it was not to become so until Christ returned

theological conviction (recall our discussion of

to bring in the new age. That is to say, men and

Philemon). To be sure, with respect to one’s stand—

women had not yet been granted full social equali—

ing before Christ, it made no difference whether

ty any more than masters and slaves had been, for

one was a slave or a slave owner; slaves were to be

Christians had not yet experienced their glorious

treated no differently from masters in the church.

resurrection unto immortality. While living in this

Thus, when believers came together to enjoy the

age, men and women were to continue to accept

Lord’s supper, it was not proper for some to have

their “natural” social roles, with women subordi—

good food and drink and others to have scarcely

nate to men just as men were subordinate to Christ

enough. In Christ there was to be equality, and

and Christ was subordinate to God (1 Cor 11:3).

failure to observe that equality could lead to disastrous results (1 Cor 11:27–30). Paul’s view, however, did not prompt him to urge all Christian

masters to free their slaves or Christian slaves to

WOMEN IN THE

seek their release. On the contrary, since “the time

AFTERMATH OF PAUL

was short,” everyone was to be content with the

roles they were presently in; they were not to try

Paul’s attitude toward women in the church may

to change them (1 Cor 7:17–24).

strike you as inconsistent, or at least as ambiva—

How did this attitude affect Paul’s view of

lent. Women could participate in his churches as

women? Whether consistent with his own views of

ministers, prophets, and even apostles, but they

equality in Christ or not, Paul maintained that

were to maintain their social status as women and

there was still to be a difference between men and

not appear to be like men. This apparent ambiva—

women in this world. To eradicate that difference,

lence led to a very interesting historical result.

in Paul’s view, was unnatural and wrong. This atti—

When the dispute over the role of women in the

tude is most evident in Paul’s insistence that

church later came to a head, both sides could

women in Corinth should continue to wear head

appeal to the apostle’s authority to support their

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# CHAPTER 24

## WOMEN IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

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SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 24.2 Similarities between 1 Tim 2:11–15 and

1 Cor 14:34–35

1 Timothy 2:11–15

1 Corinthians 14:34–35

Let a woman learn in silence with full

Women should be silent in the churches.

submission.

I permit no woman to teach or to have

For they are not permitted to speak, but

authority over a man; she is to keep

should be subordinate,

silent.

For Adam was formed first, then Eve;

as the law also says.

and Adam was not deceived, but the

woman was deceived and became a

transgressor.

Yet she will be saved through childbear—

If there is anything they desire to know

ing, provided they continue in faith and

let them ask their husbands at home.

love and holiness, with modesty.

For it is shameful for a woman to speak

in church

views. On one side were those who urged complete

Tim 2:4). They were to speak out against those

equality between men and women in the church—

who forbade marriage and urged the ascetic life (1

es. Some such believers told tales of Paul’s own

Tim 4:3). They were to silence the women in their

female companions, women like Thecla, who

churches; women were not to be allowed to tell

renounced marriage and sexual activity, led ascetic

old wives’ tales and especially not to teach in their

lives, and taught male believers in church. On the

congregations (1 Tim 4:7). They were to be silent

other side were those who urged women to remain

and submissive and sexually active with their

in complete submission to men. Believers like this

spouses; those who wanted to enjoy the benefits of

could combat the tales of Thecla and other

salvation were to produce babies (1 Tim 2:11–13).

women leaders by portraying Paul as an apostle

The Pastoral epistles present a stark contrast to

who insisted on marriage, spurned asceticism, and

the views set forth in The Acts of Paul and Thecla.

forbade women to teach.

Is it possible that these epistles were written pre—

Which side of this dispute produced the books

cisely to counteract such views? Whether or not

that made it into the canon? Reconsider the

they were, these letters are quite clear on the role

Pastoral epistles from this perspective. These let—

to be played by women who are faithful to Paul

ters were allegedly written by Paul to his two male

and his gospel. The clearest statement is found in

colleagues, Timothy and Titus, urging them to

that most (in)famous of New Testament passages,

tend to the problems in their churches, including

1 Timothy 2:11–13. Here we are told that women

the problem of women. These pastors were to

must not teach men because they were created

appoint male leaders (bishops, elders, and dea—

inferior, as indicated by God himself in the Law.

cons), all of whom were to be married (e.g., 1 Tim

God created Eve second, and for the sake of man;

3:2–5, 12) and who were to keep their households,

a woman (related to Eve) therefore must not lord

including of course their wives, in submission (1

it over a man (related to Adam) through her



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teaching. Furthermore, according to this author,

ed as a marginal note that later copyists inserted

everyone knows what happens when a woman

into the text after verse 33 (others inserted it after

does assume the role of teacher. She is easily duped

verse 40). However the verses came to be placed

(by the Devil) and leads the man astray. So

into the text, it does not appear that they were

women are to stay at home and maintain the

written by Paul but by someone living later, who

virtues appropriate to women, bearing children for

was familiar with and sympathetic toward the

their husbands and preserving their modesty.

views of women advanced by the author of the

Largely on the basis of this passage, modern critics

Pastoral epistles.

sometimes malign the apostle Paul for his misogy—

In Paul’s own churches, there may not have been

nist views. The problem, of course, is that he did

an absolute equality between men and women.

not write it.

Women were to cover their heads when praying

Paul does, however, seem to say something simi—

and prophesying, showing that as females they were

lar in his undisputed letters, in the harsh words of 1

still subject to males. But there was a clear move—

Corinthians 14:34–35. Indeed, this passage is so sim—

ment toward equality that reflected the movement

ilar to that of 1 Timothy 2:11–15, and so unlike

evident in the ministry of Jesus himself. Moreover,

what Paul says elsewhere, that many scholars are

Paul’s preference for the celibate life (a view not

convinced that these too are words that Paul himself

favored by the author of the Pastorals) may have

never wrote; rather, they were later inserted into the

helped promote that movement toward equality, for

letter of 1 Corinthians by a scribe who wanted to

make Paul’s views conform to those of the Pastoral

epistles. The parallels are obvious when the two passages are placed side by side (see box 24.2).

Both passages stress that women are to keep

silent in church and not teach men. This is

allegedly something taught by the Law (e.g., in the

story of Adam and Eve). Women are therefore to

keep their place, that is, in the home, under the

authority of their husbands.

It is not absolutely impossible, of course, that

Paul himself wrote the passage that is now found

in 1 Corinthians, but as scholars have long pointed out, Paul elsewhere talks about women leaders

F P O

in his churches without giving any indication that

they are to be silent. He names a woman minister

in Cenchreae, women prophets in Corinth, and a

woman apostle in Rome. Even more significantly,

he has already indicated in 1 Corinthians itself

that women are allowed to speak in church, for

example, when praying or prophesying, activities

that were almost always performed aloud in antiquity. How could Paul allow women to speak in

chapter 11 but disallow it in chapter 14?

Moreover, it is interesting that the harsh words

against women in 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 interrupt the flow of what Paul has been saying in the

Figure 24.2 Statue of a vestal virgin in the Roman forum, context. Up to verse 34 he has been speaking

circa 70 C.E. The six vestal virgins, among the most prominent about prophecy and he does so again in verse 37.

women in Roman society, were priestesses who guarded the

It may be, then, that the intervening verses were

sacred hearth of Rome and were accorded other special privi—

not part of the text of 1 Corinthians but originat—

leges and responsibilities.

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# CHAPTER 24

## WOMEN IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

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women who followed his example would not have

its appreciation of the importance of personal

had husbands at home who could serve as their reli—

power. It openly revered those who were strong

gious authorities. Indeed, we know of such women

and domineering. Indeed, the virtue most cher—

from the second and later centuries—ascetics who

ished by males was “honor,” the recognition of

preferred the freedom of single life to the restrictive

one’s precedence over others, established chiefly

confines of ancient marriage.

through one’s ability to achieve physical, economic, or political dominance. Other virtues were

related to how one expressed this domination, for

ANCIENT IDEOLOGIES

example, by showing courage and “manliness”

OF GENDER

when it was threatened, and self-control and

restraint when it was exercised.

The Pauline churches eventually moved to the

In Roman society, those who were “weaker”

position embraced by the Pastoral epistles. They

were supposed to be subservient to those who were

restricted the roles that women could play in the

stronger, and women were, by their very nature,

churches, insisted that Christians be married, and

weaker than men. Nature itself had set up a kind

made Christian women submit to the dictates of

of pecking order, in which men were to be domi—

their husbands both at home and in the church. It

nant over women as imperfect and underdevel—

would be easy to attribute this move simply to

oped beings, and women accordingly were to be

male chauvinism, as much alive in antiquity as it

submissive to men. This notion of dominance

is today, but the matter is somewhat more compli—

played itself out in all sorts of relationships, especated. In particular, we need to consider what

cially the sexual and domestic.

male domination might have meant in an ancient

Most people in the Roman world appear to

context; for most people in the ancient Roman

have thought that women were to be sexually

world thought about gender relations in terms that

dominated by men. This view was sometimes

are quite foreign to us who live in the modern

expressed in terms that might strike us as crass; it

Western world.

was widely understood that men were designed to

People in our world typically consider males

be penetrators while women were designed to be

and females to be two different kinds of human

penetrated. Being sexually penetrated was a sign of

beings related to one another like two sides of the

weakness and submission. This is why same-sex

same coin. We sometimes refer to “my better

relations between adult males were so frowned

half ” or to “the other half of the human race.” In

upon—not because of some natural repulsion that

antiquity, however, most people did not think of

people felt for homosexual unions (in parts of the

men and women as different in kind but as differ—

ancient world it was common for adult males to

ent in degree. For them there was a single contin—

have adolescent, and therefore inferior, boys as sex

uum that constituted humanity. Some human

partners), but because such a relation meant that a

beings were more fully developed and perfect

man was being penetrated and therefore dominat—

specimens along that continuum. Women were

ed. To be dominated was to lose one’s claim to

on the lower end of the scale for biological rea—

power and therefore one’s honor, the principal

sons: they were “men” who had been only partial—

male virtue.

ly formed in the womb, and thus they were unde—

Women’s virtues, on the other hand, derived

veloped or imperfect from birth. They differed

from their own sphere of influence. Whereas a

from real men in that their penises had never

man’s were associated with the public arena of

grown, their lungs had not fully developed, and

power relations—the forum, the business place,

the rest of their bodies never would develop to

the military—a woman’s were associated with the

their full potential. Thus, by their very nature,

domestic sphere of the home. To be sure, women

women were the weaker sex.

were extremely active and overworked and bur—

This biological understanding of the sexes had

dened with responsibilities and duties, but these

momentous social implications. Ancient Roman

were almost always associated with the household:

society was somewhat more forthright than ours in

making clothes, preparing food, having babies,



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educating children, taking care of personal

ciously and maligned for not knowing their place,

finances, and the like. Even wealthy women

for not maintaining properly female virtues, and

shouldered considerable burdens, having to serve

for being sexually aggressive, even if their personas household managers over family, slaves, and

al sex lives were totally unknown.

employees, while husbands concerned themselves

with public affairs.

The domestic nature of a woman’s virtues gen-

GENDER IDEOLOGY AND

erally required her to keep out of the public eye. At

THE PAULINE CHURCHES

least this is what the Roman men who wrote moral

essays for women urged them to do. They were not

Our theoretical discussion of the ideology of gender

to speak in public debates, they were not to exer—

in the Roman world, that is, of the way that people

cise authority over their husbands, and they were

mentally and socially constructed sexual difference,

not to be involved with other men sexually, since

gives us a backdrop for reconsidering the progressive

this would mean that one man was dominating the

oppression of women in the Pauline churches.

wife of another, calling into question the husband’s

Women may have been disproportionately repre—

own power and, consequently, his honor.

sented in the earliest Christian communities. This at

For this reason, women who sought to exercise

least was a constant claim made by the opponents of

any power or authority over men were thought to

Christianity in the second century, who saw the inor—

be “unnatural.” When women did attain levels of

dinate number of women believers as a fault; remark—

authority, as was happening with increasing regu—

ably, the defenders of the faith never denied it. The

larity in the Roman world during the time of the

large number of women followers is not surprising

New Testament, they were often viewed suspi—

given the circumstance that the earliest Christian

communities, including those established by Paul,

were not set up as public institutions like the Jewish

synagogues or the local trade associations, which met

in public buildings and had high social visibility. Paul

established house churches, gatherings of converts

who met in private homes (see box 11.3), and in the

Roman world, matters of the household were principally handled by women. Of course, the husband was

lord of the house, with ultimate authority over everything from finances to household religion, but since

the home was private space instead of public, most

men gave their wives relatively free reign within its

confines. If Paul’s churches met in private homes,

that is, in the world where women held some degree

F P O

of jurisdiction, it is small wonder that women often

exercised authority in his churches. It is also small

wonder that men often allowed them to do so, for the

home was the woman’s domain. The heightened possibility for their own involvement is perhaps one reason why so many women were drawn to the religion

in the first place.

Why, then, did women’s roles come to be curtailed? It may be that as the movement grew and

individual churches increased in size, more men

came to be involved and the activities within the

Figure 24.3 Painting of a Christian woman in prayer, from the church took on a more public air. People thorough-Catacomb of Priscilla.

ly imbued with the ancient ideology of gender nat-

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urally found it difficult to avoid injecting into the

ly opposed, and probably not only by men. As is

church the perspectives that they brought with

true today, in antiquity women were molded as

them when they converted. These views were a part

much as men by their culture’s assumptions about

of who they were, and they accepted them without

what is right and wrong, natural and unnatural,

question as being natural and right. And they could

appropriate and inappropriate. The proponents of

always be justified on other, Christian, grounds. For

the cultural status quo took the message of Paul

instance, the Scriptures that these people inherited

(and Jesus) in a radically different direction, dif—

could be used to justify refusing women the right to

ferent not only from those who advocated a high—

exercise authority. The Jewish Bible was itself a

profile for women in the churches but also from

product of antiquity, rooted in an Israelite world

Paul and Jesus themselves. The eschatological fer—

that advocated an ideology of submission as much

vor that had driven the original proclamation

as the Roman world did, though in a different way.

began to wane (notice how it is muted already in

As a result of the mounting tensions, some Pauline

the Pastorals), and the church grew in size and

believers, many of them women, we might suppose,

strength. More and more it took on a public

began to urge that the views of sexual relations dom—

dimension, with a hierarchy and a structure, a

inant in their culture were no longer appropriate for

public mission, a public voice, and a concern for

those who were “in Christ.” In reaction to social pres—

public relations. The church, in other words, set—

sures exerted on them from all sides, these people

tled in for the long haul, and the apocalyptic mes—

urged abstinence from marital relations altogether,

sage that had brought women relative freedom

arguing for sexual continence and freedom from the

from the oppressive constraints of their society

constraints imposed upon them by marriage.

took a back seat, taking along with it those who

Moreover, they maintained that since they had been

had appealed to its authority to justify their impor—

set free from all forms of evil by Christ, they were no

tant role in the life of the community.

longer restricted in what they could do in the public

Women came to be restricted in what they

forum; they had just as much right and ability to teach

could do in the churches; no longer could they

and exercise authority as men.

evangelize or teach or exercise authority. These

Unfortunately for them, their views never

were public activities reserved for the men. The

became fully rooted. Indeed, their ideas may have

women were to stay at home and protect their

contained the seed of their own destruction, in a

modesty, as was “natural” for them; they were to be

manner of speaking. These celibate Christians

submissive in all things to their husbands; and

obviously could not raise a new generation of

they were to bear children and fulfill their func—

believers in their views without producing children

tions as the weaker and less perfect members of the

to train. With the passing of time, and the dwin—

human race. The Roman ideology of gender rela—

dling of the apocalyptic hope that had produced a

tions became Christianized, and the social impli—

sense of equality in the first place, there appeared to

cations of Paul’s apocalyptic vision became lost

be little chance that the ideas so firmly implanted

except among the outcasts relegated to the mar—

in people by their upbringing could be changed.

gins of his churches, women whose tales have sur—

Those who advocated the rights of women to

vived only by chance discovery, not by their inclu—

exercise authority in the church came to be wide—

sion in the pages of canonical scripture.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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superb study of religion as embraced and molded by

extremely valuable collection of ancient texts illumi—

women in ancient Greek, Roman, Jewish, and

nating all the major aspects of women’s lives in the

Christian cultures.

Greco-Roman world.

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worlds.

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York: Crossroad, 1983. A sophisticated, controversial,

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Fortress, 1990. An intriguing attempt to reconstruct

in the formation of Christianity by a noted feminist

the assumptions and views held among the women in

New Testament scholar and historian; for more

the Corinthian congregation who took issue with

advanced students.

Paul’s perspectives; for more advanced students.

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# CHAPTER 25

Christians and Jews:

Hebrews, Barnabas, and Later Anti-Jewish Literature

Now that we have completed our study of the

Although Jesus and his earliest disciples were

Gospels, Acts, and the letters attributed to Paul,

Jews, and the authors of the New Testament all

we can move on to explore the remaining books of

understood their movement as springing from

the New Testament: the catholic epistles and the

Judaism, as time went on, conflicts arose between

Apocalypse of John. The term “catholic” may

Jews who believed in Jesus and those who did not.

cause some confusion for modern readers: contrary

Tensions mounted as Jewish Christians began to

to what one might think, these books were not

convert Gentiles to this new faith and to claim

written only by or for Roman Catholics. In this

that they too could be heirs of the promises given

context, “catholic” means “universal” or “general”;

to Israel in the Hebrew Scriptures, even without

for this reason, these books are sometimes called

adhering to Jewish customs and practices. The

the general epistles. Through the Christian ages,

social conflicts that ensued created theological dif—

they have been thought to address universal prob—

ficulties for the emerging Christian communities:

lems experienced by Christians everywhere, as

if Gentiles did not have to become Jews in order to

opposed to the letters of Paul, which have been

be Christians, how were they (and their Jewish—

thought to address specific congregations about

Christian brothers and sisters in the church) to

specific problems.

understand themselves in relationship to Judaism?

In fact, however, the general epistles are not,

Before seeing how these issues came to be

strictly speaking, general. We have already seen that

resolved in some of the early Christian writings,

three of them—1, 2, and 3 John—do address specif—

we should begin by examining the more general

ic problems of a particular community. Moreover,

problem of how early Christians came to

one of them, 1 John, is not even an epistle. At the

understand themselves as a social group that was

same time, one of the fruitful ways to go about study—

distinct from Judaism. To use a modern sociolog—

ing these books is to situate them in a broader his—

ical term, this involves the problem of Christian

torical context to see how they address problems

“self-definition.”

that Christians generally came to experience during

the period in which they were written. Many of

these problems have already cropped up in our study;

EARLY CHRISTIAN

they involve the early Christians’ relationships with

SELF-DEFINITION

(a) non-Christian Jews, (b) antagonistic pagans, (c)

their own wayward members, and (d) the history of

Self-definition is a process by which any group of

the cosmos itself. In the present chapter we will con—

individuals understands itself to be a distinct

sider the first of these relationships; the others will

group. Each of us, of course, belongs to a number

be addressed in Chapters 26–29.

of social groups. You are a member of a family, a

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student at a college or university or professional

by faith in him. These beliefs helped to character—

school, a citizen of a state and a country, perhaps

ize the group and to distinguish it from all other

the member of a church, synagogue, or other reli—

social groups. Bitter conflicts eventually emerged

gious congregation, and possibly a participant in

as the group began to define itself more and more

some other academic, religious, or civic group

rigidly and as those who were outside of the com-

(e.g., a sorority, Campus Crusade, or the Rotary

munity grew hostile toward their beliefs and prac—

Club). Each of these social networks has ways of

tices (see, for example, our earlier discussion of the

understanding and defining itself with respect to

Johannine community in Chapter 10). Opposition

both what its members have in common and what

drove the group yet further inward, as its members

makes them different from those who don’t

began to insist on conversion for admission, prac—

belong. These boundaries between insiders and

ticed distinct initiation rites such as baptism,

outsiders are part of the group’s self-definition.

observed other periodic rituals such as the Lord’s

For some social groups the boundaries are well—

Supper, devised distinctive sets of beliefs that were

defined and rigid; for others they are quite loose.

to be confessed by all group members, and conFor instance, members of a strict fundamentalist

demned those who remained on the outside.

Bible church may have a very firm understanding

As Christianity developed, it was compelled to

of who is inside and who is outside the body of the

define itself not only in relation to the Jewish

faithful. To belong to this church, you may have to

world from which it emerged but also in relation

hold certain beliefs without wavering (e.g., a belief

to the polytheistic world into which it moved and

in the Bible as the inerrant Word of God and the

from which it began to draw its greatest number of

literal second coming of Christ) and participate in

converts. Sometimes these different aspects of self—

certain practices without fail (e.g., you must be

definition reinforced each other. Let me point out

baptized in this particular church, and you must

just one of the many issues involved. As we have

attend church twice on Sunday and prayer meet—

seen, Jews were somewhat anomalous in the

ing on Wednesday evening). Those who do such

Greco-Roman world in that (a) they maintained

things are among the “saved” (insiders) and those

that only one God, the God of Israel, was to be

who don’t are among the “lost” (outsiders).

worshipped and (b) they adhered to ancient prac—

This rigorous form of self-definition stands in

tices that had been ordered by this God as part of

sharp contrast to that found, say, in a liberal

his Law, for example, the circumcision of males,

Presbyterian church, where members may know

Sabbath observance, and dietary restrictions (i.e.,

why they are Christian and, in general, understand

these were among the social boundaries of the

what it means to be Presbyterian, but who do not

Jews as a group in the Roman world). Within

at all think that they alone are God’s chosen or

Roman society, all other people were expected to

that it would be an irreversible tragedy and unpar—

participate in the cult to the state gods. Jews were

donable sin if some of their members were to

exempt because they were an ancient people with

transfer membership to the Methodist church

ancient customs that forbade such participation.

across the street.

Along came the Christians, most of them for—

All social groups define themselves by establishmer pagans, who did not appear to be Jewish to

ing what it means to be a member and how belong—

most outsiders: they worked on the Sabbath, they

ing to the group sets a person off from those who do

ate pork, and their men weren’t circumcised. Yet

not belong. This has always been the case, as long

they claimed to worship the God of the Jews and

as human societies have existed. It was certainly

him alone; in fact, they claimed to be the new peo—

true in the early days of Christianity, when one

ple of this God. As a result of their monotheism,

group of Jews understood themselves to be distinct

they refused to worship the state gods. But they had

from other Jews (and from everyone else as well) in

no ancestral traditions to claim—except the tradi—

that they believed that the Messiah had come, that

tions of the Jews, most of which they did not even

he had died and been raised from the dead, and

seem to keep (e.g., circumcision, kosher food laws,

that they could have a right standing before God

and so on). If, as was generally accepted in the

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# CHAPTER 25

## CHRISTIANS AND JEWS

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Empire, the gods were angered by those who

The need for self-defense is just one aspect of

refused to offer them cult (Jews excepted, given

the relationship of Christianity to Judaism that

their ancestral traditions), and Christians refused

drove Christians to develop a sense of group iden—

to offer them cult without having any ancestral tratity. There were other, more internal aspects as

ditions to fall back on, who would be to blame

well, such as the need for Christians to explain

when the gods sent disaster against the city—an

some of the basics of the new faith to converts.

earthquake, famine, epidemic, or the like? You

How was it that the God who had chosen the Jews

guessed it.

to be his people in days of old had now in these

Partially to defend themselves in a world in

recent days chosen a different people, the

which nearly everyone knew that a new religion

Christians? How were believers in Jesus related to

could not possibly be true and in which an exclu—

Jews who did not believe in him? And what was

sivistic cult would certainly not be protected by

their connection to the Jewish Scriptures?

the state, Christians eventually had to explain

We have already seen that different Christians

how their religion was not recent but venerable

answered these questions in different ways—recall

with age, as old as Moses and the prophets, the

our studies of Matthew, LukeActs, Galatians, and

ancient writers of ancient Israel. This act of self—

Ephesians, as well as the views of the Ebionites

definition was carried out, to some extent at

and Marcion (see box 25.1). The differences are

least, for the purpose of public relations, that is,

magnified even more when we turn to two other

for political gain. If the Christians were the true

writings produced by early Christians: the canoni—

heirs of the promises of Israel, they had a defense

cal Epistle to the Hebrews and the noncanonical

against persecution.

Epistle of Barnabas.

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 25.1 Disparate Views of Christians and Jews

Divergent understandings of Judaism were found among Christians in the mid-second century (see Chapter 1). At one extreme were the Jewish-Christians adoptionists, who continued to worship the God of Israel as the one true God and Jesus as his Son. These Christians strove to keep the Jewish Law in all its particulars, including such things as circumcision, Sabbath observance, and kosher food laws. At the other extreme was Marcion, who claimed that the Jewish God was an inferior deity, that Jesus had no relationship to this God but represented the higher true God, and that the Jewish Law was a form of bondage meant for the Jews but absolutely not for Christians.

These disparate views did not spring from the ground full-grown in the middle of the second century, of course; each had a long prehistory of its own. The Jewish-Christian adoptionists claimed to find their views in their Gospel, which was very similar to the Gospel of Matthew, where Jesus says that his followers are to keep the entire Law even better than the scribes and the Pharisees (Matt 5:17–20). Marcion claimed to find his views in the writings of Paul, who urged the Galatians not to become circumcised, because if they did they would be obligated to follow the entire Law (Gal 5:2–3).

These differences raise an interesting hypothetical question. Suppose Matthew and Paul themselves had been brought together and instructed to produce a joint position paper on whether believers in Jesus were to follow the Jewish Law. Would they have been able to hammer out a consensus?

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CONTINUITY AND

nizing that he did not. The writing style is not

SUPERIORITY: THE EPISTLE TO

Paul’s, and the major topics of discussion (e.g., the

Old Testament priesthood and the Jewish sacrifi-

THE HEBREWS

cial system) are things that Paul scarcely men—

The Epistle to the Hebrews portrays the Jewish

tions, let alone emphasizes. Moreover, the way this

Law as partial and imperfect, unable to accomplish

author understands such critical terms as “faith”

its task of putting people into a right standing

(11:1) differs markedly from what you find in the

before God. The inadequacy of the old covenant,

writings of the apostle. It is difficult to say, then,

the book claims, was recognized even by the Old

who did write the book. A number of names have

Testament prophets, who predicted that God

been proposed over the years, including such early

would establish a new covenant to do what the old

Christian notables as Barnabas, Apollos, and

one could not. This new covenant was foreshad—

Priscilla. It is safest, though, simply to accept the

owed in the legislation of Moses and came to real—

pronouncement of a famous Christian scholar of

ity only in the work of Jesus. The old has now

the third century, Origen of Alexandria, who said:

passed away and believers must cling to the new.

“As for who has written it, only God knows.”

We are in a better position to say something

about the book’s audience. The author presuppos-

The Book, the Author, and the Audience

es that they are Christians who had previously

Although Hebrews is normally labeled an epistle,

undergone some serious persecutions for their

this designation is not particularly fitting. Even

faith, including imprisonment and the confisca—

though the book has an epistolary closing

tion of property (10:32–34), although none of

(13:20–25), there is no epistolary prescript. The

them had been martyred (12:4). From antiquity

author names neither himself nor his addressees,

the book has been titled “To the Hebrews,” but

nor does he include an opening prayer, benedic—

there is some considerable doubt over whether

tion, or thanksgiving on their behalf. Moreover,

these persecuted Christians were Jews or Gentiles.

the author describes his book not as a letter but as

For instance, when the author reminds them of

a “word of exhortation” (13:22). This is a fair sum—

the instruction they received upon first coming

mary of the book’s contents, leading most scholars

into the fold, he includes such matters as faith in

to think that it was originally a sermon or homily

God, belief in the resurrection of the dead, and

delivered by a Christian preacher to his congrega—

eternal judgment (6:1–2). Surely Jews attracted to

tion. The author may have composed the sermon

the Christian religion would already have known

to be read aloud (most literature in antiquity was,

about such things. It seems more probable, then,

in fact, read publicly), or possibly he wrote it down

that we are dealing with a group of Gentile con—

after it was delivered orally (from notes?). If it did

verts who had experienced some persecution for

originate as a sermon, then the epistolary closing

their Christian faith, possibly (though not certain—

with its benediction, exhortation, travel plans,

ly) for reasons similar to those sketched earlier,

final greetings, and farewell (13:20–25) may have

that is, for refusing to worship state gods without

simply been tacked on by its author, or by someone

having the Jewish roots that would make this

else who read the piece, when he sent it to anoth—

refusal acceptable to local state officials.

er community. It is particularly intriguing that

The author, then, is writing to demonstrate to

Timothy is mentioned at the end (13:23). Are we

them that Christianity is superior to Judaism.

to infer from this that Paul wrote the sermon?

Possibly he fears that members of his audience are

The book does not explicitly claim to be writ—

being tempted to convert away from Christianity

ten by Paul; like the New Testament Gospels, it is

to non-Christian Judaism, perhaps to escape perse—

anonymous. But it came to be included in the

cution. To abandon Christ for Judaism, in his judg—

canon only after Christians of the third and fourth

ment, would be a serious mistake. To do so would

centuries became convinced that Paul had written

be to prefer the foreshadowing of God’s salvation

it. Modern scholars, however, are unified in recog—

to salvation itself and to opt for the imperfect and

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# CHAPTER 25

## CHRISTIANS AND JEWS

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flawed religion of the Jewish Scriptures rather

unlike them, he was without sin and did not need

than its perfect and complete fulfillment in Christ.

to offer a sacrifice for himself before representing

For this author, Christ does indeed stand in conti—

the people. He is superior to the priests descended

nuity with the religion of the Jews as set forth in

from Levi because he is the one promised in the

their sacred writings; but he is superior to that reli—

Scriptures as the priest from the line of

gion in every way, and those who reject the salva—

Melchizedek (Ps 110:4), the mysterious figure

tion that he alone can provide are in danger of

whom Abraham, the ancestor of Levi, honored by

falling under the wrath of God.

paying one-tenth of his goods (Gen 14:17–20).

For this reason, Levi himself, as represented by his

ancestor, was inferior and subservient to

Melchizedek and the descendant from his line. If

The Overarching Theme of

the Levitical priests had been able to make the

the Sermon: The Superiority of Christ

people of God perfect, God would not have had to

The superiority of Christ and of the salvation he

promise to send a priest from the line of

brings is the constant refrain sounded throughout

Melchizedek into the world. Moreover, Christ is

this homily. Consider the following points that the

superior to these other priests because they are

author stresses.

many, but he is one, and unlike them, he needed

to offer his sacrifice only once, not repeatedly.

Christ Is Superior to the Prophets (1:1–3). The

Jewish prophets were God’s spokespersons in for-

Christ Is Minister of a Superior Covenant

mer times, but now he has spoken through his own

(8:1–13). God promised in the Scriptures to bring

Son, the perfect image of God himself.

a new covenant (Jer 31:31–34), thereby showing

that the old covenant with the Jews was outmod-

Christ Is Superior to the Angels

(1:4–11;

ed and imperfect. Christ is the minister of this new

2:5–18). The angels mentioned in the Old

covenant.

Testament are God’s messengers par excellence,

but Christ is his very Son, exalted to a position of

Christ Is Minister in a Superior Tabernacle

power next to God’s heavenly throne. Angels are

(9:1–28). The earthly tabernacle, where Jewish

ministers for those destined for salvation, but

sacrifices were originally performed, was con—

Christ is the Son of God whose suffering actually

structed according to a heavenly model. Unlike

brought this salvation.

the Jewish priests, Christ did not minister in the

earthly replica; he brought his sacrifice to heaven,

Christ Is Superior to Moses (3:1–6). Moses was

to the real sanctuary, into the presence of God

a servant in “God’s house,” but Jesus is the Son of

himself.

the house.

Christ Makes a Superior Sacrifice (10:1–18).

Christ Is Superior to Joshua (4:1–11). Joshua

Christ’s sacrifice was perfect, unlike those that had

gave the people of Israel peace (or “rest”) after the

to be offered year after year by the Jewish priests.

Promised Land had been conquered; but as the

His death brought complete forgiveness of sins;

Scriptures themselves indicate, the people of Israel

there is therefore no longer any need for sacrifice.

could not fully enjoy that peace (or “enter into

their rest”) because they were disobedient. Christ

brings a more perfect peace.

The Method of the Author’s Demonstration

Like the author of Matthew, the author of

Christ Is Superior to the Jewish Priesthood

Hebrews bases his understanding of Jesus on the

(4:14–5:10; 7:1–29). Like the Jewish high priests,

Jewish Scriptures. This may seem somewhat iron—

Jesus was personally acquainted with human weak—

ic, in view of his insistence that Jesus is superior to

nesses that require a mediator before God, but

anything that the Jewish religion has to offer. But

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SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 25.2 Divergent Views of Christ in Hebrews

We have seen that sometime during the second century, Christians began to debate whether Jesus was God or man or somehow both. It is fairly easy to see how a book like Hebrews could have been used by all sides in such a debate. On the one hand, there are passages that appear to embrace an exalted view of Christ, more exalted than what is found almost anywhere else in the New Testament. You may have noticed that elsewhere in the New Testament Jesus is rarely, if ever, explicitly called “God” (although he is constantly called “Son of God”). Yet Hebrews 1:8 presents a quotation of the Psalms in which God is said to be speaking to his Son and calls him “God”: “But of the Son, [God] says, ‘Your throne, O God, is forever and ever.’”

Is this not an unequivocal statement that Christ himself is God? One difficulty is that the Greek of this verse can be translated in different ways. For example, it could also be rendered: “But of the Son [God] says, ’God is your throne forever and ever.’”

Other passages in Hebrews could be used by the opposite side in the later christological debates to show that Jesus was a full flesh-and-blood human. One of the most striking verses is 5:7, which indicates that Jesus went to his death with “loud cries and tears,” beseeching God to save him from death, and that he “learned obedience” (meaning that he learned how to obey?) through his suffering. This does not sound like the calm and assured Jesus of some of the Gospel accounts (e.g., Luke and John); here Jesus almost seems to go to the cross kick-ing and screaming.

Other second-and third-century Christians, of course, could have argued that since Hebrews has both kinds of passages they have to be reconciled in some way, for example, by saying that Jesus started out as a normal human being but became divine at his exaltation (cf.

Phil 2:6–10), or that Jesus was at one and the same time both man and God.

How would the author of Hebrews himself have reacted to these debates or reconciled the divergent views that he appears to have written? Regrettably, we will never know.

as we have already seen, he was not the only

better to supplant the Jewish religion. This new

Christian author who used the Jewish Bible to

something, of course, would stand in continuity

show that the Judaism he knew was inadequate

with Judaism; otherwise there would scarcely be

and passé. The apostle Paul, for example, argued

any reason for the author to quote the Jewish

that the Jewish Law itself taught his doctrine of

Bible. As something new, however, it would be

justification by faith apart from the Law. The

superior to that which it had been sent to replace.

author of Hebrews takes a different tack. He

The clearest expression of the author’s view comes

claims that the Scriptures anticipated a future act

in his lengthiest citation of the Old Testament (Jer

of God that would surpass everything that had

31:31–34):

come before. Somewhat like Matthew, he conceptualizes this anticipation in two different ways, as

For if that first covenant had been faultless, there

would have been no need to look for a second one.

a prophecy that was to be fulfilled and as a fore—

God finds fault with them when he says: “The days

shadowing that was to be made real.

are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and

Prophecy-Fulfillment. On several occasions the

with the house of Judah . . . for they did not contin—

author uses predictions of the Jewish Scriptures to

ue in my covenant, and so I had no concern for

show that God had planned something new and

them,” says the Lord. (8:7–9)

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He concludes the citation, which continues for

eyes. The prisoners themselves can see only the

three more verses, by saying that “in speaking of ‘a

shadows, and when they hear the voices of those

new covenant,’ [God] has made the first one obso—

who carry the puppets echoing off the wall before

lete” (8:13). That is to say, the Scriptures predict—

them, they naturally assume that it is the images

ed that God would establish a new covenant

themselves who are speaking. These shadows are

which would make the older religion, as set forth

the only phenomena that they experience and they

in the Scriptures themselves, invalid. In the

take them to be real—in fact, to be reality in its full—

author’s judgment, the Scriptural prediction has

ness. For them, these shadows are plants, animals,

now been fulfilled in Christ.

and humans.

What would happen, asks Socrates, if one of

Shadow-Reality. The author of Hebrews also

these chained persons were set free from his

understands Christ to be superior to the religion of

bondage and stood up to look around? He would

the Jews to the extent that the reality of a thing is

no doubt be blinded by the bright light; in his ter—

superior to its foreshadowing. On two occasions he

ror, he might sit down and beg to be chained

makes this claim explicit: both the Old Testament

again. But if this person’s eyes grew accustomed to

tabernacle (8:5) and the Law itself (10:1) were but

the light, so that he could see that the images on

“shadows” of another reality; on yet other occa—

the wall were actually shadows of puppets, he

sions he appears to presuppose this view without

would then realize how fully his senses had been

explicitly stating it (9:23–24; 13:10–13).

deceived. What he had taken to be reality were in

Scholars have long recognized that the terms

fact only shadows.

“shadow” and “reality” were popular philosophical

Suppose this person then proceeded to leave the

metaphors that had been developed nearly 500

cave and to enter into the light of the sun. A simi—

years earlier by Plato. Plato insisted that things

lar sequence of events would no doubt occur. First he

appearing to be real are often only shadows of a

would be blinded by the light (in comparison to

greater reality. Physical pleasure, for example, has

which the fire in the cave could itself be thought of

all the appearance of being a superior good; why

as only a shadow). Only after his eyes adjusted would

else would so many people actively pursue it, some

he come to see that not even the puppets had been

of them devoting their entire lives to little else? In

the real thing, but only imperfect representations of

itself, though, pleasure is good only in appearance.

real-life plants, animals, and people. No one who

Witness the hangover, the county jail, and the

came to this kind of realization would choose to

halfway house. For Plato, the real good is located

return to the cave to spend the rest of his days

somewhere outside of bodily pleasure, which is

watching shadows cast on the wall. Once one has

itself, therefore, a mere shadow of reality.

experienced reality, there is no turning back.

Plato’s most famous illustration of this idea is his

For the author of Hebrews, Christ is the reality

Allegory of the Cave, found in Book VII of his

that was foreshadowed in the Jewish Scriptures. As

influential dialogue The Republic. Let us suppose,

such, he is superior to anything Judaism has to

says Socrates, the speaker of the dialogue, that there

offer. The author, however, is not concerned mere—

is a cave in which a number of people are chained

ly with making a debating point to an impartial

together on the floor in such a way as to be unable

audience. He is writing to Christians, and his ulti—

to see anything except what lies in front of their

mate goal is quite clear: he wants to convince his

eyes. These prisoners have always lived this way and

readers that for them there is no turning back to

so do not realize that they are in a cave or that there

the shadow of Judaism once they have experi—

are other things in the world to be seen. Some disenced the reality of Christ.

tance behind them, unbeknownst to them, is a low

half-wall and beyond that a large fire. Between the

half-wall and the fire are people carrying puppets in

The Goal of the Author’s Exposition

the shapes of plants and animals and humans. The

Throughout his exposition the author of Hebrews

light from the fire casts the shadows of these objects

repeatedly exhorts his readers not to fall away from

on the wall of the cave that is before the prisoners’

their commitment to Christ. Many of these exhor-



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Figure 25.1 A medieval representation of Melchizedek and Abraham. The book of Hebrews indicates that the mysterious figure of Melchizedek, mentioned in Genesis 14 as one to whom Abraham, the father of the Jews, gave a tenth of his goods, was none other than Christ himself.

tations are based on the notion that Christ is the

fect and complete? If rejecting God’s servants was

reality behind the shadows of the Jewish

bad, what happens to those who reject his Son?

Scriptures. The Old Testament contains numerous

The logic of this argument can be easily illustrated:

stories of individuals who chose to disobey God. As

if I was upset when my son played with matches,

a rule, the penalties for disobedience were not pret—

think how I’d react if he torched the house.

ty—being left as rotting carcasses in the wilderness

The first exhortation occurs in 2:1–4: “If the

and the like. If this was what happened to people

message declared through angels was valid, and

who spurned the imperfect and incomplete revela—

every transgression or disobedience received a just

tion of God, asks the author, what gruesome fate

penalty, how can we escape if we neglect so great

awaits those who reject the revelation that is pera salvation [i.e., provided by Christ]?” The answer:

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there will be no escape. A similar exhortation

in his own more poetic words, “Faith is the assur—

appears in 3:7–18: if those who were disobedient

ance of things hoped for, the conviction of things

to Moses, God’s servant, were destroyed in the

not seen” (11:1).

wilderness, imagine what will happen to those

Chapter 11 recounts the deeds of the faithful

who disobey Jesus, God’s Son.

from the Jewish Scriptures, those who lived by and

Sometimes these warnings leave less to the

acted on their assurance of that which they had

imagination, as in the dire and threatening words

not yet experienced. Jesus himself acted in this

of 6:1–6, where the author claims there can be no

way (12:1–2). His followers need to emulate his

hope of salvation for those who have “fallen away”

example. Even though they suffer (as he himself

after having “been enlightened,” that is, for those

did), they need to remain faithful to God’s promis—

who leave the faith after once having joined. In

es so as to reap their future reward. The book ends

the author’s opinion, such people are “crucifying

with a series of exhortations to love one another,

again the Son of God and . . . holding him up to

to refrain from sexual improprieties, to obey the

contempt” (v. 6). So too in chapter 10:

community’s leaders, and to abstain from false

teachings, especially those that promote adher—

If we willfully persist in sin after having received the

ence to the laws of Judaism (13:1–18).

knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a

sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgment,

and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries

The Epistle to the Hebrews

(vv. 26–27). . . . It is a fearful thing to fall into the

and the Problem of Self-Definition

hands of the living God (v. 29).

What was the social context of the author of this

Why does the author need to give such vitriolic

book and the readers to whom he made such a

warnings to people who are members of the con—

strong appeal? Even though we don’t know the full

gregation? Evidently because some of them were

story, we can make some plausible stabs at the sit—

being tempted to fall away. The author does not

uation. As we have seen, from its earliest days the

explicitly state where these people might go after

Christian message was closely tied to the apoca—

leaving the Christian community, but there can

lyptic notion that the end of the age was immi—

scarcely be any doubt, given everything else that

nent, that the forces of evil were on the rise but

he says about Christ’s superiority to non-Christian

God would soon intervene on behalf of his people

Judaism. He is afraid that Christians will renounce

and vindicate their suffering. With the passing of

Christ to join the synagogue, and he’s doing every—

time and the failure of the end to appear, some

thing in his power to stop them.

believers gave up their confidence in this apoca—

The author’s bottom line is that his readers will

lyptic message. Generally, we don’t know what

inherit the salvation that God has promised only

happened to such people. Did some of them return

if they remain within the Christian church. And

to their former gods? Probably. Did some of them

so he exhorts them: “Do not, therefore, abandon

maintain their monotheistic devotion to the God

that confidence of yours; it brings great reward.

of Israel but jettison their faith in Christ as his

For you need endurance, so that when you have

messiah and join the local synagogue as Gentile

done the will of God, you may receive what was

“God-fearers”? No doubt some of them did that as

promised” (10:35–36). As the Scriptures say, “my

well. The author appears fearful that such a con—

righteous one will live by faith” (Hab 2:4, quoted

version (or return) to Judaism might occur among

in 10:37). For this author to live by faith appears

some members of his community.

to mean something different from what it meant

We don’t know where the author’s community

for Paul, who also quoted Habakkuk 2:4 (Rom

was located or when he lived. When he conveys

1:17; Gal 3:11). For the author of Hebrews, faith

greetings from “those from Italy” (13:24), he could

does not mean a trusting acceptance of Christ’s

mean either “those of us who are presently living in

death and resurrection for sins; it means being

Italy” or “those who hale from Italy but are present—

confident that God will do what he promised. Or

ly living with us.” Some scholars have thought that

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his references to priests who continually perform

fell away from their Christian faith would learn

sacrifices indicate that the Temple was still stand—

firsthand that it is indeed “a fearful thing to fall

ing when he wrote, and therefore that the book

into the hands of the living God” (10:29).

must have been written before 70 C.E. Others have

pointed out that later Jewish authors also spoke of

the Temple in the present tense long after it was

gone and have noted that almost all of the refer-

DISCONTINUITY

ences to the Jewish sacrificial system in the book

AND SUPREMACY:

are drawn from the descriptions in the Old

THE EPISTLE OF BARNABAS

Testament rather than from first-century practice.

Moreover, the few explicit references to the com—

A somewhat different perspective emerges in the

munity’s history suggest a somewhat later date, pos—

so-called Epistle of Barnabas, a book that portrays

sibly during the final quarter of the first century.

Judaism as a false religion from the very beginning.

These Christians had earlier suffered persecution

According to this author, Jews broke God’s

but were now experiencing some complacency and

covenant as soon as it was made with them; they

possibly some defections.

have never been the people of God and have

Whenever he was writing, the anonymous

never understood their own Scriptures. Indeed,

author of Hebrews was concerned to establish

the Old Testament is and always has been a

appropriate boundaries for his Christian commu—

Christian book.

nity; that is, he was involved with the problem of

Barnabas has traditionally been called an epis—

Christian self-definition. Even though his commu—

tle, even though its epistolary opening contains

nity was evidently made up largely of converted

only a greeting; neither its author nor its recipients

polytheists, they understood themselves (or at

is named. The second-and third-century

least the author thought they ought to understand

Christians who first referred to the book claimed

themselves) as the true heirs of the traditions of

that it had been written by Paul’s companion

Israel. They were clearly in conflict with other

Barnabas (hence its name), but they may have

groups that also claimed these traditions for them—

been simply guessing. Indeed, these later authors

selves, in particular, with groups of non-Christian

may have ascribed the book to a companion of the

Jews. As we will discuss later in this chapter, non—

apostle in order to elevate its importance. The ear—

Christian Jews far outnumbered Christians at this

liest writer to mention the book, Clement of

time, and as a rule they found it ludicrous for non—

Alexandria, includes it among the writings of the

Jews to claim to understand the Jewish religion

New Testament, as do other Christian writers in

better than they themselves did.

Egypt through the fourth century. Most scholars,

Nonetheless, the Christian author of Hebrews,

however, date the book to a period long after the

whether he himself was Jewish or not, claimed

real Barnabas’s death. Several comments in the

that Christ fulfilled the Old Testament revelation

text itself suggest a date of around 130 C.E. or so.

and that his followers were the true people of God.

For instance, the book mentions the destruction of

Those outside the Christian faith, whether Jews or

the Temple, which occurred in the year 70 C.E.

Gentiles, could not legitimately claim to be the

(16:3), and refers to the possibility of its soon

heirs of the religion espoused by Moses, for that

being rebuilt (16:4). That possibility was very

religion looked forward to what was to come. It

much alive during the first decades of the second

was but a foreshadowing of the salvation that God

century, but it more or less evaporated when the

had promised in the prophets, a salvation brought

emperor Hadrian (132–34 C.E.) had a Roman

in the person of his son Jesus, the messiah. In this

shrine constructed over the Temple’s ruins.

sense, the Christian religion was continuous with,

Given the popularity of the epistle in the city of

but ultimately superior to, the religion of non—

Alexandria, many scholars think that it was writ—

Christian Judaism, and Christians were not to

ten there. Alexandria had a large Jewish popula—

yield to the temptation of preferring the foreshad—

tion, and the city eventually came to house one of

owing of salvation to salvation itself. Those who

the largest Christian churches in the Empire.



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# CHAPTER 25

## CHRISTIANS AND JEWS

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Relations between the groups were occasionally

tense and sometimes even volatile. Moreover, and

more intriguing, we know of Alexandrian Jews

who practiced allegorical methods to interpret the

Scriptures. One of the most famous of them was

the first-century philosopher Philo, whose methods of interpretation are comparable to those used

by the second-century Gnostics, many of whom

F P O

also came from Alexandria. The author of

Barnabas, whoever he was, also utilizes an allegorical mode of interpretation, taking the text to

mean something other than what a literal reading

would suggest, but he uses his allegorical readings

not to support Judaism, as Philo did, but to attack

it. Barnabas (as I’ll continue to call him) understood the Old Testament to be a Christian book

that had always been misinterpreted by the Jews,

Figure 25.2 Coin of the emperor Vespasian, which commem-who, in his opinion, foolishly maintained that

orates the conquest of Judea by Titus with the inscription

their religion had been given them by God. He

“Judea Taken Captive.” The fall of Jerusalem was a significant claims that they were misled in this by an evil

event in the development of Jewish-Christian relations.

angel, who persuaded them to take the laws of the

Old Testament literally rather than as figurative

pointers to Christ and the religion that he was to

ation in which he spent six days making the world

establish (9:5).

before resting on the seventh. Moreover, as the

Barnabas himself considers only parts of the

Scriptures themselves testify, “with the Lord a day

Old Testament to be literally true, especially the

is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one

parts that recount the repeated acts of disobedi—

day” (2 Pet 3:8; Ps 90:4). The six days of creation,

ence by the children of Israel. For him, for exam—

then, refer to a period of six thousand years in

ple, it is literally true that when Moses came down

which God is actively involved with the world, to

from Mount Sinai after receiving the Ten

be followed by a seventh day of rest, in which he

Commandments, he smashed the two tablets of

will finally put an end to sin and bring peace on

the Law into bits, having seen the idolatry and

earth once and for all. The injunction to keep the

immorality of the Israelites in the camp below.

Sabbath day holy is therefore not to be interpret—

This act showed that God’s covenant had been

ed as a commandment to refrain from work; it is an

broken, quite literally, by the Jews, a disobedient

instruction concerning the future apocalypse in

and immoral people; and once broken, the

which God’s millenial kingdom will come to earth

covenant could never be renewed (4:6–8).

(see box 25.3). Only then will there be a comIn the author’s view, Jews failed to understand

pletely holy people who can keep “the day” holy

the figurative meaning of the Law that was given

(15:1–8).

to Moses. Barnabas devotes most of his energies to

Jews are also wrong to take the dietary laws of

driving home this basic point, time and again giv—

the Old Testament literally. God did not mean

ing the “true” interpretation of the Jews’ Law in

that his people were not to eat pork or rabbit or

opposition to their own literalistic understandings

hyena, all of which are proscribed in the Torah.

of it. For example, when God spoke of honoring

The injunction not to eat pork means not to live

the Sabbath day and keeping it holy, he did not

like swine, who grunt loudly when hungry and

mean that Jews should refrain from work on the

keep silent when full. People are not to treat God

seventh day. As unholy people, Barnabas claims,

in this way, coming to him with loud petitions

Jews could not possibly keep the day itself holy.

when they are in need and ignoring him when

God was instead referring to his own act of cre—

they are not (10:3). Not to eat rabbit means not to

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SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 25.3 Six Thousand Years and Counting

Barnabas was the first Christian on record to claim that the world was to last 6,000 years.

His logic—if you grant him his premises—was hard to impugn: since the creation is said to have taken “six days” (Genesis 1) and since Scripture says that with the Lord, “a day is as a thousand years” (2 Pet 3:8)—voilà! The creation of God is to last 6,000 years, before the seventh “day,” a thousand-year period of millennial bliss. This line of reasoning became commonplace throughout the Middle Ages.

But when does one start the 6,000-year stopwatch, to know the precise time of the end?

The answer for many English-speaking Christians was provided long after Barnabas, by the famous seventeenth-century archbishop of Ireland, James Ussher. Ussher was an erudite and wide-ranging scholar. Basing his calculations on the genealogies of the Bible (which state not only who begat whom, but also indicate, in many instances, how long each of the begotten then lived) along with other ancient sources, such as Babylonian and Roman history, he argued that the world was created in 4004 B.C.E.—in fact, at noon on October 23. This chronology became dominant throughout Western Christendom. It was printed widely in King James Bibles and continues to be believed by non-evolutionarily minded Christians today.

Why, though, did Archbishop Ussher not simply round things off a bit and opt for the year 4000 B.C.E., say, some time in late afternoon? It was because he realized full well about a faux pas made by the inventor of the modern calendar (which divides the ages into two periods, one before and one after the birth of Jesus), a sixth-century monk named Dionysius Exiguus. In addition to failing to start the era with the year zero—a failing for which he can scarcely be faulted, since the concept of zero was not mathematically worked out yet in the sixth century—Dionysius miscalculated the date of Jesus’ birth, from which the era had its beginning. For if Jesus was in fact an infant during the reign of King Herod—as related by both Matthew and Luke in the New Testament—then he must have been born no later than 4 B.C.E., the year of Herod’s death. This creates a problem, of course, for those who continue to work with the abbreviations A.D. (anno domini: Latin for The Year of our Lord) and B.C.

(Before Christ)—since, as sometimes noted, according to the calendar we use Jesus was actually born four years Before Christ! And for Ussher, who thought that Jesus was born exactly 4,000 years after the world was made (and 2,000 years before it would end), it meant that the date of creation had to be in 4004 B.C.E.

The larger problem, though, is that if the world were to exist for exactly 6,000 years (as many readers of the Bible have maintained since practically the inception of the Christian religion) and if Ussher’s chronology were correct (as many fundamentalist Christians still believe)—it should have ended already, at noon on October 23, 1997! But the world keeps on tickin’.

live like those wild creatures, who with every pass—

Likewise, not to eat hyena means not to live licen—

ing year increase their sexual appetites and multitious lives, like those promiscuous animals who

ply the number of their sexual partners, propagat—

were thought to change their gender every year,

ing at random and even committing incest (10:6).

alternately becoming male and female (10:7).

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# CHAPTER 25

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SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 25.4 Gematria in Early Christianity

The possibilities of gematria seem almost endless. Since any sequence of letters in Greek or Hebrew “adds up” to a total number, different words can be related to one another by their numerical totals. One second-century Gnostic group, for example, pointed out that the letters in the Greek word for “dove” add up to 801, the same numerical value contained in the Greek letters alpha (worth 1) and omega (worth 800). From this they concluded that the Spirit of God that descended upon Jesus “as a dove” was in fact an element of the divine itself, the “alpha and the omega” (see Rev 1:8), which came into the man Jesus to empower him for his ministry. Other Christians, needless to say, were not convinced.

Some Christian scribes used the numerical value of letters to help them devise abbreviations. In some ancient Greek texts, rather than concluding a prayer with the word “amen,”

these scribes simply wrote the two Greek letters that represented 99, the numerical value obtained by adding up the letters in amen, thereby saving themselves a second of time and a smidgen of ink.

The use of gematria is important in other early Christian texts, as we will see especially when we try to determine what the author of the Book of Revelation might have meant when he claimed that the number of the Antichrist was 666 (see Chapter 28).

For Barnabas, the laws of God are meant to

where we use Roman letters but Arabic numerals.

induce ethical behavior; they are totally misread if

The practice is similar, though, to our occasional

taken literally. This rule also applies to the most

use of Roman numerals, in which, for instance, the

distinctive Jewish law of all, the law of circumci-

I represents one, V is five, and X is ten. In the case sion. God did not want his people literally to cut

of both ancient Greek and ancient Hebrew, every

off the foreskins of their baby boys. The sign of cir—

letter had a numerical value (so that in Greek, for

cumcision given to Abraham was something quite

example, the alpha was one, beta two, gamma

different; it was the sign that salvation would be

three, and so on). For this reason, every word writ—

given to the world through the cross of Jesus. To

ten in these languages had a numerical equivalent

justify this interpretation, Barnabas points to the

(the sum of the numbers represented by its letters).

first account of circumcision in the Bible, where

Conversely, every number was represented by a

Abraham took his 318 servants into the wilderness

sequence of letters.

to rescue his nephew Lot, who had been taken

In explaining Abraham’s circumcision of his

prisoner by an army of invading kings (Gen 17).

318 servants, Barnabas notes that 318 is represent—

Prior to going into battle, Abraham had these 318

ed (in Greek) by the letters tau, iota, and eta

members of his household circumcised. What is

(τιη). For him, this number is significant because

significant for Barnabas is the number 318 itself, a

it clearly shows that circumcision prefigures the

mysterious number that he explains by using the

Christian religion. The tau (τ), he points out, is

method of interpretation known in ancient Jewish

made in the shape of the cross (it looks like the

sources as “gematria.”

English t) and iota (ι) and eta (η) are the first two

Gematria was a way of interpreting words in

letters of the name “Jesus” (ιησους) in Greek

light of their numerical value (see box 25.4). In

(9:1–8). The true circumcision is thus not the lit—

ancient languages, the letters of the alphabet per—

eral cutting of the flesh of the foreskin. It is the

formed double duty as numbers, unlike in English,

cross of Jesus. Adherence to the cross, not literal

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circumcision is what makes a person a member of

not know exactly when or where Barnabas was

the people of God. According to Barnabas, this

writing, although around the year 130 in the city

doctrine is found in the text of the Jewish

of Alexandria is not a bad guess. In any event, it is

Scriptures themselves in the story of Abraham, the

safe to say that as a Christian, Barnabas represent—

father of circumcision. Barnabas assures his readers

ed a tiny minority of persons within the empire of

that no one had ever heard a more excellent leshis day, a marginalized religious sect that had

son from him (9:9).

never been heard of by most people and was

This fascinating piece of early Christian writing

scorned by most of those who had heard of it.

ends on a different note by describing the “Two

Demographic estimates from antiquity are

Ways” of life: the morally upright way of “light”

extremely problematic, but the best guesses put

and the morally perverse way of “darkness.” These

the population of the Roman empire at the begin—

are paths that all people must choose between, and

ning of the second century at around 60 million,

the author indicates the moral practices and

with Jews making up something like 7 percent of

improprieties pertaining to each.

the total. Christians, on the other hand, would

In conclusion, what can we say about Christian

have comprised much less than 1 percent of the

self-definition as expressed in the Epistle of

population. As we saw previously, there may have

Barnabas? Christians here do not, strictly speak—

been more women than men in the earliest

ing, stand in continuity with historic Judaism.

Christian churches, and the majority of

Judaism is a false religion followed by people who

Christians, both men and women, appear to have

do not understand their own Scriptures. This

come from the lower classes. We have no indica—

harsh indictment of the Jews serves to differentiate

tion that any Christian in this period came from

them from the Christians, who are the only true

the very upper echelons of Roman society.

heirs of the promises of God. The Scriptures

Throughout this period churches continued to

belong to the Christians, and the Jews have no

meet in private homes, so that in urban areas there

right to them. As the people of God, on the other

may have been a number of small individual con—

hand, the Christians’ roots are as ancient as Moses

gregations, possibly a large number, spread

and the prophets. Christians may not appear to be

throughout a city. Church buildings were not to be

distinct from the rest of the world in the ways that

built for more than a century.

Jews are, but that is only because the Jews have

In light of these basic demographics,

misconstrued their own religion. True religion

Christianity was clearly not a massive unified

means accepting the cross of Christ and living a

movement with a centralized power base and

moral upright life as a member of God’s covenan—

political clout. On the contrary, it was scattered

tal community, the Christian church.

and poorly financed, with little public presence

and less public credence. Most of the people who

had heard of Christians did not consider their

views acceptable, and they sometimes harassed the

CONCLUSION: THE RISE OF

local Christian communities as a result. This put

CHRISTIAN ANTI-JUDAISM

Christianity in stark contrast to Judaism, which

not only had far greater numbers but also had vis—

To modern ears the anti-Jewish invectives of the

ible public structures, wide public recognition, and

Epistle of Barnabas sound incendiary. As we know

prominent public representatives, some of whom

in hindsight, such attacks against the Jewish reli—

had the ear of the highest officials in the empire,

gion have led to hateful crimes against the Jewish

on occasion even of the emperor himself.

people, some of them of unthinkable audacity.

How was Christianity to justify its own exis—

Anyone propounding such inflammatory views in

tence in this world? The people of the Jewish God

our own day would be subject, quite rightly, to

did not believe in Jesus, the crucified criminal, as

public denunciation and censure.

the messiah, and anyone in society at large could

It is important, though, to understand the Epis-

see that Christians did not practice the ancestral

tle of Barnabas in the context of its own day. We do

traditions of the Jews, whose God the Christians

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# CHAPTER 25

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SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 25.5 Melito's Passover Sermon

Melito of Sardis died around the year 190 C.E., so his sermon lambasting Jews for the role they played in the death of Jesus must have been written sometime during the middle of the second century. It is thus the first instance that we have of a Christian charging Jews with the crime of “deicide,” the murder of God. This charge has been used to justify hateful acts of violence against Jews over the centuries. In part, the rhetorical eloquence with which the charge was sometimes leveled has contributed to the emotional reaction that it has produced.

Consider Melito’s own gripping, if terrifying, rhetoric:

This one was murdered. And where was he murdered? In the very center of Jerusalem! Why? Because he had healed their lame and had cleansed their lepers, and had guided their blind with light, and had raised up their dead. For this reason he suffered. . . . (chap. 72) Why, O Israel, did you do this strange injustice? You dishonored the one who had honored you. You held in contempt the one who held you in esteem. You denied the one who publicly acknowledged you. You renounced the one who proclaimed you his own. You killed the one who made you to live. Why did you do this, O Israel? (chap. 73) It was necessary for him to suffer, yes, but not by you; it was necessary for him to be dishonored, but not by you; it was necessary for him to be judged, but not by you; it was necessary for him to be crucified, but not by you, not by your right hand, O Israel! (chaps. 75–76) Therefore, hear and tremble because of him for whom the earth

trembled. The one who hung the earth in space, is himself hanged; the one who fixed the heavens in place, is himself impaled; the one who firmly fixed all things, is himself firmly fixed to the tree. The Lord is insulted, God has been murdered, the king of Israel has been destroyed, by the hand of Israel. . . . (chaps. 95–96) claimed to serve. If the religion could receive no

very different ways by Matthew, Paul, and the

recognition from Jewish leaders, since it advanced

author of Hebrews. It was also the position was

an aberrant set of beliefs and practices, and had no

taken by the Jewish-Christian adoptionists who

protection from Roman administrators, since it

continued not only to embrace the Jewish

lacked ancestral tradition, what recourse was left

Scriptures but also to follow Jewish practices such as

to the Christian church?

circumcision, Sabbath observance, and kosher food

Christians who were convinced that their faith

laws (see Chapter 1). Early in the second century,

was not misfounded or misguided struck back at

however, other Christian authors began to paint

those who rejected and persecuted them. One form

their opponents as adherents of a false religion.

that this opposition took was the anti-Jewish litera—

These Christians denied that their religion had any

ture that began to be written with increasing fre—

real continuity with Judaism, though they still

quency as more and more literate and outspoken

claimed continuity with the Old Testament itself.

persons were converted to the Christian faith. At

This, in a nutshell, was the position of Barnabas.

one stage, and in some places, the writers of this lit—

Still later in the second century, real intellectu—

erature simply tried to claim the promises of Israel

als converted to the Christian faith—philosophers

for the followers of Jesus; this basic position taken in

like Justin of Rome and rhetorically sophisticated

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writers like Tertullian of North Africa. These

wrong. Christian survival required a defensive pos—

intellectuals put their literary skills to work both

turing that was spun out in vitriolic tracts designed

to defend their faith from accusations made by

to mold a Christian identity.

pagans and to attack Jews who failed to recognize

It is doubtful that these Christian counterat—

its superiority. More highly trained than their pre—

tacks proved convincing to anyone except those

decessors, these authors were frequently impres—

who already believed. To use a modern metaphor,

sive in their rhetoric, even though the positions

these writers were preaching to the choir. Within

they advanced may sound appalling to modern

a few hundred years, however, this bitter lashing

ears. Both Justin and Tertullian, for example,

out against a much larger opponent had become

admitted that circumcision was given as a sign to

the confident attack of the high and mighty

set Jews apart from all other peoples, but for Justin

against a relatively defenseless minority.

it was to set them apart for persecution, and for

For reasons more or less unrelated to the anti—

Tertullian it was to show who would not be

Jewish writings of the early church, Christianity

allowed into the holy city. (Tertullian was writing

became the dominant religion of the empire. The

after the Romans had made it illegal for Jews to

shift did not occur overnight. By the beginning of

live in Jerusalem after the violence of the second

the fourth century, Christians still comprised far less

Jewish uprising in 132–35 C.E.)

than 10 percent of the empire’s population (perhaps

Other authors raised the ante even higher. One

some five million people). But in one of the most

of the most eloquent homilies of the second cen—

momentous conversions in history, the Roman

tury derives from a Christian orator named Melito,

emperor Constantine came to profess belief in the

who lived in the city of Sardis in Asia Minor (see

Christian God, and from then on everything

box 25.5). His sermon text is the story of the

changed. Constantine not only put an end to offi—

Passover in the book of Exodus and his mode of

cial persecution of the church (somewhat before his

interpretation is figurative. He sees Jesus as the

conversion, in the year 313 C.E.), but he also

real Passover lamb, rejected and killed by his own

bestowed special imperial favors upon it. He pro—

people; even more than this, he was also God him—

vided extensive lands, magnificent buildings, and

self. The implications, for Melito, are severe: Israel

sizable revenues to churches, patronized leaders of

is guilty of murdering its own God. Indeed, Jews

the church in Rome and elsewhere, and took an

who continue to reject Christ are themselves cul—

active part in critical matters of Christian doctrine

pable of this hateful deed. With Melito we are

and church administration, for instance, by calling

clearly at the beginning of a form of anti-Jewish

the famous Council of Nicea in 325 C.E., where the

hatred that had not appeared on the stage of

orthodox doctrine of Christology was established.

human history prior to the advent of Christianity.

It became not only acceptable but also fashion—

We are not yet at the point when anything

able and even advisable in some circles to become a

much could be done about this hatred. Such

Christian. By the end of the fourth century,

inflammatory words mean one thing when they

Christianity was named the official religion of the

come from the pen of a relatively obscure preach—

empire, with something like half of the entire popu—

er of a weak and powerless minority group within

lation, some 30 million people, professing belief.

the empire and something quite different when

This historic upheaval had profound effects for

taken to heart by people in positions of authority

Jewish-Christian relations. In the early part of the

and power. For Melito and his predecessors, such

second century, Christians were a marginalized

opposition to the Jews represented an attempt to

group that occasionally produced revolutionary and

justify the existence of Christianity in a world that

incendiary tractates. By the end of the fourth cen—

refused to recognize it. These Christians believed

tury the tables had turned, and turned with a

that their right to exist hinged on the inadequa—

vengeance. What had started as the defensive pos—

cies of the religion from which they had originat—

ture of an insignificant and powerless minority group

ed. If the majority of Jews was right, then

became a view shared by prominent members of the

Christians (so they understood) were necessarily

Roman bureaucracy. The official policies of the

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empire did not actively require or promote the per—

though his Jewish disciples were taught to love

secution of Jews, but in many instances the

their fellow Jews as themselves, and even though

Christian governors looked the other way or pri—

after their founder’s death they developed a theol—

vately condoned it. Synagogues were burned, prop—

ogy, a system of ethics, and a basic view of the

erties were confiscated, and Jews were publicly

world that continued to be rooted in Judaism,

mocked and sometimes subjected to mob violence.

understanding themselves in light of the Jewish

Leading the way were Christians, who took the

Scriptures that they believed had been given to the

defensive rhetoric of their predecessors in the faith

Jewish people by the Jewish God—despite all these

all too literally and acted on it by striving to deprive

things, much of the subsequent history of

Jews of their right to exist.

Christianity involved a falling away from its Jewish

The result is one of the tragic ironies of history.

roots and a sometimes violent opposition to the

Even though the founder of the Christian religion

Jewish people. In an effort to define themselves in

was a Jew, who lived among the Jewish people, fol—

the world, Christians came to deny their ties to the

lowed the Jewish Law, worshipped in the Jewish

history, religion, and people of the Jews. The trag—

synagogue, and selected Jewish followers, even

ic effects of that denial remain with us even today.

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# CHAPTER 26

Christians and Pagans: 1 Peter, the Letters of Ignatius,

the Martyrdom of Polycarp, and Later Apologetic Literature

We have seen that one area of ongoing concern for

Roman emperor or senate declared the religion

the early Christians was their relationship with

illegal and used the troops and the law courts to

non-Christian Jews. Sometimes this relationship

the fullest extent possible to repress it. As a result,

became tense, leading to wide-open conflict. In

the Christians went into hiding; they met secretly

some measure, the conflict involved more than

in the catacombs, conversed only in private, and

Jew against Christian. Once Christians left the

identified one another in public through secret

protective embrace of the ancestral religion of

signs such as the symbol of the fish.

Judaism, they found themselves open to attack by

This view of Christianity in the Roman Empire

a pagan society that generally did not respect new

may make for an indifferent screenplay, but it is far

religious movements and occasionally feared the

worse from a historical perspective. In fact,

wrath of the gods who punished the flagrant

Christianity appears to have made only a scant

neglect of their cult. In this chapter we shift our

impact on the empire during the first hundred

attention to this other form of early Christian con—

years of its existence. In none of the documents

flict, focusing on the tensions that arose between

that have survived from pagan authors of the first

Christians and pagans in the Roman Empire.

century of the Common Era—whether histories or

philosophical treatises, travelogues or works of fiction, private correspondence or public inscriptions, legal documents or personal notes—in no

THE PERSECUTION

pagan document of any kind is either Jesus or

OF THE EARLY CHRISTIANS

Christianity mentioned at all. This was not a religion that was on everybody’s minds and inspired

Perhaps as a result of too many bad Hollywood

terror in the hearts of the Roman administration.

movies, many people have a completely erroneous

I do not mean to say that no one had ever heard

sense of what it meant to be a Christian in the

of Christianity. People obviously had heard of it,

Roman Empire. It is commonly imagined, for

and many of those who did were not kindly dis—

example, that Christians were of immediate and

posed toward it. This included at least one of the

important concern to the upper echelons of the

first-century emperors, as we will see. But the reli—

Roman administration, who saw the Christian

gion was not of major concern to the rulers of the

movement as taking the world by storm and felt

empire or their underlings. During the second half

constrained to stop it by any means necessary, and

of the first century it was a minor and insignificant

therefore launched massive and violent persecu—

nuisance, a mosquito to be swatted, not a tiger to

tions as a kind of counterattack. In this view, the

be tamed.

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# CHAPTER 26

## CHRISTIANS AND PAGANS

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It was not swatted through an officially enacted

North American countries today. Disputes over

empire-wide persecution. Contrary to popular

property rights, contractual obligations, financial

imagination, there was no imperial legislation

liabilities, and marriage arrangements were all ham—

against Christianity and correspondingly no

mered out by Roman legislators in careful and pre—

empire-wide persecution of the Christians until

cise detail. Roman criminal law, on the other hand,

nearly two centuries after the time of Paul. Not

was a different matter altogether. Criminal activi—

until 250 C.E. did an emperor proscribe the religion

ties were not strictly defined, and punishments were

and urge persecutions on a large scale, and even

not prescribed by law. In fact, odd though it may

then there is some question concerning how mas—

seem, neither the Roman emperor nor the Roman

sive the scale was. In any event, during the first

senate passed criminal legislation that was binding

century Christians were not driven underground

on all inhabitants of the provincial realms.

and forced to communicate in private and to hide

The provinces were ruled by governors who

from the authorities in the Roman catacombs.

were appointed by either the senate or the emperor (depending on whose jurisdiction the province

was under). These governors were drawn from the

The Legal Standing of Christians

highest ranking officials of the empire, senators

Christians had the same rights and responsibilities

and, occasionally, other aristocrats who were

as everyone else in the empire. Starting a new cult

judged capable of handling the rule of an indige—

was not illegal; it happened occasionally through—

nous population. The provincial governors had

out the entire Hellenistic-Roman period.

two main responsibilities: to keep the peace and to

Christians had the right to worship whatever God

collect the taxes. They themselves had more than

they chose, even the Jewish God. Furthermore,

a little stake in these matters, since the governors

the Roman authorities did not care whether the

received a cut of the tax money they brought in.

Christians who worshipped this God lived and

Moreover, they were granted nearly absolute

acted as Jews. It was certainly not against any law

power to accomplish their objectives. To assist

for Christians to believe and proclaim that Jesus

provincial authorities in their duties, the senate

himself was divine, as some of them eventually

would occasionally pass bills proposing rules of

came to do. As we have seen, most people

governance; these were not federal laws, however,

believed that gods could come to earth in human

but more like pieces of official advice. In any situ—

form, sometimes as great philosophers or powerful

ation, the governor was expected to use his best

rulers. Some people thought that the emperor

judgment to deal with problems that arose,

himself was a god. To proclaim one more person

employing whatever means necessary to maintain

divine was neither sacrilegious nor sinister.

public order and maximize revenue collection.

Morever, Christians were within their legal

Being able to employ any means necessary gave

rights to communicate their faith to others, to

governors the power of life and death. From a

meet together in private homes, to participate in

Roman administrative point of view, Pontius

their own distinctive cultic practices, and to read

Pilate was altogether justified in condemning Jesus

their sacred Scriptures. Why, then, were

to death as a public nuisance. People like Pilate

Christians like Paul sometimes put in prison, sub—

were expected to deal with cases like this with jus—

jected to corporal punishment, and made to stand

tice where possible and severity where necessary.

trial? If they hadn’t broken the law, how was it that

This takes us, now, to the minor irritations

Christians were found guilty of crimes and pun—

caused by the Christians and the resultant perse—

ished by torture and imprisonment? To answer the

cutions that were launched in various localities

question, we must first visit the Roman legal sys—

throughout the early empire. Even though the

tem.

Christian religion was not illegal, in the strict

Roman civil law was extremely sophisticated

sense of the term (i.e., there were no laws against

and nuanced; indeed, it provided the basis for the

it), we know that Christians themselves were fre—

systems of civil legislation found in European and

quently involved in socially disruptive and there-

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fore punishable behavior, as can be seen, for

ents and the men left at the altar were not at all

instance, in the accounts in Acts. It was the mag—

pleased. At least in the apocryphal Acts they

istrate’s job to resolve the situation by following

sometimes did something about it by stirring up

his best judgment, for example, by punishing par—

public opinion against the Christians and

ties that caused the disturbance.

demanding judgment from the governor.

The early Christian communities apparently

were viewed with suspicion and distrust for other

Christians As Disturbers of the Peace

reasons as well. As we have already seen, these

What kinds of public disturbances did Christians

communities were closed to outsiders. Closed soci—

cause? From our earliest sources we learn that

eties are always seen as suspicious by society at

Christians considered their communities of faith

large: what exactly are they trying to hide? When

to be self-contained groups that made exclusive

word leaked out concerning the Christians’ activ—

demands on the individual member. People were

ities, the news did little to allay other people’s

to leave behind their former associations to join

fears. It was known that Christians often met with

the church. This involved abandoning their earli—

their brothers and sisters either after dark or before

er religious affiliations and, if necessary, their own

dawn to hold a “love feast” (their term for the

families. Christians claimed that their Lord him—

Lord’s Supper), a celebration that included ritual

self had meant to disrupt the normal family lives of

kissing (e.g., see Rom 16:16; 1 Pet 5:14). At this

his followers (see box 16.6). From a historical permeal they ate the body and drank the blood of the

spective it is difficult to know whether Jesus actu—

Son of God. Rumors began to fly, and if you can

ally spoke the words that are attributed to him on

imagine the worst you won’t be far off the mark.

this score, but they certainly reflect the realities of

Christians were thought to meet under the cloak

the churches that later professed his name:

of darkness in order to hide their despicable deeds

from the world. They engaged in wild sex orgies

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the

(the love feasts, where the passionate kiss of peace

earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

was just the beginning), they committed commu—

For I have come to set a man against his father, and

nal incest with their “brothers and sisters,” and

a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law

most sinister of all, they performed acts of infanti—

against her mother-in-law; and one’s foes will be

cide and ritual cannibalism (eating the son).

members of one’s own household. Whoever loves

father or mother more than me is not worthy of me;

These charges may sound ludicrous to us, but

and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is

they were widely believed by non-Christians in

not worthy of me. (Matt 10:34–37)

the second century, as evidenced by the fact that

Christian authors repeatedly had to defend them—

Families were disrupted when one member

selves against them (see box 19.2). Similar charges

became a Christian and rejected all family ties in

were leveled against other groups in antiquity as

favor of a commitment to the church. Indeed, the

well; evidently one of the common ways to cast

Christian church portrayed itself as a convert’s

aspersions on an unpopular group was to claim

new family: believers called one another brother

that they held nocturnal orgies and ate babies.

and sister, they had “fathers” and “mothers” in the

Compounding these problems was the fact that

faith, and God himself was the Father of all.

Christians refused to participate in local cults and,

That this new family of faith was to replace

even worse, in state cults that honored the Roman

one’s real family is evident in such early Christian

gods. This refusal was widely seen as treasonous.

narratives as Paul’s adventures with Thecla, a

These were the gods who protected society, who

model convert who left her betrothed to follow

brought peace and prosperity to the empire through

the apostle in a life of chastity (see also box 26.1).

the agency of the emperor, who was himself someThis religious family opened up new possibilities of

times considered divine in the provinces where

life for Christian converts; for those outside, how—

Christianity was most successful. In modern terms,

ever, the impact was sometimes jarring and disrup—

failing to worship these gods was a political state—

tive. As you might imagine, the abandoned par—

ment as much as a religious one, for as we have seen,

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SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 26.1

The Christian Disruption of the Family: The Case of Perpetua

Early Christians recognized, and sometimes even celebrated, the fact that adherence to their religion could disrupt family lives. For many of them, the Christian church was a new family that replaced their old, biological family. Nowhere can the disruptive possibilities of Christianity be seen more clearly than in the gripping account from the end of the second century of the trial and execution of a Roman matron named Perpetua and her female slave Felicitas. The first part of the report actually derives from a private diary that Perpetua kept while in prison awaiting her fate among the wild beasts of a Roman amphitheatre in North Africa.

Perpetua reports that she had an infant son whom she had given over to the care of her family.

In one of the most powerful and pathetic scenes of the account, her father pleads with her to consider the pain she is causing her loved ones by her senseless determination to die a martyr’s death: And then my father came to me [in prison], worn out with anxiety.

He came up to me, that he might cast me down [from the faith], saying,

“Have pity my daughter, on my grey hairs. Have pity on your father, if I am worthy to be called a father by you. . . . Have regard to your brothers, have regard to your mother and your aunt, have regard to your son, who will not be able to live after you. Lay aside your courage, and do not bring us to destruction; for none of us will speak in freedom if you should suffer anything.” . . . And I grieved over the grey hairs of my father . . . and I comforted him saying, “On that scaffold, whatever God wills shall happen. . . .” And he departed from me in sorrow.

Another day . . . an immense number of people were gathered together. We mount the platform. The rest were interrogated and confessed.

Then they came to me and my father immediately appeared with my boy and withdrew me from the step, and said in a supplicating tone, “Have pity on your babe.” And Hilarianus the procurator . . . said, “Spare the grey hairs of your father, spare the infancy of your boy, offer sacrifice for the well-being of the emperors.” And I replied, “I will not do so.”

Hilarianus said, “Are you a Christian?” And I replied, “I am a Christian.”

And as my father stood there to cast me down from the faith, he was ordered by Hilarianus to be thrown down, and was beaten with rods. . . .

The procurator then delivers judgment on all of us, and condemns us to the wild beasts, and we went down cheerfully to the dungeon ( Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas. 2).

Perpetua and her slave Felicitas, who had herself given birth just days before the event, were thrown to the wild beasts for confessing to be Christians. A detailed and gory account of the incident was recorded by an eyewitness and forms the final portion of the martyrology called The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas.

people in the ancient world didn’t separate religion

sistent testimony of the accounts in Acts and the

and politics into distinct categories. For them, to

references in Paul’s letters, where followers of Jesus

spurn the state gods was to repudiate the state.

are sometimes subject to mob violence (e.g., Acts

The earliest Christians were attacked principal—

7:54–60; 13:48–51; 14:19–21, 21:27– 36; 1 Thess

ly for causing public disturbances. This is the con—

2:13–16). At other times they suffer an official

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punishment by order of a Roman magistrate, as

because of the general loathing for them. Nero,

indicated, for instance, by Paul’s reference to being

however, did not order persecutions of Christians

beaten three times with rods (2 Cor 11:25; see also

living outside of Rome, and more importantly, he

Acts 16:22). Outsiders evidently considered the

did not punish the Christians of Rome for being

followers of Christ to be public nuisances, not the

Christians. He condemned them for arson (even

moral, upright citizens one might have expected

though they were apparently innocent of the

them to be.

charge). Thus, Christians were accused of com—

The negative public image of the early

mitting actual crimes.

Christians can be deduced from the caustic

Nero may have set a precedent. Christians who

remarks directed against them by pagan authors of

were already looked upon with suspicion and

the early second century (see box 13.1). Thus, for

hatred increasingly came to be seen as a public

example, the Roman historian Tacitus calls

problem, and governors in the provinces must have

Christianity a “pernicious superstition” and claims

known the disdain that the emperor himself had

that Nero could use Christians as scapegoats for

shown for them. The problems mounted with the

the burning of Rome because of their “hatred of

passing of time, as Christians grew in number and

the human race” (Annals 15). At about the same

openly refused to worship the state gods. This

time (ca. 115 C.E.), the historian Suetonius

becomes clear in the second incident of official

described Christians as people who held “to a

persecution that we can speak about with some

novel and mischievous superstition” (Life of Nero

confidence. In 112 C.E., Pliny, the governor of

16). The Roman governor of Bithynia-Pontus,

Bithynia-Pontus in Asia Minor, heard complaints

Pliny the Younger, considered the Christians to be

about the Christians in his province and put them

“obstinate” and “mad” adherents of a “depraved

on trial. Afterward, he wrote to the Emperor Trajan

superstition” and expressed some surprise when he

to see whether he had handled the situation prop—

learned that at their community meals they ate

erly. The letter still survives. In it Pliny tells the

ordinary food, possibly because he suspected them

emperor that he arrested those suspected of being

of cannibalism (Letter 10 to Trajan). Later authors

Christians and forced them to prove their loyalty

like the emperor Marcus Aurelius considered

to the state by paying homage to the images of the

Christians to be misguided and hardheaded

emperor and the state gods by offering up incense

(Meditations XI, 3); the satiricist Lucian portrayed

and wine. He executed those who refused.

them as irrational, gullible dolts (Death of

Pliny had these people executed not because

Peregrinus, 11–13).

they worshipped the Christian God—they were

free to do that—but because they refused to worship the gods that supported the empire of Rome.

Official Persecution

Also, Pliny did not punish those who were sus—

This widespread disapproval of the Christians lies

pected of having formerly been Christians so long

at the root of the earliest governmental actions

as they were willing to worship the Roman gods.

against them. The first full-blown episode appears

This procedure shows that it was not a crime to

to have been the persecution under Nero. When

have been a Christian (since crimes are punished

Nero’s enemies blamed him for the fire that lev—

even after someone stops committing them). The

eled a good portion of the city—a blame that he

crime was being adamant in refusing to worship

evidently deserved—he decided to use the

the state gods. Pliny appears to have recognized

Christians in Rome as his scapegoats. According

that Christians were prevented by their religion

to the Roman historian Tacitus, Nero made a pub—

from worshipping these gods. For this reason, any—

lic display of Christians, having some of them

one who persisted in claiming to be a Christian

clothed in animal skins to be eaten by ravenous

was automatically subject to prosecution.

dogs and others rolled in pitch and set aflame to

Trajan gave his full approval to Pliny’s procedure

light his public gardens. Tacitus suggests that Nero

in a written reply which also still survives, and gov—

could treat the Christians this way with impunity

ernors of other Roman provinces appear to have

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taken his response to heart. Christians weren’t

we have already considered. In this chapter we

hunted down—Trajan explicitly forbade such a

will examine several additional documents that

practice—and anonymous accusations were gener—

derive from this context—the book of 1 Peter, the

ally disallowed, but when difficulties arose within a

letters of Ignatius, and the Martyrdom of Polycarp—

community and Christians were thought to be to

ranging from the end of the first century to the

blame, persecutions erupted, even if for a brief peri—

middle of the second. By coincidence, each of

od of time. As the existence of the Christians

these documents relates in one way or another to

became more widely known, it became increasingly

Asia Minor, the region where Pliny describes his

clear that they were (a) antisocial, in that they did

own persecution of Christians during roughly the

not participate in the normal social life of their

same period. By exploring these writings we will

communities, (b) sacrilegious, in that they refused

acquire further insights into how Christians saw

to worship the gods, and (c) dangerous, since the

themselves in light of the antagonistic world in

gods did not take kindly to communities that har—

which they lived.

bored those who failed to offer them cult. By the

end of the second century, the Christian apologist

(literally, “defender” of the faith) Tertullian could

CHRISTIANS IN

complain about the widespread perception that

A HOSTILE WORLD:

Christians were the source of all disasters brought

against the human race by the gods:

THE LETTER OF 1 PETER

The book of 1 Peter is a kind of circular letter

They think the Christians the cause of every public

disaster, of every affliction with which the people

written in the name of the apostle Peter to “the

are visited. If the Tiber rises as high as the city walls,

exiles of the Dispersion” in several of the

if the Nile does not send its waters up over the

provinces of Asia Minor: “Pontus, Galatia,

fields, if the heavens give no rain, if there is an

Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia” (1:1). Before

earthquake, if there is famine or pestilence, straight—

considering the question of whether Simon Peter

way the cry is, “Away with the Christians to the

himself actually wrote this letter, we need to learn

lion!” (Apology 40)

something about its recipients and their situation.

Christians, of course, had to devise ways of

understanding and reacting to the hatred that

The Addressees

confronted them on every side. That is to say, the

The author calls his readers “exiles” (1:1) and

opposition that Christians faced from the rest of

“aliens” (2:11). Most scholars have understood

the world drove them to define themselves against

these to be figurative designations of Christians,

it. Sociologists have long recognized that a social

whose real home is heaven and who are therefore

group often achieves stronger solidarity and inter—

exiles in this world for the time being. Supporting

nal bonds of cohesion when faced with an enemy,

this interpretation are verses where the author

especially one that is powerful and threatening.

indicates that his readers are in exile only for “a

Speaking in the most general terms, the opposi—

while” (1:17) and that their real allegiance is to

tion and persecution that confronted various early

their heavenly calling (1:13).

Christian communities strengthened the commit—

Other scholars, however, have suggested that

ment of their members to one another, as they

the addressees really were exiles and aliens in the

were compelled to face their adversaries together.

communities in which they lived, that is, that they

It also pushed them to explain to themselves the—

were persons who had moved to new communities

ologically why they, the people of God’s special

but were not fully integrated into them. In the

favor, should have to undergo such intense and

Roman world, such “resident aliens” stood on the

cruel suffering.

margins of society, with more legal rights, for

These issues are addressed at length in a num—

example, than slaves but fewer than native-born

ber of the early Christian writings, some of which

citizens (with respect, for instance, to the owner-

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SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 26.2 The Spread of Christianity

Contrary to what many people seem to imagine, the Christian church grew quite slowly in its early years. At the end of the first century, far fewer than 1 percent of the Empire’s population of 60 million was Christian. But the growth was steady. And it was evidently achieved, according to recent studies, not by large evangelistic campaigns and massive conversions, but via close social networking: a person who converted would explain the benefits of the new religion to family members, friends, and colleagues, some few of whom might themselves convert. With a steady growth rate of 40 percent every decade (the approximate rate of growth for the Mormon church today, as it turns out), the small band of Jesus’ followers could become something like 5 percent of the Empire by the end of the third century.

And then, when the Emperor Constantine converted, the numbers rose dramatically, so that by the end of the fourth century, half the empire called itself Christian.

In the early years, what made people decide to give up other forms of worship to accept the Christian God? Older studies claimed that it was because of a widespread spiritual “void”

throughout the empire, that the old gods were no longer considered worthy of worship and Christianity arrived on the scene at just the right moment. Archaeological evidence, though, shows that pagan religions were actually thriving in the second and third centuries, with no sign of weakness or malaise.

Some scholars have argued that it was precisely the pagan opposition to Christianity that, somewhat ironically, led to its growth. The logic is that unlike the widely inclusive pagan religions—none of which insisted on having an exclusive corner on the “truth”— Christianity claimed to be the right and the only right religion, and its adherents were willing to die to prove it. According to this view, such stalwart passion for the faith was attractive to potential converts.

Other scholars have noted that the Christian church provided a much-needed social network for people who were otherwise estranged from society, with local Christian communities gathering together at least weekly, considering members of the group all part of a big family, taking care of one another’s needs, worshipping and enjoying social occasions together—all of which was attractive to outsiders in a world that didn’t provide such intimate social group-ings.

Yet other scholars have pointed out that our earliest accounts suggest that outsiders were drawn to belief in Jesus because of the fabulous tales of his power—not just while he was alive, but in the present. People who prayed through him to the one true God had their prayers answered: the sick were healed, the demon-possessed were exorcized, and even the dead were raised. If the “point” of religion was to secure benefits from the divine, and this religion could provide these benefits better than any other, then no surprise that it would attract increasing numbers of adherents.

Fortunately, one does not need to choose among these theories; they (and possibly others you might think of) may all help explain the early success of Christianity in the Empire.

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ship of property). As is often the case with people

advice; they are also guidelines for avoiding perse—

in our own world who are new in town, especially

cution from suspicious authorities and for putting to

if they are entering a close-knit community whose

shame those who wrongfully cause abuse.

families have been together for a long time, these

outsiders would no doubt have felt a sense of alienation from their social world.

The Context of Persecution

How should we weigh these two options for

Those recipients who were literally resident aliens

understanding the addressees of 1 Peter? On the

would no doubt have been accustomed to feeling

one hand, resident aliens or foreigners would have

ostracized by society at large. These feelings would

been prime candidates for membership in the new

have been assuaged to some extent once they

churches that were being established by the early

joined the Christian community. Here they would

Christians. First Peter may well have been

have found a home for themselves in the “house—

addressed to such persons. They stood on the mar—

hold of God” (4:17). Joining this new family also

gins of society at large but who been welcomed

would have had a downside, however, in the pub—

into a new community of faith in which they

lic opposition that the group evoked.

could enjoy the benefits of warm fellowship and

We have seen that the persecution of Christians

family ties unavailable to them on the outside.

in Bithynia-Pontus during the governorship of

Moreover, this new community was not just any

Pliny erupted at the grassroots level. Corres—

social gathering of like-minded individuals; it was

pondingly, 1 Peter indicates that Christians are

“the household of God” (4:17).

principally opposed by their former colleagues and

At the same time, it is a little difficult to

friends who “are surprised that you no longer join

believe that the author of 1 Peter actually thought

them in the same excesses of dissipation” (4:4).

that resident aliens were the only people who were

That is to say, the Christian converts have caused a

Christians in the churches that he addressed (were

good deal of consternation for those with whom

there no citizens?) or that social outcasts would be

they used to spend their time. There has been a

the only Christians who would be interested in

public outcry, apparently by those who felt aban—

reading his letter. It is probably best, then, not to

doned by their former friends (and spouses?), and it

press the literal meaning of these designations too

may have reached the point of mob violence or

far. Many of his addressees may have been resident

administrative intervention. Thus the author

aliens, but surely not all of them were.

speaks of “the fiery ordeal that is taking place

One thing that we can say with relative certain—

among you” (4:12).

ty about the addressees is that, whether or not they

were foreigners, they were Christian believers

undergoing suffering, and this author is trying to tell

The Author’s Response

them how to deal with it. The word for “suffering”

Persecution often functions to solidify the ties that

occurs more often in this short letter than in any

bind a social group together, giving the members

other book of the New Testament, even more than

of the group a greater sense of cohesion and

in the much longer works of Luke and Acts com—

belonging as they realize they are “all in it togeth—

bined. Even where the author is not talking direct—

er.” Although the author of 1 Peter was obviously

ly about how to handle suffering, he appears to be

not versed in modern sociological theory, he was

speaking about it indirectly. Throughout the letter,

clearly attuned to the social dimensions of suffer—

for example, he urges his readers to live moral lives

ing as they were being experienced in the commu—

so that those on the outside can see that they are

nities that he addressed. One of his goals was to

doing nothing wrong and causing nobody any

keep these communities together, which meant

harm. They are to be obedient slaves, submissive

keeping individual members from leaving as the

wives, and tender husbands, and they are to obey all

pressure from the outside mounted.

governing authority and to be devoted subjects of

He constantly reminds his readers that they

the emperor. These are not simply pieces of moral

acquired a privileged status when they joined

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God’s household; they were specially chosen by

as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to

God, they were “sanctified by the Spirit,” and they

praise those who do right. For it is God’s will that by

were “sprinkled with [Christ’s] blood” (1:2). He

doing right you should silence the ignorance of the

wants them to remember that they have been

foolish” (3:13–15).

brought into this new family by means of a new

The ultimate reward for those who remain

birth (1:3, 23) and that they are now children of

steadfast in suffering will be the salvation that is

God their Father (1:14, 17), having been pur—

soon to come (1:1–3, 9). This author has not

chased by the precious gift of Christ’s blood (1:19).

abandoned the eschatological hope of the earliest

They are the chosen people, set apart from the rest

Christian communities; he embraces it, confident

of the world, belonging to God alone (2:9).

that God will soon bring the believers’ suffering to

Indeed, they are the place of God’s residence, his

an end (4:17; 5:10). Who was this author?

own temple, where sacrifices are made to God; at

the same time they are the holy priests who make

these sacrifices (2:4–9). Clearly these believers are

The Author of 1 Peter

special before God and unique in the world.

The book claims, of course, to be written by Peter,

Indeed, to some extent they are suffering because

the disciple of Jesus, and it suggests that he was

they are so distinct. Outsiders can’t fathom why

writing from the capital of the empire. This is inti—

the members of God’s house behave so differently;

mated at the close of the letter, where the author

and in their ignorance they lash out at what they

says that he has written from “Babylon” (5:13), a

don’t understand (4:3–5). In this they are driven

code word in early Christianity for Rome, the

on by the devil himself, God’s cosmic enemy (5:8).

locus of the evil empire that was opposed to God

Christians, then, should expect to suffer and

(see Rev 17:5; 18:2). Peter has been traditionally

should not be surprised when they do so (4:12), for

associated with Rome as its first bishop (i.e., the

just as Christ suffered, so too must his followers

first Pope; see box 21.1).

(4:13). They must not suffer for doing what is

Many scholars, however, doubt that Peter wrote

wrong, however, but only for doing what is right.

this letter. Virtually the only things that we can say

They are therefore to live moral, upright lives

for certain about the disciple Peter is that he was a

(3:14–17; 4:14–15). Moreover, when they suffer in

lower-class fisherman from Galilee (Mark 1:16)

this way, they must be prepared to defend them—

who was known to have been illiterate (Acts 4:13).

selves by explaining who they are and what they

His native tongue was Aramaic. This letter, on the

stand for: “Always be ready to make your defense

other hand, is written by a highly literate Greek—

to anyone who demands from you an accounting

speaking Christian who is intimately familiar with

for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentle—

the Old Testament in its Greek translation and

ness and reverence” (3:15–16). By making this

with a range of Greek rhetorical constructions. It is

kind of defense, Christians will put their enemies

possible of course, that Peter went back to school

to shame (3:17).

after Jesus’ resurrection, learned Greek, became an

Thus the author of 1 Peter is concerned not only

accomplished writer, mastered the Greek Old

to create solidarity in the Christian communities but

Testament, and moved to Rome before writing this

also, and perhaps primarily, to bring an end to the

letter; but to most scholars, this seems unlikely.

suffering. He makes precisely this point when he

Some have suggested that the letter was actual—

urges his readers to “conduct yourselves honorably

ly produced by Silvanus, who is mentioned in

among the Gentiles, so that though they malign you

5:12. This is certainly possible as well, but one

as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and

might then wonder why Silvanus is named not as

glorify God” (2:11). His injunctions to moral behav—

the author of the letter but only as its scribe (or

ior appear to be designed to win over the skeptical

carrier). Others have thought that Silvanus

(3:1). In a world in which the Christian community

penned the letter as it was dictated by Peter and

was regarded as antisocial, the believers are to

that he put Peter’s rough dictation into a more aes-

“accept the authority of every human institution,

thetically pleasing and rhetorically persuasive style

whether of the emperor as supreme or of governors

of Greek. If so, one would still have difficulty

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# CHAPTER 26

## CHRISTIANS AND PAGANS

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N

GALLIA

RAETIA

I

BLACK SEA

T

HISPANIA

A L Y

MACEDONIA

ACHAEA

SYRIA

M E D I T

GALILEE

E R R A N E A N S E A

Regions Containing

JUDEA

Christian Churches

E G Y P T

0

200

400 miles

0

200

400

600 km

Figure 26.1 The Distribution of Christianity by 300 C.E.

accounting for the detailed interpretations of the

Christian pseudepigraphy, in which a later author

Greek Old Testament—and, indeed, for most of

took the name of Jesus’ closest disciple to lend

the detailed argument—without supposing that

authority to his own views.

Silvanus, rather than Peter, was the real author.

It is difficult to say, however, when the author

I should point out that there are an extraordi—

would have been writing, or even from where and

nary number of pseudonymous writings forged in

to whom. If the letter is indeed associated with Asia

Peter’s name outside of the New Testament. In

Minor, as its prescript suggests, it should probably be

addition to the Gospel of Peter that we have

assigned to the first century, possibly near its end,

already discussed, there are three apocalypses

when persecution was on the rise but the later

attributed to Peter (one of which we will discuss in

church hierarchy with a solitary bishop over each

Chapter 28) several “Acts” of Peter, and other

church had not yet developed. There is no trace of

Petrine letters. In addition, as we will see, scholars

this hierarchy in the letter, where the churches of

are virtually unanimous in thinking that the book

Asia Minor appear to be ruled by groups of “elders”

of 2 Peter within the New Testament is pseudony-

(5:1–4). A hierarchy is in evidence in this region,

mous as well. On balance, then, it is probably best

however, at the beginning of the second century,

to regard 1 Peter as yet another example of

especially in the letters of Ignatius.

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CHRISTIANS SENTENCED

himself was the issue. It may be that his authority

TO DEATH:

as bishop had been challenged by other members

of the church before he left.

THE LETTERS OF IGNATIUS

We do not know exactly what happened during

The letters of Ignatius of Antioch are among the

the persecution that sent Ignatius to Rome. He

most intriguing early Christian writings to be predoes indicate that several other members of the

served from antiquity, in no small measure because

Syrian church had gone before him, apparently

of their unusual historical setting. They are

also to face execution (Ign. Rom. 10:2). It is rea—

addressed to several churches of Asia Minor that

sonable to assume that a local outcry had led to

had sent delegations to meet Ignatius as he passed

the arrest of Christian leaders in Antioch; the sit—

through the region en route to Rome, around the

uation in that case would be somewhat similar to

year 110 C.E. This was no vacation jaunt for

that which arose about the same time under Pliny

Ignatius. Convicted of crimes against the state, he

in Bithynia-Pontus, just north of where Ignatius

was traveling under armed guard to face his death

passed through Asia Minor. Moreover, since

by execution, having been condemned to the wild

Ignatius was sent to the empire’s capital for pun—

beasts of the Roman arena because of his Christian

ishment (possibly to stand trial first), it may be

faith. Far from shuddering in the face of his com—

that he and his predecessors were Roman citizens

ing martyrdom, however, Ignatius embraced it

and so had to receive special treatment, unlike

ecstatically; he looked forward to the opportunity

native citizens of Antioch, who could have been

to be torn apart and devoured for the sake of

put on trial and executed on the spot.

Christ. Ignatius was an intriguing personality, to

Ignatius was accompanied across the land route

put it mildly. He is seen by some modern readers as

from Syria to Rome by a group of soldiers whom he

the ideal Christian martyr and by others as a case

likens to ten wild leopards who behave more cruel—

study in pathology. In any event, his status in early

ly when treated kindly (Ign. Rom. 5:1). News of his

proto-orthodox circles is clear, for some Christians

journey evidently preceded him, since local

of later centuries cited his letters as sacred author—

churches sent representatives to visit him at sever—

ities.

al of his stopping points, possibly to provide him

with supplies. In response to this outpouring on his

behalf, Ignatius wrote letters to the churches in the

The Historical Background

cities of Tralles, Magnesia, Ephesus, Philadelphia,

We know almost nothing about the man Ignatius

and Smyrna. He also wrote a separate letter to the

apart from what can be inferred from his letters.

bishop of one of these churches, Polycarp of

From these we learn that he was the bishop of the

Smyrna, whom we will meet again momentarily, as

church of Antioch, Syria, one of the oldest and

well as a letter to the Christian congregation in

largest of the empire. He was obviously educated

Rome. These letters were obviously written in reland gives some evidence of knowing secular Greek

ative haste by a man in highly unusual circum—

literature (e.g., in Ign. Rom. 4:1). It could be that stances. Several themes recur throughout them.

as a highly literate convert from the upper classes

Ignatius had made inroads into the Christian com-

The Overarching Themes

munity in Antioch and eventually rose to the

position of bishop.

The Church’s Unity.

Ignatius insists that

Ignatius appears to have left the church in a

Christian communities throughout the world be

state of turmoil. He intimates that there had been

unified. That this would be a pressing concern of a

an internal squabble, possibly a struggle for con—

proto-orthodox bishop should come as no surprise

trol, and that the matter had been resolved just

given the widespread diversity of early Christianity

recently. The side that Ignatius himself backed in

that we have repeatedly observed. Indeed, even

the dispute (whatever it was about) had apparent—

Ignatius’s own church in Antioch appears to have

ly won. Some scholars have supposed that Ignatius

been internally divided, possibly over Ignatius’s own



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F P O

Figure 26.2 Mosaic from a villa in North Africa, showing a lion attacking a man. During the persecutions, Christians were sometimes martyred by wild beasts in the arena.

authority as bishop or over the appointment of his

teachings about Jesus that he regarded as false. We

successor once he was gone. From other sources we

have already seen that various New Testament

know that there were Gnostic Christians there and

writers living before Ignatius had different views of

possibly also Jewish Christians with adoptionistic

Jesus. These differences came to be magnified with

views. These various groups may actually have dom—

the passing of time, leading some Christian leaders

inated some of the house churches in town and

to declare that only one of them could be right. In

urged their own “candidates” for the post of local

this struggle over who was right and who was

bishop. If so, then part of the internal struggle of the

wrong, some of the parties insisted that Jesus

community may have involved widely divergent

should be seen as a human being chosen by God

theological perspectives among its leading members.

but not as himself divine. Others claimed that

Jesus was actually God and therefore not a flesh-

The Church’s Purity. If Ignatius had himself expe—

and-blood human being. Still others, including

rienced theological controversy in Antioch, this

Ignatius himself, maintained that both of these

would explain his insistence that the churches of

views were right in what they affirmed but wrong

Asia Minor maintain the “pure” doctrine that had

in what they denied. For this group, Jesus was both

been given them by the apostles, and not depart

human and divine. The resultant view, at least as

from the truth to embrace heretical speculations.

Ignatius himself worked it out, was probably meant

Ignatius is particularly concerned to combat

to sound somewhat paradoxical: Christ was “of

different kinds of christological heresies, that is,

flesh, and yet spiritual, born yet unbegotten, God

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SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 26.3 An Alternative View of Christian Martyrdom

Most of the surviving Christian writings from antiquity take a positive view of Christian martyrdom, urging Christians to go willingly to their deaths for the faith and to endure all the tortures that humans can devise. By doing so, Christians would imitate the Passion of their Lord, Jesus.

But not everyone agreed. We know from the letters of Pliny and the writings of several Christian authors, for example, that there were large-scale defections from the Christian ranks in times of persecution. Indeed, one of these authors, Tertullian, specifically attacks Christian Gnostic groups for opposing martyrdom. These groups tried to persuade their fellow Christians not to be so foolish as to die for their faith. In their view, Christ died so that his followers would not have to do so. For them, anyone who embraced the need for martyrdom in effect denied that Jesus’ death itself was sufficient for salvation (Tertullian Scorpion’s Sting 1). It appears likely that such people urged Christians to perform the necessary sacrifices to the state gods without actually committing apostasy in their hearts, since God after all was concerned with the heart, not with such meaningless actions as tossing a handful of incense on a burning altar.

If there were competing Christian views of martyrdom, why do most of our surviving texts embody only one of them? The proto-orthodox Christians who won the struggle over whose views were right were quite strong in their insistence that Christians should go to their own deaths willingly, in no small measure because this view was closely related to other theological positions that they took. In particular, the physical sufferings of the Christians served to highlight the reality of Christ’s own death, a point of great importance in the debates over docetism and Gnosticism in the second and third centuries. The connection between the virtues of martyrdom and the reality of Christ’s death was already made clear in the writings of Ignatius: For [Christ] suffered all these things on our account that we might be saved. And he truly suffered, just as he truly raised himself, not as some unbelievers say, that he only appeared to suffer. For they are the ones who are only an appearance. . . . For if these things were done by the Lord in appearance only, then also I am bound only in appearance. And why then have I given myself over to death, to fire, to the sword, to the wild beasts? (Ign. Smyr. 2, 4) incarnate, genuine life in the midst of death,

leader who was to guide the church in the way that

sprung from Mary as well as God, first subject to

it ought to go.

suffering then beyond it” (Ign. Eph. 7:2).

For Ignatius, the purity of the church depended

The Church’s Leadership. Even more than the

on this basic confession of faith. Anyone who

Pastoral epistles, the letters of Ignatius stress the

rejected it was to be rejected from the church. But

importance of the church hierarchy in all matters

who was to guarantee that Christians throughout

of doctrine and practice and maintain that the

the world would continue to subscribe to it? Who

bishop is God’s representative on earth, whose rule

was responsible for the purity of the church? The

is law (see box 23.5). No one is permitted to

answer for Ignatius was the single bishop who was

engage in any church activities apart from the

to preside over every Christian community, the

bishop and no one is allowed to gainsay his

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authority. In Ignatius’s words: “It is essential to act

May nothing seen or unseen begrudge me making my

in no way without the bishop” (Ign. Trall. 9:2),

way to Jesus Christ. Come fire, cross, battling with

“You ought to respect him as you respect the

wild beasts, wrenching of bones, mangling of limbs,

authority of God the Father” (Ign. Magn. 3:1), and

crushing of my whole body, cruel tortures of the

“We should regard the bishop as the Lord himself”

devil—only let me get to Jesus Christ. (5:2–3)

(Ign. Eph. 6:1). What better way to bring order out

We would be wrong, though, to write Ignatius

of chaos than to claim that the leaders of the

off as a demented soul who was out of touch with

churches, with whom one happens to agree, have

reality. He was very much in touch with reality; it

been appointed by God himself to run the show.

just happened to be a reality that most other people don’t see. Ignatius’s reality (speaking from his

Ignatius and Christian Persecution

own perspective) was a kingdom that was not of

this world, a kingdom that he wanted to obtain

In some respects, the most interesting of Ignatius’s

with all his heart. The kingdoms of earth meant

writings is the letter to the Romans, where he

nothing to him and were clearly run by the forces

deals explicitly with his upcoming martyrdom. We

of evil. One could escape bondage to these forces

might expect that Ignatius would want to find

by letting them do their worst, by allowing them

some way to avoid having to pay the ultimate

to kill the body so as to free the soul. He believed

price for his faith, if he could do so without com—

that by escaping this world he would attain to

promising his convictions. Ignatius, however, goes

God. Ignatius was thus one of the first in a long

to his death eagerly, longingly. He writes to the

line of Christian martyrs who came to be seen by

Romans in order to urge them not to interfere, for

some of their fellow Christians as people of true

he believes that only by suffering a glorious and

faith because they alone were willing to suffer hor—

bloody martyrdom will he become a true disciple

rible abuses of their bodies for the sake of the king—

of Christ, only by imitating Christ’s own Passion

dom that was not of this world (but see box 26.3).

will he be able to “get to God.”

We lose track of Ignatius after he penned his

Ignatius asks the Roman congregation to “grant

letters, although later Christian sources indicate

me no more than to be a sacrifice to God while

that he did indeed face martyrdom in the Roman

there is an altar at hand” (1:2). He wants them to

amphitheater. For an actual depiction of a martyr

pray for him, not so he might escape his suffering

in the face of death, we have to go elsewhere—but

but so he might embrace it: “Pray that I may have

not too far, since the first full-blown account of a

strength of soul and body so that I may not only

Christian martyr happens to be that of Polycarp,

talk [about martyrdom], but really want it” (3:2).

the bishop of Smyrna to whom Ignatius wrote a

Most of all, he does not want them to interfere in

letter on his way to Rome.

the proceedings: “I plead with you, do not do me an

unseasonable kindness. Let me be fodder for wild

beasts—that is how I can get to God. I am God’s

wheat and I am being ground by the teeth of wild

CHRISTIANS BEFORE

beasts to make a pure loaf for Christ. I would rather

THE TRIBUNAL: THE

that you fawn on the beasts so that they may be my

MARTYRDOM OF POLYCARP

tomb and no scrap of my body be left” (4:1–2).

This longing for death may appear to some modern

Polycarp appears to have been a relatively young

readers to border on the pathological:

man when he was befriended by Ignatius. His martyrdom occurred some forty-five years later, around

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What a thrill I shall have from the wild beasts that

C.E. It is somewhat difficult to gauge his age at

are ready for me! I hope they will make short work of

that time, since at his trial Polycarp claimed to have

me. I shall coax them on to eat me up at once and

served Christ for eighty-six years (Mart. Pol. 9:3). If not to hold off, as sometimes happens, through fear.

he became a Christian at a very young age, he may

And if they are reluctant, I shall force them to it. . . .

thus have been born sometime around 60 or 65 C.E.

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The execution of Polycarp and the events lead—

example, that the only crime Polycarp had coming up to it were recorded by a member of his con—

mitted was siding with the Christians in refusing

gregation in Smyrna, in a letter directed to the

to worship the state gods. In order to be delivered

church in Philomelium in the province of Phrygia

from the sentence of death, all that was required

in Asia Minor. Even though this “martyrology,” or

was to “swear by the fortune of Caesar” (i.e., do

account of a martyrdom, derives from an eyewit—

homage to the emperor’s divine spirit) and to curse

ness’s observation, it cannot be taken as an objec-

“the atheists,” that is, the Christians, who did not

tive report of what happened to the aged bishop

acknowledge the gods and were therefore, in the

(since any historical document will reflect the sub—

eyes of these pagans, “atheists” (literally, “not—

jective views of the person who produced it).

theists,” those who do not accept the gods).

There is, for example, a good deal of artistry in this

Polycarp refused to disavow Christ or his followers

account in that the author goes out of his way to

and so forced the governor to do his duty to the

show that Polycarp’s martyrdom was “conformable

people by having him executed.

to the gospel” (1:1), that is, similar to Jesus’ own

Why would Polycarp not reject his Christian

martyrdom as described in the early Christian tra—

faith, even if just for the moment, in order to avoid

ditions (cf. Ignatius’s desire to suffer like Christ).

a brutal and cruel death? Obviously, we will never

Thus, in the narrative, Polycarp knows in advance

know what Polycarp himself thought of the mat—

how he is to die (5:2), he is betrayed by his own

ter, since he never had the chance to tell us, but

companions (6:2), the police chief in charge of his

the author of the account provides an answer,

arrest is named Herod (6:2), Polycarp refuses to

which is no doubt representative of much

escape arrest but instead prays that “God’s will be

Christian thinking about suffering for the sake of

done” (7:1), he enters the city mounted on a don—

the faith (but see box 26.3). In speaking of “all the

key (8:1), and he is put on trial before the Roman

martyrdoms” that Christians had experienced with

tribunal, who tries to have him released, but is

such boldness (which indicates, of course, that

opposed by the crowds, especially the Jews among

Ignatius and Polycarp were not the only ones

them, who demand Polycarp’s death (chaps. 9–13).

known to have died in this way), the anonymous

In addition to these literary touches, there are

author tells us that

several legendary accretions to the account, particularly in the description of Polycarp’s execution

they despised the tortures of this world, purchasing

itself. The Roman governor condemns Polycarp to

for themselves in the space of one hour the life eter—

death by burning. When the executioners build a

nal. To them the fire of their inhuman tortures was

fire around him, however, he is not touched by the

cold; for they set before their eyes escape from the

blaze; the flames instead form a kind of chamber

fire that is everlasting and never quenched. (2:2–3)

around him. His skin does not burn but takes on

the appearance of baking bread, and it emits not

According to this author, Christian martyrs

the stench of charred flesh but the aroma of pre—

thought of their future glory rather than their precious spices. When his enemies behold this mira—

sent sufferings and were willing to exchange tor—

cle, they order the executioner to pierce him with

ment in the present for ecstasy in the hereafter.

a dagger, but when he does, such a quantity of

Moreover, they recognized the reverse side of this

blood gushes forth that it douses the entire confla—

commitment: to retreat from their Christian faith

gration. A scribe who later copied the story added

to avoid pain now would mean to suffer eternal

an even more miraculous detail: a dove flies out

torment later, in the life to come. Surely it was

from the dagger wound in Polycarp’s side (repre—

better to experience agony for an hour than the

senting his holy spirit?). So died Polycarp, accord—

cruel torments of hell for a million years and

ing to the story, the martyr whom God rewarded in

beyond.

death as much as he did in life.

This view of suffering can tell us something

Despite the obviously fictional touches in the

interesting about the direction in which some

account, there are some very interesting historical

Christians were heading in their thinking. As we

features as well. We are shown by the narrative, for

have seen, from the outset Christians had looked



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# CHAPTER 26

## CHRISTIANS AND PAGANS

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the empire in the second century, it eventually

came to attract converts not only from among the

lower classes but also, occasionally, from the ranks

of those who were wealthier, more powerful, and

more highly educated. The more intellectually oriented Christians of the second century, of course,

were just as prone to persecution for their faith as

were their lower-class associates. Some of them

reacted to the situation by employing their literary

skills to develop intellectual defenses of

Christianity, for example, by writing open letters

to the emperor to urge him to bring an end to the

sporadic persecution of Christians. Some of these

Christian thinkers, including such authors as

Justin in Rome, Tertullian in North Africa, and

Origen in Alexandria, continue to be well known

even today (see Chapter 25). While we cannot

devote a substantial amount of time to this later

apologetic literature in an introduction to the

Figure 26.3 Many Romans believed that the Roman gods

New Testament, we can at the least see how

were responsible for their military and political successes, as Christian thinkers of the second century followed

evident in this silver coin which shows a Roman goddess

the lead of the New Testament writers (e.g., the

crowning the memorialized image of a soldier after a victory.

author of 1 Peter) while developing their ideas in

new directions as they defended themselves

against the charges brought against them.

to the future; for most of them, it was a future to be

The Christian apologists claimed that the

brought soon by Christ, when he came in power at

Christians’ beliefs were superior to anything

his second coming. When this imminent appear—

found in the other religions of the empire and

ance never occurred, many Christians stopped con—

that Christians were altogether innocent of the

cerning themselves with the salvation of this world

charges of immorality and atheism. To show the

and began to reflect on their own salvation from

superiority of Christianity, the apologists argued

this world. For them, the present life was not the

that the religion could not have spread so far and

end of the story; indeed, it was only the beginning.

wide, and with such speed, if the hand of

After this life came eternity, and no one could

Providence had not been behind it. They main—

afford to let the allures and pleasures of this mortal

tained that individual Christians could not dis—

existence interfere with the true ecstasies of the

play such superhuman bravery in the face of death

world to come, which would be granted to those

unless they were supported by the power of God.

who remain faithful to God and to his Christ.

They insisted that Christ could not have miraculously fulfilled prophecies made hundreds of years

before his time in the Hebrew Bible if he himself

CHRISTIANS ON THE

were not divine and if the religion that he found-

DEFENSE: THE LATER

ed did not represent the true interpretation of the

traditions of Israel. Indeed, the apologists claimed

APOLOGETIC LITERATURE

that their religion was superior precisely because

We have seen in our discussions of Acts and 1

it was so ancient, more ancient than the philo—

Peter that Christians who were opposed by their

sophical traditions stemming from Plato (who

non-Christian neighbors and by hostile rulers were

lived 800 years after Moses) and even than the

bound to make a defense, or apology, for their

religious traditions dependent on Homer (who

beliefs and actions. As Christianity spread through

lived 400 years after Moses).

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The antiquity of the Christian religion could

erant. But Christianity was something that many

also be seen, according to the apologists, in the

could not tolerate precisely because, ironically, the fact that other (acceptable) religions of the empire

Christians themselves were perceived to be so stub—

had taken over so many of its important beliefs.

born and intolerant. Unlike followers of other reli—

Thus, belief in a supreme God, in a human as his

gions, many Christians claimed that they knew the

Son, in the Son of God’s virgin birth, in his mira—

one and only way, that they alone had the truth.

cles, resurrection from the dead, and ascent into

Those who accepted this truth would be blessed by

heaven—all of these things had their parallels in

God, those who rejected it did so at their own eter—

Greek mythology. Why should Christians be pun—

nal peril. At the end, believers would be rewarded,

ished for beliefs that others subscribed to as well,

nonbelievers damned. Many Christian people,

especially when Christianity, which was older

especially the proto-orthodox Christians who

than the oldest Greek myths (since it can be found

ended up dominating the religion, believed that

already in the writings of Moses), was the source

theirs was the only God and that anyone who

for these beliefs?

rejected him would suffer the eternal consequences.

Finally, the apologists insisted that even if

These Christians thus urged non-Christians to

pagans decided to rebel against the truth and

live and let live—when it came to their own

reject the true knowledge of God offered by this

Christian beliefs—but these very beliefs consigned

ancient religion they should at least have the

to the flames of hell all those who did not accept

decency to leave it alone. Christians had done

them. This kind of intolerance was intolerable to

nothing to deserve their persecution. Indeed, the

most pagans.

apologists claimed, the charges of disrespect for

The apologists’ request that the government not

Roman authority and the accusations of flagrant

get tangled up in the affairs of religion by persecut—

immorality leveled against the Christians were

ing aberrant cults may also seem reasonable to us,

outrageous and unsubstantiated. Christians were

especially those of us in the United States, where

the “salt of the earth,” the element of society that

there is a constitutional guarantee of the separation

prevented it from crumbling altogether. They were

of church and state. For ancient persons, though,

good citizens and loyal to the state; they were

such a separation was unheard of and nonsensical.

faithful wives, husbands, and slaves; and they were

The gods had made the state great and in response

moral and upright members of their communities,

the state honored the gods. The gods, after all, did

who deserved to be thanked rather than punished.

not ask for much—simply the respect and honor

Furthermore, argued the apologists, it would be in

that was due their name, shown in such simple acts

the authorities’ own best interests to leave the

as the sacrifice of some incense on an altar. Those

Christians in peace, for every attempt to squelch

who refused to make such a sacrifice were obvious—

the religion had failed miserably. As often as

ly obstinate and dangerous—obstinate because so

Christians were persecuted and martyred, other

little was involved and dangerous because the gods

converts flooded in to swell their ranks. To para—

did not take kindly to those who willfully neglect—

phrase Tertullian, “the blood of the martyrs is the

ed their cult, or to the communities that housed

seed of the church” ( Apology 50).

them. To be sure, the gods themselves were toler—

The positions staked out by these Christian

ant, but only up to a point, and once offended, they

apologists may sound completely reasonable to most

knew full well how to exact retribution. For the

of us who live in the Western world that emerged

state not to promote the worship of the gods—

from the victory they ultimately won. To most

indeed, for the state not to insist upon it—would

pagans of the time, however, these Christian argu—

have been to commit social suicide.

ments would have seemed altogether irrelevant. It

It was the task of the Christian apologists to

is not that pagans in the empire were intolerant of

show that this pagan view was wrong. In one inter—

diversity. Quite the contrary, as we have seen, pagan

esting respect, they failed miserably. After the

religions and their devotees, whether from the

conversion of Constantine, the state did not take

lower or upper classes, were as a rule remarkably tol—

the apologists’ advice to get out of the business of

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# CHAPTER 26

## CHRISTIANS AND PAGANS

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religion. The Christian emperors promoted reli—

church and state would prove beneficial to both.

gion just as avidly as the pagan emperors had

And only when this novel idea entered into the

before them, but rather than using the power of

public domain and became a centerpiece of the

the state in support of the Roman gods, they used

constitutional charter of the United States did

it to advance the worship of the Christian God. It

religion and politics come to be seen as two dis—

was not until the Enlightenment that European

crete entities, for the first time in the history of

thinkers came to believe that a separation of

Western civilization.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Elliott, J. H. A Home for the Homeless: A Sociological Exegesis eight accounts of Christian martyrdoms, from eyewit-of 1 Peter, Its Situation, and Strategy. Philadelphia: ness sources of the second to fourth centuries.

Fortress, 1981. A groundbreaking examination of the

communities addressed by 1 Peter from a sociological

Perkins, Judith. The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative

perspective; for advanced students.

Representation in the Early Christian Era. London and New York: Routledge, 1995. A brilliant study of early

Frend, W. H. C. Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early

Christian narratives of suffering, which argues that

Church. Oxford: Blackwell, 1965. The best full-length people like Ignatius embraced pain not because they

study of hostilities against Christians during the first

were pathological, but because there was a shift in how

three centuries of the Common Era.

people in the Greco-Roman world began to see and

portray themselves as suffering bodies.

Lane Fox, Robin. Pagans and Christians. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987. A long but fascinating and often bril-Tugwell, Simon. The Apostolic Fathers. Harrisburg, Pa.: liant discussion of the relationship of pagans and Morehouse, 1990. A clear and straightforward discus—

Christians during the first centuries of Christianity; for

sion of the background and message of the Apostolic

more advanced students.

Fathers, including the epistles of Ignatius; ideal for

beginning students.

Macmullen, Ramsey. Christianizing the Roman Empire A.D.

100–400. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press,

Wilken, Robert. The Christians As the Romans Saw Them.

1984. A concise and insightful discussion of the diffi—

New Haven. Conn.: Yale University Press, 1984. A

culties Christians encountered, the methods they used,

popular study of the largely derogatory views of

and the success they enjoyed in propagating their reli—

Christians held by several Roman authors; particularly

gion throughout the Roman world.

suitable for beginning students.

Musurillo, H., ed. The Acts of the Christian Martyrs. Oxford: Clarendon, 1972. An intriguing collection of twenty-

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# CHAPTER 27

Christians and Christians: James,

the Didache, Polycarp, 1 Clement, Jude, and 2 Peter

Up to this stage in our examination of the general

epistles and their attacks on the secessionists from

problems of the general epistles, we have explored

the community. Indeed, it appears that most of our

two areas of social conflict encountered by the

early Christian authors saw as many enemies

early Christians: those involving non-Christian

inside the church as outside.

Jews and those involving pagans. We have seen

Internal conflicts arose in no small measure

that these areas of conflict affected more than the

because Christianity was so remarkably diverse in

external aspects of Christianity; they were pro—

the first two centuries. From the beginnings of this

foundly related to certain internal dynamics as

religious movement, believers who insisted that

well. The Jewish opposition to Christianity, for

they had a corner on the truth found some of their

example, compelled Christians to engage in acts of

most energetic adversaries among those who also

self-definition as they tried to understand them—

claimed to be Christian but who advanced a dif—

selves in relation to the religion from which they

ferent point of view or promoted a different kind

had emerged and to the people who continued to

of lifestyle. As we have already seen, only one

embrace it. Not all Christians agreed on the self—

basic form of Christianity emerged victorious from

definitions that were devised. Pagan opposition

these conflicts and thereafter declared itself

also forced Christians to attend to their public

“orthodox,” and every major form of modern

image. Church leaders urged their communities to

Christianity—Catholic, Protestant, Eastern

maintain high ethical standards so as to earn the

Orthodox—traces its roots to this victory. Indeed,

respect of those who suspected the group’s motives

the collection of twenty-seven ancient Christian

and activities. Again, not every Christian agreed

writings that became the sacred canon of Scripture

on what these ethical standards should entail.

is itself one of the legacies of this victory. During

We now to turn from these external forms of

the period we are exploring in this study, however,

conflict to controversies that raged within the

no New Testament canon had yet come into

Christian communities themselves. The issues

being, and Christians were by no means in agree—

affect not only the general epistles; we have

ment on some of the most basic questions about

already seen numerous instances of internal

what to believe and how to live.

Christian conflicts in the other writings we have

We can see some of the conflicts at work in

examined. One need only think of Paul’s conflicts

several of the general epistles of the New

with the Judaizing Christians in Galatia or with

Testament as well as in other early Christian writ—

the “superapostles” in Corinth, of the Pastoral

ings that happen to survive from roughly the same

epistles and the problems of false teaching that

period of time. In this chapter we will consider

they were written to address, or of the Johannine

some of these writings, following a sequence based

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# CHAPTER 27

## CHRISTIANS AND CHRISTIANS

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more on the content of these books than on their

There is some question concerning the identity

chronology (precise dates are nearly impossible to

of the book’s author. He gives his name as James,

establish with these writings in any case). As we

which readers over the centuries have taken to

will see, the major internal conflicts of the early

refer to the brother of Jesus, but there is little rea—

Christian movement involved ethics, leadership,

son to think that the author is claiming to be that

and doctrine. These three areas of concern were

particular James. The name was fairly common in

not, of course, mutually exclusive. On the con—

the first century; just within the pages of the New

trary, many early Christians believed that bad

Testament, in addition to the brother of Jesus, we

leaders introduced false teachings that promoted

encounter James the son of Zebedee (Matt 4:21),

immoral activities. We have already seen this

James the son of Alphaeus (Matt 10:3), James the

view reflected in the Pastoral epistles and the let—

son of Mary (Matt 27:56), and James the father of

ters of Ignatius, books that are roughly contempo—

Judas (Luke 6:16). If the author of this epistle was

rary with the works we are about to consider: the

James the brother of Jesus (or was at least claiming

epistle of James, the Didache, the letter of

to be), it is somewhat strange that he never refers

Polycarp to the Philippians, 1 Clement, Jude, and

to any personal knowledge of his brother or of his

2 Peter.

teachings.

The letter that James writes is full of exhortations to his readers, and these strong moral teach-

THE EPISTLE OF JAMES

ings do indeed appear to reflect (though they

never quote) traditions of Jesus’ own teaching. For

Of all of the writings that we will be examining in

instance, believers should not swear oaths, but let

the present chapter, James appears to be the least

their “yes be yes” and their “no be no” (5:12, cf.

concerned with corrupt leaders or false teachings

Matt 5:33–37); loving one’s neighbor fulfills the

infiltrating the community (but see 3:1–3).

Law (2:8, cf. Matt 22:39–40); and those who are

Nonetheless, parts of the letter appear to be direct—

rich should fear the coming judgment (5:1–6, cf.

ed against aberrant notions advanced by

Matt 19:23–24). One of the most striking features

Christians known to the author. In particular, as

of the book, however, is that Jesus himself is

we have already seen in Chapter 22, it is possible

scarcely ever mentioned. Apart from 1:1, the epis—

that some Christians had taken Paul’s doctrine of

tolary opening, and 2:1, the verse quoted above,

justification by faith apart from the works of the

Jesus makes no appearance at all. What is even

Law to mean something that Paul himself did not,

more intriguing is that, apart from these two vers—

namely, that it only mattered what a person

es, almost none of the ideas in the book is unique—

believed, not how he or she lived. James stakes out

ly Christian. The various ethical injunctions have

the opposing position, arguing that true faith will

numerous parallels, for instance, in non-Christian

always be manifest in one’s life, especially in the

Jewish writings, and all of the examples of ethical

ways one treats the poor and the oppressed. To put

behavior are drawn from stories of the Hebrew

it in his own words, “a person is justified by works

Bible (Abraham 2:21, Rahab 2:25, Job 5:11, Elijah

and not by faith alone” (2:24) because “faith with—

5:17) rather than from the life of Jesus or the

out works is dead” (2:26).

activities of his apostles. Even the communities of

The book consists of a series of ethical admoni—

believers that are addressed appear in Jewish

tions to those “who believe in our glorious Lord

guise—they are described as “the twelve tribes in

Jesus Christ” (2:1). It is a letter in form, at least

the Dispersion,” and their place of assembly is lit—

partially: it begins with a prescript that names the

erally called a “synagogue” (2:2).

author and contains a greeting. There is no episto—

For these reasons, some scholars have argued

lary conclusion, however, and the “letter” gives no

that James is a kind of Jewish book of wisdom

indication of a specific occasion. It is instead a col-

(somewhat like the Book of Proverbs but without

lection of pieces of good advice to those who

as many one-liners) with only a thin Christian

“believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ” (2:1).

veneer. According to this opinion, the author took



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F P O

Figure 27.1 The first page of a Coptic copy of The Didache.

over a piece of Jewish writing and “Christianized”

2:14–26). Other recurring themes include the

it by adding a couple of references to Jesus.

importance of controlling one’s “tongue” (i.e.,

Not everyone is persuaded by this point of view,

one’s speech; 1:26; 3:1–12), the danger of riches

however. Many scholars, for example, have

for believers (1:9–11; 4:13–17; 5:1–6), and the

observed that a large number of the admonitions

need to be patient in the midst of suffering (1:2–8,

in James have close parallels in Matthew’s Sermon

12–16; 5:7–11). The author, however, is not con—

on the Mount (see the examples cited above). In

cerned only with what we might call individual

addition, portions of the book relate closely to

ethics. Near the end of the book he turns to

other teachings of Jesus (compare, for instance,

address communal activities within the church as

4:13–15 with Jesus’ parable of the rich fool in Luke

well, giving his readers advice about saying

12:16–21). How then does one account for the

prayers, singing psalms, anointing the sick with

general nature of these admonitions, that is, the

oil, confessing sins, and restoring those who have

fact that most of them are not distinctively

strayed from the faith (5:13–16).

Christian, and for their close similarities to older

traditions about Jesus? It may be that the author

strung together a number of important ethical

THE DIDACHE

admonitions that could be found in a variety of

settings, such as Jewish wisdom literature and tra—

The idea that false teachers and fraudulent

ditions of Jesus’ own teaching, and has applied

Christian leaders were abroad is somewhat more

them to the Christian communities that he is

prominent in a book of the early second century

addressing.

known as The Didache of the Twelve Apostles

James emphasizes that those who have faith

( “didache” literally means “the teaching”). The

need to manifest it in the way they live (1:22–27;

book was virtually unknown until the end of the

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# CHAPTER 27

## CHRISTIANS AND CHRISTIANS

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nineteenth century, when it was discovered in a

ed. As a result, some scholars have maintained that

monastery library in Constantinople. Since then it

this notion of the Two Ways ultimately originated

has made a tremendous impact on our understandin non-Christian Jewish circles. Still, the various

ing of the inner life of the early Christian commu—

authors who incorporate this source into their writ—

nities. Among other things, it ( a) preserves our

ings (Barnabas, the Didache, and several later writ—

earliest account of how the early Christians prac—

ers) were all Christian. Moreover, just as James has

ticed their rituals of baptism and the eucharist, ( b)

a number of parallels to Matthew’s Sermon on the

discloses the kinds of prayers that early Christians

Mount, so too does the Didache—even more, in

said, ( c) indicates the days on which they fasted,

fact, including references to praying for one’s

and ( d) demonstrates the existence of itinerant

enemies, turning the other cheek, and going the

Christian apostles, prophets, and teachers who

extra mile.

roved from town to town, addressing the spiritual

Unlike the “Teaching of the Two Ways,” the

needs of the Christian communities in exchange

second portion of the Didache does not appear to

for daily food and shelter.

be drawn from an earlier source and may well rep—

The first six chapters of the book present a set

resent the anonymous author’s own composition.

of ethical admonitions organized according to the

It is a kind of “church order” in which instructions

doctrine of the “Two Ways,” which we have

are given for various kinds of church activities. For

already seen in the Epistle of Barnabas. Here,

example, Christians are to perform their baptisms

though, rather than being presented as “the Ways

in cold running water (i.e., in an outdoor stream)

of Light and Darkness,” the two ways are said to be

wherever possible, although standing or warm

those “of Life and Death.” The broad similarities

water is permissible where necessary. If none of

to Barnabas have led most scholars to think that

these options is available, water is to be poured

this portion of the writing was drawn from an ear—

over a person’s head three times “in the name of

lier source that was more widely available to vari—

the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” (chap. 7).

ous Christian authors.

Christians are to fast twice a week, on

In many respects, the “Way of Life” is more

Wednesdays and Fridays (8:1), not on Mondays

interesting than the “Way of Death.” At least the

and Thursdays since that is when “the hypocrites,”

author devotes considerably more space to it—all

presumably non-Christian Jews (cf. Matt

of chapters 1–4, as opposed to merely chapter 5.

6:16–18), do so. Nor are they to pray “like the

Many of the moral exhortations are reminiscent of

hypocrites,” but they should repeat the Lord’s

James: a Christian’s words are to be backed up by

prayer three times a day (8:2–3; see box 27.1).

actions (2:5; cf. James 2:14–26); jealousy and

When they celebrate the Eucharist they are first to

anger are to be avoided, since they lead to murder

bless the cup with a prayer that the author pro-

(3:2; cf. James 4:1–2); believers should associate

vides and then to bless the broken bread, with

with the humble and upright rather than the high

another set prayer (9:1–4). This way of celebrating

and mighty (3:8; cf. James 2:5–7); and Christians

the Lord’s Supper by starting with the cup and

are not to show favoritism or to turn their backs on

ending with the bread has long puzzled scholars,

the needy (4:3; cf. James 2:1–4) but instead to

since the typical practice of the early Christians

share their goods with one another (4:8; cf. James

appears to be reflected in the New Testament

2:14–16).

accounts of the Last Supper, where Jesus distrib—

The Way of Death is described far more tersely;

utes first the bread and then the cup (e.g., see

it involves “murders, adulteries, lusts, fornications,

Mark 14:22–25).

thefts, idolatries . . . deceit, arrogance, malice, stub—

The Didache continues by giving extended

bornness, greediness, filthy talk, jealousy, audacity,

instructions concerning what to do with the trav—

haughtiness,” and so on (5:1). Once again, the

eling apostles, teachers, and prophets who arrive

exhortations are not uniquely Christian, in that

in town to minister to the community (chaps.

other moralists of the Greco-Roman world agreed

11–13). These three categories of persons appear

that such activities and attitudes were to be avoid—

to overlap. Evidently, problems had arisen because

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THE NEW TESTAMENT: A HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 27.1 The Development of the Lord's Prayer

The Lord’s Prayer is not found in the Gospels of Mark or John. Luke appears to represent the oldest surviving form of the prayer, possibly the form that was original to Q. Matthew’s Gospel expands this version by adding some additional petitions. One of the many intriguing features of the Didache is that it also presents the Lord’s Prayer, but in a slightly different form from what can be found in either of the canonical Gospels. Interestingly, of the three extant versions, the Didache’s is closest to the form of the prayer familiar to most Christians today.

Consider first the versions in Luke (Q) and Matthew, side by side: Luke 11:2–4

Matthew 6:9–13

Father, hallowed be your name.

Our Father, who is in heaven, hallowed be

your name.

Let your kingdom come.

Let your kingdom come.

Let your will be done, even on earth as it is

in heaven.

Give us our daily bread every day.

Give us today our daily bread.

And forgive us our sins, for we our—

And forgive our debts, as we have forgiven

selves have forgiven everyone who is

those who are our debtors.

indebted to us.

And do not lead us into temptation.

And do not lead us into temptation, but

deliver us from evil.

The Didache agrees almost word for word with Matthew’s form of the prayer but tacks on the conclusion “For yours is the power and glory forever.” Later scribes who copied Matthew’s Gospel supplied a similar ending but added several more words to form the familiar conclusion “For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever, amen.”

some itinerant Christians were scoundrels who

“first-fruits” of the community’s wine, harvest, and

had become traveling preachers solely for financial

livestock, as if they were its chief priests (13:1–3).

gain. For this reason, the author insists that visitIn addition, the Christian communities are to

ing prophets not be allowed to have more than

elect bishops and deacons from among their own

two days’ room and board at the community’s

ranks to run the affairs of the church (15:1–2).

expense, and that they be considered false if they

The concluding chapter of the book provides a

demand money while uttering a pronouncement

kind of apocalyptic discourse, an exhortation to be

from God. Moreover, any wandering prophets who

ready for the imminent end of the world which

disagree with the “doctrines” expressed in this

will be brought by “the Lord coming on the clouds

document, or who fail to practice what they

of heaven” (16:7). Given its loose connection

preach, are to be rejected as false (11:1–2, 10).

with what precedes it, this chapter may have been

The Didache finally gives instructions concern—

tacked on to the Didache at a later date.

ing wandering prophets who decide to settle down

What is the date of the earlier portion of the

within the community. True prophets are to be

book (chaps. 1–15)? Scholars have debated the

treated with the highest honor and offered the

issue for as long as they have known of the docu-

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# CHAPTER 27

## CHRISTIANS AND CHRISTIANS

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ment’s existence. Part of the dispute centers around

POLYCARP’S LETTER

the question of the book’s unity, that is, whether or

TO THE PHILIPPIANS

not its different parts derived from different times

and places and were combined by someone living

Problems of morality and church structure are also

later. Recent scholars tend to think that the book

evidenced in a writing whose historical circum—

was produced by a single author on the basis of ear—

stances are somewhat clearer to us and whose

lier sources at his disposal. Its final production may

author we have already had occasion to meet. This

date to around 100 C.E. One reason for choosing

is the letter written to the church of Philippi by the

some such date is that the document appears to pre—

Bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp, the friend of Ignatius,

suppose Christian communities that are not yet

who like him came to be martyred on behalf of his

highly structured, unlike the proto-orthodox com—

Christian faith (see Chapter 26 above). You will

munities that we know about from later in the sec—

recall that Polycarp was himself the recipient of a

ond century. Moreover, the author knows a wide

letter from Ignatius around 110 C.E., some forty—

range of earlier Christian traditions such as those

five years or so before his own death. Soon after he

embodied in the Sermon on the Mount, and it

received this letter, he wrote to the Philippian

appears that his community, somewhat like

Christians, evidently in response to their requests

Matthew’s, held views that were widespread in

on several matters (Pol. Phil. 3:1).

Judaism even though it rejected Judaism as it was

One of the things the Philippians had request—

currently practiced (thus the references to the “hyp—

ed was a copy of “the letters of Ignatius, those he

ocrites”; cf. Matthew 23). It appears then that the

sent to us [in Smyrna] and any others which we

document dates from a time when a variety of

had by us” (13:2). Polycarp complied with this

Christian traditions, possibly even Matthew itself,

request, sending his own epistle as a kind of cover

were in circulation—that is, sometime after the

letter for the collection. The collection itself

middle third of the first century. Yet it was appar—

would have included the two letters Ignatius wrote

ently produced before the mid second century,

from Troas to the Smyrneans and their bishop, and

when the proto-orthodox churches had developed

possibly those that he had earlier written while he

their rigid form of structure.

was actually staying with them in Smyrna:

As for the inner life of the congregation(s) that

Ephesians, Magnesians, Trallians, and Romans.

the author addresses, it appears that they are in the

Whether it also included the letter to the

process of developing a strict ethical code (or at

Philadelphians (written from Troas) or any of

least that he hopes they are) and establishing the

Ignatius’s other writings is something that we will

most important early Christian sacraments and

probably never know.

ceremonial practices (baptism, eucharist, set

Polycarp indicates that both Ignatius and the

prayers, and days of fasting). They are also experi—

Philippians had requested that he, or one of his

encing both the benefits and problems of wander—

representatives, take letters to the Christian

ing Christian “authorities,” some of whom provide

church in Syria (13:1). This was the church over

useful guidance for the communities while others

which Ignatius had been bishop prior to his arrest

actively exploit them. In our discussion of the

and which had just recently experienced consider—

Pastoral epistles we saw how charismatic commu—

able internal turmoil, evidently due to an in-house

nities like these ended up solving their problems

fight over who would control the church, possibly

by establishing clerical hierarchies, creedal state—

involving persons with widely disparate theologi—

ments, and canonical authorities. In many ways

cal views. The struggle had ended successfully

the communities of the Didache are moving in this

from Ignatius’s perspective. Churches with leaders

direction themselves, as is evident in the appoint—

who embraced views similar to his were requested

ment of local bishops and deacons, the insistence

to send delegations to Antioch showing their sup—

on conformity to certain views, and the devotion

port. Polycarp announces his plan to go there per—

to certain recognized traditions such as those that

sonally, if the opportunity presents itself (13:1).

at an earlier stage had come to be incorporated in

One of the problems that scholars have had in

the Sermon on the Mount.

understanding Polycarp’s letter is in knowing

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when he wrote it. Parts of the letter suggest that

who accordingly “does not confess that Jesus

Ignatius had just passed through town on his way

Christ has come in the flesh” (7:1).

to Rome. Thus, for example, Polycarp asks the

Somewhat less opaque is the problem involving

Philippians for any news that they have heard

the ethical misconduct of the Philippian elder, a

about him (13:2). But earlier in the letter Polycarp

man named Valens, who along with his wife had

seems to know that Ignatius has already met his

evidently embezzled funds from the church and

death by martyrdom (9:1). Some scholars have

been caught red-handed (chap. 11). The

proposed, on these grounds, that chapters 13–14

Philippians asked Polycarp’s advice in the matter

represent part of a letter written around 110 C.E.,

and he willingly gives it. He states that the inci—

soon after Polycarp had seen Ignatius, but that the

dent should be a lesson to them not to crave

earlier chapters derive from a letter written some

worldly goods. With respect to the offending cou—

twenty-five years later on the occasion of problems

ple themselves, Polycarp advises that they be

that had arisen in the church of Philippi. As hap—

allowed to repent and return to the good graces of

pened with Paul’s letters to the Philippians,

the church. No such kindly treatment is recom—

according to this theory, the letters of Polycarp

mended for the unrepentant false teachers.

were later cut up and pasted together to form one

Apart from these specific issues, Polycarp’s let—

larger letter for broader circulation.

ter consists chiefly of general moral exhortations.

Scholars continue to take different sides in this

The Philippians are to love one another and to

debate. The majority today appears to think that

pray for one another and to give alms whenever

when Polycarp refers to Ignatius as a martyr for the

possible, their wives are to love their husbands and

faith in chapter 9, he is indicating what he knows

to educate their children in the fear of God, their

is going to happen once his friend arrives in Rome.

widows are to be discreet and devoted to prayer,

If this is the case, then the letter as a whole would

their deacons are to be moral and upright, their

not necessarily have been a composite piece but

younger men are to avoid passions of the flesh, and

could have been penned at one time, fairly early in

so on. Many readers of the letter have found these

the second century.

guidelines somewhat uninspiring, or at least

In any event, whether it was written around the

uncreative. Indeed, Polycarp devotes almost the

year 110 or some time later, it is clear that the let—

entire letter to quoting or alluding to other early

ter was composed in part because Polycarp felt

Christian authorities. Rather than formulating

constrained to address the serious internal prob—

views of his own, he has produced a kind of pas—

lems that the Philippian church was experiencing,

tiche of earlier traditions.

problems involving both the ethical misconduct of

This circumstance in itself, however, is of con—

one of its elders and the appearance of false teach—

siderable interest to the historian of early

ers. The problem with the false teachers is some—

Christianity. In this short letter of only about five

what elusive, but it appears that some members of

pages in English translation, there are well over

the Philippian congregation, perhaps outsiders

100 quotations of and allusions to other authors.

who came into their midst, had begun to proclaim

Moreover, only about 10 percent of these are

a docetic kind of Christology similar to that coun—

drawn from the pages of the Jewish Scriptures,

tered in the letters of Ignatius himself and, from

writings that Polycarp frankly confesses not to

roughly the same time, in the Johannine epistles.

know very well (12:1). He does, however, claim to

This much, at least, can be inferred from

know the letters of Paul (3:2; 11:2–3), and indeed

Polycarp’s castigation of someone whom he calls

a number of his quotations are drawn from letters

“the firstborn of Satan.” This was an epithet that

ascribed to the apostle, including the Pastoral epis—

Polycarp later used specifically against the docetist

tles and Hebrews. In addition, Polycarp displays

Marcion, according to the testimony of his own

considerable knowledge of the traditions that are

student, the proto-orthodox church father

embedded in the Synoptic Gospels, Acts, and 1

Irenaeus. The person Polycarp attacks in his letter

Peter (see box 27.2).

to the Philippians is an “antichrist” who denies

In short, despite the fact that he was writing so

that there will be a resurrection of the flesh and

early in the second century, Polycarp evidences

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SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 27.2 Polycarp and the Early Christian Tradition

To get an idea of how thoroughly immersed Polycarp was in the Christian tradition, consider the following passage drawn from the fifth chapter of his letter to the Philippians. I have placed possible echoes and citations of earlier Christian writings in parentheses.

Knowing, then, that God is not mocked (Gal 6:7), we ought to walk worthily (Phil 1:27) of his commandment and glory. Likewise let deacons be blameless before his righteousness as servants of God and Christ, and not of humans; let them not be slanderers, or double-tongued (1 Tim 3:8), or lovers of money (1 Tim 3:3), but let them be temperate in all things, compassionate, careful, walking according to the truth of the Lord, who became the servant of all (Mark 9:35). For if we are pleasing to him in the present world, we will receive also the world that is coming, just as he promised us to raise us from the dead (John 5:21), and that if we conduct ourselves worthily of him, we will also reign with him (2

Tim 2:12) . . . for it is a good thing to be cut off from the desires that are in this world, because every desire wages war against the Spirit (1 Pet 2:11), and neither the sexually immoral nor the effeminate nor men who have sex with men will inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9–10).

Here within a half page of text Polycarp repeats phrases found in eight different books that eventually became part of the New Testament. It appears that by the early second century earlier Christian writings had already begun to mold the thoughts and views of proto-orthodox church leaders.

precisely the concerns that will come to dominate

schism in the church of Corinth. Since the second

proto-orthodox authors of the later second and

century, the letter has been attributed to a man

third centuries, who engaged in the internecine

named Clement, thought to be the third bishop of

conflicts of their communities and who subscribed

the church in Rome. The letter itself, however,

to positions that later came to be dominant

never mentions Clement; it claims to have been

throughout the church at large. He urges an

produced by “the church of God, living in exile in

upright church hierarchy (with respect to the

Rome, to the church of God, exiled in Corinth”

elder Valens), appeals to a doctrinally pure creed

(1:1). That is to say, it was a letter from the Roman

(with respect to the docetists), and uses earlier

Christian community to the Corinthian church.

Christian traditions and writings as authoritative

Since the letter was presumably not compiled as a

for guiding the ongoing life of the church.

kind of committee project, however, its actual

author may well have been the leader of the

Roman church.

Unlike most of the other books that we are

1 CLEMENT

considering in this chapter, 1 Clement provides

some concrete clues concerning the time of its

Concerns for the leadership of the church are even

writing. Its author speaks of the Corinthian

more central in the epistle known as 1 Clement, a

church as “ancient” (47:6) and yet maintains that

letter whose single-minded purpose is to address

there are still church leaders throughout the world

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who were hand-picked by the apostles (chap. 44).

The letter gives no concrete information con—

Taken together these comments may indicate that

cerning who the new leaders were or what they

the author is living sometime near the end of the

stood for. We do not know, for example, whether

first century. Corroborating evidence may be

they embraced theological positions that Clement

found in the author’s reference to the martyrdoms

found to be untenable, whether they were people

of both Peter and Paul as having taken place dur—

whom Clement himself simply didn’t like or

ing an earlier persecution in the city in “our own

admire, or whether Christian leaders in Rome

time” (chap. 5; they are generally thought to have

opposed a change of church leadership on general

been executed during the reign of Nero) and in his

principle, perhaps out of fear that if such things

indication that hostilities against the Christians

could happen abroad, they could happen at home

have recently been renewed (1:1; 7:1). For many

as well. Whatever the real historical situation, 1

scholars, these references suggest a time of compo-

Clement states firmly its primary guideline for

sition sometime around the year 95 or 96, when

church governance, a guideline that is imbued

the emperor Domitian is thought to have engaged

with divine authority and backed by the words of

in some local persecution of Christians, although

sacred Scripture. The leaders of the Christian

hard evidence of this persecution is scanty.

churches have been appointed by the apostles,

A later author living in Corinth, a proto-ortho—

who were chosen by Christ, who was sent from

dox Christian named Dionysius, indicates that 1

God. Anyone who deposes these leaders is there-

Clement was used as Scripture by the Corinthian

fore in rebellion against God (chaps. 42–44).

church around 170 C.E. Moreover, other evidence

These chapters of 1 Clement provide one of the

suggests that the book was sometimes considered

earliest surviving expressions of the notion of “aposto be a part of the “New” Testament in some

tolic succession,” which later came to play such a

regions of the church. It appears, then, that the

significant role in the theological controversies of

book was written near the end of the first century,

the second century. We have already seen that

that it was an immediate success in Corinth (at

proto-orthodox Christians used the church hierar—

least among some of the Christians there), and

chy as a way of controlling theological deviation in

that it was then distributed to other parts of the

their congregations, but the proto-orthodox bish—

Christian world where it was also read with favor.

ops, elders, and deacons were only as effective as

The author (whom I will continue to call

their offices were stable. If there was considerable

Clement for the sake of convenience) has learned

and repeated turnover in the offices held by the

of an “abominable and unholy schism” in the

church leaders, as happens today, for example, in

Corinthian church (1:1). Evidently the elders of

the political arena, then there could be no guaran—

the church had been forcibly deposed from their

tee of a stable agenda and unified outlook—the sine

office, and others had taken their places (3:2–4).

qua non for proto-orthodox Christians wanting to

We are not told how, exactly, the coup had been

establish their form of belief and practice as domi—

staged, that is, whether there had been (a) an actu—

nant throughout Christendom.

al act of violence (which seems unlikely, since the

This is not, however, the argument that the

issue was church leadership, not military or civil

author of 1 Clement uses to castigate those who

government), (b) an election of leaders which the

have taken over the leadership of the church in

former officers lost, (c) the appearance of charis—

Corinth. Instead, he appeals to Scripture to show

matic figures in the church who simply won over

that throughout the history of the people of God,

the hearts and minds of the congregation and

envy and strife have always been promoted by sin—

thereby assumed de facto positions of authority, or

ners who are opposed to the righteous. Thus he

(d) something else. What is clear is that the church

maligns the actions of the Corinthian “usurpers”

in Rome found the circumstance altogether unset—

by citing examples of jealousy and rivalry all the

tling and wrote a relatively long letter to rectify the

way from Cain and Abel up to his own day. He

situation to its own satisfaction, somewhat as Paul

also appeals to the words of the prophets to show

himself had done some forty years earlier.

that God opposes those who exalt themselves over

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the ones whom he has chosen. Furthermore, this

that because of one or two individuals the solid and

author does not restrict his citations to the words

ancient Corinthian Church is in revolt against its

of the Jewish Scripture but applies the teachings of

presbyters. . . . (47:6)

Jesus and the writings of his apostles to the con—

You who are responsible for the revolt must submit

temporary situation as well (e.g., chaps. 12, 46).

to the presbyters. You must humble your hearts and

For him, these are just as authoritative as the Old

be disciplined so that you repent. You must learn

Testament. Here we are on the way to having

obedience, and be done with your proud boasting

uniquely Christian authorities—eventually,

and curb your arrogant tongues. For it is better for

Christian writings—serve as the ultimate arbiters

you to have an insignificant yet creditable place in

over all matters of faith and practice.

Christ’s flock than to appear eminent and be exclud—

Toward the end of his letter, Clement offers

ed from Christ’s hope. (57:1–2)

some practical advice for dealing with the leader—

We cannot know for certain how well this let—

ship crisis. What has happened in the church at

ter to the Corinthians was first received. No doubt

Corinth is a disgrace, and those responsible must

the former leaders of the church (friends of the

repent and return the leadership to those who for—

leaders in Rome?) welcomed it with open arms,

merly possessed it:

whereas those who had taken over their positions

of authority found it more than a little discomfit—

It is disgraceful, exceedingly disgraceful, and unwor—

ing. It is possible that they relinquished control of

thy of your Christian upbringing, to have it reported

the church, but it is also possible that, even if they

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 27.3 Other Problems in the Corinthian Church

Many of the problems that the apostle Paul addressed in 1 Corinthians recur in the letter of 1 Clement, including ( a) divisions in the congregation (chaps. 3, 42–44), ( b) conflicts resulting from the pride and condescending attitude of some of the members (chaps. 13–23), and, possibly ( c) instances of flagrant immorality (chap. 30). There is some question, though, whether these are actually recurring problems in the church or whether the author of 1 Clement has been influenced in what to write by 1 Corinthians, a letter that he knew and sometimes quoted (see 1 Clement 47).

What is particularly interesting is that there still appear to be some members of the Corinthian church who deny the future resurrection of the dead. The author addresses this issue directly but in a manner very different from Paul. For him, the certainty of the future resurrection is proven by the course of nature itself: just as day and night follow one another without end, so life must follow death, which came from life (chap. 24). (Why this reasoning doesn’t also suggest that those who are raised from the dead will then have to die again is something the author never addresses.) Most intriguing of all, the author finds proof of the resurrection in the legend of the Phoenix, a bird that reportedly lives for 500 years (chap. 25). Near the time of its death the Phoenix makes its own sepulchre, into which it crawls and dies. But from its putrifying flesh is born a worm, which eventually grows and puts forth wings and then returns to the temple of Egypt, where it had lived in its previous life, to begin once again the cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth. Thus, claims the author of 1 Clement, God reveals “the greatness of his promise” of resurrected life through the ongoing existence of a bird.

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did so, the infighting did not come to an immedi—

peasant. Indeed, we learn from sources dating to

ate end. What is clear is that the Roman position

the second century that Jude’s family did not attain

eventually became more widely known and appre—

social prominence and were therefore, presumably,

ciated: the leaders of the churches were thought to

not well educated: his grandsons were known to be

owe their position to God himself and could not

uneducated peasant farmers. The author of this

be opposed without opposing God.

book, on the other hand, was someone who was

A number of scholars have found it significant

well trained in Greek and was conversant with a

that this view was first promoted, so far as we can

wide range of apocryphal Jewish literature. He

tell, within the church of Rome, whose bishop was

quotes, for example, from a lost apocryphal account

eventually to assume a position of special promi—

of the angelic battle over Moses’ body (v. 9), and

nence within all of Christendom. Here in 1

he cites the book of 1 Enoch as Scripture (v. 14).

Clement the Roman leaders exert influence not

Thus, it does not appear to be likely that Jesus’ own

only over their own congregation but also over a

brother wrote the book.

congregation located far away. This Roman influ—

The book is concerned with false teachers who

ence made itself increasingly felt with the passage

have invaded the Christian community:

of time, until the Roman bishop came to be considered the father of all the bishops and thus the

Beloved. . . I find it necessary to write and appeal to

leader of the entire Christian church. It is proba—

you to contend for the faith that was once for all

bly no accident that the form of Christianity that

entrusted to the saints. For certain intruders have

stolen in among you, people who long ago were

eventually established itself as orthodox in the

designated for this condemnation as ungodly, who

third and fourth centuries proceeded out of Rome,

pervert the grace of our God into licentiousness

and that the universal church came to be known

and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

as the Roman Catholic Church, with the bishop of

(vv. 3–4)

that church, the Pope, serving as the head of the

church throughout the world.

It is hard to know how Christian leaders can be

thought to have denied Christ, but it may be that,

from the author’s perspective, anyone who understands the religion in a way that is significantly

JUDE

different from the way he himself does is liable to

this charge. We saw a similar state of affairs in our

This concern for the leadership of the church is

study of 1 John. Also, just as the secessionists from

addressed in yet another way in a much shorter let—

the Johannine community were thought to have

ter that did have the good fortune to be included in

engaged in immoral and illegal activities because

the New Testament, perhaps because the author

of their false beliefs, so the opponents of Jude are

claimed to be someone of high standing in early

chiefly maligned for their licentious and perverse

Christian circles. The writer of this one-page epis—

lifestyles. They are “like irrational animals” (v.

tle names himself Jude (literally, Judas), the “broth—

10), they engage in “deeds of ungodliness” (v. 15),

er of James” (v. 1). As you know, there were early

they are “grumblers and malcontents, they indulge

traditions that two of Jesus’ own brothers were

their own lusts, and they are bombastic in speech”

named Jude and James (Mark 6:3). This author,

(v. 16). The author likens them to the children of

then, is apparently claiming to be related to the

Israel, who after escaping from Egypt reveled in

great leader of the Jerusalem church, James, and

wanton acts of disbelief (adulteries and idolatries),

therefore to be a family relation of Jesus himself.

and to the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah,

The letter itself gives scant reason for accepting

who “indulged in sexual immorality and pursued

this ascription, and many critical scholars think

unnatural lust” (vv. 5–7).

that it is another example of early Christian

From the historians’ point of view it is to be

pseudepigraphy. Jesus’ brother Jude, of course,

regretted that the author never tells us what these

would have been a lower-class Aramaic-speaking

people actually stood for, that is, what they taught

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and how they lived. Most of the letter is simply

this letter has been taken over from the book of

filled with invective and name-calling. The

Jude and incorporated into chapter 2. If Jude can

author’s enemies are “waterless clouds carried

be dated near the end of the first century, 2 Peter

along by the winds; autumn trees without fruit,

must be somewhat later. Therefore, it could not

twice dead, uprooted; wild waves of the sea, cast—

have been penned by Jesus’ companion Peter, who

ing up the foam of their own shame” (vv. 12–13).

was evidently martyred in Rome sometime around

It is clear, however, the author feels that his

64 C.E. during the reign of Emperor Nero (see dis—

community is in jeopardy from these “worldly peo—

cussion of 1 Clement above).

ple, devoid of the Spirit, who are causing divi—

This letter, then, should probably be included

sions” (v. 19). These false teachers need to realize

among the large number of pseudonymous writ—

what happens to those who oppose God and lead

ings in the name of Peter, which include the

his people astray. In the past those who have

Gospel of Peter that we considered in Chapter 12

caused disturbances and promoted immorality

and the Apocalypse of Peter that we will examine

among God’s people have been confronted with

in Chapter 28. In this connection, it is striking

God’s judgment. The offenders must take heed

that the letter was not widely accepted as Peter’s,

and repent, lest they become like the inhabitants

or even known to exist, for most of the first three

of Sodom and Gomorah, serving “as an example

Christian centuries. There is not a solitary refer—

by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire” (v. 7).

ence to it until around 220 C.E., and it does not

We do not know exactly when the pseudony—

appear to have been widely circulated for at least

mous author produced his account; most modern

another century after that. It was no doubt

scholars date it somewhere near the end of the

included in the canon because the orthodox

first century. We do know that the book was used

fathers of the fourth century accepted the claims

as a source some years later by another pseudony—

of its author to be Peter, and because it served

mous author, who produced a similarly vitriolic

their purposes in opposing those who promote

attack on false teachers who promoted immoral

false teaching.

behavior among the Christians. This author

The author goes out of his way to insist that he

wrote in the name of the apostle Peter and pro—

is none other than Jesus’ disciple—a case, perhaps,

duced a letter that was in all likelihood the final

of protesting too much. Not only does he begin by

book of the New Testament to be written, the

naming himself “Simeon Peter, a servant and apos—

epistle of 2 Peter.

tle of Jesus Christ” (1:1), but he proceeds to

recount his own personal experience with Jesus on

the Mount of Transfiguration, where he beheld for

2 PETER

himself Jesus’ divine glory and heard God’s affirmation of his Son in the voice from heaven (1:17;

For a variety of reasons, there is less debate about

as we will see, the pseudonymous author of the

the authorship of 2 Peter than any other pseude-

Apocalypse of Peter also appeals to his “memory” of

pigraphon in the New Testament. The vast major—

this event). He assures his reader that he was there

ity of critical scholars agree that whoever wrote

to see these things: “We ourselves heard this voice

the book, it was not Jesus’ disciple Simon Peter. As

come from heaven, while we were with him on the

was the case with 1 Peter, this author is a relative—

holy mountain” (1:18). Why does he choose to

ly sophisticated and literate Greek-speaking

parade his credentials in this manner? It is proba—

Christian, not an Aramaic-speaking Jewish peas—

bly to convince his readers that he has no need of

ant. At the same time, the writing style of the

“cleverly devised myths” to understand Jesus

book is so radically different from that of 1 Peter

(1:16) since he knows about him firsthand.

that linguists are virtually unanimous in thinking

This reference to myths may intimate some—

that if Simon Peter was responsible for producing

thing about the author’s opponents. They may be

the former book, he could not have written this

early Gnostics, who use their creative mythologies

one. Even more to the point, a major portion of

and genealogies to support their “unorthodox”

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SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 27.4 Peter, the Smoked Tuna, and the Flying Heretic

Among the pseudepigrapha connected with the apostle Peter, none is more interesting than the apocryphal Acts of Peter, a document that details Peter’s various confrontations with the heretical magician Simon Magus (cf. Acts 8:14–24). The narrative shows how Peter out-performs the magician by invoking the power of God. Consider the following entertaining account, in which Peter proves the divine authorization of his message by raising a dead tunafish back to life: But Peter turned round and saw a smoked tunny-fish hanging in a window; and he took it and said to the people, “If you now see this swimming in the water like a fish, will you be able to believe in him whom I preach?” And they all said with one accord, “Indeed we will believe you!” Now there was a fish-pond near by; so he said, “In thy name, Jesus Christ, in which they still fail to believe” [he said to the tunny] “in the presence of all these be alive and swim like a fish!” And he threw the tunny into the pond, and it came alive and began to swim.

And the people saw the fish swimming; and he made it do so not merely for that hour, or it might have been called a delusion, but he made it go on swimming, so that it attracted crowds from all sides and showed that the tunny had become a live fish; so much so that some of the people threw in bread for it, and it ate it all up. And when they saw this, a great number followed him and believed in the Lord. (Acts of Peter 5) In the ultimate showdown between the heretical sorcerer and the man of God, Simon the magician uses his powers to leap into the air and fly like a bird over the temples and hills of Rome. Not to be outdone, Peter calls upon God to smite Simon in midair; God complies, much to the magician’s dismay and demise. Unprepared for a crash landing, he plunges to earth and breaks his leg in three places. Seeing what has happened, the crowds rush to stone him to death as an evildoer. And so the true apostle of God triumphs over his enemy, the preacher of heresy.

points of view, for the author goes on to attack

as “Scripture”—other indications that the letter

people who provide idiosyncratic interpretations

was written long after the apostle’s death. As we

of Scripture—a favorite activity of the Gnostics,

have previously seen, the Gnostics took a particu—

according to the proto-orthodox church fathers:

lar liking to Paul as an authority for their views.

“First of all you must understand this, that no

So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you

prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own

according to the wisdom given him, speaking of this

interpretation” (1:21). Moreover, the author’s

as he does in all his letters. There are some things in

opponents appeal to the writings of the apostle

them hard to understand, which the ignorant and

Paul, which by this time are evidently in circula—

unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do

tion as a collection and are even being considered

the other scriptures. (3:16)

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Unfortunately, the author of 2 Peter does not

ness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the

set forth the actual views of his opponents but

coming of the day of God, because of which the

simply enters into invective against them. Much

heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the

of his attack has simply been borrowed from the

elements will melt with fire” (3:11–12).

epistle of Jude. He sees his opponents as “false

prophets” (2:1) who engage in acts of flagrant

immorality: “They have eyes full of adultery, insa—

tiable for sin. . . . They speak bombastic nonsense,

CONCLUSION: CONFLICTS

and with licentious desires of the flesh they entice

WITHIN THE EARLY

people who have just escaped from those who live

CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

in error” (2:14, 18). Moreover, these persons are

not outsiders but members of the Christian comIn the Christian writings that have survived from

munity who, in the author’s judgment, have gone

the end of the first century and the beginning of

astray to their own destruction:

the second we get some sense of the state of

Christianity at the close of the New Testament

For it would have been better for them never to have

period. The Christian communities were by no

known the way of righteousness than, after knowing

means unified at this time. Different Christian

it, to turn back from the holy commandment that

leaders and teachers were proclaiming different

was passed on to them. It has happened to them

according to the true proverb, “The dog turns back

versions of the faith, and many of them were at

to its own vomit.” (2:21–22)

serious odds with one another. Christians had different views of how to conduct themselves both

One additional piece of information about these

within the Christian community and within soci—

Christian adversaries is that they scoff at the tradi—

ety as a whole. Some Christians were thought to

tional apocalyptic belief that the end of the world is

be engaging in wild, immoral activities and to be

imminent. The author assures his readers that the

promoting such ventures in the church.

prophets and Jesus himself, speaking through the

As historians of the period we should remember

apostles, predicted that “in the last days scoffers will

that we have only one side of almost every story.

come scoffing and indulging their own lusts and say—

There can be no doubt that the “immoral and cor—

ing, ‘Where is the promise of his coming? For ever

rupt heretics” attacked in surviving writings would

since our ancestors died, all things continue as they

have had a lot to say in their own defense. Indeed,

were from the beginning of the creation’ ” (3:3–4).

they did defend their views and attack their proto—

The author goes on to indicate that the end is

orthodox opponents for propagating error, as we have

destined to come. Whereas the world had once

discovered from the Gnostic writings of the Nag

been destroyed by water, it is now being preserved

Hammadi library. Regrettably, almost all of the other

for destruction by fire. Indeed, this end seems to

books produced by advocates of alternative Christian

be slow in coming only for those who measure

perspectives came to be destroyed on order of their

time in human terms. For God, however, “one day

victorious adversaries. Typically, from the ancient

is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are

world, only the writings of the winners survive.

like one day” (3:8)—meaning, one might sup—

The authors who later came to be canonized in

pose, that if the end is still 6,000 years away, it is

the New Testament, some of them claiming to be

still coming “soon.”

apostles, urged their own versions of the faith,

The author emphasizes that the end has been

their own leaders, and their own systems of ethics.

delayed to allow all people adequate time to repent

These authors may not have been in full agree—

and turn to the truth. But the day of judgment is

ment with one another on every point, but most of

nonetheless destined to come, and when it does it

their differences came to be smoothed over when

will appear “like a thief” (3:9). The certainty of this

their books were later collected into a sacred

final day should drive people to live “lives of holi—

canon of Scripture and read and interpreted only

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in light of one another. The proto-orthodox

believers thus set the stage for the battles over

Christians chiefly responsible for this canon of

orthodoxy that were to rage throughout the sec—

Scripture also advocated a church structure that

ond and third centuries, as different Christian

could trace itself back to Jesus and his apostles. In

groups representing different understandings of

their conflicts with aberrant forms of the religion,

the faith strove for converts both from the outside

these late-first-century and early-second-century

(through evangelism) and from within.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Bauckham, Richard. Jude and the Relatives of Jesus in the

Jefford, Clayton, ed. The Didache in Context: Essays on Its Early Church. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990. An

Text, History, and Transmission. Leiden: Brill, 1995.

interesting study that argues, among other things, that

A significant collection of essays that cover every

the epistle of Jude was actually written by Jesus’ own

major aspect of the study of the Didache; for advanced

brother.

students.

Chester, Andrew, and Ralph Martin. The Theology of the

Tugwell, Simon. The Apostolic Fathers. Harrisburg, Pa.: Letters of James, Peter, and Jude. Cambridge:

Morehouse, 1990. A clear and straightforward discus—

Cambridge University Press, 1994. A nice discussion

sion of the background and message of the Apostolic

of the social context and theological perspectives of

Fathers, including the Didache, the epistle of Polycarp, these Catholic epistles.

and 1 Clement; ideal for beginning students.

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# CHAPTER 28

Christians and the Cosmos: The Revelation of John,

The Shepherd of Hermas, and the Apocalypse of Peter

INTRODUCTION: THE END

author of 2 Peter, came to mock the idea that Jesus

OF THE WORLD AND

was soon to return from heaven in judgment.

Nonetheless despite the passing of time and

THE REVELATION OF JOHN

the failure of their hopes to materialize, many

The end of the world was near. So proclaimed

Christians remained firmly committed to this belief.

Jesus, and some years after him, the apostle Paul.

It stood at the heart of the message proclaimed by

And so proclaimed most of the earliest Christians

the apostle Paul some twenty years after Jesus

of whom we have any knowledge. The end of time

himself had died, and by the Gospel of Mark some

had come, God was about to intervene in history;

fifteen years after Paul, by the Gospel of Matthew

Christ was soon to return from heaven in judg—

some fifteen years after Mark, and by 2 Peter and

ment on the earth, and people were to repent and

the Didache some thirty years after Matthew.

prepare for his coming.

The coming of the end was also the fervent

With the passing of time, this message lost its

conviction of a prophet named John, who lived

appeal in some Christian circles. For the end never

near the end of the first century. John was a

did come, and Christians had to reevaluate (or

Christian seer who penned a majestic and awe—

even reject) the earlier traditions that said it

inspiring account of the end of the world, an

would. We have already observed such reevalua—

account that has spawned endless speculation and

tions among some of the early Christian authors.

debate among those who have continued to await

We have noticed, for example, how the Gospel of

the return of Jesus over the intervening nineteen

Luke modifies Jesus’ predictions so that he no

hundred years. John was not the only Jewish or

longer claims that the Son of Man will arrive in his

Christian author to narrate visions of the end of

disciples’ lifetimes. We have also seen that in sev—

the world. Indeed, the kind of book that he wrote

eral later Gospels, such as John and Thomas, Jesus

was quite popular among people looking for the

tells no parables concerning the coming kingdom

heavenly truths that could give meaning to their

of God. We have also observed that among the

earthly realities. But none of the other early apoc—

Christians in Corinth, Jesus’ return and the resur—

alypses has enjoyed nearly the success of the

rection of the dead became heated questions, as

Apocalypse of John. Indeed, the book of

some believers claimed that the divine plan of

Revelation continues to serve many Christians

redemption had already come to completion and

today as a kind of blueprint of events that are still

that they were already experiencing the full bene—

to transpire in the future, when the history of the

fits of salvation. Moreover, we have seen that still

world, as they believe, will be brought to a

other Christians, such as those attacked by the

screeching halt.

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0

100

200 mi.

0

100

200 km

Pergamum

Thyatira

Sardis

Smyrna

Philadelphia

Ephesus

Laodicea

Figure 28.1 The seven churches of Asia Minor addressed in Revelation 2–3.

THE CONTENT AND

chapter 1. The second is undertaken in chapters

STRUCTURE OF

2–3. Christ dictates brief letters to each of the

seven churches of Asia Minor, describing their sit-

THE BOOK OF REVELATION

uations and urging certain courses of action. These

The title of the book comes from its opening

churches are experiencing difficulties: persecu—

words: “The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God

tions, false teachings, and apathy. Christ praises

gave him to show his servants what must soon take

those who have done what is right, promising

place” (Rev 1:1). The revelation, or apocalypse

them a reward, but upbraids those who have fallen

(from the Greek word for “unveiling” or “reveal—

away, threatening them with judgment.

ing”) concerns the end of time; it is given by God

The third task is accomplished in chapters 4–22,

through Jesus and his angel to “his servant John”

which record John’s heavenly vision of the future

(1:1). The author appears to be known to his read—

course of history, down to the end of time. Briefly,

ers, who are identified as Christians of seven

the narrative unfolds as follows. The prophet is

churches in Asia Minor (1:11). He begins to nar—

taken up into heaven through a window in the sky.

rate his visionary experiences by describing his

There he beholds the throne of God, who is eter—

extraordinary encounter with the exalted Christ,

nally worshipped and praised by twenty-four human

the “one like a Son of Man” who walks in the

“elders” and four “living creatures” (angelic beings in

midst of seven golden lampstands (1:12–20).

the shapes of animals; chap. 4). In the hand of the

Christ instructs John to “write what you have

figure on the throne is a scroll sealed with seven

seen, what is, and what is to take place after this”

seals, which cannot be broken except by one who is

(1:19). In other words, he is to ( a) narrate the

found worthy. This scroll records the future of the

vision of Christ that he has just had (“what you

earth, and the prophet weeps when he sees that no

have seen”), ( b) describe the present situation of

one can break its seals; but one of the elders informs

the churches in his day (“what is”), and ( c) record

him that there is one who is worthy. He then sees

his visions of the end of time (“what is to take

next to the throne a “Lamb standing as if it had been

place after this”). The first task is accomplished in

slaughtered” (5:6). The Lamb, of course, is Christ.

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# CHAPTER 28

## CHRISTIANS AND THE COSMOS

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The Lamb takes the scroll from the hand of

Those who have sided with Christ are brought into

God, amidst much praise and adoration from the

the eternal kingdom; those who have aligned them—

twenty-four elders and the four living creatures,

selves with the Devil and his antichrist are taken

and he begins to break its seals (chap. 5). With

away for eternal torment in the lake of fire. The

each broken seal, a major catastrophe strikes the

Devil himself is thrown into the lake, as are finally

earth: war, famine, death. The sixth seal marks the

Hades and Death itself (chap. 20).

climax, a disaster of cosmic proportions: the sun

The prophet then has a vision of the new heav—

turns black, the moon turns red as blood, the stars

en and the new earth that God creates for his peo—

fall from the sky, and the sky itself disappears. One

ple. A new Jerusalem descends from heaven, with

might think that we have come to the end of all

gates made of pearl and streets paved with gold.

things, the destruction of the universe. But we are

This is a beautiful and utopian place where Christ

only in chapter 6.

reigns eternal, where there is no fear or darkness,

The breaking of the seventh seal leads not to a

no pain or suffering or evil or death, a place where

solitary disaster but to a period of silence that is

the good and righteous will dwell forever (chaps.

followed by an entirely new set of seven more dis—

21–22). The prophet ends his book by emphasiz—

asters. Seven angels appear, each with a trumpet.

ing that his vision is true, and that it will come to

As each one blows his trumpet, further devasta—

fulfillment very soon.

tions strike the earth: natural disasters on the land

and sea and in the sky, the appearance of dread

beasts who torture and maim, widespread calamity

and unspeakable suffering (chaps. 8–9). The sev-

THE BOOK

enth trumpet marks the beginning of the end

OF REVELATION FROM

(11:15), the coming of the antichrist and his false

A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

prophet on earth (chaps. 12–13) and the appearance of seven more angels, each with a bowl filled

To most modern readers the Apocalypse of John

with God’s wrath. As the angels pour out their

seems mystical and bizarre, quite unlike anything

bowls upon the earth, further destruction and

else that we read. In part, this explains our con—

agony ensue: loathsome diseases, widespread mis—

tinual fascination with the book—it is so strange,

ery, and death (chaps. 15–16).

so unearthly, that its descriptions cannot simply

The end comes with the destruction of the

have been dreamt up. Its supernatural feel seems to

great “whore of Babylon,” the city ultimately

vindicate its supernatural character.

responsible for the persecution of the saints (chap.

The historian who approaches the book, how—

17). The city is overthrown, to much weeping and

ever, sees it in a somewhat different light, for this

wailing on earth but to much rejoicing in heaven

was not the only book of its kind to be written in

(chaps. 18–19). The defeat of the city is followed

the ancient world, even if it is the only one that

by a final cosmic battle in which Christ, with his

most of us have ever read. Indeed, a number of

heavenly armies, engages the forces of the

other apocalypses were produced by ancient Jews

antichrist aligned against him (19:11–21). Christ

and Christians. These works also offer unworldly

wins a resounding victory. The enemies of God are

accounts of happenings in heaven, bizarre descrip—

completely crushed, and the antichrist and his

tions of supranatural events and transcendent real—

false prophet are thrown into a lake of burning sul—

ities that impinge on the history of our world, and

fur to be tormented forever.

deeply symbolic visions of the end of time that are

Satan himself is then imprisoned in a bottomless

given by God through his angels to a human

pit, while Christ and his saints rule on earth for a

prophet, who writes them down in cryptic and

thousand years. Afterwards, the Devil emerges for a

mysterious narratives filled with emphatic claims

brief time to lead some of the nations astray. Then

that they are true and soon to take place.

comes a final judgment, in which all persons are

Some of these other apocalypses still survive,

raised from the dead and rewarded for their deeds.

and together they make up a distinct genre of liter-

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ature. Thus, far from being unique in its own day,

what later include the noncanonical Jewish works

the Apocalypse of John followed a number of liter—

of 1 Enoch, 2 Baruch, and 4 Ezra, and two impor—

ary conventions that were well known among Jews

tant Christian apocalypses that we will be explor—

and Christians of the ancient world. A historian

ing later in this chapter: The Shepherd of Hermas

who wants to understand this one ancient text,

and the Apocalypse of Peter.

then, will situate it in the context of this related

These apocalypses differ in important ways.

literature and explain its important features in light

Some of their most obvious differences relate to

of the literary conventions of the genre.

whether they were written by Jews or Christians,

since the apocalyptic drama unfolds differently

depending on whether or not Jesus himself is the

key to the future. One of the things that all of these

APOCALYPTIC WORLDVIEWS

books have in common, however, is that they were

AND APOCALYPSE GENRE

evidently written in times of distress and suffering,

whether real or perceived. In large measure, apoca—

Apocalypses were written to convey an apocalyp—

lypses were books that protested the present order

tic agenda. Here it is important to be very clear

of things and the powers that maintained it; these

about our terms. Throughout our discussion I have

powers were seen to be inimical to the ways and

used the term “apocalypticism” to refer to an

people of God. These books invariably show that

ancient Jewish and Christian worldview that

despite the suffering experienced by the people of

maintained that there were two fundamental com—

God, God is ultimately in control and will soon

ponents of reality, good and evil, and that every—

intervene on their behalf. One of the important

thing in the world was aligned on one side or the

purposes of these works, then, is to encourage those

other (God versus the Devil, the angels versus the

who are experiencing the forces of evil to hold on

demons, life versus death, and so on; see Chapter

and keep the faith. Their suffering is not in vain

15 above). This dualistic perspective applied to

and it will not last long, for soon they will be vin—

human history: the present age was seen to be evil,

dicated in the glorious climax of history in which

controlled by the Devil and his forces, whereas the

God will destroy the forces of evil and exalt those

age to come would be good, controlled by God.

who have remained faithful to him.

According to this view, there was to be a cataclysmic break between these ages, when God

would destroy the forces of evil to bring in his

kingdom. At that time there would be a judgment

Apocalypse as a Genre:

of all beings, both living and dead. This judgment

General Description

was imminent.

The various Jewish and Christian apocalypses that

Whereas the term “apocalypticism” refers to

convey this message share a number of literary fea—

this worldview, “apocalypse” refers to a genre of

tures. All of these books are first-person narratives

literature that embodies it. Everyone who wrote a

by prophets who have been granted highly sym—

Jewish or Christian apocalypse was obviously an

bolic visions or dreams. The visions are usually

apocalypticist (i.e., he or she embraced the apoca—

interpreted by a heavenly being who serves as a

lyptic worldview). The reverse, however, is not

mediator. For the most part, the visions serve to

true: not every apocalypticist wrote an apocalypse.

explain the realities of earth from the perspective

Thus, neither John the Baptist nor Jesus nor Paul,

of heaven—realities such as the ultimate meaning

to take three prominent examples, appears to have

of life and the future course of earth’s history.

written a detailed vision of the heavenly realities.

These narratives always embody a triumphal

The first Jewish apocalypticist to do so, to our

movement from the painful existence of life here

knowledge, was the author of Daniel (around 165

below to the glorious life up above or from the

B.C.E.), the second half of which contains several

hardships and sufferings of the present to the vin—

brief apocalypses. Other apocalypses written some—

dication and bliss of the future.

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# CHAPTER 28

## CHRISTIANS AND THE COSMOS

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There are two major kind of ancient apoca—

can help to secure a hearing for one’s views, by

lypses. These are not mutually exclusive cate—

lending a kind of authority to one’s writing that it

gories. As you will see, the book of Revelation has

otherwise could not hope to enjoy. Nowhere is

aspects of each, although some other apocalypses

this kind of authority more important than when

are of only one type or the other:

one is writing a detailed description of heavenly

realities that explain the tragedies and suffering of

1. Heavenly Journeys. In this kind of apocalypse,

earthly life. Such visions of transcendent truth are

the prophet is taken up into heaven and given

obviously not granted to just anybody. It makes

a tour of the heavenly realm by an angelic

sense, then, that authors of apocalypses typically

companion, where he beholds symbols and

claimed to be famous persons of the past who were

events that have earthly implications. The

renowned for their religious piety and devotion to

idea implicit in this kind of apocalypse is that

God. Only to such as these would God reveal the

life on earth directly reflects life in heaven;

ultimate truths that could unlock the mysteries of

that is, it is somewhat like the earthly shadow

human existence.

The use of a pseudonym made particular sense

of a heavenly reality (cf. our discussion of the

for apocalypses of the historical sketch type. By

Platonic notion of shadow versus reality in

pretending to be someone living in the distant

Chapter 25).

past, an author could “predict” the future. A typi—

2. Historical Sketches. In this kind of apocalypse,

cal ploy, then, was to write in the name of a

the prophet has a symbolic vision of the future

prophet from ancient times to whom was revealed

course of history. For example, grotesque beasts

a number of events that were to take place. When

might arise out of the sea to wreak havoc on

the author then continued to predict what was

the earth, representing various kingdoms that

soon to happen in his own day—the reader didn’t

will come to dominate the people of God (see

know when this was, of course, since the author

Daniel 7). The symbolism is often explained to

claimed to be writing from the distant past—he

the seer by the heavenly mediator, and

was naturally granted the benefit of the doubt.

through him to the reader.

That is to say, these future events (from the time

of the reader) were just as certain to occur as those

that had already happened. The prophet had been

Apocalypse as a Genre:

right about everything else; surely he was also right

about what would come next!

Specific Literary Features

The first apocalypse known to use this tech—

Despite their wide-ranging differences, the surviv—

nique came to be included in the Hebrew Bible.

ing apocalypses typically share specific literary fea—

The book of Daniel, allegedly written by the great

tures. The most common of these are the following:

wise man of the sixth century B.C.E. during the

days of the Babylonian captivity, was actually writ-

Pseudonymity. Almost all of the ancient apoca—

ten, in the judgment of almost all critical scholars,

lypses were written pseudonymously in the name

sometime during the period of suffering associated

of a famous religious person from the past (the

with the Maccabean revolt, some 400 years later.

book of Revelation is a rare exception). Among

No wonder “Daniel” could predict the rise of the

the surviving Jewish apocalypses are some claim—

Persians and the Greeks, and even more accurate—

ing to be written by Moses, Abraham, Enoch, and

ly detail events that were to transpire near the

even Adam. We have Christian apocalypses reput—

time of the Jewish uprising; the author of these

edly from the pens of the prophet Isaiah and the

“prophecies” lived after they had taken place.

apostles Peter, Paul, and Thomas.

We should probably not pass moral judgment on

Is there a particular reason for authors of apoc—

this kind of literary device, for it is not at all clear

alypses to hide their identity behind a pseudo—

that the apocalyptic authors meant to lead people

nym? We have already seen that pseudonymity

astray by writing under a pseudonym. Rather, they

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intended to provide comfort and hope for those

literally, for example, there would be no way to

who were in the throes of terrible suffering.

map them out chronologically on a time line. As

we have already seen, at the breaking of the sixth

Bizarre Symbolic Visions. Rarely do apocalypses

seal, the sun, moon, and stars are destroyed; surely

describe the geography of heaven or the events of

this is the end—no life could possibly go on exist—

the future in straightforward and easily understood

ing. But life does go on, and we enter into a new

terms. Instead, they delight in the mystical and

phase of sufferings on the earth with the heavenly

revel in the symbolic. The future is envisioned as

lights shining in full force.

a series of wild and grotesque beasts that appear on

What we have, then, is a kind of spiral effect in

the face of the earth; there are fantastic spectacles,

narrative. The catastrophes that it describes can—

bizarre images, strange figures, mysterious events.

not be sketched in linear fashion as if one event

The symbols often confuse not only the reader

necessarily occurred after another. One benefit of

but also the prophet himself, who sometimes press—

this kind of repetition is that it allows the author

es the angelic mediator for an interpretation of

to employ important numbers known to have mys—

what he has seen. Sometimes the explanation

tical qualities. In the book of Revelation, for

itself is mysterious and subject to a wide range of

example, there are three major sets of seven disas—

interpretations.

ters sent from heaven, the number three probably

symbolizing fullness and perfection and seven sym-

Violent Repetitions. Apocalypses often convey

bolizing divinity—as opposed to six, which is one

the mysteries of the heavenly realm through vio—

short of seven, and therefore imperfect (see below

lent repetitions. By this I do not mean that there

on the number of the Beast, 666).

is always repeated violence in these texts—

although there often is—but that the repetitions

Triumphalist Movement. By their nature, apoca—

themselves are violent in that they violate the lit—

lypses are designed to provide hope for those who

eral sense of the narrative. That is, apocalypticists

suffer and despair. In the end, God will prevail.

often emphasize their points by producing count—

The present suffering is intense, and that to come

less repetitions for effect. If one were to take

will be yet more intense, but ultimately God will

Revelation’s descriptions of future tribulations

triumph over evil and vindicate his people.

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 28.1 The Book of Revelation as Underground Literature

Some readers of the book of Revelation have taken its mysterious symbols to suggest that it was “underground” literature. The symbolic language of the book, according to this interpretation, was used to keep the governing authorities from realizing that they themselves were under attack.

There may be an element of truth in this view, but one might wonder whether a Roman administrator was likely to sit down over the weekend to read a good Christian book. It seems more plausible that the principal function of the symbolism, whether in Revelation or in other apocalypses, lay elsewhere, namely, in the character of the material itself. Indeed, the heavenly secrets are by their very nature not straightforward or banal or subject to empirical demonstration; their mystery and splendor virtually require them to be conveyed in unearthly and bizarre symbols of the higher realities of heaven.

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# CHAPTER 28

## CHRISTIANS AND THE COSMOS

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SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 28.2 The Author of Revelation in the Early Church

Even though the book of Revelation was finally included in the New Testament canon because Christian leaders came to think it had been written by Jesus’ disciple, John the son of Zebedee, there were outspoken dissenters. Perhaps the most famous was Dionysius, a bishop of the city of Alexandria (Egypt) in the mid third century, whose remarks about the book have a surprisingly modern feel to them. Dionysius used the author’s self-presentation and his Greek writing style to show that he was not the writer of the Fourth Gospel (whom Dionysius assumed was the disciple John). His conclusion? There must have been two different early Christian leaders named John, both of whom were active in Asia Minor, whence both the Gospel and Revelation derived. The following quotations are drawn from Dionysius’s writings, as these are quoted by the fourth-century church historian Euseius ( Ecclesiastical History 7.25).

The one who wrote these things (i.e., the book of Revelation) calls himself John, and we should believe him. But it is not clear which John he was. For he doesn’t call himself the disciple whom the Lord loved — as happens often in the Gospel — nor does he say that he was the who leaned on Jesus’ breast or that he was the brother of James, who both saw and heard the Lord. But surely he would have described himself in one of these ways if he had wanted to make himself clearly known. . . . I think [therefore] that there must have been another John living among the Christians in Asia Minor, just as they say that there are two different tombs in Ephesus, both of them allegedly John’s.

The phrasing itself also helps to differentiate between the Gospel and Epistle [of John] on the one hand and the book of Revelation on the other.

The first two are written not only without errors in the Greek, but also with real skill with respect to vocabulary, logic, and coherence of meaning. You won’t find any barbaric expression, grammatical flaw, or vulgar expression in them. . . . I don’t deny that this other author had revelations . . . but I notice that in neither language nor style does he write accurate Greek. He makes use of barbaric expressions and is sometimes guilty even of grammatical error. . . . I don’t say this in order to accuse him (far from it!), but simply to demonstrate that the two books are not at all similar.

Motivational Function. These books exhort their

THE REVELATION OF JOHN

readers to remain faithful to their religious com-

IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

mitments, to keep true to their faith, and to refuse

to give up hope. This point is worth emphasizing:

The Book of Revelation is virtually unique among

ancient Jewish and Christian apocalypses were

apocalypses in that it does not appear to be pseudo—

written not so much to reveal the precise details of

nymous. The author simply calls himself John with—

the future as to provide motivation for those who

out claiming to be a famous person from the past.

were in danger of growing slack in their commit—

Some Christians of the second and third cen—

ments and of losing hope in the midst of their suf—

turies claimed that this John was none other than

fering. The hope they provided was rooted in the

Jesus’ own disciple, the son of Zebedee. Others

belief that when all was said and done, God was in

rejected this notion and as a result refused to

control of the world and would eventually reward

admit the book into the Christian canon of

those who remained faithful to him.

Scripture. (If the author had claimed to be that



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John, the book would probably have to be considered pseudonymous, for reasons we will see

momentarily.) One of the ironies of the New

Testament is that the Fourth Gospel, which does

not claim to be written by someone named John,

is called John, whereas the book of Revelation,

which does claim to be written by someone named

John, is not called by this name. In any event, it

can be stated without reservation that whoever

F P O

wrote the Gospel did not also write this book. For

one thing, the theological emphases are quite distinct. In the Gospel of John there is virtually no

concern for the coming end of the age (contrast

the Synoptics, with their proclamation of the

imminent arrival of the Son of Man); in the book

of Revelation the end is nearly the entire concern.

Even more importantly, as recognized even by linguists in early Christianity, the writing styles of

these two books are completely different. Detailed

Figure 28.2 Roman coin showing the son of the emperor

studies have shown that the author of Revelation

Domitian seated on a globe and reaching out to seven stars,

was principally literate in a Semitic language,

with an inscription “To the Divine Caesar.” Notice the simi—

probably Aramaic, and knew Greek as a second

larities with the visions found in Revelation, where Christ too is a divine being, the Son of God and ruler of the earth, in

language. His Greek is clumsy in places, some—

whose hand are seven stars (e.g., Rev 1:12–16). Interesting

times even ungrammatical. This is not at all the

enough, Revelation was written during the time of Domitian,

case with the Gospel of John, which is written in

when this coin was minted.

an entirely different style and therefore by a different author.

For example, the Beast of Babylon in chapter 17,

We have already seen that the Fourth Gospel

which, as we will see, appears to represent the city

was probably not written by John the son of

of Rome, is said to have seven horns on its head.

Zebedee. Is it possible, then, that the book of

These represent seven “kings,” evidently meaning

Revelation was? The difficulty with this view is

the rulers of Rome (17:9). Five of these are said to

that parts of the book could scarcely be explained

have come and gone and one is currently reigning

if it were written by Jesus’ own disciple. The

(17:10). This would presumably mean that the

author, for example, occasionally mentions “the

vision was written during the reign of the sixth

apostles,” but he never indicates that he is one of

Roman ruler, but with which ruler should we begin

them (e.g., 21:14). Even more intriguingly, at one

counting—with the dictator Julius Caesar or with

point in the narrative the prophet sees twenty-four

his adopted son, the first emperor, Caesar

elders around the throne of God (chap. 4). Most

Augustus? And does this vision date the entire

interpreters understand these figures to represent

book or simply this portion of it?

the twelve Jewish Patriarchs and the twelve apos—

On the basis of a detailed study of all such clues

tles of Jesus (cf. 21:12, 14); among them, of course,

in the text, most investigators think that parts of

would be the two sons of Zebedee. But the author

the book were written during the 60s of the

gives no indication that he is seeing himself! It

Common Era, soon after the persecution of the

appears, then, that the book was written by some

Christians under Nero. If we begin counting with

other Christian named John, a prophet who was

Julius Caesar, Nero happens to have been the sixth

known to several of the churches of Asia Minor.

ruler of Rome. He was also one of the author’s chief

It is difficult to know exactly when he wrote

enemies. There are other aspects of the book, how—

this book. Modern interpreters usually appeal to

ever, that suggest that it was not completed until

details in some of the visions to pinpoint a date.

somewhat later, probably around 95 C.E., during the



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# CHAPTER 28

## CHRISTIANS AND THE COSMOS

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F P O

Figure 28.3 Painting of Christ as the Alpha and Omega (Rev 21:6; 22:13), from the catacomb of Commodilla.

reign of Domitian. For example, the code word

(18:11–20). In particular, John directs his anger

“Babylon” (see, e.g., Rev 14:8; 16:9; 18:2) came to

against the political institutions of his day, espe—

be used by Jews to designate Rome as the chief

cially the Roman government, which was respon—

political enemy of God after the destruction of

sible for the oppression and suffering of the people

Jerusalem in 70 C.E. (e.g. 4 Ezra 3; 2 Baruch 10).

of God. In his view, this government will not sur—

Somewhat less complicated is the question of

vive, since God was soon going to destroy it.

the social context of the book. The author

In short, Christianity as experienced by this

describes the Christian churches of Asia Minor in

author was an oppressed and persecuted religion.

chapters 2–3. They are persecuted, they have false

Indeed, interpreters have traditionally maintained

teachers in their midst, and a number of their

that John actually wrote the book while in exile

members have lost their fervor for their faith, pos—

from his homeland because of his Christian procla—

sibly because of the passing of time and the hard—

mation (see 1:9). The churches of his world had suf—

ships imposed upon them as Christians. Elsewhere

fered from economic exploitation and some

in the book we read of extensive Christian mar—

Christians had been martyred, but God was going

tyrdoms (6:5) and find hints that the Christian

to put an end to it all, and he would do so very soon.

communities that the author addresses are among

In general terms, Revelation corresponds to the

the poorer classes, who hate the rich and powerful

basic description of an apocalypse. It is a firsthand

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SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Box 28.3 Futuristic Interpretations of the Book of Revelation

One of the most popular ways to interpret the book of Revelation today is to read its symbolic visions as literal descriptions of what is going to transpire in our own day and age. But there are problems with this kind of approach. On the one hand, we should be suspicious of interpretations that are blatantly narcissistic; this way of understanding the book maintains that the entire course of human history has now culminated with us! An even larger problem, though, is that this approach inevitably has to ignore certain features of the text in order to make its interpretations fit.

Consider, as just one example, an interpretation sometimes given of the “locusts” that emerge from the smoke of the bottomless pit in order to wreak havoc on earth in chapter 9.

The seer describes the appearance of these dread creatures as follows: On their heads were what looked like crowns of gold; their faces were like human faces, their hair like women’s hair, and their teeth like lions’ teeth; they had scales like iron breastplates, and the noise of their wings was like the noise of many chariots with horses rushing into battle. They have tails like scorpions, with stingers, and in their tails is their power to harm people. . . . (Rev 9:7–10) According to one futuristic interpretation, these locusts are modern attack helicopters fly-ing forth through the smoke of battle. The seer, living many centuries before the advent of modern warfare, had no way of knowing what these machines really were, and so he described them as best he could. They fly like locusts but are shaped like huge scorpions.

The rotors on top appear like crowns, they seem to have human faces as their pilots peer through their windshields, they are draped with camouflage that from a distance looks like hair, they have fierce teeth painted on their fronts, they are made of steel and so appear to have iron breastplates, the beating of their rotors sounds like chariots rushing to battle, and they have machine guns attached to their tails, like scorpions’ stingers.

What could be more plausible? The prophet has glimpsed into the future and seen what he could not understand. We, however, living in the age in which his predictions will come to pass, understand them full well.

The problem is that the interpretation simply doesn’t work, because it overlooks some of the most important details of the passage. Consider, for example, what these locusts are actually said to do. The text is quite emphatic: they are not allowed to harm any grass or trees, but only people; moreover, and most significantly, they are given the power to torture people for five months, but not to kill them (9:4–5). Those who are attacked by the locusts will long to die but will not be able to do so (9:6). These locusts can’t be modern instruments of war designed for mass destruction because they are explicitly said to be unable to destroy anything.

The same problems occur with virtually every interpretation of the book that takes its visions as literal descriptions of events that will transpire in our own imminent future. These approaches simply cannot account for the details of the text, which is to say that they don’t take the text itself seriously enough. It is more reasonable to interpret the text within its own historical context, not as a literal description of the future of the earth, but as a metaphorical statement of the ultimate sovereignty of God over a world that is plagued by evil.

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# CHAPTER 28

## CHRISTIANS AND THE COSMOS

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account written by a prophet who has been shown a

“woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of

vision of heaven that explains the realities of earth,

blasphemous names” (v. 3). The woman is wearing

a vision that is mediated by angels and full of bizarre

fine clothes and jewels and holds in her hand “a

and mysterious symbolism. The nature of the book is

golden cup full of abominations and impurities of

indicated at the outset in the magnificent vision of

her fornication” (v. 4). Across her forehead is writ—

the exalted Christ that the prophet describes in

ten the name “Babylon the great.” She is “drunk

chapter 1. Here Christ appears as “one like a Son of

with the blood of the saints and the blood of the

Man” (cf. Dan 7:13–14, where the phrase describes

witnesses to Jesus” (v. 6).

the cosmic judge of the earth) and is seen walking

An amazing vision. Fortunately, the accompany—

amidst the seven golden lampstands (i.e., he is pre—

ing angel gives enough of an explanation to enable

sent among the seven churches of Asia Minor, 1:20)

us to interpret its major points with relative ease

with seven stars in his hands (i.e., he himself is in

(though even so some of the details are a bit puz—

control of the guardian angels of these churches and

zling). The beast on which the woman is seated is

therefore of the churches’ own destinies, 1:20). His

about to descend to the bottomless pit (v. 8); we

appearance is symbolic: among other things, he is a

learn in 20:2 that Satan is about to be thrown into

king (wearing a long robe with golden sash, 1:12), he

the pit, so this woman, whoever she is, appears to be

is ancient (with white hair, 1:14), he is the cosmic

supported by the Devil. (This is an important point

judge (with eyes like fire, 1:14), he is full of splendor

to observe, for the book of Revelation will some-

(with feet of burnished bronze, 1:15), he is all-pow—

times interpret its own symbols for the attentive

erful (with a voice of many waters, 1:15), he speaks

reader.) Who is the woman herself? The beast has

the word of God (has a two-edged sword coming

seven heads, and we are told that these are seven

from his mouth, 1:16), and he is totally overpower—

mountains on which the woman is seated (v. 9). For

ing (with a face like the sun, 1:16). The prophet’s

those who know enough about the world in which

response to this vision is understandable: he falls

the prophet was writing, this will be the only clue

down as if dead. But Christ raises him up and com—

that is needed. For those who don’t, the angel

mands him to convey both the message of his vision

makes the matter still clearer in verse 18: “The

and the truth of what is yet to come. Many other

woman you saw is the great city that rules over the

features of the book are also typical of the genre.

kings of the earth.”

The meaning of the vision is now reasonably

Bizarre Symbolism. The symbolic character of

transparent. The “great city” that ruled the world in

John’s visions is obvious. Sometimes he himself

John’s day was obviously Rome, commonly called

doesn’t understand what he sees and needs an

the city “built on seven hills” (hence the beast’s

angel to explain it to him (e.g., 17:7). Not every—

seven heads). This city, which in the vision is sup—

thing he says is shrouded in mystery, however.

ported by the Devil himself, had corrupted the

Many of the symbols are not difficult to undernations (the whore fornicates with the kings of

stand for those who know enough about the Old

earth), exploited the peoples of earth (she is

Testament (e.g., the image of “one like a son of

bedecked in fine clothing and jewelry), and perse—

man”) or about common images in ancient culture

cuted the Christians (she is drunk with the blood of

(e.g., eyes of fire). The explanations of other sym—

the martyrs). Why is the whore called Babylon?

bols are hinted at in the text. These are among the

This symbol too is clear for those who know the Old

most interesting features of the book. A few

Testament, where Babylon is portrayed as the arch—

prominent examples will illustrate the process of

enemy of God, the city whose armies devastated

historical interpretation.

Judah, leveled Jerusalem, and destroyed the Temple

in 587 B.C.E. In Revelation, then, “Babylon” is a

The Great Whore of Babylon. In chapter 17 the

code name for the city opposed to God—Rome,

prophet is taken into the wilderness to see “the

God’s principal enemy. Like Babylon of old, Rome

great whore . . . with whom the kings of the earth

too will be destroyed (v. 16). Indeed, this is the

have committed fornication” (v. 2). He sees a

point of much of the entire book.

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The Number of the Beast, 666. Somewhat earli—

exploits its people, and kills the saints. Given the

er in the book we are given a description of anoth—

similarities to the beast in chapter 17, we may not

er beast, which bears a remarkable resemblance to

be too far afield to assume that the beast may be

the one we have just observed. According to chap—

another image of the Roman Empire. If so, then

ter 13, this other beast arises from the sea and has

the heads would presumably be the rulers of the

ten horns and many heads. One of its heads receives

empire, some of whom demand to be worshipped

a mortal wound that is then healed. The entire

(as did some of the emperors). One of these heads

world follows this beast, which is empowered by the

was mortally wounded, but then healed. What

dragon (i.e., the Devil, 12:9). The beast makes war

might this mean? Historians have long known of a

on the saints and conquers them (13:7). It has

group of ancient Jewish books called the Sybilline

power over all the nations of earth (13:7–8),

Oracles, which predict that one of the most hated

exploiting them economically (13:17) and demand—

of the Roman emperors, Caesar Nero, will return

ing to be worshipped (13:15). The author concludes

from the dead to wreak havoc on the earth—mak—

his description of this mortal enemy of God with a

ing him comparable to one who recovers from a

final identifying mark, given for those “with under—

death-inflicting wound. This popular belief may

standing.” The number of the beast is 666 (13:18).

have something to do with the number of the

Interpreters have offered numerous explana—

beast. It should be recalled that Nero was seen as

tions of this number over the years (probably more

the archenemy of the Christians, whom he ruth—

than six hundred and sixty-six of them). Most of

lessly and unjustly persecuted for setting fire to the

these interpreters have been concerned to show

city of Rome. Could he have been the beast

that the beast has finally arisen in their own day.

described in Revelation 13?

Rarely are the interpretations put forth as conjec—

Intriguingly, when the name “Caesar Nero” is

tures, of course, but almost always with the confi—

spelled in Hebrew letters (“Nero” becomes

dence of those who have the inside scoop. Just

“Neron”), their numerical total is 666. More

within the past several decades, for example,

intriguingly still, the name can be spelled in

Christian preachers, televangelists, and authors

another way, without a final n at the end. The n is have suggested such tantalizing and diverse candi-worth 50 in the Hebrew numerical system. When

dates as Adolf Hitler, Mussolini, former Secretary

the alternative spelling is employed, the name

of State Henry Kissinger, and Pope Paul VI!

adds up to 616.

The author of this book, however, was writing

The author of Revelation is not referring to

for his own day, not for the twentieth century, and

Hitler or Mussolini or anyone else in modern

he may have had something specific in mind (see

times. His enemy was Rome and its Caesars. It was

box 28.3). Recall our discussion of the ancient art

Rome that had dominated the other nations of

of interpretation known as gematria (in connec—

earth, exploited their native populations, and

tion with the Epistle of Barnabas). In ancient

oppressed the people of God; it was the Roman

numeral systems, numbers were written by using

emperor who was worshipped as divine and who

letters, and conversely, any combination of letters

persecuted Christians and sometimes put them to

could yield a numerical total. Anyone conversant

death. This book is about how God was going to

with gematria would have understood what the

overthrow this emperor and his empire at the end

author meant by saying that the number of the

of time (see especially chaps. 18–19) prior to

beast was 666. He was indicating that this was the

rewarding his saints with the kingdom in a new

numerical value of the person’s name. An interest—

heavens and a new earth (chaps. 20–22).

ing wrinkle in this matter is that some of the

ancient Greek manuscripts of the book of

Violent Repetitions. The book of Revelation fol—

Revelation give a different number for the beast.

lows the literary convention of using violent repe—

In these documents, it is 616 rather than 666.

titions. It is impossible to take the predictions of

How can we make sense of all this? The beast is

this book as a linear, chronological sequence of

described as God’s enemy, who controls the world,

events that are to transpire at the end of time. The

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universe caves in on itself in chapter 6, but the

pain and agony continue for another thirteen

chapters! The author has written for effect, compounding the tribulations and intensifying the sufferings of the last times to show how dreadful

things are going to be.

Triumphalist Movement. The narrative moves

through tragedy to triumph, through despair to

hope. The fundamental point of the narrative is to

provide assurance that, regardless of how terrifying

the situation may become, God is ultimately in

control of it all. The suffering of the present is part

of God’s plan, and he will vindicate his people by

destroying their enemies. When he does so, he will

establish a new kingdom on earth in which there

will be no more pain, suffering, or death, no more

persecution or exploitation, no more disease,

famine, or war. There will only be Christ and his

Figure 28.4 Coin minted in 71 C.E., showing the city of Rome kingdom of saints.

seated on the seven hills (cf. Rev 17:9).

Imminence. The author emphasizes at the beginning and end of his work that the events he

ment for those who have proved faithless but an

records are going to happen soon (1:1, 3; 22:6, 10,

eternal reward for those who have stayed true.

12, 20). This emphasis may suggest that the people he addresses are presently undergoing considerable suffering (note the pervasive references to

THE SHEPHERD OF HERMAS

persecution, exploitation, and martyrdom). He is

writing to provide them with hope that they will

We have already seen that early Christian apoca—

not have to suffer long before the end comes and

lypses employed a variety of means for revealing

God intervenes in history to make right all that

the heavenly secrets that can make sense of earth—

has gone wrong.

ly realities. Neither of the two books we will now

examine briefly, for example, includes a detailed

Encouragement and Admonition. Ultimately,

sketch of the future course of history.

Revelation is a book about hope. In some respects,

The first is a book titled The Shepherd, written

the author’s timetable matters less than his overar—

by a Christian named Hermas. Like the book of

ching message that God is sovereign over this world,

Revelation, The Shepherd is unusual among apoca—

appearances notwithstanding, and that he will soon

lypses in not being pseudonymous. Hermas was a

bring his people’s suffering to a crashing halt. This

Christian living during the first half of the second

message is meant to encourage those who are perse—

century C.E. in Rome, where his brother was the

cuted and weak, but it is also meant to admonish

bishop. His book was well received by the

those who are tempted to abandon ship in view of

Christians throughout the world and was even

their present distress. John emphasizes that those

included among the writings of the New

who depart from the faith will face a severe judg—

Testament canon by one of our oldest manuscripts.

ment, indeed, they will experience eternal torment.

Eventually, however, the judgment articulated by

Believers must therefore hold on and not cave in,

an anonymous author of the second century was

they must keep the faith and never abandon hope,

sustained; this author urged that The Shepherd not

for the end is near, and with it comes a fearful judg—

be read as Scripture because it was written “recent-

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ly” (i.e., it wasn’t ancient enough) and because its

visions and similitudes are enigmatic and symbol—

author was someone who was known to the

ic; they are normally explained to Hermas (and

Roman church, not an apostle (see box 28.4).

the reader) as having a spiritual significance for

The book takes its name from the angelic

Christians living on earth. The mandates are

mediator who appears to Hermas in the form of a

somewhat easier to interpret, consisting of direct

shepherd. There are other angelic beings here as

exhortations to speak the truth, to give alms, to do

well, in particular, an old woman who identifies

good to all, to avoid sexual immorality, drunken—

herself as a personification of the Christian

ness, gluttony, hypocrisy, malice, and so on.

church. These various figures communicate

The entire book, not just the mandates, is drivisions, commandments, and parables to Hermas,

ven by an ethical concern. The primary issue

who asks for interpretations of what he sees and

involves Christians who have lapsed into sin

hears. His heavenly companions typically con—

after being baptized. While a number of early

sent, sometimes grudgingly.

Christians insisted that those who returned to a

The book divides itself rather neatly into five

life of sin after their conversion and baptism had

visions, twelve sets of commandments (or “man—

lost their salvation (cf. Heb 6:4–6), this book

dates”), and ten parables (or “similitudes”). The

contends that a second repentance is possible. A

SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 28.4 The Shepherd of Hermas

and the Muratorian Canon

The anonymous author who dismisses The Shepherd of Hermas because it was penned

“recently” by someone who was not an apostle is an otherwise unknown figure whose writing continues to intrigue scholars. In the only fragment of his writing that remains, he briefly discusses the books that he considers to be part of the Christian Scriptures. Unfortunately, the fragment begins in the middle of a sentence, followed by the words, “The third book of the Gospel is that according to Luke. . . .” Evidently, he has just discussed Matthew and Mark (assuming that these were his first two Gospels). He proceeds to describe Luke, John, the letters of Paul, and the other books that he accepts as canonical. The piece ends, as it begins, in midsentence.

The fragment was discovered in the eighteenth century in a library in Milan, Italy, by a scholar named Muratori. For this reason, it is known as the Muratorian Fragment. The fragment itself was written in the eighth century by an unskilled Latin scribe; his grammar is terrible, and he was extremely careless. Scholars debate when and where the original text that the scribe was copying was produced; most believe that it was written during the second half of the second century, in or around Rome. The original language of the document was probably Greek.

The Muratorian canon does not mention the books of Hebrews, James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, or 3 John, but it does accept as canonical all of the other books of our present New Testament. Interestingly, it also accepts the Wisdom of Solomon and, somewhat tentatively, the Apocalypse of Peter. Finally, the author explicitly condemns two books that he labels as forgeries concocted by followers of Marcion in the name of Paul: a letter to the Laodiceans and another to the Alexandrians. These are not to be accepted by the Catholic church as canonical writings, the author declares, “for it is not fitting for gall to be mixed with honey.”

This fragment is of great interest to the historian of early Christianity, for it reveals a period of Christian history in which a closed canon of Scripture appears to be on the horizon, while being still some distance off.

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person who reverts to sin after being baptized has

tower, six of whom are more powerful than

only one second chance to repent, however. If

the others. The stones represent persons who

the second opportunity is squandered, then no

make up the church. Those that fit perfectly

hope remains.

are apostles, bishops, teachers, and deacons

This promise of a second repentance may not

who are in perfect harmony with one anoth—

seem like a particularly apocalyptic message, but it

er. The other usable stones are Christians

is, because the second repentance will prevent a

who have been faithful to God unto death.

person from suffering the apocalyptic judgment of

The stones that are rotten, cracked, or mis—

God. Moreover, the book contains a number of

shapen represent people who can form no

other features of apocalypses.

part of the tower of God, even though they

were formerly stones of potential value (i.e.,

1. First-Person Narrative. The author speaks of

they at one time claimed to be Christian).

his own personal history and of events that

These would include people who have been

have happened to him.

hypocritical in their faith or who have aban—

2. Mediated Revelations. He experiences visions

doned the truth.

that convey the truth that he needs to com—

The vision portrays a social reality and its

municate to his readers. These visions are

ultimate point is a moral one. Those who have

given through angelic intermediaries and are

been cast out of the church because of their

generally interpreted by them as well.

hypocrisy or complacency are urged to repent

3. Transcendent Realities. The visions provide

before the tower is completed, for once the job

Hermas with the “heavenly” basis for his

is done, they will have no place among the

“earthly” doctrine. The church and its experi—

people of God.

ences are not the haphazard accidents of

The Monster. In another important vision,

human history. They are rooted in divine real—

Hermas describes his encounter with a

ity and are directed by higher powers. In this

grotesque beast that is symbolic of a spiritual

narrative God works behind the scenes to

reality (Vision IV). Hermas is passing along

bring his plan for the church to fruition.

the road and to his horror sees a gigantic mon—

4. Symbolic Visions. The visions and simili—

ster breathing fiery locusts from its mouth and

tudes that Hermas portrays are manifestly

rushing upon him with power enough to

symbolic and often relate to other visions

destroy a city. Frightened nearly to death,

found in other Jewish and Christian apoca—

Hermas prays for help and is told simply to pass

lypses. Two instances are the visions of the

the beast by. As he does so, the monster lies

tower and the monster.

down meekly and does nothing but flick its

The Tower. In his third vision, Hermas sees

tongue in the air. We are told that the beast

a tower being built in the sea by six young

represents a great persecution to come, which

men who are assisted by tens of thousands of

will crush everyone who does not turn to God

others. They use a variety of stones for the

with all their heart, pure and blameless.

tower’s construction. Some stones are tailor—

5. Encouragement and Admonition. Like the

made for the task, but some are rotten, others

Revelation of John, The Shepherd of Hermas

are cracked, and others simply do not fit.

ultimately aims to encourage and admonish its

Those that can be used are joined together to

readers. Those who have fallen into a life of sin

build the tower while the others are cast

after their baptism are encouraged to repent

aside. The angelic interpreter then explains

and turn anew to the life of faith; they can

what all of this means. The tower is the

trust that they will be given a second chance.

church. It is built in the sea because it comes

But all believers must know that God’s

into being through the waters of baptism. The

patience with sinners is not without limit, for

workers are the holy angels who construct the

a day of judgment will come in which the

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tower of the church will be complete, and

two abodes of the dead or simply describes them

those who are outside God’s good graces will

in such vivid detail that it feels as if Peter is actu-feel the power of his wrath.

ally seeing them. There is no ambiguity, however, concerning the respective fates of those destined for one place or the other. In an unsettling

way, the horrific punishments of the damned are

THE APOCALYPSE OF PETER

made to fit their crimes. Those guilty of blasphemy are hanged by their tongues over unquench—

The last Christian apocalypse for us to consider

able fire, to roast eternally. Men who have com—

claims to be a firsthand account of the tortures of

mitted fornication are forever suspended by their

hell and the ecstasies of heaven written in the

genitals. Those who have committed murder are

name of Jesus’ disciple, Peter. As we have seen,

thrown into a gorge to be perpetually tormented

there are a large number of early Christian pseude—

by venomous reptiles and swarming worms.

pigrapha written in Peter’s name, one or two of

Worshippers of idols are chased by hideous

which came to be included in the New Testament.

demons and driven off of high cliffs, time and

Indeed, among Christian apocalypses alone we

again, for all eternity.

know of three that claim his name. One is pre—

Included among the sinners who suffer eternal

served only in an Arabic translation, another was

torments are those who have engaged in extra—

discovered among the Coptic writings of the Nag

marital sex, who have disobeyed their parents,

Hammadi library, and the third has been known

who have given alms but not striven to live right—

by historians for centuries, although they have had

eously, and who have lent out money and demand—

it in their possession only since 1887, when it was

ed compound interest. The blessed, on the other

found in the tomb of a Christian monk along with

hand, are those who have followed Christ and

the pseudonymous Gospel of Peter. It is the third

kept the commandments of God. These will be

apocalypse that will concern us here, for it is a

brought into the eternal kingdom, where they will

book that was accepted as canonical Scripture in

enjoy the blissful life of heaven forever. The book

some churches of the second and third centuries

ends with Peter describing firsthand what he saw

(see box 28.4). Even when it finally came to be

on the Mount of Transfiguration, possibly to vali—

excluded from the canon, it continued to make an

date the legitimacy of the rest of his vision (cf. 2

impact on Christian thought. To our knowledge,

Pet 1:17–18).

this is the first Christian writing to describe a jour—

The ultimate message of this firsthand descrip—

ney through hell and heaven, an account that

tion of hellish and heavenly realities is reason—

influenced a large number of successors, including,

ably clear. There is only one way to avoid facing

ultimately, Dante’s Divine Comedy, one of the

eternal torment for sins: don’t sin. Only those

great inspirational classics of Western civilization.

who believe in Christ and lead upright moral

The book begins with Peter and the other dis—

lives can expect to enter into his eternal king—

ciples on the Mount of Olives listening to Jesus

dom. All others will be damned by God to face

deliver his “apocalyptic discourse” (see Mark 13).

unspeakable pain and suffering for all eternity.

Peter asks about the coming judgment. Jesus

This message no doubt made a considerable

responds by describing the terrifying events that

impact on its Christian readers; it was, after all,

will occur when the world is destroyed by fire at

written by “Peter,” the closest disciple to Jesus!

the last judgment. He then details the eternal ter—

Moreover, the message became an essential ele—

rors that await those destined for hell and, more

ment in the Christian missionary proclamation

briefly (possibly because they are somewhat less

as well, providing an incentive for pagans and

interesting and certainly less graphic), the perpet—

Jews to turn from their false ways and to worship

ual blessings of those bound for heaven.

the one true God who would reward those who

There is some ambiguity over whether Jesus

came to accept his truth and punish for all eter—

actually takes Peter on a journey through these

nity those who did not.

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# CHAPTER 28

## CHRISTIANS AND THE COSMOS

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SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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lypses; for more advanced students.

tive; for advanced students.

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social world of the church in Rome in the early second

beginning students.

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# CHAPTER 29

Epilogue: Do We Have the Original New Testament?

We have now come to the conclusion of our study

one word at a time. The copy itself was then

of the earliest Christian writings. Our investiga—

copied, possibly in Thessalonica, possibly in

tions have taken us over a remarkable range of

another community to which a copy was taken or

materials—historical movements, social groups,

sent. This copy of the copy was also copied, as

and literary works from before the days of Jesus

were later copies, until before long there were a

through the early decades of the second century.

large number of different copies of the letter circu—

In some ways, of course, we have only scratched

lating in different communities throughout the

the surface of this extraordinary segment of human

Mediterranean, all made by hand at a pace that

history and the literature that emerged out of it. In

would seem outrageously slow to those of us who

this epilogue to our study I will make some brief

are accustomed to the world of photocopiers, word

comments on the fate of the earliest Christian

processors, electronic mail, and desktop publish—

writings after they were produced and pose a ques—

ing.

tion that has probably never occurred to most peo—

In this process of recopying the document by

ple: Do we have the original New Testament? The

hand, the original was eventually thrown away or

answer may surprise you.

burned or otherwise destroyed. Perhaps it had

been read so much that it simply wore out. In any

event, the early Christians saw no need to preserve

the “original” text, since they already had copies of

THE MANUSCRIPTS

it. Possibly, they did not fully appreciate what hap-

OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

pens to a text that is copied and recopied by hand,

especially by scribes who are not trained profes—

In fact we do not have the original copies of any of

sionals but simply literate persons with the time

the books of the New Testament or of any of the

and money to do the job. Copyists, even if they are

other Christian writings that we have examined in

skilled specialists, inevitably make mistakes.

our study (or indeed of any literary text from the

(Anyone who doubts this should copy a long doc—

ancient world). The originals were lost or

ument by hand and see how well he or she does.)

destroyed long ago, and all that we have are

Moreover, whenever a copyist makes a copy from

copies. For the most part, these copies were made

a document that has already been copied, the mis—

hundreds of years after the originals, and from

takes begin to multiply; scribes not only introduce

other copies, rather than the originals.

their own mistakes, they also reproduce mistakes

Let me explain the situation by giving a solitary

found in the copy being copied.

example of how things worked. When the

We do not have the original copy of 1

Thessalonians received Paul’s first letter, someone

Thessalonians or of any other New Testament

in the community must have copied it by hand,

book. Nor do we have copies made directly from

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# CHAPTER 29

DO WE HAVE THE ORIGINAL NEW TESTAMENT?

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the originals, copies made from the copies of the

Middle Ages, many of them nearly a thousand

originals, or copies made from the copies of the

years after Paul and his companions had passed off

first copies. Our earliest manuscripts (i.e., hand—

the face of the earth, does not mean that we can

written copies) of Paul’s letters date from around

rest assured that we know what the original text

200 C.E., that is, nearly 150 years after he wrote

said. For if we have very few early copies, in fact,

them. The earliest full manuscripts of the Gospels

scarcely any, how can we know that the text was

come from about the same time, although we have

not changed significantly before it began to be

some fragments of manuscripts that date earlier.

reproduced in such large quantities?

One credit-card-sized fragment of John discovered

It is not simply a matter of scholarly specula—

in a trash heap in Egypt is usually dated to the first

tion to say that the words of the New Testament

half of the second century. Even our relatively full

were changed in the process of copying. We

manuscripts from around the year 200 are not pre—

know they were changed because we can com—

served intact, however. Pages and entire books

pare all 5,400 copies with one another. What is

were lost from them before they were discovered

striking is that when we do so, we find that no

in modern times. Indeed, it is not until the fourth

two of these copies (except the smallest frag—

century, nearly 300 years after the New Testament

ments) agree in all of their wording. There can be

was written, that we begin to find complete man—

only one reason for this: the scribes who copied

uscripts of all of its books.

the texts changed them. Nobody knows for cer—

After the fourth or fifth century, copies of the

tain how often they changed them, because no

New Testament become far more common.

one has yet been able to count all of the differ—

Indeed, if we count up all of the New Testament

ences among the surviving manuscripts. Some

manuscripts that have been discovered, the num—

estimates put the number at around 200,000, oth—

ber is impressive. We currently know of nearly

ers at around 300,000. Perhaps it is simplest to

5,400 Greek copies of all or part of the New

express the figure in comparative terms: there are

Testament, ranging from tiny scraps of a verse or

more differences among our manuscripts than

two that could fit in the palm of your hand to mas—

there are words in the New Testament.

sive tomes containing all twenty-seven books

In spite of these remarkable differences, schol—

bound together. These copies range in date, rough—

ars are convinced that we can reconstruct the orig—

ly, from the second century down to the invention

inal words of the New Testament with reasonable

of the printing press in the fifteenth century. As a

(though probably not 100 percent) accuracy. The

result, the New Testament is preserved in far more

first step in doing so is to categorize the kinds of

manuscripts than any other book from antiquity.

changes that scribes made in their texts.

There are, for example, fewer than 700 copies of

Homer’s Iliad, fewer than 350 copies of the plays of

Euripides, and only one copy of the first six books

of the Annals of Tacitus.

CHANGES IN

What is unsettling for those who want to know

THE NEW TESTAMENT TEXT

what the original text looked like is not the number of New Testament manuscripts but their dates

The vast majority of all changes found in our New

and the differences among them. Of course, we

Testament manuscripts are careless mistakes that are

would expect the New Testament to be copied in

easily recognized and corrected. Christian scribes

the Middle Ages more frequently than Homer or

were fully human and often made mistakes simply

Euripides or Tacitus; the trained copyists through—

because they were tired or inattentive or, sometimes,

out the Western world at the time were Christian

inept. Indeed, the single most common mistake in

scribes, frequently monks, who for the most part

our manuscripts is misspelled words (which are sig—

were preparing copies of texts for religious purpos—

nificant for little more than showing that scribes in

es. Still, the fact that we have thousands of New

antiquity could spell no better than most people can

Testament manuscripts that were made during the

today). In addition, we have numerous manuscripts

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in which scribes have left out entire words, verses, or

simply because the scribes are no longer around for

even pages of a book, presumably by accident.

us to interview about their intentions. But some of

Sometimes scribes rearranged the words on the page,

the changes in our manuscripts can scarcely be

for example, by leaving out a word and then sticking

attributed to fatigue, carelessness, or ineptitude;

it in later in the sentence. Sometimes they found a

they instead suggest intention and forethought.

marginal note scribbled by an earlier scribe and

It is difficult to know what might have motivat—

thought that it was to be included in the text, so

ed a scribe to change his text, but it often appears to

they inserted it as an additional verse. These kinds

have been some kind of problem in the text itself

of accidental changes were facilitated, in part, by the

that he found disturbing. Sometimes, for example,

fact that ancient scribes did not use punctuation and

scribes ran across a statement that appeared to be

paragraph divisions or even spaces between words.

mistaken, as in Mark 1:2, where a citation from the

Occasionally, as you might imagine, the correct

book of Malachi is quoted as coming from Isaiah. At

interpretation of a sentence depends on how the

other times, scribes thought that a passage they were

words are to be separated (lastnightatdinnerwe

copying contradicted another one, as in Mark 2:25

sawabundanceonthetable).

(cf. 1 Sam. 21:1–7, where Ahimelech, not Abiathar,

Other kinds of changes are both more impor—

is said to have been the high priest when David

tant and harder for modern scholars to detect.

entered the Temple). At still other times, scribes

These are changes that scribes appear to have

thought that a passage was grammatically incorrect

made in their texts intentionally. I say that they

or inelegant. In all such cases, scribes appear to have

“appear” to have made such changes intentionally

had little compunction about changing the text

SOME MORE INFORMATION

Box 29.1 Citing Chapter and Verse

Given the fact that ancient manuscripts did not use punctuation, paragraphs, or even spaces to separate words, it will come as no surprise to learn that the chapter and verse divisions found in modern translations of the New Testament are not original (as if Paul, when writing Romans, would think to number his sentences and call them verses!). In order to facilitate the reading of these books—especially in public—scribes did begin to make chap-terlike divisions as early as the fourth century. But the chapters in translations of the New Testament used today go back just to the beginning of the thirteenth century, when a lectur-er at the University of Paris, named Stephen Langton, introduced major divisions into the Latin Bible.

Verse divisions were not to come along for another three centuries. In 1551, a Parisian printer named Robert Stephanus published a Greek and Latin edition of the New Testament in which each chapter was divided into separate verses. These are the verse divisions still in use today. They first appeared in an English translation in the 1560 Geneva Version.

An interesting anecdote: Stephanus’s son indicated that his father made these verse divisions while “on horseback” (i.e., on a journey) from Paris to Lyons. Presumably he meant that his father took the text along with him and worked on it at night during his layovers at inns along the way. Some wry observers have noticed, though, that in places our verse divisions make little sense (sometimes they occur right in the middle of a sentence), and have suggested that Stephanus literally worked “on horseback,” so that whenever his steed hit a pothole, it caused an inadvertent slip of the pen.



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DO WE HAVE THE ORIGINAL NEW TESTAMENT?

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F P O

Figure 29.1 The first chapter of the book of Hebrews in one of the oldest and best surviving manuscripts of the New Testament, Codex Vaticanus. Notice the marginal note between the first and second columns. A corrector to the text had erased a word in verse 3 and substituted another word in its place; a second corrector came along, erased the correction, reinserted the original word, and wrote a note in the margin to castigate the first corrector. The note reads, “Fool and knave, leave the old reading, don't change it!”

(both Mark 1:2 and 2:25 were commonly altered, for

problem. Scholars have to decide, then, which form

example). Some scribes, however, did not make such

of the verse was probably original and which repre—

changes. As a result, a verse found in some manusents the change made by a scribe.

scripts will appear to embody a mistake, a contradic—

One of the most common kinds of intentional

tion, or an awkward construction, but in others it

changes involved the “harmonization” of one text

will be worded differently in a way that avoids the

to another, that is, changing a passage in one book

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to make it conform to a similar passage in another.

all-knowing and therefore must have known when

This kind of change is particularly common in the

the end was to come. Scribes solved the theologi—

Synoptic Gospels, since these three books tell so

cal problem of Jesus’ ignorance by removing any

many of the same stories in slightly (or significant—

reference to it from the text.

ly) different ways. By harmonizing such accounts,

As you can see, some textual changes can be

scribes made them identical. One of the most

important for textual interpretation. Consider sev—

famous instances of harmonization involves the

eral other important examples. The earliest manu—

Lord’s Prayer, which is much shorter in Luke 11

scripts of the Gospel of Mark end at 16:8 with the

than it is in Matthew 6 (see box 27.1). Some

report that the women fled Jesus’ empty tomb in

scribes, however, smoothed out the differences by

fear and told no one what they had seen. Later

adding the petitions found only in Matthew to the

manuscripts append an additional twelve verses in

prayer found in Luke. This longer form is the way

which the resurrected Jesus appears before his dis—

in which the prayer is still recited today. It was also

ciples and delivers a remarkable speech in which

the way it was recited by ancient scribes, which no

he says, among other things, that those who

doubt is what led some of them to add the petitions

believe in him will be able to handle venomous

to Luke’s version of the prayer in the first place,

snakes and drink deadly poison without suffering

rather than, say, to delete them from Matthew.

harm. Are these verses original, or did scribes add

Among the most interesting changes that were

them to a text that otherwise seemed to end too

intentionally made by scribes are those that

abruptly? Most scholars think the Gospel original—

involve Christian doctrines. It appears that in the

ly ended at 16:8 (I will explain their basic reason—

second and third centuries, when the earliest man—

ing in coming to decisions like this below).

uscripts were being produced and when the doctri—

Did the author of the Fourth Gospel write the

nal controversies were in full swing (see Chapter

famous story of the woman taken in adultery or was

1), scribes would sometimes modify their texts to

this a later addition to the Gospel by a well-mean—

make them say what they were supposed to mean

ing scribe? The story is found in many of our later

(in the scribes’ opinion). For example, when Jesus

manuscripts between chapters 7 and 8 but not in

remains behind in the Temple as a twelve-year-old

any of the earliest ones; moreover, the writing style

boy and is discovered there by his mother after a

is significantly different from the rest of the Gospel.

long search, she upbraids him by saying, “Child,

Almost all scholars acknowledge that the story was

why have you treated us like this? Look, your

in fact added to manuscripts of John’s Gospel many

father and I have been searching for you in great

years after it had first been circulated.

anxiety” (Luke 2:48). Some scribes have changed

Did the voice at Jesus’ baptism in the Gospel of

the text so that Jesus’ mother no longer says “your

Luke originally declare, “You are my beloved son,

father and I have been searching for you” but

in whom I am well pleased,” which are exactly the

instead says “we have been searching for you.” The

words found in Mark’s account, or did it proclaim,

reason for the change should be obvious: proto-

“You are my son, today I have begotten you,” as

orthodox scribes believed that Joseph was not

the text is worded by some of the earliest witness—

Jesus’ father because Jesus was born of a virgin. A

es (Luke 3:23)? This latter statement, a quotation

second example occurs in Jesus’ apocalyptic dis—

of Psalm 2, would have been acceptable to second—

course, where he tells his disciples that no one

century Christians who denied that Jesus had

knows the precise moment when the end will

always been divine: for them, he was “adopted” to

come: “About that day and hour no one knows,

be God’s son at his baptism. And it may also have

neither the angels of heaven nor the Son, but only

been the original text of Luke, which was changed

the Father” (Matt 24:36). Interestingly, a large

by proto-orthodox scribes who rejected the adop—

number of scribes changed the text by eliminating

tionists’ view of Jesus’ baptism. This makes better

the phrase “nor the Son.” Again, the reason is not

sense than thinking that a scribe changed Luke’s

hard to find. If Jesus truly was divine, as medieval

text (by having the voice quote Psalm 2) to make

scribes believed he was, then he must have been

it sound more adoptionistic than it already was.

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A final example involves the famous words of 1

Christian authors from different times and

John 5:7–8, the only passage in the entire Bible

places who quoted the New Testament. By

that explicitly affirms the Christian doctrine of

collecting their quotations, we can recon—

the trinity—that the Godhead consists of three

struct what their own manuscripts probably

persons but that “these three are one.” Even

looked like.

though the passage is part of the Latin Bible and

Given this abundance of evidence, one

found its way into the King James Version, it does

might suppose that a fairly obvious criterion

not occur in any Greek manuscript of the New

for deciding which reading is original is to

Testament prior to the fourteenth century. To my

count the witnesses in support of each (differ—

knowledge, there is no textual scholar who thinks

ent) reading and to accept the one that is most

that the passage was originally found in 1 John.

abundantly attested. Suppose, for example,

that for a given verse there are 500 witnesses

that have one form of wording and only six

CRITERIA FOR ESTABLISHING

that have a variant form. All other things

THE ORIGINAL TEXT

being equal, one might suspect that the six

There is a subdiscipline within New Testament

represent a mistake.

scholarship called “textual criticism,” which seeks

The problem, though, is that all other things

to establish the original text of the New

are rarely equal. If the six witnesses, for exam—

Testament based on the surviving manuscript evi—

ple, all derive from the third and fourth cendence. It is a complex task but one that can be

turies, whereas the 500 are all later, from the

extremely intriguing—something like reading a

5th to the 15th centuries, then the six may

detective story in which a few clues have to be

preserve an earlier form of text that came to be

pieced together in order to decide “whodunit.”

changed to the satisfaction of later scribes.

When there are different forms of the text, that is,

Thus, simply counting the witnesses that sup—

when a verse is worded in different ways in the

port a certain form of the text is generally rec—

surviving manuscripts, the question has to be

ognized as a rather unreliable method for

asked, which manuscripts represent the text of the

reconstructing the original text.

autograph (the technical term for the original)

2. The Age of the Witnesses. The form of the text

and which ones represent changes of the text?

that is supported by the oldest witnesses is

Inevitably, a choice has to be made between one

more likely to be original that a different form

form of wording and another, and the choice can

found only in later manuscripts, even if these

sometimes make a significant difference in how a

are more numerous. Most scholars recognize

document is interpreted. Since it is better to make

that this principle is better than simply count—

an intelligent choice based on evidence than sim—

ing the manuscripts, but it too can be prob—

ply to guess, critics have developed certain principles for deciding which form of a text is more like—

lematic. For example, it is possible for a sixth—

ly to be the original.

century manuscript to preserve an older form

of the text than, say, a fourth-century one.

This would happen if the sixth-century manu—

1. The Number of Witnesses That Support a

script had been produced from a copy that was

Reading. In addition to the nearly 5,400 Greek

made in the second century, whereas the

manuscripts of the New Testament, we have

fourth-century manuscript derived from one

tens of thousands of New Testament manu—

made in the third.

scripts in other languages into which it was

3. The Quality of the Witnesses. In a court of law,

eventually translated (especially Latin but

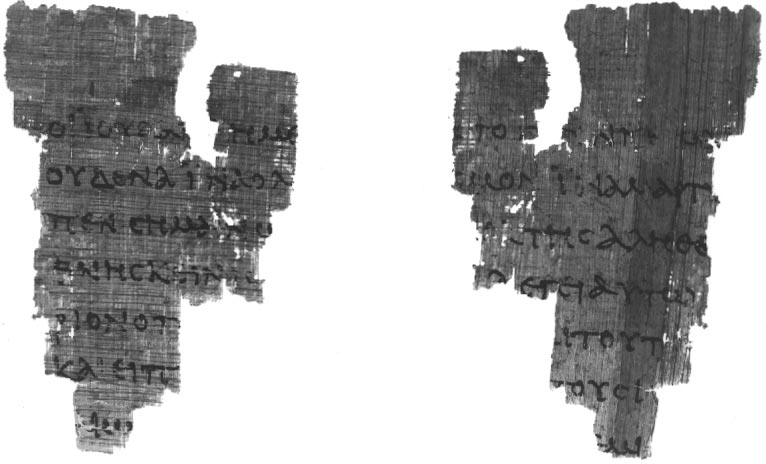
the testimony of some witnesses carries more

also Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, and others).

weight than that of others. If there are two wit—

Moreover, there are dozens of ancient

nesses with contradictory testimony, and one is



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THE NEW TESTAMENT: A HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

F P O

Figure 29.2 P52, a fragment of the Gospel of John (18:31–33, 37–38) discovered in a trash heap in the sands of Egypt. This credit-card sized scrap is the earliest surviving manuscript of the New Testament, dating from around 125–150 C.E. Both front and back are pictured here.

known to be a habitual liar, drunkard, and

to be a local variation reproduced by scribes of

thief, whereas the other is an upstanding mem—

the region, whereas the other is more likely to

ber of the community, most juries will have lit—

be older since it was more widely known.

tle difficulty deciding whom to believe. A sim—

The foregoing criteria often have a cumulative

ilar situation occurs with manuscripts. Some

effect in helping scholars decide what the orig—

are obviously full of errors, for instance, when

inal text was. If one form of reading, for exam—

their scribe was routinely inattentive or inept,

ple, is found in geographically diverse witness—

and others appear to be on the whole trust—

es that are early and of generally high quality,

worthy. The best manuscripts are those that do

then there is a good chance that it is original.

not regularly preserve forms of the text that are

This judgment has to be borne out, though, by

obviously in error.

two other factors

4. The Geographical Spread of the Witnesses. An

5. The Difficulty of the Reading. Scholars have

even more useful criterion involves the geo—

found this criterion to be extraordinarily use—

graphical distribution of the different forms of

ful. We have seen that scribes sometimes elim—

the text, especially among the earliest manu—

inated possible contradictions and discrepan—

scripts. Suppose our manuscripts support two

cies, harmonized stories, and changed doctri—

different forms of a passage, one found only

nally questionable statements. Therefore,

among manuscripts produced in a specific geo—

when we have two forms of a text, one that

graphical area (say, southern Italy), the other

would have been troubling to scribes—for

found in witnesses spread throughout the

example, one that is possibly contradictory to

Mediterranean (say, Northern Africa,

another passage or grammatically inelegant or

Alexandria, Syria, Asia Minor, Gaul, and

theologically problematic—and one that

Spain). In this case, the former is more likely

would not have been as troubling, it is the for-

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DO WE HAVE THE ORIGINAL NEW TESTAMENT?

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mer form of the text, the one that is more “dif—

manuscripts of the New Testament than of any

ficult,” that is more likely to be original. That

other book, we should have no doubts concerning

is, since scribes were far more likely to have

the truth of its message. Given what we have seen

corrected problems than to have created them,

in this chapter, it should be clear why this line of

the comparatively smooth, consistent, harmo—

reasoning is faulty. It is true, of course, that the

nious, and orthodox readings are more likely

New Testament is abundantly attested in manu—

to have been created by scribes. Our earliest

scripts produced through the ages, but most of

manuscripts, interestingly enough, are the

these manuscripts are many centuries removed

ones that tend to preserve the more difficult

from the originals, and none of them is perfectly

readings.

accurate. They all contain mistakes—altogether,

many thousands of mistakes. It is not an easy task

6. Conformity with the Author’s Own Language,

to reconstruct the original words of the New

Style, and Theology. With the preceding criterion

Testament.

we were interested in determining which form of

Moreover, even if scholars have by and large

a passage could be most easily attributed to

succeeded in reconstructing the New Testament,

scribes who copied the text. With our sixth and

this, in itself, has no bearing on the truthfulness of

final criterion we are interested in seeing which

its message. It simply means that we can be reason—

form of a passage would be easiest to ascribe to

ably certain of what the New Testament authors

the author who originally produced the text in

actually said, just as we can be reasonably certain

light of its vocabulary, writing style, and theolo—

what Plato and Euripides and Josephus and

gy. If two forms of a passage are preserved among

Suetonius all said. Whether or not any of these

the New Testament manuscripts and one of

ancient authors said anything that was true is

them contains words, grammatical construc—

another question, one that we cannot answer sim—

tions, and theological ideas that never occur in

ply by appealing to the number of surviving manu—

the author’s writings elsewhere (or that conflict

scripts that preserve their writings.

with his other writings), then that form of the

Since this has been a historical introduction to

text is less likely to be original than the other.

the New Testament rather than a theological one,

we have not entered into this question of the truth

claims of the New Testament. Historians are no

All of these criteria need to be applied to any

more qualified to answer questions of ultimate

particular passage in order to decide which reading

truth than anyone else. If historians do answer

preserved among the manuscripts is likely to be

such questions, they do so not in their capacity as

original. In many instances, the arguments coa—

historians but in their capacity as believers or

lesce, so that the earliest and best manuscripts also

philosophers or theologians (or skeptics). What

support the reading that is most difficult and that

the historian can say as a historian, however, is

conforms most closely with the author’s own lan—

that the early Christian truth claims have been

guage and style. When this happens, we can be

handed down from one generation to the next, not

relatively certain that we have uncovered the ear—

only orally but also through written texts that

liest available form of the text.

have inspired hope and faith in believers and,

sometimes, hatred and fear in their enemies.

That these texts were often changed in the

CONCLUSION:

process of their transmission is a useful lesson for

THE ORIGINAL TEXT

us. Only rarely have the documents of the New

OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Testament been read out of historical interest,

pure and simple. For those who read, heard, and

At one time or another, you may have heard

transcribed these texts over the centuries, before

someone claim that the New Testament can be

the invention of “history” as a modern disci—

trusted because it is the best attested book from

pline, they preserved a living faith, one that

the ancient world, that because there are more

could continue to change and grow and that now

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continues to change and grow. Whereas it may

or otherwise, to study the tradition and to read

be the task of a believer to decide where to stand

its texts, to see whence it came, to learn how it

within this great living entity of the Christian

changed, and to understand how it became what

tradition, it is the task of the historian, Christian

it did.

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book, ideal for beginners, which shows how the

tant aspect of New Testament textual criticism; for

changes among the manuscripts create new meanings

advanced students.

for the Gospel texts themselves.

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Adoptionism: The view that Jesus was not divine, but a flesh-and-blood human being who had been adopted at baptism to be God’s son.

Aeons: In Gnostic myth, divine beings who are offspring of the one true, unknowable God.

Alexander the Great: The great military leader of Macedonia (356–323 B.C.E.) whose armies conquered much of the eastern Mediterranean and who was responsible for the spread of Greek culture (Hellenism) throughout the lands he conquered.

Antiochus Epiphanes: The Syrian monarch who attempted to force the Jews of Palestine to adopt Greek culture, leading to the Maccabean revolt in 167

B.C.E.

Antitheses: Literally, “contrary statements,” used as a technical term to designate six sayings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:21– 48), in which he states a Jewish law (“You have heard it said . . .”) and then sets his own interpretation over it (“But I say to you . . .”).

Apocalypse: A literary genre in which an author, usually pseudonymous, reports symbolic dreams or visions, given or interpreted through an angelic mediator, which reveal the heavenly mysteries that can make sense of earthly realities.

Apocalypticism: A worldview held by many ancient Jews and Christians that maintained that the present age is controlled by forces of evil, but that these will be destroyed at the end of time when God intervenes in history to bring in his kingdom, an event thought to be imminent.

Apocrypha: A Greek term meaning, literally, “hidden things,” used of books on the fringe of the Jewish or Christian canons of Scripture. The Jewish Apocrypha comprises books found in the Septuagint but not in the Hebrew Bible, including 1 and 2 Maccabees and 4 Ezra.

Apollonius: A pagan philosopher and holy man of the first century C.E., reported to do miracles and to deliver divinely inspired teachings, a man believed by some of his followers to be a son of God.

Apology: A reasoned explanation and justification of one’s beliefs and/or practices, from a Greek word meaning “defense.”

Apostle: Generally, one who is commissioned to perform a task, from a Greek word meaning “sent”; in early Christianity, the term was used to designate special emissaries of the faith who were understood to be representatives of Christ. See also Disciple.

Apostolic Fathers: A collection of noncanonical writings penned by proto-orthodox Christians of the second century who were traditionally thought to have been followers of the apostles; some of these works were considered Scripture in parts of the early church.

Associations, Voluntary: In the Greco-Roman world, privately organized small groups of people who shared common interests and met periodically to socialize, enjoy a common meal, and conduct business; two of the best known types 451

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were trade associations (comprised of members of the same profession) and burial societies.

Augurs: A group of pagan priests in Rome who could interpret the will of the gods by “taking the auspices.” See also Auspicy.

Auspicy: A form of divination in which specially appointed priests could determine the will of the gods by observing the flight patterns or eating habits of birds. See also Divination.

Autograph: The original manuscript of a literary text, from a Greek word meaning “the writing itself.”

B.C.E. / C.E.: Abbreviations for “before the common era” and the “common era” respectively, used as exact equivalents of the Christian designations

“before Christ” (B.C.) and “anno domini” (A.D., a Latin phrase meaning,

“year of our Lord”).

Beatitudes: A Latin word meaning, literally, “blessings,” used as a technical term for the sayings of Jesus that begin the Sermon on the Mount (e.g.,

“Blessed are the poor in spirit . . .,” Matt 5:3–12).

Beloved Disciple: Nickname for the “disciple whom Jesus loved” in the Gospel of John, who plays a prominent role in the Passion Narrative but is never named. Older tradition identified him as John the son of Zebedee and claimed that it was he who wrote the Gospel.

Canon: From a Greek word meaning “ruler” or “straight edge.” The term came to designate any recognized collection of texts; the canon of the New Testament is thus the collection of books that Christians accept as authoritative.

Catholic: From a Greek word meaning “universal” or “general,” used of the New Testament epistles James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, Jude, and sometimes Hebrews (the “Catholic” epistles) to differentiate them from the letters of Paul.

Christ. See Messiah.

Christology: Any teaching about the nature of Christ. See also Adoptionism; Docetism.

Contextual Method: A method used to study a literary text first by determining its social and historical context and then using that context to help explain the text’s meaning.

Contextual Credibility, Criterion of: One of the criteria commonly used by scholars to establish historically reliable material; with respect to the historical Jesus, the criterion maintains that if a saying or deed of Jesus cannot be credibly fit into his own first-century Palestinian context, then it cannot be regarded as authentic.

Cosmos: The Greek word for “world.”

Covenant: An agreement or treaty between two social or political parties that have come to terms; used by ancient Jews in reference to the pact that God made to protect and preserve them as his chosen people in exchange for their devotion and adherence to his law.

Cult: Shortened form of cultus deorum, a Latin phrase that literally means “care of the gods,” generally used of any set of religious practices of worship. In pagan religions, these normally involved acts of sacrifice and prayer.

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Cynics: Greco-Roman philosophers, commonly portrayed as street preachers who harangued their audiences and urged them to find true freedom by being liberated from all social conventions. The Cynics’ decision to live “according to nature” with none of the niceties of life led their opponents to call them “dogs” (in Greek, cynes).

Daimonia: Category of divine beings in the Greco-Roman world. Daimonia were widely thought to be less powerful than the gods but far more powerful than humans and capable of influencing human lives.

Dead Sea Scrolls: Ancient Jewish writings discovered in several caves near the northwest edge of the Dead Sea, widely thought to have been produced by a group of apocalyptically minded Essenes who lived in a monastic-like community from Maccabean times through the Jewish War of 66–70 C.E. See also Essenes; Qumran.

Demeter: The Greek and Roman goddess of grain, worshipped in a prominent mystery cult in Eleusis, Greece. See also Persephone.

Demiurge: Literally “Maker,” a term used in Gnostic texts to designate the powerful (but inferior) deity that created the world.

Deutero-Pauline Epistles: The letters of Ephesians, Colossians, and 2

Thessalonians, which have a “secondary” (Deutero) standing in the Pauline corpus because scholars debate whether they were written by Paul.

Diaspora: Greek for “dispersion,” a term that refers to the dispersion of Jews away from Palestine into other parts of the Mediterranean, beginning with the Babylonian conquests in the sixth century B.C.E.

Disciple: A follower, one who is “taught” (as opposed to an apostle, one who is

“sent” as an emissary).

Dissimilarity, Criterion of: One of the criteria commonly used by scholars to establish historically reliable material; the criterion maintains that if a saying or deed of Jesus does not coincide with (or works against) the agenda of the early Christians, it is more likely to be authentic.

Divination: Any practice used to ascertain the will of the gods. See also A uspicy; Extispicy.

Docetism: The view that Jesus was not a human being but only appeared to be, from a Greek word meaning “to seem” or “to appear.”

Ebionites: A group of second-century Adoptionists who maintained Jewish practices and Jewish forms of worship.

Egyptian, The: A Jewish apocalyptic prophet of the first century C.E. who predicted the destruction of the walls of Jerusalem, mentioned by Josephus.

Epicureans: Ancient group of followers of the Greek philosopher Epicurus, who maintained that the gods were removed from the concerns of human life and so were not to be feared or placated. Happiness came in establishing a peaceful harmony with other like-minded people and enjoying the simple pleasures of daily existence.

Equestrian: The second-highest socioeconomic class of ancient Rome (below Senator), comprising wealthy aristocrats.

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Eschatology: Literally the “study of (or doctrine of) the end times.” A technical term that is used to describe notions of what will happen at the “end”—

either the end of a person’s life or, more commonly, the end of the world.

Essenes: An apocalyptic and ascetic Jewish sect started during the Maccabean period, members of which are generally thought to have produced the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Extispicy: A form of divination in Greek and Roman religions in which a specially appointed priest (haruspex) would examine the entrails of a sacrificed animal to determine whether it had been accepted by the gods.

Fourth Philosophy: A group of Jews that Josephus mentions but leaves unnamed, characterized by their insistence on violent opposition to the foreign domination of the Promised Land. See also Sicarii; Zealots.

Four-Source Hypothesis: A solution to the “Synoptic Problem” which maintains that there are four sources that lie behind the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke: (a) Mark was the source for much of the narrative of Matthew and Luke; (2) Q was the source for the sayings found in Matthew and Luke but not in Mark; (3) M provided the material found only in Matthew’s Gospel; and (4) L provided the material found only in Luke.

Gamaliel: A famous rabbi of first-century C.E. Judaism.

Gematria: Jewish method of interpreting a word on the basis of the numerical value of its letters (in both Greek and Hebrew, the letters of the alphabet also serve as numerals.)

Genius: A man’s guardian spirit (that of a woman was called Iuno).

Gentile: A Jewish designation for a non-Jew.

Gnosticism: A group of ancient religions, some of them closely related to Christianity, that maintained that elements of the divine had become entrapped in this evil world of matter and could be released only when they acquired the secret gnosis (Greek for “knowledge”) of who they were and of how they could escape. Gnosis was generally thought to be brought by an emissary of the divine realm.

Greco-Roman World: The lands (and culture) around the Mediterranean from the time of Alexander the Great to the Emperor Constantine, roughly 300

B.C.E. to 300 C.E. (see also box 2.2).

Hanina ben Dosa: A well-known Galilean rabbi of the first century, who was reputed to have done miracles comparable to those of Jesus.

Haruspex: In Roman religion, a specially trained priest skilled in the practice of extispicy.

Hasmoneans: An alternative name for the Maccabeans, the family of Jewish priests that began the revolt against Syria in 167 B.C.E. and that ruled Israel prior to the Roman conquest of 63 B.C.E.

Hellenization: The spread of Greek language and culture (Hellenism) throughout the Mediterranean, starting with the conquests of Alexander the Great.

Heracleon: Gnostic living around 170 C.E. who wrote a commentary on the Gospel of John, the first known to have been written by a Christian on any part of the Bible.

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Heresy: Any worldview or set of beliefs deemed by those in power to be deviant, from a Greek word meaning “choice” (because “heretics” have “chosen” to deviate from the “truth”.) See also Orthodoxy.

High Priest: Prior to 70 C.E., the highest-ranking authority in Judaism when there was no Jewish king, in charge of the operation of the Jerusalem Temple and its priests. See also Sadducees; Sanhedrin.

Historiography: The literary reconstruction of historical events; the writing of history; and the study and analysis of historical narrative.

Holy of Holies: The innermost part of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, which was completely empty, but in which God’s presence on earth was believed to dwell. No one could enter this room except the High Priest on the Day of Atonement, to make a sacrifice for the sins of the people.

Honi the “Circle-Drawer”: A first-century B.C.E. Galilean who was reputed to have done miracles and had experiences similar to those of Jesus.

Independent Attestation, Criterion of: One of the criteria commonly used by scholars to establish historically reliable material; with respect to the historical Jesus, the criterion maintains that if a saying or deed of Jesus is attested independently by more than one source, it is more likely to be authentic.

Isis: Egyptian goddess worshipped in mystery cults throughout the Roman world.

Josephus: First-century Jewish historian, appointed court historian by the Roman emperor Vespasian, whose works The Jewish War and The Antiquities of the Jews are principal resources for information about life in first-century Palestine.

Judas Maccabeus: Jewish patriot who led the family responsible for spearhead-ing the Maccabean revolt. See also Hasmoneans.

Judicial Model: One of the two principal ways that Paul understood or conceptualized the relationship between Christ’s death and salvation. According to this model, salvation is comparable to a legal decision, in which God, who is both lawmaker and judge, treats humans as “not-guilty” for committing acts of transgression (= sins) against his law—even though they are guilty— because Jesus’ death has been accepted as a payment. See also Participationist Model.

Justification by Faith: The doctrine found in Paul’s letters (see “Judicial Model”), that a person is “made right” (= justified) with God by trusting in the effects of Christ’s death, rather than by doing the works prescribed by the Jewish Law.

Justin Martyr: One of the earliest “apologists,” Justin lived in Rome in the mid-second century.

Literary-Historical Method: A method used to study a literary text by asking how its genre text functioned in its historical context and by exploring, then, its historical meaning (i.e., seeing how its meaning would have been understood to its earliest readers) in light of its literary characteristics.

L: A document (or documents, written or oral) that no longer survives, but that evidently provided Luke with traditions that are not found in Matthew or Mark. See also Four-Source Hypothesis.

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Lares: Household deities commonly worshiped in homes throughout the Roman world, thought to protect the home and its inhabitants, and often identified with the spirits of the family’s ancestors.

M: A document (or documents, written or oral) that no longer survives, but that evidently provided Matthew with traditions that are not found in Mark or Luke. See also Four-Source Hypothesis.

Maccabean Revolt: The Jewish uprising against the Syrians and their king, Antiochus Epiphanes, starting in 167 B.C.E., in protest against the forced imposition of Hellenistic culture and the proscription of Jewish practices such as circumcision. See also Hasmoneans.

Manuscript: Any handwritten copy of a literary text.

Marcion: A second-century Christian scholar and evangelist, later labeled a heretic for his docetic Christology and his belief in two Gods—the harsh legalistic God of the Jews and the merciful loving God of Jesus—views that he claimed to have found in the writings of Paul.

Markan Priority: The view that Mark was the first of the Synoptic Gospels to be written and was one of the sources used by Matthew and Luke.

Melito of Sardis: Second-century Christian leader from Asia Minor, whose eloquent Easter sermon on the Old Testament story of Exodus casts vitriolic aspersions on the Jews.

Messiah: From a Hebrew word that literally means “anointed one,” translated into Greek as Christos, from which derives our English word Christ. In the first century C.E., there was a wide range of expectations about whom this anointed one might be, some Jews anticipating a future warrior king like David, others a cosmic redeemer from heaven, others an authoritative priest, and still others a powerful spokesperson from God like Moses.

Mishnah: A collection of oral traditions passed on by generations of Jewish rabbis who saw themselves as the descendants of the Pharisees, finally put into writing around 200 C.E.. See also Talmud.

Mithras: A Persian deity worshipped in a mystery cult spread throughout the Roman world.

Muratorian Fragment: A fragmentary text discovered in the 18th century, named after its Italian discoverer, Muratori, which contains, in Latin, a list of Christian books that its author considered canonical; the canon is usually considered to have been produced in the late second century, in or around Rome.

Mystery Cults: A group of Greco-Roman religions that focused on the devotees’ individual needs both in this life and in life after death, so named because their initiation rituals and cultic practices involved the disclosure of hidden things that were to be kept secret from outsiders.

Nag Hammadi: Village in upper (southern) Egypt, near the place where a collection of Gnostic writings, including the Gospel of Thomas, were discovered in 1945.

Oracle: A sacred place where the gods answered questions brought by their worshippers to the resident holy person—a priest or, more commonly, a

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priestess—who would often deliver the divine response out of a trance-like state; the term can also refer to the divine answer itself.

Origen: A Christian philosopher and theologian from early third-century Alexandria, Egypt, who wrote one of the best known Christian apologies.

Orthodoxy: From the Greek, literally meaning “right opinion”; a term used to designate a worldview or set of beliefs acknowledged to be true by the majority of those in power. See also Heresy.

Paganism: Any of the polytheistic religions of the Greco–Roman world, an umbrella term for ancient Mediterranean religions other than Judaism and Christianity.

Papyrus: A reed-like plant that grows principally around the Nile, whose stalk was used for the manufacture of a paper-like writing surface in antiquity.

Parousia: A Greek word meaning “presence” or “coming,” used as a technical term to refer to the Second Coming of Jesus in judgment at the end of time.

Participationist Model: One of the two principal ways that Paul understood or conceptualized the relationship between Christ’s death and salvation. This model understood sin to be a cosmic force that enslaved people; salvation (liberation from bondage) came by participating in Christ’s death through baptism. See also “Judicial Model.”

Passion: From a Greek word that means “suffering,” used as a technical term to refer to the traditions of Jesus’ last days, up to and including his crucifixion (hence the “Passion narrative”).

Passover: The most important and widely celebrated annual festival of Jews in Roman times, commemorating the exodus from Egypt.

Pastoral Epistles: New Testament letters that Paul allegedly wrote to two pastors, Timothy (1 and 2 Timothy) and Titus, concerning their pastoral duties.

Pauline Corpus: All of the letters of the New Testament that claim to be written by Paul, including the Deutero-Pauline and Pastoral Epistles.

Penates: Household deities commonly worshipped throughout the Roman world, thought to protect the pantry and foodstuffs in the home.

Pentateuch: Literally, the “five scrolls” in Greek, a term used to designate the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, also known as the Torah or the Law of Moses.

Pentecost: A Jewish agricultural festival, celebrated fifty days after the feast of the Passover, from the Greek word for fifty ( pentakosia).

Persephone: Daughter of the Greek goddess Demeter, reported to have been abducted to the underworld by Hades but allowed to return to life every year to be reunited temporarily with her grieving mother; also known as Kore.

Pesher: An ancient Jewish way of interpreting Scripture, used commonly in the commentaries from the Dead Sea Scrolls, in which a text was explained as having its fulfillment in persons or events of the present day.

Pharisees: A Jewish sect, which may have originated during the Maccabean period, that emphasized strict adherence to the purity laws set forth in the Torah. See also Mishnah.

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Philo: A famous Jewish philosopher who lived in Alexandria Egypt in the first century, who saw the Jewish Scriptures as completely compatible with the insights of Greek philosophy and worked to interpret them accordingly.

Prescript: The formal beginning of an epistle, normally including the names of the sender and addressees, a greeting, and often a prayer or wish for good health.

Proto-orthodox Christianity: A form of Christianity endorsed by some Christians of the second and third centuries (including the Apostolic Fathers), which promoted doctrines that were declared “orthodox” in the fourth and later centuries by the victorious Christian party, in opposition to such groups as the Ebionites, the Marcionites, and the Gnostics.

Pseudepigrapha: From the Greek, literally meaning “false writings” and commonly referring to ancient noncanonical Jewish and Christian literary texts, many of which were written pseudonymously.

Pseudonymity: The practice of writing under a fictitious name, evident in a large number of pagan, Jewish, and Christian writings from antiquity.

Q Source: The source used by both Matthew and Luke for the stories they share, principally sayings, that are not found in Mark; from the German word Quelle, “source.” The document no longer exists, but can be reconstructed on the basis of Matthew and Luke.

Qumran: Place near the northwest shore of the Dead Sea, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in 1946, evidently home to the group of Essenes who had used the Scrolls as part of their library.

Redaction criticism: The study of how authors modified or edited (i.e., redacted) their sources in view of their own vested interests and concerns.

Rhetoric: The art of persuasion; in the Greco-Roman world, this involved training in the construction and analysis of argumentation and was the principal subject of higher education.

Roman Empire: All of the lands conquered by Rome and ruled, ultimately, by the Roman emperor, starting with Caesar Augustus in 27 B.C.E.; prior to that, Rome was a republic ruled by the Senate ( see also box 2.4).

Sadducees: A Jewish party associated with the Temple cult and the Jewish priests who ran it, comprising principally the Jewish aristocracy in Judea. The party leader, the High Priest, served as the highest ranking local official and chief liaison with the Roman governor.

Samaritans: Inhabitants of Samaria, located between Galilee and Judea, considered by some Jews to be apostates and half-breeds, since their lineage could be traced back to intermarriages between Jews and pagan peoples several centuries before the New Testament period.

Sanhedrin: A council of Jewish leaders headed by the High Priest, which played an advisory role in matters of religious and civil policy.

Scribes, Christian: Literate Christians responsible for copying sacred scripture.

Scribes, Jewish: Highly educated experts in Jewish Law (and possibly its copyists) during the Greco-Roman period.

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Senators: The highest-ranking members of the Roman aristocracy, comprising the wealthiest men of Rome, responsible for governing the vast Roman bureaucracy during the republic and still active and highly visible during the time of the empire.

Septuagint: The translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek, so named because of a tradition that seventy (Latin: septuaginta) Jewish scholars had produced it.

Sermon on the Mount: The sermon found only in Matthew 5–7, which preserves many of the best known sayings of Jesus (including Matthew’s form of the Beatitudes, the antitheses, and the Lord’s Prayer).

Sicarii: A Latin term meaning, literally, “daggermen,” a designation for a group of first-century Jews responsible for the assassination of Jewish aristocrats thought to have collaborated with the Romans. See also Fourth Philosophy.

Signs Source: A document, which no longer survives, thought by many scholars to have been used as one of the sources of Jesus’ ministry in the Fourth Gospel; it reputedly narrated a number of the miraculous deeds of Jesus.

Socio-historical Method: A method used to study a literary text that seeks to reconstruct the social history of the community that lay behind it.

Son of God: In most Greco-Roman circles, the designation of a person born to a god, able to perform miraculous deeds and/or to convey superhuman teachings; in Jewish circles, the designation of persons chosen to stand in a special relationship with the God of Israel, including the ancient Jewish Kings.

Son of Man: A term whose meaning is much disputed among modern scholars, used in some ancient apocalyptic texts to refer to a cosmic judge sent from heaven at the end of time.

Stoics: Greco-Roman philosophers who urged people to understand the way the world worked and to live in accordance with it, letting nothing outside of themselves affect their internal state of well-being.

Superstition: In the ancient world, superstition was understood by the highly educated upper classes as an excessive fear of the gods that drove a person to be excessively scrupulous in trying to avoid their displeasure.

Synagogue: Jewish place of worship and prayer, from a Greek word that literally means “being brought together.”

Synoptic Gospels: The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which narrate so many of the same stories that they can be placed side by side in parallel columns and so “be seen together” (the literal meaning of “synoptic”).

Synoptic Problem: The problem of explaining the similarities and differences between the three Synoptic Gospels. See also Markan Priority; Q Source.

Talmud: The great collection of ancient Jewish traditions that comprises the Mishnah and the later commentaries on the Mishnah, called the Gemarah.

There are two collections of the Talmud, one made in Palestine during the early fifth century C.E. and the other in Babylon perhaps a century later. The Babylonian Talmud is generally considered the more authoritative.

Tertullian: A brilliant and acerbic Christian author from the late second and early third century. Tertullian, who was from North Africa and wrote in Latin, is one of the best known early Christian apologists.

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Textual Criticism: An academic discipline that seeks to establish the original wording of a text based on the surviving manuscripts.

Thecla: A (legendary) female disciple of Paul whose adventures are narrated in the novel-like work of the second century, The Acts of Paul and Thecla.

Theudas: (1) A first-century Jewish apocalyptic prophet (mentioned by Josephus) who predicted the parting of the Jordan River and, evidently, the reconquest of the Promised Land by the chosen people. (2) An early Gnostic Christian, allegedly the disciple of Paul and the teacher of Valentinus.

Torah: A Hebrew word that means “guidance” or “direction,” but that is usually translated “law.” As a technical term it designates either the Law of God given to Moses or the first five books of the Jewish Bible that Moses was traditionally thought to have written—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

Tradition: Any doctrine, idea, practice, or custom that has been handed down from one person to another.

Two Ways: The doctrine found in the Didache and the Epistle of Barnabas, that people must choose between two ways of living, the way of life (or light) and the way of death (or darkness).

Undisputed Pauline Epistles: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon—letters that scholars overwhelmingly judge to be have been written by Paul. See also Deutero-Pauline epistles; Pastoral Epistles.

Valentinus: Second-century Gnostic Christian who traced his intellectual lineage through his teacher Theudas back to the apostle Paul.

Zealots: A group of Galilean Jews who fled to Jerusalem during the uprising against Rome in 66–70 C.E., who overthrew the reigning aristocracy in the city and urged violent resistance to the bitter end. See also Fourth Philosophy.

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