

## Abbreviations Used in the Bibliographical Listings

The academic field of biblical studies employs a number of standard abbreviations when listing bibliographical references. The following abbreviations are used throughout the files on this website. Most of the references are to series in which books are published.

As an example, take the following bibliographical reference:

Köstenberger, Andreas J. *John*. BECNT. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004.

The abbreviation BECNT indicates that this book is published in the Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament series.

Some of the series titles are in German, but this does not mean that all of the individual books published in that series are in German. All bibliographic works listed in these files are in English.

AB	Anchor Bible
ABRL	Anchor Bible Reference Library
ABS	Approaches to Biblical Studies
AcBib	Academia Biblica
ACNT	Augsburg Commentaries on the New Testament
AGJU	Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums
ALGHJ	Arbeiten zur Literatur und Geschichte des hellenistischen Judentums
AnBib	Analecta biblica
ANTC	Abingdon New Testament Commentaries
ASBT	Acadia Studies in Bible and Theology
ASNU	Acta seminarii neotestamentici upsaliensis
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
BETL	Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologicarum lovaniensium
BGBE	Beiträge zur Geschichte der biblischen Exegese
BibSem	The Biblical Seminar
BIS	Biblical Interpretation Series
BLS	Bible and Literature Series
BMW	Bible in the Modern World
BNTC	Black's New Testament Commentaries
BTCB	Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible
BZNW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBET	Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology
CBNT	Coniectanea biblica, New Testament
CBQMS	Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series

CCSS	Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture
CCT	Chalice Commentaries for Today
CIRC	Cambridge Introduction to Roman Civilization
CMBI	Cambridge Methods in Biblical Interpretation
ConBNT	Coniectanea biblica: New Testament Series
ConcC	Concordia Commentaries
ContC	Continental Commentaries
CRINT	Compendia rerum iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum
EBS	Encountering Biblical Studies
ECC	Eerdmans Critical Commentary
EI	Essential Inquiries
ESEC	Emory Studies in Early Christianity
FAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
FCNTECW	Feminist Companion to the New Testament and Early Christian Writings
FRLANT	Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments
GBS	Guides to Biblical Scholarship
GNS	Good News Studies
GNTÉ	Guides to New Testament Exegesis
GP	Gospel Perspectives
HCSPTH	Holy Cross Studies in Patristic Theology and History
HDR	Harvard Dissertations in Religion
HNTC	Harper's New Testament Commentary
HTS	Harvard Theological Studies
HUT	Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie
HvTStSup	Hervormde Teologiese Studies Supplement Series
IBC	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
IBT	Interpreting Biblical Texts
ICC	International Critical Commentary
IRT	Issues in Religion and Theology
JPTSup	Journal of Pentecostal Theology: Supplement Series
JSJSup	Journal for the Study of Judaism: Supplement Series
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series
LCBI	Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation
LEC	Library of Early Christianity
LNTS	Library of New Testament Studies
LPS	Library of Pauline Studies
LTPM	Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs
MBS	Message of Biblical Spirituality
McNTS	McMaster New Testament Studies
NABPRDS	National Association of Baptist Professors of Religion Dissertation Series
NCamBC	New Cambridge Bible Commentary
NCenBC	New Century Bible Commentary
NColBC	New Collegeville Bible Commentary
NGS	New Gospel Studies
NIBC	New International Bible Commentary

NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NovTSup	Novum Testamentum Supplements
NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology
NTC	The New Testament in Context
NTL	New Testament Library
NTM	New Testament Monographs
NTOA	Novum Testamentum et Orbis Antiquus
NTR	New Testament Readings
NTSCE	New Testament Studies in Contextual Exegesis
NTT	New Testament Theology
NTTS	New Testament Tools and Studies
OBO	Orbis biblicus et orientalis
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
OTL	Old Testament Library
PBM	Paternoster Biblical Monographs
PC	Proclamation Commentaries
PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
PTMS	Princeton Theological Monographs Series
RBS	Resources for Biblical Study
RGRW	Religions in the Greco-Roman World
RNTS	Reading the New Testament Series
SAC	Studies in Antiquity and Christianity
SBEC	Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity
SBL	Studies in Biblical Literature
SBLABS	Society of Biblical Literature Archaeology and Biblical Studies
SBLAcBib	Society of Biblical Literature Academia Biblica
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLHBS	Society of Biblical Literature History of Biblical Studies
SBLMS	Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series
SBLRBS	Society of Biblical Literature Resources for Biblical Study
SBLSBS	Society of Biblical Literature Sources for Biblical Study
SBLSS	Society of Biblical Literature Semeia Studies
SBLSymS	Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series
SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology
SFSHJ	South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism
SH	Scripture and Hermeneutics
SHBC	Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary
SJ	Studia judaica
SJC	Studies in Judaism and Christianity
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
SNTSU	Studien zum Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt
SNTW	Studies in the New Testament and Its World
SP	Sacra pagina
SubBi	Subsidia biblica
TC	Thornapple Commentaries

TGST	Tesi Gregoriana, Serie Teologica
THNTC	Two Horizons New Testament Commentary
TI	Theological Inquiries
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
TST	Toronto Studies in Theology
USFISFCJ	University of South Florida International Studies in Formative Christianity and Judaism
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WestBC	Westminster Bible Companion
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZS	Zacchaeus Studies

## What the Bible Says about the Word of God

- One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God (Deut. 8:3; Matt. 4:4).
- Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path (Ps. 119:105).
- Every word of God proves true (Prov. 30:5).
- So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it (Isa. 55:11).
- Blessed . . . are those who hear the word of God and obey it! (Luke 11:28).
- The Word became flesh and lived among us (John 1:14).
- Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (Eph. 6:17).
- The word of God is not chained (2 Tim. 2:9).
- The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Heb. 4:12).
- By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God (Heb. 11:3).
- Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves (James 1:22).
- You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God (1 Pet. 1:23).
- The word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one (1 John 2:14).

## What the Bible Says about Scripture

- You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God (Matt. 22:29).
- You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf (John 5:39).
- The scripture cannot be annulled (John 10:35).
- Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and . . . he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures (1 Cor. 15:3–4).
- The scripture has imprisoned all things under the power of sin, so that what was promised through faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe (Gal. 3:22).
- Give attention to the public reading of scripture (1 Tim. 4:13).
- All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16).
- No prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God (2 Pet. 1:20–21).
- There are some things in them [Paul's letters] hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures (2 Pet. 3:16).

## Dead Sea Scrolls

The Dead Sea Scrolls are a collection of over eight hundred manuscripts discovered by archaeologists in several caves around the Dead Sea. The first scrolls were found in 1947, and many more were unearthed in the ensuing years. The manuscripts had been stored in sealed jars, and some care had been taken to preserve them, most likely by the Essenes, who apparently operated a monastic community in the area. The manuscripts date from the New Testament era or slightly before. Among the finds:

- manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), including parts of every book, except Esther and Nehemiah, and also many books of the Apocrypha; most of these are over a thousand years older than any copies of these books that we possessed previously
- numerous biblical commentaries (called *pesharim*) that interpret passages in psalms and prophetic works as predictions of what would happen to the community
- the *Temple Scroll*, a work that reinterprets and systematizes laws from the Pentateuch in a manner analogous to the much later Jewish Talmud; perhaps this was similar to what the Pharisees also did orally in their “tradition of the elders” (Matt. 15:2)
- the *Community Rule* and the *Damascus Document*, two works that spell out regulations for the sect: procedures for joining, duties of members, qualifications for leadership, disciplinary policies, and so forth
- the *War Scroll*, an apocalyptic work that provides a blueprint for an imminent end-time conflict, describing how the children of light will triumph over the children of darkness
- the *Messianic Rule*, a handbook for the future that details life in a postwar righteous community ruled by two messiahs, one a king and the other a priest
- a wealth of ancient liturgical materials

## New Testament References to Samaritans

Matthew 10:5	Jesus instructs his disciples not to take their ministry to any city of the Samaritans.
Luke 9:52–55	Jesus rebukes his disciples after they want to call fire down from heaven to consume a Samaritan village that would not receive them.
Luke 10:30–37	Jesus tells the parable of “the Good Samaritan.”
Luke 17:11	Jesus passes through Samaria on his way from Galilee to Jerusalem.
Luke 17:12–19	Jesus heals ten lepers, and the only one who returns to give thanks is a Samaritan.
John 4:4–42	Jesus converses with a Samaritan woman at a well; other Samaritans persuade him to stay with them for two days, and they acknowledge him as the Savior of the world.
John 8:48	Some Jews accuse Jesus of being a Samaritan (after he has suggested that they are not the true children of Abraham).
Acts 1:8	Jesus says that his disciples are to be his witnesses “in Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”
Acts 8:5–25	Many Samaritans, including Simon Magus, accept baptism from Philip the evangelist; Peter and John bring the gift of the Spirit to the Samaritan converts and preach the gospel to many Samaritan villages.



## Roman Emperors of the New Testament Period

Dates	Emperor	Contact with New Testament Concerns
27 BCE–14 CE	Augustus (Octavian)	usually regarded as the first Roman emperor; credited with establishing the <i>Pax Romana</i> ; birth of Jesus during his reign (Luke 2:1)
14–37 CE	Tiberius	ministry and death of Jesus during his reign (Luke 3:1); appointed and later removed Pilate as governor of Judea; his image would have been on the coin shown to Jesus (Mark 12:14–17); see also Luke 23:2; John 19:12, 15; Acts 17:7
37–41 CE	Caligula (Gaius)	established reputation of emperors for cruelty and decadence; demanded that a statue of himself be placed in Jewish temple but died before this could be carried out
41–54 CE	Claudius	installed as a figurehead but turned out to be surprisingly competent; expelled Jews from Rome due to a disturbance over “Christus,” which brought Priscilla and Aquila into contact with Paul (Acts 18:1–4); made Herod Agrippa I king over Palestine (Acts 12:1–3)
54–68 CE	Nero	an exemplary ruler during first five years, then turned self-indulgent and violent; responsible for horrific persecution of Christians; Peter was crucified and Paul beheaded during his reign (ca. 62–64)
69 CE	Galba Otho Vitellius	a time of civil war known as the “Year of Four Emperors”; Galba, Otho, and Vitellius rose to power in quick and forgettable successions before stability was restored under Vespasian
69–79 CE	Vespasian	the Roman general in the war with the Jews; returned to Rome to seize power when Nero died
79–81 CE	Titus	son of Vespasian; took over command of troops when his father became emperor; crushed the Jewish rebellion, destroyed the temple in Jerusalem, and presided over prolonged siege of Masada
81–96 CE	Domitian	reported to have persecuted Christians, but solid evidence for this is lacking; his reign perhaps forms the background for the anti-Roman sentiments in the book of Revelation

## Roman Rulers in Palestine: New Testament References

37–4 BCE ruled all Palestine	<b>Herod the Great</b> Matt. 2:1–19; Luke 1:5
4 BCE–6 CE ruled Judea, Samaria	<b>Archelaus</b> (a son of Herod the Great) Matt. 2:22
4 BCE–39 CE ruled Galilee	<b>Herod Antipas</b> (a son of Herod the Great) Matt. 14:1–12; Mark 6:14–29; Luke 3:19–20; 9:7–9; 13:31–33; 23:6–12
26–36 CE ruled Judea	<b>Pontius Pilate</b> Matt. 27:1–26; Mark 15:1–5; Luke 3:1; 13:1–5; 23; John 18:28– 19:22, 31–38; Acts 3:13; 4:27; 13:28; 1 Tim. 6:13
41–44 CE ruled all Palestine (Galilee from 37–40 CE)	<b>Herod Agrippa I</b> (a grandson of Herod the Great) Acts 12:1–23
52–60 CE ruled Judea	<b>Felix</b> Acts 23:23–24:27
60–62 CE ruled Judea	<b>Festus</b> Acts 24:27; 25–26
44–100 CE ruled Galilee	<b>Herod Agrippa II</b> (a son of Herod Agrippa I) Acts 25–26

## Two Roman Writers: Suetonius and Tacitus

**SUETONIUS** (ca. 69–135 CE). Suetonius served as secretary to the emperor Hadrian and became one of the most important historians of the Roman Empire. His book *Lives of the Caesars* covers the emperors from Julius Caesar through Domitian. Although he has a penchant for telling salacious stories, he also had access to the imperial archives and is able to quote directly from numerous letters and other documents related to Roman rule. In one place he writes that the emperor Claudius “banished from Rome all the Jews, who were continually making disturbances at the instigation of one Chrestus” (*Life of Claudius* 25). Most scholars think that this “Chrestus” is a mangled spelling of the Latin for “Christ.” The event to which Suetonius refers, then, is the same as that reported in the book of Acts, where we hear that Christian Jews were expelled from Rome by Claudius (Acts 18:2).

**TACITUS** (ca. 56–117 CE). Tacitus was a Roman historian whose two works (*Annals* and *Histories*) combined to cover the period from the death of Caesar Augustus to the end of Domitian’s reign. His work is considered to be fairly accurate, though it is obvious that he wanted to portray the emperors in the worst possible light. Unfortunately, only portions of the two books have survived; the *Histories* breaks off just as he is beginning to tell about the fall of Jerusalem. Tacitus does, however, mention the crucifixion of Jesus in one passage, and he also describes the persecution of Christians:

Nero had self-acknowledged Christians arrested. Then, on their information, large numbers of others were condemned. . . . Their deaths were made farcical. Dressed in wild animals’ skins, they were torn to pieces by wild dogs, or crucified, or made into torches to be ignited after dark as substitutes for daylight. . . . Despite their guilt as Christians and the ruthless punishment it deserved, the victims were pitied, for it was felt that they were being sacrificed to one man’s brutality rather than to the national interest. (*Annals* 15.44)

## Two Jewish Writers: Philo and Josephus

**PHILO OF ALEXANDRIA** (20 BCE–50 CE). Philo was a contemporary of Jesus, though he shows no knowledge of ever having heard of Jesus. He lived in Alexandria (in northern Egypt) and provides us with a fairly extreme example of Hellenistic Judaism. His writings try to reconcile the Hebrew scriptures with Greek philosophy (especially Platonism and Stoicism). He wants to show Jews that many Hellenistic ideas are actually taught (often allegorically) in their scriptures, and he wants to show others that the Jewish religion is an intellectually respectable and profound faith. His writings sometimes reveal things about the Jewish and Roman worlds that might otherwise be unknown to us (e.g., a section of one book describing the beliefs and practices of the Essenes).

**JOSEPHUS** (37–100 CE). Josephus was a Jewish aristocrat born into a priestly family just one generation after Jesus. He became an important historian, concentrating most of his writings on matters pertaining to the Jewish people. During the war with Rome, he led the Jewish forces in Galilee, but after he was captured, he went over to the Roman side and later became a court historian in Rome. His book *Jewish Antiquities* retells much of Jewish history for a Roman audience. *The Jewish War* picks up that story around the beginning of the second century BCE and continues through the siege at Masada that ended the recent conflict. The writings of Josephus contain numerous stories about the New Testament era as viewed from a Hellenistic Jewish perspective, including details about Pontius Pilate and the various Herodian rulers, and even a few references to John the Baptist and Jesus.

## Christians and the Apocrypha

The Apocrypha consists of several books included in the Septuagint but absent from the Hebrew Bible:

- Additions to Daniel\*
- Additions to Esther
- Baruch
- 1 Esdras
- Judith
- Letter of Jeremiah
- 1 Maccabees
- 2 Maccabees
- 3 Maccabees
- 4 Maccabees
- Prayer of Manasseh
- Psalm 151
- Sirach (Ecclesiasticus)
- Tobit
- Wisdom of Solomon

\*Sometimes these are listed separately as Prayer of Azariah and Song of Three Jews; Susanna; Bel and the Dragon.

In the New Testament, the Apocrypha is never cited as scripture, but Paul and other authors appear to have read some of these books and to regard their teaching favorably:

Romans 1:20–29	recalls	Wisdom 13:5–8; 14:24–27
Romans 9:20–23	recalls	Wisdom 12:12, 20; 15:7
2 Corinthians 5:1–4	recalls	Wisdom 9:15
James 1:9	recalls	Sirach 5:11
James 1:13	recalls	Sirach 15:11–12

In modern Christianity there is a spectrum of opinion regarding the Apocrypha:

- **Greek Orthodox** churches regard all of the books listed above as part of their Old Testament canon of scripture.
- **Roman Catholic** churches follow a decision made at the Council of Trent (1546) to regard most of these books (all but 1 Esdras, Prayer of Manasseh, Psalm 151, 3 Maccabees, and 4 Maccabees) as scripture. They resist the term *apocrypha* and prefer to call the books *deuterocanonical* (which means “secondary canon” or “added to the canon later”). The books are read and used in church on a status almost equivalent to other writings of the Old Testament, with the caveat that no teaching or doctrine is to be established from these writings alone.

- **Anglicans and Episcopalians** do not usually refer to the books of the Apocrypha as scripture, but they do regard them as ancient sacred writings that may be used in liturgy and as texts for preaching in church.
- **Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians**, and some other Protestant denominations commend the books of the Apocrypha for reading and regard them as works of historical and spiritual interest, but they do not regard them as scripture and (unlike the Anglicans) have not traditionally authorized their use as sacred texts in worship.
- **Other Protestants** regard the Apocrypha with attitudes ranging from respect to disdain. The Puritans who came to America viewed the Apocrypha with suspicion and objected to the books being included in printed Bibles. That attitude has taken hold among many American denominations.

## After the New Testament: Writings of Early Christianity

These writings shed light on the nature of Christianity just after the New Testament era:

**THE DIDACHE** (ca. 100 CE). The author of this writing is unknown, but it presents a summary of Christian teaching from a time period shortly after the principal writings of the New Testament. It includes instruction on basic morality, how to conduct baptisms, which days should be set aside for fasting, how to pray, how to celebrate the Eucharist, how to show hospitality to missionaries, how to distinguish true prophets from false ones, and how to appoint leaders within the community. Some early Christians (Clement of Alexandria and Origen) treated it as scripture.

**CLEMENT OF ROME** (d. ca. 100 CE). Clement was bishop of Rome for the last ten to fifteen years of his life, during the time of the emperor Domitian. Traditionally, he is identified as the author of a letter to the church at Corinth (called *1 Clement*) that appears to have been written around 96 CE, which may make it earlier than some New Testament books. The letter was read as scripture in some parts of the early church, and it continues to be valued by scholars as an authentic witness to Christian thought at the end of the first century.

**IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH** (ca. 35–110 CE). Ignatius became the bishop of the church in Antioch, where both Paul and Peter had been active a generation earlier, and where the Gospel of Matthew is thought to have been written just twenty to thirty years prior to Ignatius's own works. Ignatius was arrested and taken to Rome, where he was martyred in the arena (apparently killed by lions). On the way to his death, he wrote seven letters to various churches, and these are revealing of Christian thought and life in the early second century.

**EUSEBIUS** (ca. 260–340 CE). Eusebius served as bishop of Caesarea in the days after the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine. He wrote *Ecclesiastical History*, the first definitive history of the Christian church up to that point. It records the current traditions of the church regarding the lives of the apostles and other early leaders, along with stories of Roman persecutions of the church. Eusebius does not always distinguish between reliable tradition and legendary material, but he does preserve lengthy quotations from earlier authors whose works would otherwise be lost to us.

## Coins Mentioned in the New Testament

<b>Coins: Values and New Testament References</b>		
The denarius or drachma is the standard unit, equal to a typical day's wage		
talent	6,000 drachmae/denarii	Matt. 18:24; 25:14–30
mina	100 drachmae/denarii	Luke 19:13–26
shekel	4 drachmae/denarii	
stater	4 drachmae/denarii	Matt. 17:27
half-shekel	2 drachmae/denarii	
didrachmon	2 drachmae/denarii	Matt. 17:24
drachma	Greek: a day's wage	Luke 15:8
denarius	Roman: a day's wage	Matt. 18:28; 20:1–16; 22:19; Mark 6:37; 12:15; 14:5; Luke 7:41; 10:35; 20:24; John 6:7; 12:5; Rev. 6:6
assarion	1/10 drachma/denarius	Matt. 10:29
quadrans	1/4 assarion (1/40 drachma/denarius)	Matt. 5:26; Mark 12:42
lepton	1/2 quadrans (1/80 drachma/denarius)	Mark 12:42; Luke 12:59; 21:2

### talent

This unit of silver was equal to 6,000 Greek drachmae or Roman denarii. One talent was roughly equal to what a typical worker could earn over a sixteen-year period. Jesus tells a parable (Matt. 25:14–30) in which a wealthy man gives his servants different amounts of talents (1, 2, 5—in the latter case, the amount was more than the servant could hope to earn in a lifetime). In another parable (Matt. 18:23–35), Jesus uses creative exaggeration to stress the incalculable difference between divine and human mercy: a servant owes his king (God) 10,000 talents (= millions of dollars) but is upset with a fellow servant who owes him 100 denarii.

### mina (pound)

The NRSV uses the word *pound* for a Greek mina, a silver coin worth 100 drachmae (or denarii). The only New Testament reference comes in a parable told by Jesus in Luke 19:13–26 (the parable of the pounds); another version of the same story appears in Matthew 25:14–30 (the parable of the talents).

### denarius

This silver coin was the usual day's wage for a typical laborer (see Matt. 18:28; 20:2, 9, 13; 22:19; Mark 6:37; 12:15; 14:5; Luke 7:41; 10:35; 20:24; John 6:7; 12:5; Rev. 6:6). The denarius (a Roman coin) appears to have been roughly equivalent in value to the drachma (a Greek coin). The "lost coin" in the parable that Jesus tells in Luke 15:8–10 is a drachma.



### **shekel (pieces of silver)**

The story of Judas receiving money to betray Jesus uses an imprecise term: the Greek simply says that Judas was paid thirty “silvers” (Matt. 26:15). Most scholars think that this referred to thirty shekels. A shekel was a silver Judean coin (i.e., not Roman or Greek, for the priests avoided using coins bearing idolatrous images of Caesar or pagan gods). It was worth about four drachmae (or four denarii).

### **stater, didrachma (temple tax)**

The story of the temple tax in Matthew 17:24–27 involves two different Roman coins. The amount of the annual temple tax was two drachmae (or two denarii) per person.

- In Matthew 17:24, the NRSV uses the English expression “temple tax” to translate a reference to a Greek coin called the “didrachma,” a coin that was worth two drachmae. This was the typical coin that an individual used to pay the tax.
- In Matthew 17:27, Jesus tells Peter to use the “coin” that he finds in a fish’s mouth to pay the tax for both of them. Here, the Greek word translated “coin” in the NRSV is *stater*. A stater was a silver Greek coin worth about four drachmae; thus, the single coin could pay the temple tax for two people.

### **assarion, quadrans, lepta (penny)**

The NRSV uses the English word *penny* for three different Roman coins:

- An assarion was worth one-tenth of a denarius; this is the amount for which Jesus says two sparrows are sold (Matt. 10:29).
- A quadrans (in Greek, *kodrantēs*) was worth one-fourth of an assarion; this is the amount of the offering that the widow put in the temple treasury in Mark 12:42 (except that she used two coins [see below]; see also Matt. 5:26).
- A leptos was worth one-eighth of an assarion or one-half of a quadrans, the least value of any coin in circulation; the widow in the temple put “two lepta, which make a quadrans” into the treasury (Mark 12:42).

## Background Information for Understanding the New Testament

The world of the New Testament is so different from our own that we may find its concepts, customs, and terminology confusing. Bible dictionaries, commentaries, and encyclopedias offer explanations for such matters. Here is a sampling of what one might learn about certain aspects of the New Testament world:

- **anointing**—the application of ointment or oil to a body or object. Kings were anointed with oil at their coronation (cf. Luke 4:18); the sick sometimes were anointed with oil to accompany prayers for their healing (Mark 6:13; James 5:14); a host might anoint a favored guest with some sort of fragrant ointment (Luke 7:38, 46; John 11:2; 12:3–8); mourners anointed corpses with scented oils to remove the stench of death (Mark 16:1); the term *messiah* literally means “Anointed One” (John 1:41), and Christians seized on the ambiguity of whether this meant “anointed to rule” or “anointed to die” (Mark 14:8).
- **betrothal**—a marriage that had not yet been consummated. A couple who had been betrothed were legally married—the relationship could be ended only by divorce—but they did not yet live in a sexual relationship as a married couple. Reasons for such an intermediate state included: (1) the wife was underage; (2) the dowry had not yet been paid (thus, the man had essentially reserved a woman to be his wife but was not allowed to take her to his home until he had paid for her); (3) the bride and/or groom’s family needed more time and money to prepare a proper wedding. See Matthew 1:18.
- **carpenter**—construction worker or builder who worked with wood or stone. Jesus is identified as a carpenter (in Greek, *tektōn*) in Mark 6:3; and as the son of a carpenter in Matthew 13:55. It is possible that Jesus (and Joseph) had a carpenter shop in which they made wooden doors and furniture for the mud-brick houses in their village. However, many scholars think that the term *carpenter* was used for common laborers who worked on Roman construction projects. The village of Nazareth may have been a community for such persons, providing opportunity for them to work in the nearby city of Sepphoris.
- **centurion**—a Roman army officer in charge of one hundred soldiers. See Matthew 8:5–13; 27:54; Mark 15:39, 44–45; Luke 7:2, 6; 23:47; Acts 10; 21:31–32; 22:25–26; 23:17, 23; 24:23; 27.
- **corban**—literally, “given to God,” the practice of setting aside for religious purposes what typically was used in another way (cf. Lev. 1:2; Num. 7:13). Jesus criticizes the Pharisees for encouraging people to declare as “corban” money that they should use to care for their elderly parents. See Mark 7:11–13.
- **crucifixion**—a Roman form of execution designed to terrorize subjugated populations. Men and women were nailed or tied naked to wooden stakes (sometimes with cross beams) and left to die of asphyxiation when the weight of their hanging body made breathing impossible (this took several hours). Sometimes, the victim was seated on a small block to prevent asphyxiation, and death from exposure then took several days. The exact manner of cru-

cifixion varied and may have been left to the discretion of soldiers, but the goal was to cause maximum torment and humiliation and to do so in public view as a warning to others. Crucifixion generally was reserved for lower classes or enemies of the state. Bodies normally were left on the crosses to be consumed by scavengers. See Matthew 27:33–60; Mark 15:22–46; Luke 23:33–53; John 19:16–42.

- **cubit**—a common (though somewhat inconsistent) unit for measuring distance. A cubit (in Greek, *pēchys*) was equal to the span from a typical man's elbow to the tip of his middle finger (about 17.5 to 20 inches). See Revelation 21:17; see also the KJV of Matthew 6:27; Luke 12:25; John 21:8.
- **denarius**—a silver coin that was the usual day's wage for a typical laborer. See Matthew 18:28; 20:2, 9–10, 13; 22:19; Mark 6:37; 12:15; 14:5; Luke 7:41; 10:35; 20:24; John 6:7; 12:5; Revelation 6:6.
- **first watch**—roughly 6:00–9:00 PM. Likewise, the second watch is 9:00 PM to midnight, the third watch from midnight to 3:00 AM, and the fourth watch from 3:00 AM to dawn (i.e., 6:00 AM). The idea was to divide the time between sunset (around 6:00 PM) and sunrise (around 6:00 AM) into four equal segments. The NRSV often does not translate these literally; see the KJV, NIV, or RSV of Mark 6:48; Luke 12:38.
- **hem/fringe of garment**—the four tassels that devout Jewish men wore at the corners of their outer garment. These tassels had symbolic meaning, with different-colored threads standing for various thoughts, but they served generically to remind the wearer of an obligation to keep the Torah. Jesus criticizes the Pharisees for wearing ostentatious tassels on their garments (Matt. 23:5), but apparently he wore less showy ones himself (Matt. 9:20; Mark 6:56).
- **lamp**—the most common means of providing light at night (people did not have wax candles). A simple receptacle, usually made of pottery, was filled with oil, and a lit wick could be dropped in to float. Lamps were portable, but they also could be placed on a tall stand to emit maximum light in a particular area. See Matthew 5:15; 6:22; 25:1–8; Mark 4:21; Luke 11:33–36; 12:35; 15:8; John 5:35; Acts 20:8; Hebrews 9:2; 2 Peter 1:19; Revelation 1:12–20; 2:1–5; 11:4; 18:23; 21:23; 22:5.
- **leprosy**—not the illness that we know as Hansen's disease but rather any disfigurement on the surface of a person or thing, including mildew on clothing, mold on a house, or rust on metal. With humans, it could include a range of disfiguring conditions, from birthmarks to acne to more severe and debilitating skin diseases. See Matthew 8:2–3; 10:8; 11:4–5; 26:6; Mark 1:40–45; 14:3; Luke 4:27; 5:12–13; 7:22; 17:12–19.
- **magi**—Persian sages or religious leaders who practiced a mixture of sorcery and astrology. The Jewish people in New Testament times identified the sorcerers in Pharaoh's court as magi (Exod. 7–9) along with Balaam (Num. 22–24) and Nebuchadnezzar's ineffective dream interpreters (Dan. 2). In the New Testament, magi are found in Matthew 2; Acts 8:9–24; 13:6–12.
- **moneychanger**—a person who exchanged one type of coin for another, extracting a small fee for the service. The motivation for such exchanges was religious: coins minted by the Romans usually bore images that made them unacceptable for use by pious Jews. Moneychangers functioned in the temple court (not inside the temple itself) so that temple-goers who

wanted to make offerings or purchase animals for sacrifices could obtain untainted coins. See Mark 11:15.

- **oath**—either a vow or an utterance of profanity. The first sense seems to predominate in biblical references: when people “swear,” they usually are swearing an oath or vow to do something (Jesus forbids this in Matt. 5:33–37; see also Matt. 23:16–22; 26:63; Mark 6:23, 26; Acts 18:18; 23:12–14, 21–23; Heb. 6:13–18; 7:20–21, 28; James 5:12; Rev. 10:6). In a few instances, swearing might refer to the use of profanity (see Mark 14:71 KJV), which for Jewish people sometimes involved vulgar use of God’s name and was, by some reports, quite common.
- **phylacteries**—a pair of small boxes containing passages of scripture written on parchment, worn by devout Jewish men, one bound to the forehead and the other strapped to the wrist, so that the Torah might always be at their right hand and before their eyes (see Exod. 13:9, 16; Deut. 6:8; 11:18). Jesus criticizes the Pharisees for displaying their piety by wearing phylacteries that he considered to be excessively large (Matt. 23:5).
- **pinnacle of the temple**—the summit of the Jerusalem temple, as reconstructed by Herod the Great in the years just prior to Jesus’ birth. The pinnacle of the Jerusalem temple is believed to have been the highest architectural point in the world at the time. It was destroyed (along with the rest of the temple) by Titus, son of the Roman emperor Vespasian, in 70 CE. See Matthew 4:5; 24:1.
- **prison**—the purpose of imprisonment was not reform or punishment but rather to confine a person awaiting trial. After trial, a guilty prisoner was punished or executed, not sentenced to further confinement. Prison conditions varied greatly, from dark dungeons to house arrest. See Matthew 11:2; 14:3; 25:36–44; Luke 21:12; Acts 4:3; 5:17–25; 8:3; 12:4–19; 16:23–24; 21:33–26:32; Romans 16:7; 2 Corinthians 11:23; Ephesians 3:1; 4:1; Philippians 1:7, 13; Colossians 4:3, 10; 2 Timothy 1:8; Philemon 1, 9; Hebrews 13:3; Revelation 2:10.
- **prostitutes**—female slaves forced to perform sexual services for the financial benefit of their masters. In Roman cities there may have been professional “high class” prostitutes, but in the areas of Palestine that serve as settings for New Testament stories all prostitutes appear to have been slaves; thus, we hear of no ex-prostitutes (and, specifically, Mary Magdalene is never said to be a prostitute). See Matthew 21:31–32; Luke 7:36–50. New Testament passages that speak of prostitutes as immoral persons (rather than as marginalized outcasts) refer to persons outside of Palestine, in a “far country” (Luke 15:13) or in notorious Corinth (1 Cor. 6:9, 15–16).
- **Roman citizenship**—was obtained by being born a Roman citizen, and otherwise was granted only by the emperor or his designated representatives. Benefits of citizenship included: one was accountable only to imperial law rather than to local statutes (which varied throughout the empire); one could not be subjected to torture or corporal punishment without a trial; if accused of a crime, one could appeal to Caesar to have the case heard in Rome. See Acts 16:37; 22:25–29; 23:27.
- **Sabbath day’s journey**—the distance that one was allowed to travel on the Sabbath without violating religious observation of that day as a time for rest. The actual distance prescribed is no longer known, and it may have varied with time and place. See Acts 1:12; cf. Matthew 24:20.

- **Sanhedrin**—a council of Jewish leaders that met in Jerusalem. In the New Testament, both Pharisees and Sadducees are said to sit on the Sanhedrin, which is also described as being composed of “chief priests, scribes, and elders.” See Mark 14:55; 15:1, 43; John 11:47; Acts 4:5–21; 5:21–42; 6:12–15; 22:5, 30; 23:1–10, 12–22.
- **shepherd**—usually an itinerant or migrant worker hired to care for sheep and goats. In New Testament times, the profession of shepherd was a low-class position near the bottom of the social scale. It was a dirty, demanding, and dangerous job that most people would not pursue if they were capable of finding better work, and shepherds appear to have been particularly despised by the religious establishment, perhaps because they violated Sabbath and purity regulations. See Matthew 18:12–14; 25:32; Mark 6:34; 14:27; Luke 2:8–20; John 10:1–16; Acts 20:28; Hebrews 13:20; 1 Peter 2:25; 5:4; Revelation 7:17.
- **slavery**—could result from a sentence of punishment for various offenses. Entire families were sold into slavery when someone defaulted on a debt. Between one-fourth and one-third of the people in the Roman Empire were slaves. Conditions varied enormously from agreeable to appalling, and slavery was not always permanent. Nevertheless, a slave was a person with no honor, a person who literally lived in disgrace.
- **sowing seed**—the agricultural practice of planting. In ancient Palestine the process seems to have been the reverse of what we are familiar with: first, the seed was thrown on the ground; then the ground was plowed, allowing the plow to work the previously scattered seed into the soil. See Mark 4:3–20; cf. Matthew 6:26; 13:24–43; 25:24, 26; Mark 4:31–32; John 4:36–37; 1 Corinthians 9:11; 15:36–37, 42–44; 2 Corinthians 9:6, 10; Galatians 6:7–8; James 3:18.
- **stadion**—a somewhat inconsistent unit of measurement equal to six hundred feet (a foot being, literally, the length of a man’s foot). The NRSV avoids using the term, instead translating measurements given in stadia into equivalent feet or miles; the KJV uses “furlongs”; other versions use “stadia” in some cases. See Matthew 14:24; Luke 24:13; John 6:19; 11:18; Rev. 14:20; 21:16.
- **swaddling clothes**—linen wrapped tightly around a small child’s body to restrict its movements. In certain cultures it is common to swaddle a baby by rolling it in cloth with its arms at its sides. See Luke 2:7.
- **talent**—a unit of silver, measured by weight, approximately seventy-five pounds of silver by our reckoning. One talent was equal to six thousand denarii. See Matthew 18:23–35; 25:14–30.
- **tax collector**—native citizen of a conquered territory hired by the Romans to collect taxes for the empire. Tax collectors were viewed as traitors and usually were suspected of skimming off the top by collecting more than was actually due and keeping the surplus for themselves. Some of the tax collectors in the New Testament (e.g., Matthew) appear to have been specifically assigned to collect tolls for the use of Roman roads. See Matthew 5:46; 9:9–12; 10:3; 11:19; 18:17; 21:31–32; Luke 3:12–14; 7:29; 15:1; 18:10–14; 19:1–10.
- **temple tax**—an annual payment to support the temple in Jerusalem. It was completely voluntary, but devout Jews throughout the Roman Empire were expected to pay it as an act of piety. Roman law allowed Jews who opted to pay this tax to deduct the amount from whatever civic taxes they owed to the empire. See Matthew 17:24–27.

- **third hour**—roughly 9:00 AM. Likewise, the sixth hour is 12:00 noon, the ninth hour is 3:00 PM, and the eleventh hour is about 5:00 PM. The basic thought seems to be that the workday begins at sunrise (around 6:00 AM) and ends at sunset (around 6:00 PM), but the hours are numbered according to when they conclude rather than when they start (the third hour ends at 9:00 AM; the sixth hour ends at 12:00 noon). The NRSV frequently does not translate these references literally but instead substitutes the appropriate modern reference. See the KJV, NIV, or RSV of Matthew 20:3, 5–6, 9; Mark 15:25, 33; John 1:39; 4:6, 52; 19:14; Acts 2:15; 3:1; 10:3, 9; cf. John 11:9.
- **winnowing grain**—the practice of tossing grain into the air with a large fork or fan so that the wind will blow away dust and other lightweight impurities, the chaff. See Matthew 3:12.

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## New Testament Canon: The Early Lists

By the end of the second century, lists began to appear specifying which Christian writings were to be considered scripture by churches in line with the apostolic tradition (i.e., in line with what Jesus, his disciples, and the apostle Paul had taught). In most cases, these lists were more descriptive than prescriptive: they did not attempt to regulate which writings should be read as scripture, but rather shared with other Christians which books were accepted as scripture in some particular region or congregation.

The essential data from some of these early canon lists is given below, followed by a summary.

### The Muratorian Fragment (ca. 170–200)

This list of which books are to be regarded as scripture was written by an unknown author.

- books not included: Hebrews, James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 3 John
- a book not in our current New Testament that is included: Apocalypse of Peter (with note: “some of us are not willing that it be read in church”)
- books that are approved but not as scripture: Shepherd of Hermas (written too recently; ought to be read, but not “publicly to the people in church”)
- books to be rejected: two spurious forgeries attributed to Paul, Letter to the Laodiceans and Letter to the Alexandrians (unknown to us)

### Origen of Alexandria (ca. 215–250)

This early theologian does not provide a list but does discuss which books are disputed.

- 2 Peter: “Peter left behind one letter that is acknowledged, and possibly a second, but it is disputed”
- 2 John and 3 John: “not everyone agrees that they are genuine”
- Hebrews: probably not written by Paul, but acceptable anyway because “the thoughts of the epistle are marvelous and in no way inferior to the acknowledged writings of the apostle”

### Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 311)

This early church historian reports which books were considered scripture in his day.

- James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 John, 3 John are “disputed books which are nonetheless known by many”
- lists Revelation as being among both the “acknowledged books” and the noncanonical books, noting that it is a “book that some reject but others judge to belong”
- also lists these books as noncanonical: Acts of Paul, Shepherd of Hermas, Apocalypse of Peter, Didache, Epistle of Barnabas, and Gospel to the Hebrews

(which Eusebius says is considered noncanonical only by “some people” and is “particularly celebrated” by others)

### **Cyril of Jerusalem (ca. 350)**

This prominent Eastern theologian wrote a catechism in which he discusses canon; he lists all books of our current New Testament except Revelation.

- says that no other books should be read in the churches or even privately (as his readers might have heard was acceptable)
- specifically lambasts the Gospel of Thomas as a work that “having been camouflaged by the sweetness of its title derived from an apostle corrupts the souls of the simpler ones”

### **Mommsen Catalogue (aka Cheltenham List) (ca. 359)**

This list comes from an unknown author from North Africa.

- indicates that the New Testament contains twenty-four books, as symbolized by the twenty-four elders in the book of Revelation (see Rev. 4:4)
- not included: Hebrews, James, Jude
- unclear: seems to indicate that only one letter of John and only one letter of Peter are canonical (but that would throw off the count, which is supposed to be twenty-four)

### **Athanasius of Alexandria (367)**

This prominent bishop wrote a letter listing what he regarded as “the canon” of Christian scripture.

- lists all twenty-seven books of the New Testament
- also lists other books that are not to be included in the canon but that “have nonetheless been designated by the fathers as books to be read”: Didache, Shepherd of Hermas
- also says that “there should be no mention at all of apocryphal books created by heretics, who write them whenever they want but try to bestow favor on them by assigning them dates, that by setting them forth as ancient they can be, on false grounds, used to deceive the simple minded”

### **Amphilochius of Iconium (ca. 375–394)**

A Christian poet composed a poem to teach the books of the canon in iambic verse.

- indicates that some say Hebrews is spurious, but that they are wrong to say this, for the grace that it imparts is genuine
- lists 2 Peter, 2 John, 3 John, and Jude as books that “some receive” but that should not be received
- Revelation: “some approve, but most say it is spurious”

### **Third Synod of Carthage (393)**

This regional meeting of churches was not a churchwide council but had significant representation.

- ratified the list of Athanasius (above), declaring the twenty-seven books of our current New Testament to be the canon of Christian scripture

### Summary of Data from the Early Canon Lists

Looking at these lists, we can group the New Testament books and other early Christian writings into four basic categories.

- *Universally Accepted Canonical Writings.* Twenty of the New Testament's twenty-seven books appear to have been accepted as canonical scripture by virtually all churches that remained within the apostolic tradition. They are the four Gospels, the book of Acts, all thirteen of Paul's letters, 1 Peter, and 1 John. All of these books are included as accepted writings in every list known to us (with only one exception: 1 Peter is not listed in the Muratorian Fragment).
- *Sometimes Disputed Canonical Writings.* Seven of the New Testament's twenty-seven books had a more difficult time finding universal acceptance among Christian churches. They are Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 John, 3 John, Jude, and Revelation. We have no indication that these books were ever rejected or denounced, but in many cases churches seem to have been reluctant to grant them the status of scripture.
- *Commended Noncanonical Writings.* A few books that are not found in our New Testament turn up on the canon lists as works that are "known to many" and "recommended for Christian reading" even though they are not to be read publicly in the church (i.e., treated as scripture or used as texts for teaching and preaching). Examples include the Didache, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Apocalypse of Peter, and the Letter of Barnabas. In a few cases, we find one or more of these books actually included in a list of Christian scriptures (or, indeed, contained in an early manuscript of the New Testament). Most of the time, however, a distinction is made between "canonical writings" and "commendable-but-not-canonical writings."
- *Rejected Noncanonical Writings.* A number of books not found in our New Testament are listed as works to be avoided. These are books that were recognized as forgeries, having been written in the name of an apostle or associate of Jesus in order to claim support for gnostic teachings or other novel philosophies that had no connection with the apostolic tradition.

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## Text Criticism: Determining the Original Reading of the Text

### External Evidence

Text critics try to determine which manuscripts are likely to be the most reliable. Manuscripts must be “weighed and not counted.”

**Antiquity.** More ancient manuscripts are generally preferred to less ancient ones; the following broad categories may be considered in order of decreasing significance.

1. *papyri*—oldest and best (usually before the fourth century); usually fragmentary or incomplete manuscripts. Papyri manuscripts are written on sheets of papyrus.
2. *uncials*—next best (usually from fourth century to ninth century); most of our oldest complete manuscripts. Uncial manuscripts are written in all capital letters.
3. *minuscules*—least ancient (usually later than the ninth century). Minuscule manuscripts are written with both capital and lowercase letters. The majority of our manuscripts are minuscules, but these are not valued as highly as uncials or papyri.

**Text Type.** Certain families of manuscripts (produced in particular geographical areas and, perhaps, under more controlled conditions) generally prove more reliable than other families.

1. *Alexandrian*—usually regarded as most reliable; resists grammatical or stylistic polishing or theologically motivated corrections; includes Sinaiticus [Ⲛ] and Vaticanus [B], two fourth-century uncial manuscripts
2. *Western*—displays certain oddities (harmonizes one book to agree with another; adds explanatory notes, especially in Acts; paraphrases or omits passages) but otherwise seems reliable; includes Bezae [D] and Washingtonianus [W], two fifth-century uncial manuscripts
3. *Byzantine*—contains many more errors than the other text types and generally is regarded as the least reliable; often tries to resolve problematic readings (e.g., by harmonizing disparate accounts); includes most minuscules (and therefore the majority of manuscripts); specifically, the handful of minuscule manuscripts used for translation of the KJV were Byzantine type

### Internal Evidence

Text critics try to consider variant readings logically to determine if there are intrinsic reasons to suggest that the reading found in one manuscript is more likely to be original than the reading found in another manuscript.

### ***What Would the Author Be More Likely to Have Written?***

- Is one reading more consistent with the style and vocabulary of the author?
- Is one reading more consistent with the theology of the author?
- Does one reading cohere better with the immediate context in which the passage is found?

### ***What Would a Scribe Be More Likely to Have Altered?***

Confronted with two different readings, text critics examine each reading in turn and ask, "If this reading was the original, what would have motivated or caused the other reading to come into existence?" Sometimes, it seems more logical for the alteration to have been made in one direction than the other. Two general principles are often cited (though there are certainly exceptions to both):

#### **The Shorter Reading Is to Be Preferred**

Scribes did not want to leave anything out. When they were uncertain whether or not something belonged in the text, they were encouraged to err on the side of inclusion, so that nothing that might possibly belong in scripture would be lost. A scribe might read an explanatory note written in the margin of a manuscript and copy it into the text of the manuscript that he was producing. A scribe confronted with two different possible readings of a verse might include both rather than choose between them. Thus, except in obvious cases where someone accidentally skipped a line or section, the more reliable reading is often the shorter reading; the longer variant is regarded as having added something to the text rather than the shorter variant being regarded as having omitted something.

#### **The More Difficult Reading Is to Be Preferred**

Scribes had no motivation to create readings that would cause problems for the church, but they sometimes were motivated (consciously or subconsciously) to create readings that would resolve problems. They tended to correct what appeared to be grammatical errors or to substitute more common vocabulary words for obscure ones. They tended to harmonize accounts that appeared to be contradictory—for example, making Jesus say the same thing in one Gospel as he does in another Gospel. They sometimes tended to reword a text that was phrased in a way that had become theologically objectionable. Thus, the more reliable reading is often the more difficult one; the easier variant is regarded as an alteration of a potentially problematic text rather than the difficult variant being regarded as an alteration of a nonproblematic one.

## Tradition and Framework: Composition of the Gospels and Acts

### Stages of Transmission

- Stage One: Life Setting of Jesus
- Stage Two: Period of Oral Tradition and Early Written Sources
- Stage Three: Work of the Evangelists (authors of the Gospels)

Many scholars think that the author of Luke refers to these three stages in the opening sentences of his Gospel:

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were *eyewitnesses* [stage one] and *ministers of the word* [stage two], it seemed good to *me* also [stage three], having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account. (Luke 1:1–3)

### Basic Assumptions of New Testament Scholarship

1. The Gospel tradition was transmitted through stages like those described above.
2. Changes in the tradition may have occurred throughout this process of transmission.
3. All that we have is the written texts of the completed Gospels and Acts, which are the cumulative products of this process.

### Goal of Source Criticism and Form Criticism

The goal of source criticism and form criticism has been to understand the second stage in the transmission of the Gospel tradition so that we might also better understand the first and third stages.

- *Source Criticism* seeks to establish which portions of the Gospels and Acts derive from early written sources and, if possible, to reconstruct these early sources. Source critics classify material according to various strands of tradition (Q, M, L, etc.) and evaluate the material in each strand according to its likely origin.
- *Form Criticism* seeks to understand how traditions were preserved and handed down orally in the early church. Form critics distinguish between independent units of tradition and attempt to identify the *Sitz im Leben* (setting in life) in which these units of tradition were preserved (catechesis, liturgy, etc.).
- *Both Source Criticism and Form Criticism* distinguish between *tradition* and *framework*. Material that is thought to derive from the period of oral tradition or from early written sources (i.e., material from stage two) is ascribed to tradition. Material that has been added by the evangelists themselves is described as framework.

## Goals of Historical Jesus Studies and Redaction Criticism

Source criticism and form criticism provide the basis for two other fields of research: historical Jesus studies and redaction criticism.

- *Historical Jesus Studies* seek to reconstruct as accurately as possible the actual words and deeds of Jesus and his earliest followers. Historical Jesus scholars try to determine which material in the Gospels and Acts meets generally accepted criteria for historical reliability. Historical Jesus scholars focus on stage one of the Gospel transmission and are most interested in the material that source critics and form critics classify as tradition.
- *Redaction Criticism* seeks to understand the distinctive theology and concerns of the Gospel authors. Redaction critics are primarily interested in the way the authors of these books edited traditional materials and worked them into their final compositions. Redaction critics focus on stage three of the Gospel transmission and are most interested in the material that source critics and form critics classify as framework.



## Source Criticism of the Gospels and Acts

### Presuppositions of Source Criticism

- A significant period of time (thirty to sixty years) elapsed between the occurrence of the events reported in the Gospels and Acts and the writing of these books.
- Although this period was primarily a time of oral transmission, some materials probably were put into writing before the Gospels and Acts were produced.
- Some of these materials probably were collected and circulated or preserved by communities, including those in which the Gospels and Acts were later produced.
- These early written materials were edited by the evangelists, who used them as sources when they composed the Gospels and Acts.

### What Source Critics Do

Source critics identify places in the Gospels and Acts where an evangelist may be drawing upon material that was already in writing. They do this through external and internal analysis.

#### *External Analysis*

The clearest identifications of source material usually come through the study of parallel passages. When the same material is found in more than one writing, scholars may decide that one of these writings was the source for the other(s) or that some other document was the common source for all of the parallel passages known to us.

#### *Internal Analysis*

Editorial seams such as abrupt shifts or awkward connections may indicate a transition to source material. Peculiarities of style or content are also indications that source material is being used. Based on such analysis, source critics propose lists of materials that each author might have used when composing his book.

### Results of Source Criticism: Some Common Proposals

#### *Possible Sources for Matthew's Gospel*

- the Gospel of Mark
  - a collection of the sayings of Jesus, called "Q"
  - a variety of other sources, collectively called "M"
- (According to the Farrer Theory, Matthew used Mark as a source, but not Q; according to the Two-Gospel Hypothesis, Matthew did not use Mark or Q.)

#### *Possible Sources for Mark's Gospel*

- a collection of controversy stories, including those found now in 2:1–3:6
- a collection or, possibly, two collections of miracle stories, including many of those now found in chapters 4–8
- an apocalyptic tract containing much of what is now in chapter 13

- an early version of the passion narrative (the story of Jesus' death and resurrection)  
(According to the Two-Gospel Hypothesis, Mark used Matthew and Luke as sources.)

### ***Possible Sources for Luke's Gospel***

- the Gospel of Mark
- a collection of the sayings of Jesus, called "Q"
- a variety of other sources, collectively called "L"  
(According to the Farrer Theory, Luke used Mark and Matthew as sources, but not Q; according to the Two-Gospel Hypothesis, Luke used Matthew as a source, but not Mark or Q.)

### ***Possible Sources for John's Gospel***

- a "Signs Gospel" that recorded seven or eight miracle stories (2:1–12; 4:46–54; 5:1–9; 6:1–13; 9:1–7; 11:1–44; 21:1–6; perhaps 6:15–25) and may have included an account of the passion and resurrection
- a collection of remembrances of one called the "beloved disciple," dealing mostly with the last week of Jesus' life
- a body of material underlying the great discourses of Jesus, possibly sermons by the beloved disciple or another prominent member of the community

### ***Possible Sources for the Book of Acts***

- an Aramaic document describing the life of the early church in Jerusalem, used for chapters 1–12
- a collection of traditions from the church at Antioch, used for stories concerning Stephen and Barnabas (6:1–8:4; 11:19–30; 12:25–25:35)
- a travel diary, used for portions of the book recounting the journeys of Paul

## **Separating Tradition from Framework**

Source critics sometimes attempt to reconstruct what the early written sources may have looked like prior to their incorporation into the Gospels or Acts. In doing this, they distinguish between *tradition* (the source material originally available to the author) and *framework* (the material added to the source when it was incorporated into the book of which it is now a part).

This works best when the sources have been identified through external analysis.

- For material in Matthew or Luke that has a parallel in Mark, the Markan parallel is usually thought to represent the source for what is in Matthew or Luke. Accordingly, the material in Matthew or Luke that is identical with what is in the Markan parallel may be designated "tradition," and the material that differs from what is in the Markan parallel may be designated "framework."
- For material that is parallel in Matthew and Luke but not in Mark, the source is thought to have been "Q," which is now lost to us. When the parallel passages in Matthew and Luke are identical, this material may be designated "tradition." When the parallel passages in Matthew and Luke differ, one of the two readings can perhaps be designated "tradition" and the other "framework," but a judgment must be made as to which reading most likely represents the original source.

Designation of tradition and framework is less certain with regard to sources identified through internal analysis. Sometimes, however, source critics will designate as “tradition” the material that is more consistent linguistically, thematically, or theologically with other material ascribed to the source than with the document as a whole.

### **Why Source Critics Do This**

- Scholars who are interested in the historical period of Jesus and his earliest followers believe that even tentative reconstructions of early written sources are more likely to be representative of this period than the edited material in the Gospels and Acts.
- Scholars who are interested in the history of the early church believe the reconstructed sources offer direct testimony to the concerns of the church during the period before the Gospels and Acts were written.
- Scholars who are interested in the concerns of the evangelists believe that the identification and possible reconstruction of sources allows them to discern better the distinctive interests of the evangelists evident in their editing of these sources.

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Goodacre, Mark. *The Case against Q: Studies in Markan Priority and the Synoptic Problem*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002. Offers support for what is called the “Farrer Theory”: Matthew and Luke used Mark as a source, but not Q; instead, Luke used Matthew as a source, explaining the overlap between Matthew and Luke sometimes ascribed to Q.

Streeter, B. H. *The Four Gospels: A Study of the Origins, Treating of the Manuscript Tradition, Sources, Authorship, and Dates*. London: Macmillan, 1924. Contains the original statement of what has been revised and developed to become the dominant view: Matthew used Mark, Q, and M, while Luke used Mark, Q, and L.

#### **On Sources for Mark**

Achtemeier, Paul J. “Toward the Isolation of Pre-Markan Miracle Catenae.” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 89 (1970): 265–91; “The Origin and Function of the Pre-Markan Miracle Catenae.” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91 (1972):

198–221. Definitive statement of the view that Mark used a collection of miracle stories as one source in composing his Gospel.

Matera, Frank J. *What Are They Saying about Mark?* New York: Paulist Press, 1987. Chapter 4 contains summaries of the important theories of Rudolf Pesch and Heinz-Wolfgang Kuhn, whose works are not available in English.

### **On Sources for John**

Bultmann, Rudolf. *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971. A classic interpretation that assumes three sources: a “signs source,” a “discourse source,” and a “passion narrative.”

Fortna, R. T. *The Gospel of Signs*. SNTSMS 11. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970. Contends that the “signs source” that Bultmann identified was actually an early Gospel in its own right. See also Fortna’s *The Fourth Gospel and Its Predecessor: From Narrative Source to Present Gospel*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988.

Kysar, Robert. *The Fourth Evangelist and His Gospel: An Examination of Contemporary Scholarship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1975. Pages 9–82. A survey of the most important works on this subject.

Lindars, Barnabas. *Behind the Fourth Gospel*. London: SPCK, 1971. Presents a developmental model through which the Gospel was produced in stages. Compare the view of Raymond Brown in *The Gospel According to John*. 2nd ed. AB 29, 29A. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979.

### **On Sources for Acts**

Dibelius, Martin. *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles*. Edited by Heinrich Greeven. Translated by Mary Ling. New York: Scribner, 1956 [1941]. Proposes that Luke used a travel diary as a source for Acts.

von Harnack, Adolf. *The Acts of the Apostles*. Translated by J. R. Wilkinson. London: Williams & Norgate, 1909. This is the original proposal that Luke used various “local sources” (including Antioch traditions) in composing Acts.

Wilcox, Max. *The Semitisms of Acts*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1965. Argues that Luke had Aramaic sources for Acts but has integrated them into the document so well that they cannot be reconstructed.

## Form Criticism of the Gospels and Acts

### Presuppositions of Form Criticism

- There was a period of oral transmission prior to the writing of the Gospels and Acts.
- During this period, small units of material that could be easily remembered circulated independently.
- These small units exhibit characteristics that allow them to be classified as particular types of material. The defining characteristics may be related to structure (a typical outline), language (similar wording), or content (a common theme).
- These units served different needs for the early Christian communities and were remembered or developed in ways appropriate to the settings in life (*Sitz im Leben*) that they were intended to serve (see below).
- These small oral units were collected, organized, and edited when they were incorporated into our four Gospels and the book of Acts.

### What Form Critics Do

Form critics try to identify where small units of oral tradition have been incorporated into the written documents of the Gospels and Acts. They look for material in which structural patterns or other rhetorical features typical of oral transmission are evident. They also look for material that, at least in part, appears to address a setting in life (*Sitz im Leben*) other than what might be presupposed for the document as a whole.

### Form-Critical Classifications

Form critics classify units of tradition according to typical form-critical categories.

**Sayings**—memorable quotations that may have been preserved apart from any particular context

- *wisdom sayings* provide insight into how life really works:
  - “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Luke 12:34).
  - “If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand” (Mark 3:24).
- *prophetic sayings* proclaim the activity or judgment of God:
  - “The kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe” (Mark 1:15).
- *eschatological sayings* reflect the view that the future is of primary importance:
  - “The Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done” (Matt. 16:27).
- *legal sayings* interpret God’s will:
  - “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets” (Matt. 7:12).
- *“I” sayings* are autobiographical:
  - “I have come to call not the righteous but sinners” (Mark 2:17).
  - “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).

**Pronouncement Stories**—short narratives of incidents that provide context for memorable quotations (these sometimes are called *apophthegms* or *paradigms*)

- *correction* stories preserve a saying that corrects a mistaken point of view:
  - forgive seventy-seven times (Matt. 18:21–22)
  - whoever is not against us (Mark 9:38–40)
- *commendation* stories preserve a saying that blesses someone or endorses a particular idea or type of behavior:
  - the confession of Peter (Matt. 16:13–20)
  - the generous widow (Mark 12:41–44)
- *controversy* stories preserve a saying that explains, resolves, or defines a conflict:
  - Jesus’ disciples don’t fast (Mark 2:18–22)
  - paying taxes to Caesar (Mark 12:13–17)
- *biographical* stories recall significant moments in a person’s life:
  - cleansing of the temple (Mark 11:15–17)
- *didactic* stories recall occasions in which a person’s teaching was particularly relevant:
  - the true family of Jesus (Mark 3:31–35)

**Parables**—longer sayings that function as extended figures of speech (similes, metaphors, allegories, etc.)

- for example: the parable of the sower in Mark 4:3–8

**Speeches**—extensive reports of discourse that purport to represent what individuals said on particular occasions. Speeches differ from mere “collections of sayings” in that they are more unified thematically and usually evince particular rhetorical strategies.

- *evangelistic* speeches may use deliberative rhetoric to urge the audience to decision or action
  - for example: the speech of Paul in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:16–41)
- *defense* speeches may use judicial rhetoric to refute charges and claim innocence
  - for example: the speech of Paul in Jerusalem (Acts 22:3–21)

**Commissioning Stories**—narrative accounts of persons or groups receiving calls to participate in the divine plan

- for example: Jesus’ call of Levi in Mark 2:14

**Miracle Stories**—narrative accounts of people displaying extraordinary power

- *exorcisms* (example: Mark 5:1–20)
- *healing miracles* (example: Mark 5:25–34)
- *resuscitations* (example: Mark 5:21–24, 35–43)
- *nature miracles* (example: Mark 4:35–41)
- *feeding miracles* (example: Mark 8:1–10)

**Hymns**—words to canticles or songs that may be distinguished by particular metrical patterns or by poetic devices such as alliteration, parallelism, and chiasm

- for example: the “Magnificat” in Luke 1:46–55

**Genealogies**—narrative lists that trace the line of descent for persons or groups

- for example: genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1:1–17

**Legends**—narrative accounts of persons earning renown or glory

- for example: Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem (Mark 11:1–10)

**Myths**—narrative accounts of people interacting with supernatural beings

- for example: Jesus’ temptation (Matt. 4:1–11) and transfiguration (Mark 9:2–8)

Note: All of these categories are descriptive and not fixed. They may also overlap.

### ***Sitz im Leben: The Original Setting in Life***

Form critics try to identify the probable *Sitz im Leben* (setting in life) that each unit of tradition might have served prior to its incorporation into a larger written document. Among other questions, form critics ask, “Why was this material remembered? What purpose did it serve for those who preserved it?”

Common suggestions for *Sitz im Leben* include:

- preaching
- catechetics
- polemics
- discipline
- worship
- entertainment

### ***Reconstruction***

Form critics sometimes try to reconstruct what the units of tradition may have looked like prior to their incorporation into the documents. They distinguish between *tradition* (the material prior to incorporation) and *framework* (the material added to the unit when it was incorporated). Once a pericope is identified as deriving from oral tradition, editorial additions (framework) sometimes can be identified by recognizing parts of the pericope that are atypical for material of this type (e.g., a unit classified as an “exorcism story” that exhibits features atypical for exorcism stories). Likewise, editorial additions may also be recognized when portions of a pericope serve a *Sitz im Leben* different from that which would be supposed for the stage of oral transmission.

### **Why Form Critics Do This**

- Scholars who are interested in the historical period of Jesus and his earliest followers believe that the reconstructed units of oral tradition are more

likely to be representative of this period than is the edited material in the Gospels and Acts.

- Scholars who are interested in the history of the early church believe that the reconstructed units of oral tradition offer direct testimony to the concerns of the church during the period before the Gospels and Acts were written.
- Scholars who are interested in the concerns of the evangelists believe that the reconstructed units of oral tradition represent sources that these writers used when they composed the Gospels and Acts, and that distinctive interests of the evangelists can be discerned through analysis of their editing of these sources.

### **Bibliography of Classic Texts**

The three classic studies are:

Bultmann, Rudolf. *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*. Translated by John Marsh. 3rd ed. New York: Harper & Row, 1963 [1921].

Dibelius, Martin. *From Tradition to Gospel*. Translated by Bertram Lee Woolf. 2nd ed. New York: Scribner, 1965 [1919].

Taylor, Vincent. *The Formation of the Gospel Tradition*. 2nd ed. London: MacMillan, 1935 [1933].

A helpful modern handbook, which includes more extensive bibliography:

Bailey, James L., and Lyle D. VanderBroek. *Literary Forms in the New Testament: A Handbook*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992.



## Redaction Criticism of the Gospels

The goal of redaction criticism is to uncover the particular theologies of the individual evangelists by analyzing the manner in which they “redacted” (or edited) their Gospels.

### Presuppositions of Redaction Criticism

- The Gospel authors were not eyewitnesses for much that they report—they had to rely on oral and written reports passed on to them by others.
- The Gospel authors did have such sources: some written materials regarding words and deeds of Jesus and his followers and many accounts that had come to them through oral tradition.
- The Gospel authors were not just “scissors and paste” collectors interested in preserving these source materials; they wanted to tell coherent stories that would be rhetorically effective, and they had to edit the source materials to make them fit into their narratives.
- The Gospel authors were not disinterested reporters but “evangelists” with distinctive theological commitments and ideals; they edited their source materials accordingly.

### What Redaction Critics Do

Redaction critics analyze the Gospel narratives to detect editorial tendencies. This analysis is of two basic types.

#### *Emendation Analysis*

This type of analysis attempts to discern an author’s distinctive interests by observing changes that have been made in the source material. This procedure presupposes possession of the source material so that comparisons between the Gospel and its source can be made.

Emendation analysis works best in study of those portions of Matthew and Luke that are thought to be derived from Mark, because the text from Matthew or Luke can be compared side by side with that of Mark, and the changes that either Matthew or Luke made can be clearly seen.

#### *Example:*

- In Mark 4:40, Jesus says to his disciples, “Why are you afraid? Have you still *no faith?*”
- In Matthew 8:26, he says, “Why are you afraid, you of *little faith?*”

The dominant theory is that Matthew had a copy of Mark’s Gospel and changed the words “no faith” to “little faith.” This affects how the disciples of Jesus are perceived by Matthew’s readers, and it may reveal something about Matthew’s understanding of discipleship.

Emendation analysis is less helpful in the study of Matthew/Luke parallels where the apparent source was not Mark's Gospel but, possibly, a now lost document that scholars call "Q."

**Example:**

- In Luke 6:20, Jesus says, "Blessed are *you who are poor*."
- In Matthew 5:3, he says, "Blessed are *the poor in spirit*."

The dominant theory is that the source used by Matthew and Luke (Q) said either "you who are poor" or "the poor in spirit," and one of the two Gospels (Matthew or Luke) changed it; however, it is difficult to know which one made the change.

Emendation analysis seems to be least helpful in the study of Mark, John, or passages unique to Matthew ("M" material) or Luke ("L" material). Even then, however, the distinction between "tradition" and "framework" material made by source and form critics allows for some application of the method.

### **Composition Analysis**

This type of analysis attempts to discern an author's distinctive interests by noting how individual units have been ordered and arranged in the work as a whole.

First, composition analysis includes general observations regarding the overall structure of a Gospel.

**Example:**

The Gospel of Luke devotes ten chapters (9:51–19:40) to describing a journey that Jesus makes to Jerusalem, a trip that appears to be covered in about half a chapter elsewhere (Mark 10:32–52). This affects the plot of Luke's overall story and reveals something distinctive about Luke's perspective.

Second, composition analysis is used to examine the immediate contexts of individual passages in the Gospels.

**Example:**

In Matthew 18:15–20, Jesus outlines procedures for removing an unrepentant sinner from the church. In the immediately preceding passage (18:10–14), Jesus relates the parable of the lost sheep, in which he concludes, "It is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost" (18:14). And in the very next passage, Matthew presents an episode in which Jesus insists that his followers should forgive each other repeatedly (18:21–22). Thus, Matthew has deliberately chosen to sandwich the harsh words dealing with possible expulsion between stories that emphasize forgiveness and mercy. This affects how Matthew's reader hears the harsh words, and it reveals something about Matthew's own theological priorities.

### **Pioneer Works in Redaction Criticism**

New Testament redaction criticism began in Europe in the 1950s. It took a few years for works to be translated and produced in English, but the most important volumes for defining the discipline were these three studies of the Synoptic Gospels:

Bornkamm, Günther, Gerhard Barth, and Heinz Joachim Held. *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew*. Translated by Percy Scott. NTL. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963.

Conzelmann, Hans. *The Theology of Saint Luke*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1961.

Marxsen, Willi. *Mark the Evangelist: Studies on the Redaction History of the Gospel*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1969.

## Narrative Criticism of the Gospels and Acts

Narrative criticism is a branch of literary criticism that entails a variety of established methodologies and approaches. According to this discipline, a “narrative” is any work of literature that tells a “story.” This is a very broad definition, but not all literature is narrative. Essays, for example, are not.

In the Bible, the best examples of narrative are the four Gospels and Acts. Much material in the Old Testament qualifies as well, but prophetic oracles and New Testament epistles do not. Some scholars employ narrative criticism to study the underlying story that appears to be assumed by these writings (e.g., the story of Paul’s relationship with the Corinthian church that underlies his letters to that community), but narrative criticism is used most prominently in the study of the Gospels and Acts.

Narrative criticism views the Gospels as communications between an *implied author* and an *implied reader*.

- *implied author*—the author as he or she may be reconstructed from the text; the sum total of the impressions (values, worldview, etc.) that the reader gains from the narrative
- *implied reader*—the reader presupposed by the text; the imaginary person who is to be envisioned as always responding to the text with whatever knowledge, understanding, action, or emotion is called for

### The Goal of Narrative Criticism

The goal of narrative criticism is to read the Gospels in the manner intended by their implied author and in the manner expected of their implied reader. To determine what this expected response would be, modern readers must use their imagination in order to approach the text in the following way:

1. *As a person who receives the text in the manner the author assumed it would be received.* For a Shakespearean play, this might mean seeing the work performed on stage (as opposed to reading a script). For a Gospel, it might mean hearing the entire Gospel read out loud from beginning to end at a single sitting.
2. *As a person who knows everything the author expected the reader to know, but no more than this.* The reader of a Gospel is expected to know the Old Testament and certain things about the Roman world but probably is not expected to know material from the other Gospels or doctrinal propositions from later Christianity.
3. *As a person who believes everything the author expected the reader to believe, but nothing other than this.* The reader of any one of our four Gospels is assumed to hold certain beliefs and values that may or may not coincide

with beliefs or values of modern readers today (e.g., the reader may be expected to believe that demons are literal beings; that ghosts actually exist; that slavery is an acceptable social institution; that women are intrinsically inferior to men). To determine the response expected of an implied reader, modern readers must ask, "How would a reader with these assumed beliefs and values respond to this story?"

Note that narrative criticism temporarily brackets out questions of historicity or interpretation in order to first understand the Gospels on their own terms.

## Story and Discourse

Every narrative may be understood in terms of story and discourse. *Story* refers to what the narrative is about: the events, characters, and settings that make up its plot. *Discourse* refers to how the narrative is told: the way in which the events, characters, and settings are presented to the reader.

## What Narrative Critics Do

Narrative critics analyze *events*, *characters*, and *settings* in terms of both story and discourse. What follows here is a survey of some questions that they typically ask.

### Events

1. *Story*. What is it that happens in each episode of the story, and how do the individual episodes relate to what happens in the story as a whole?

Events may be classified as:

- *kernel*—event that is integral to the narrative, such that the event could not be deleted without destroying the logic of the plot. Kernels represent the major turning points in the narrative.
- *satellite*—event that is not crucial to the narrative but fills in the story line as determined by the kernels. A satellite could be removed from the narrative without destroying the logic of the plot, though of course it might weaken the story aesthetically. If an event is regarded as a satellite, the next question is "To which of the kernels is it related?"

Narrative critics also ask, "What elements of conflict are present in each episode, and how do these relate to the development and resolution of conflict in the story as a whole?" Conflict may be described in terms of threats that characters or other elements in the story pose to one another. As conflict develops in the narrative, its nature may change: a new threat may be added or an existing one removed. Or, the essence of the conflict may remain the same, with changes only in its intensity. Conflict that is left unresolved in the narrative tends to impinge most directly on the reader.

2. *Discourse*. How does the author incorporate individual events into the narrative? What rhetorical techniques does the author use?

Examples of rhetorical technique include foreshadowing, suspense, irony, symbolism, and narrative patterns (framing, step progression, concentric patterns, etc.).

Particular questions about the narration of events involve:

- *order*—the place that the narration of each event occupies in the sequence of other events in the narrative
- *duration*—the length of time taken up in the narrative with each event relative to the duration of other events in the narrative
- *frequency*—the number of times each event is narrated or referred to in the narrative

Narrative critics also examine events in terms of causality: what is the link between each event and other events in terms of cause and effect?

- *possibility*—event makes the occurrence of another event possible
- *probability*—event makes the occurrence of another event more likely
- *contingency*—event makes the occurrence of another event necessary

### **Characters**

1. *Story*. Who are the characters and what type of characters are they? What traits are assigned to the characters? Are these traits consistent throughout the narrative? *Traits* may be defined as “persistent personal qualities that describe the character involved” (Sherlock Holmes is “perceptive”; Ebenezer Scrooge is “stingy”).

What is the point of view of the characters, and does it concur with the point of view of the implied author or narrator? Is this consistent throughout the narrative? *Point of view* may be defined as “the norms, values, and general worldview that govern the way a character looks at things and renders judgments upon them.”

*Character groups*: consistency of traits and point of view sometimes indicates that various characters belong to a “character group” that is treated as a single character throughout the narrative. For example, the disciples of Jesus in the Gospels often function as a group of people who act and think alike (when the Gospel reports, “The disciples said . . .” the reader is not expected to think that they spoke in unison but rather that they spoke as though they were a single character).

Types of characters include:

- *round*—exhibits inconsistent or unpredictable traits
- *flat*—exhibits consistent and predictable traits
- *stock*—exhibits only one trait or very few consistent ones
- *dynamic*—shows development or change in basic profile (i.e., traits and point of view) over the course of the narrative
- *static*—basic profile remains the same through the narrative

*Opposition of characters:* divergence of point of view and incompatibility of traits between characters and character groups often forms the basis for the development of conflict.

Readers tend to regard characters with *empathy*, *sympathy*, or *antipathy*:

- *empathy*—reader identifies with the character and experiences the story from that character's point of view (empathy may be either realistic or idealistic)
- *sympathy*—reader may or may not identify with the character, but feels favorably disposed to the character
- *antipathy*—reader may or may not identify with the character, but feels unfavorably disposed to the character

Readers typically feel sympathy for characters for whom the protagonist feels sympathy and antipathy for characters for whom the protagonist feels antipathy.

2. *Discourse.* What method of characterization does the author use in the narrative? How do readers know what the characters are like (in terms of traits and point of view)?

- *telling*—narrator describes the characters for the reader from the implied author's own point of view (e.g., "Joseph was a just man")
- *showing*—narrator describes the characters from the point of view of other characters within the story by reporting the actions, speech, thoughts, or beliefs of those characters (e.g., when Jesus says that the Pharisees are hypocrites, the reader gets some impression of both Jesus and the Pharisees)

Four *planes of expression* on which characters may be revealed:

- *spatial-temporal*—actions of the characters in space and time
- *phraseological*—speech, including thoughts if they are verbalized as speech
- *psychological*—inside views of the character's motives
- *ideological*—norms, values, and general worldview ascribed to the character

Narrative critics notice which of these planes are used to reveal characters to readers.

*Incongruity* occurs when the author provides conflicting characterization: a character's own self-description may differ from the perception of that character attributed to others; or, a character's speech may present the character differently than the character's actions (Herod says that he wants to worship Jesus but then tries to kill him). The reader must decide which level of characterization is the more reliable.

### **Settings**

1. *Story.* What is the place, time, and social situation for the story, and does this have any special significance? Settings may be *spatial*, *temporal*, or *social*.

Spatial settings include the physical environment (geographical and architectural locations) in which the characters live, as well as the “props” and “furniture” (articles of clothing, modes of transportation, etc.) that make up this environment.

Temporal settings include the broad sweep or concept of time assumed by the narrative (“monumental time”), as well as the chronological and typological references to time as it is measured by the characters in the story (“mortal time”). Examples of monumental time: “the days of Noah”; “the age of the church.” Examples of mortal time: “year,” “day,” “night,” “Sabbath.”

Social settings include the political institutions, class structure, economic systems, social customs, and general cultural context assumed to be operative in the narrative (e.g., the social institution of slavery is part of the social setting for *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*; the Roman occupation of Palestine is part of the social setting for all four New Testament Gospels).

Settings may be symbolic:

- “the wilderness”—a place of testing
- “the sea”—a place of danger
- “night”—a time for secrecy

Settings may be set in opposition to each other:

- “day and night”
- “land and sea”
- “heaven and earth”

Certain settings may also serve as boundaries that bridge such oppositions:

- evening or dawn may be a boundary between day and night
- a beach, a boat, or an island may be a boundary between land and sea
- a mountain may be a boundary between heaven and earth

2. *Discourse*. How does the author or narrator describe the settings for the reader?

Settings may be described with either an abundance or a paucity of detail. How much is left to the reader’s imagination? What is the reader simply assumed to know?

## **Bibliography**

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- Resseguie, James L. *Narrative Criticism and the New Testament: An Introduction*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005.



## Rhetorical Criticism

The focus of rhetorical criticism is on the strategies employed by the author of a work to achieve particular purposes. Aristotle formulated a theory that allowed for three “species” of rhetoric:<sup>1</sup>

- *judicial*—accuses or defends
- *deliberative*—offers advice
- *epideictic*—praises or blames

Phyllis Trible has offered this helpful summary of these three types of rhetoric:<sup>2</sup>

	Judicial	Deliberative	Epideictic
<b>focus</b>	justice	expediency	adulation/denunciation
<b>setting</b>	law court	public assembly	public ceremony
<b>purpose</b>	to persuade	to persuade	to please or inspire
<b>time</b>	past	future	present
<b>emphasis</b>	speech	audience	speaker

Thus, rhetorical critics are interested not only in the point that a work wishes to make but also in the basis on which that point is established (the types of arguments or proofs that are used): sometimes external evidence or documentation may be cited; sometimes the trustworthy character of the writer is invoked; at other times, an appeal is made to the readers’ emotions or sense of logic.

Trible identifies three primary “goals of communication”:

- intellectual goal of teaching
- emotional goal of touching the feelings
- aesthetic goal of pleasing so as to hold attention

In New Testament studies, rhetorical criticism has been used mainly in studies of epistles or of portions of the Gospels and Acts that may be isolated as distinctive units (e.g., speeches).

Two sample studies:

1. Hans Dieter Betz interprets Paul’s letter to the Galatians as an instance of judicial rhetoric in which Paul defends his ministry and apostleship. See *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Churches in Galatia*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979).
2. George Kennedy discusses the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s Gospel (Matt. 5–7) as a speech that employs deliberative rhetoric: it offers advice to disciples on how to live if they want to inherit the blessings of the

kingdom of heaven. See *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 39–72.

### **Footnotes**

1. See Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric* 3.1.1358a; also *The Poetics*.
2. See Phyllis Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, GBS (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 9.

## Reader-Response Criticism

### Polyvalence

Reader-response critics are interested in the phenomenon of *polyvalence*—why texts mean different things to different people. They pay special attention to four factors that often cause readers to understand or experience texts differently.

- *Social Location*. The social location of a reader refers to identifying characteristics such as age, gender, nationality, race, health, career, social class, personality type, and marital status. Readers who share certain aspects of social location tend to understand texts in similar ways that can be distinguished from understandings produced by readers from a different social location.
- *Reading Strategy*. The manner in which a text is received affects the way in which it is interpreted. For example, if a text is heard out loud, it might be understood differently than if it is read silently. If a section of a text is read as a pericope, it might be understood differently than if it is encountered as an episode in a longer work. If a book is read as a part of a larger book (“the Bible”), it might be understood differently than if it is read as a freestanding work.
- *Empathy Choice*. With narrative literature, readers will experience the meaning of a story differently depending on the characters with whom they most identify.
- *Conception of Meaning*. Diverse interpretations of a text’s meaning are determined at a basic level by different philosophical concepts of what constitutes meaning (a cognitive message to be passed from author to reader, or an affective or emotive response produced in readers through the experience of receiving the text).

### Expected and Unexpected Readings

Some reader-response critics classify different interpretations or responses to texts as expected or unexpected readings. An *expected reading* is one that seems to be invited by signals within the text itself. An *unexpected reading* is one in which factors extrinsic to the text seem to resist or ignore the text’s signals. In terms of narrative criticism, an expected reading is one that is compatible with the response of a text’s implied readers, while an unexpected reading is one that is incompatible with the response of a text’s implied readers.

*Example:* Imagine four different people reading the story of the passion of Christ recorded in Matthew 26–27. They respond emotionally to the narrative:

- Reader One is *inspired* by the story because it presents Jesus as a man of integrity who is willing to die nobly for his convictions.
- Reader Two is *traumatized* by the story because it reveals the depth of human depravity on the part of those who denounce, betray, and torture an innocent man.

- Reader Three is *comforted* by the story because it portrays Jesus' death as an atoning sacrifice through which God offers forgiveness and mercy to the undeserving.
- Reader Four is *delighted* by the story because it reports the gruesome execution of a meddling busybody who tried to tell everyone else how they should live.

Reader-response critics would classify the first three responses as expected readings: though very different from each other, all three respond to cues within the text (and so exemplify polyvalent responses). The critics would classify the fourth response as an unexpected reading: it responds to the story in a way that the narrative does not solicit or invite.

## Bibliography: Different Approaches to New Testament Studies

### Overview

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Introductory study of the New Testament is concerned primarily with the interpretation of individual books, each of which presents its own distinctive theological message. The discipline known as New Testament theology moves beyond this in an attempt to synthesize the theological perspectives of the different writings. A scholar who writes a New Testament theology tries to determine what can be said about the theological witness of the New Testament as a whole.

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## Quests for the Historical Jesus: Highlights in the History of the Discipline

### Prior to the Twentieth Century (ca. 1750–1900)

- Prior to what came to be called *the quest for the historical Jesus*, “the Jesus of history” was thought to be identical to “the Christ of faith.”
- The intellectual movement known as the Enlightenment initiated the historical quest. The Gospels came to be viewed not simply as scripture but as historical sources.
- H. S. Reimarus (1694–1768) wrote a four-thousand-page manuscript, published anonymously as the *Wolfenbüttel Fragments*. It was a rationalist reconstruction of early Christianity that presented Jesus as an unsuccessful political reformer; the disciples invented the story of the resurrection by stealing the body of Jesus. Reimarus hoped to create a rational (nonrevealed) Christianity.
- D. F. Strauss (1808–1874) observed the mythical dimension of the Gospels and assumed that, once it was stripped away, a defensible, rationalistic Jesus could be recovered. Strauss’s Jesus was a religious genius, an example for humanity.
- The nineteenth century saw a spate of literary portraits of Jesus in which he was a great, noble teacher. These portraits of Jesus invariably were idealistic, romantic, and rationalistic.

For more information, see Mark Allan Powell, *Jesus as a Figure in History: How Modern Historians View the Man from Galilee* (Westminster John Knox, 1998).

### First Half of the Twentieth Century (ca. 1900–1950)

- Albert Schweitzer’s book *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* (1906) had an enormous impact. Schweitzer surveyed the nineteenth-century portraits of Jesus and determined that the authors inevitably portrayed Jesus as the figure that they personally wanted him to be. He also averred that the actual historical Jesus was a zealous, apocalyptic fanatic, lacking in relevance for our time.
- Rudolf Bultmann reached the pessimistic conclusion that certain knowledge of Jesus was all but impossible, but he proposed that such knowledge was also theologically unnecessary. Christian faith could be based on the existential truth embedded in New Testament mythology rather than on literal truth that might have been presented in more historically reliable documents.
- Christian interest in the historical Jesus waned during this period, though significant studies continued to be produced by scholars such as Alfred Loisy, Maurice Gogul, Charles Guignebert, Joachim Jeremias, C. H. Dodd, and many more.

### The New Quest (ca. 1950–1980)

- Bultmann’s students became convinced that their teacher had driven a wedge too deeply between “the Jesus of history” and “the Christ of faith.” Some measure of continuity between the two was needed. Otherwise Christianity would sink into Docetism and Jesus would become a phantom.

Their work was sometimes called “the new quest” to distinguish it from the “lives of Jesus” produced in the former era.

- Ernst Käsemann wrote an essay in 1953 in which he parted ways with his teacher (Bultmann) and argued for greater continuity between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith.
- Günther Bornkamm and Norman Perrin likewise published books on Jesus, which claimed it might be impossible to produce a biography of the man but that it was possible to make judgments regarding certain facts about him. Bornkamm and Perrin presented lists of “indisputable facts” regarding Jesus.
- In the United States, J. M. Robinson wrote *The New Quest for the Historical Jesus* (1959). Robinson sought to demonstrate points of consistency between the Jesus who lived and the Jesus of Christian proclamation.
- Features of the new quest include an awareness of the limits of historical reconstruction; a recognition that the Gospels are religiously biased; an insistence on the role of history in understanding Jesus’ significance.

### **Recent Studies (ca. 1980–present)**

- The last two decades of the twentieth century witnessed a revival of interest in the historical Jesus.
- The Jesus Seminar was launched in 1985. A largely American group, these scholars held regular meetings to discuss the sayings and deeds of Jesus and to vote on their historical authenticity. They deemed about 20 percent of the sayings attributed to Jesus in the Gospels to be historically verifiable apart from any consideration of religious ideology.
- Numerous biographies of Jesus were produced by scholars such as Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, John Meier, E. P. Sanders, and N. T. Wright.
- N. T. Wright suggested that the work of some scholars (Meier, Sanders, and himself—but not the Jesus Seminar) should be called “the third quest” as a way of distinguishing their work from *both* the former “lives of Jesus” *and* the skeptical “new quest” work done by Bultmann’s students.
- Characteristics of this so-called third quest would include: a more accurate knowledge of first-century Judaism (and more emphasis on Jesus’ Jewish identity) and a more positive assessment of the Gospel traditions (chastened use of “the criterion of dissimilarity”).
- People who did not understand that the term “third quest” was intended to refer to a particular type of historical Jesus studies sometimes thought the term was a label for a chronological period (e.g., all of the studies associated with the widespread revival of interest in the late twentieth century). Thus, some surveys speak of the “old quest,” the “new quest,” and the “third quest” as eras of scholarship.
- Most scholars would eventually conclude that labels like “new quest” and “third quest” are inaccurate and subject to misinterpretation; there is only one quest for the historical Jesus, which has continued unabated for centuries, albeit with different expressions and degrees of intensity.

## Criteria for Historical Criticism

How do historians decide which information about Jesus may be deemed “historically plausible” or “historically verifiable”? They typically use criteria such as these to evaluate the relative merit of material found in the New Testament and other ancient sources.

### Multiple Attestation

Material is more likely to be deemed historically reliable if it correlates with the witness of other, independent sources.

- The proposal that “Jesus told parables” passes this criterion, since several different sources portray Jesus as telling parables.
- The proposal that “Jesus told the parable of the good Samaritan” does not pass this criterion, because we find this particular parable in only one source—the Gospel of Luke.

### Memorable Form or Content

Material is more likely to be deemed historically reliable if it is couched in terms easy to remember (e.g., brief, humorous, paradoxical, or shocking).

- The report that Jesus told a man, “Let the dead bury the dead” (Luke 9:60) passes this criterion, because the saying is provocative and would have been easy to remember.
- The so-called “High-Priestly prayer” that Jesus is said to have prayed on the night of his arrest (John 17:1–26) does not pass this criterion, because it is long and rambling and would have been difficult for any bystander to have remembered.

### Language and Environment

Material is more likely to be deemed historically reliable if it is compatible with the language and culture of the period it describes (rather than reflecting the language and culture for the time and place in which the source was written).

- The parable of the sower (Mark 4:3–8) passes this criterion, because it accurately reflects agricultural practices in rural Galilee that would not have been widely known elsewhere in the Roman Empire.
- The explanation that Jesus gives for this parable (Mark 4:13–20) does not pass this criterion, because it contains language that derives from the early church (“the word”) and compares what happens to the seed to the effects of Christian preaching.

### Embarrassment

Material is likely to be deemed historically reliable if reporting the material would have been awkward for the church.

- Stories that portray tension between Jesus and his family members (e.g., Mark 3:21, 31–35) pass this criterion, because those family members came

to be highly regarded in the early church, which would have had no incentive for recalling stories about their shortcomings.

- Stories that portray Jesus besting his Jewish opponents in debate (e.g., Mark 12:13–37) do not pass this criterion, since the early church was engaged in disputes with Judaism and no doubt found those stories to be particularly appealing.

### **Dissimilarity or Distinctiveness**

Material is more likely to be deemed historically reliable if it does not support the particular interests of the author.

- The proposal that “Jesus was baptized by John” passes this criterion, because the report of this event does not appear to support any particular claim that the Gospel authors wish to make.
- The proposal that “Jesus commissioned his followers to make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:16–20) does not pass this criterion, because the author of the Gospel that portrays Jesus doing this was interested in motivating churches to evangelize Gentiles.

### **Plausible Influence**

Material is more likely to be deemed historically reliable if it explains Jesus’ purported influence on early Christianity in ways that derive from Palestinian Judaism.

- The notion that Jesus spoke about “the Son of Man” passes this criterion, because early Gentile Christians made much of that term but would not have been inclined to favor such a distinctively Jewish concept if it had not come to them as part of the inherited tradition.
- The idea that Jesus told people that knowing the truth would set them free (John 8:32) does not pass this criterion, because the early Christian church’s concern with the liberating effects of knowledge owed more to Greek philosophy than to Jewish tradition.

### **Coherence**

Material that cannot be established by the above criteria is more likely to be deemed historically reliable if it is consistent with the information that is so derived.

- A saying found in the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas passes this criterion, because it resembles genuine sayings of Jesus: “Whoever is near me is near the fire; whoever is far from me is far from the Kingdom” (Thomas 82, cf. Mark 9:49; 12:34).
- A saying that implores Jesus’ followers to regard an impenitent sinner “as a Gentile or a tax collector” (Matt. 18:17) does not pass this criterion, because it does not cohere well with our knowledge that Jesus was accepting of Gentiles and tax collectors.

### **Congruity with a Modern View of Reality**

Material is more likely to be deemed historically reliable if it does not require acceptance of ideas that contradict modern views of reality.

- The proposal that Jesus earned fame as a popular teacher even though he had no professional training passes this criterion, because our modern world recognizes that untrained individuals can possess the inherent ability to become noteworthy teachers.
- The resurrection of Jesus would not pass this criterion, because modern science maintains that people who have been dead for three days do not come back to life.



## Summary Chart: Criteria for Determining Historical Reliability in Jesus Research

CRITERION	Passes this criterion	Does not pass this criterion
<b>Multiple Attestation</b> Material correlates with the witness of other, independent sources.	<i>Jesus told parables.</i> Several different sources portray Jesus as telling parables.	<i>Jesus told the parable of the good Samaritan.</i> This particular parable is in only one source ("L").
<b>Memorable Form or Content</b> Material is couched in terms easy to remember (e.g., brief, humorous, paradoxical, or shocking).	<i>Jesus told a man, "Let the dead bury the dead" (Luke 9:60).</i> The saying is provocative and would have been easy to remember.	<i>The "High-Priestly prayer" that Jesus is said to have prayed on the night of his arrest (John 17:1–26)</i> It is long and rambling and would have been difficult to remember.
<b>Language and Environment</b> Material is compatible with the language and culture of the period it describes (rather than reflecting the language and culture for the time and place in which the source was written).	<i>The parable of the sower (Mark 4:3–8)</i> Accurately reflects agricultural practices in rural Galilee that would not have been widely known elsewhere in the Roman empire	<i>Explanation of the parable of the sower (Mark 4:13–20)</i> Contains language that derives from the early church ("the word") and compares what happens to the seed to the effects of Christian preaching
<b>Embarrassment</b> Material would have been awkward for the church to remember and report.	<i>Stories revealing tension between Jesus and his family members (e.g., Mark 3:21, 31–35)</i> The early church had no incentive for recalling stories about tensions within the family of Jesus.	<i>Stories in which Jesus bests his Jewish opponents in debate (e.g., Mark 12:13–37)</i> The early church was engaged in disputes with Judaism and no doubt found these stories appealing.
<b>Dissimilarity or Distinctiveness</b> Material does not support the particular interests of the author or the source.	<i>Jesus was baptized by John.</i> Report of this incident does not appear to support any particular claim that any Gospel author wishes to make.	<i>Jesus commissioned his followers to "make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:16–20).</i> The author of this Gospel was interested in evangelizing Gentiles.
<b>Plausible Influence</b> Material reflects the enduring influence of Jesus by explaining how a matter rooted in Palestinian Judaism would become a prominent concern in Gentile Christianity.	<i>Jesus spoke about the Son of Man.</i> Early Gentile Christians made much of this term but would not have been inclined to favor such a distinctively Jewish concept on their own (i.e., unless Jesus had used it).	<i>Jesus told people that knowing the truth would set them free (John 8:32).</i> The early church's concern with the liberating effects of knowledge owed more to Greek philosophy than Jewish tradition.
<b>Coherence</b> Material that cannot be established by the above criteria is nevertheless consistent with information that is so derived.	<i>Jesus says in Gospel of Thomas, "Whoever is near me is near the fire; whoever is far from me is far from the Kingdom" (Thomas 82).</i> This resembles sayings of Jesus found in more reliable sources (Mark 9:49; 12:34).	<i>Jesus implores his followers to regard an impenitent sinner "as a Gentile or a tax collector" (Matt. 18:17)</i> This does not cohere well with knowledge that Jesus was accepting of Gentiles and tax collectors.
<b>Congruity with Modern View of Reality</b> Material does not require acceptance of ideas that contradict modern views of reality.	<i>Jesus became a popular teacher though he lacked professional training.</i> Such things are known to happen in our modern world.	<i>Jesus was raised from the dead.</i> Modern science says people who are dead for three days do not come back to life.

## Modern Biographies of Jesus

Historians often attempt to write biographies of Jesus based on what they take to be plausible reconstructions of his life and teaching. What follows here are a few summaries of key conclusions reached by some of the most prominent historical Jesus scholars regarding what they believe can be regarded as historically plausible.

1. *Marcus Borg* sees Jesus as a Jewish mystic, a charismatic “Spirit person” who was intent on revitalizing Israel. Jesus claimed an intimacy with God and, throughout his life, experienced visions and other encounters with divine reality that he believed empowered him to accomplish the mission for which God had selected him. This mission involved initiating a religious movement that would prioritize compassion over concern for purity. Thus, Jesus opposed the “politics of holiness” that categorized people in his day as “clean or unclean” or even as “Jew or Gentile,” and this religious vision led him to be identified as a subversive social reformer. He focused on both personal and political transformation, emphasizing practices rather than beliefs and exemplifying faith through deep commitment and gentle certitude.<sup>1</sup>
2. *John Dominic Crossan* views Jesus as a radical peasant who rebelled against political and religious authorities by defying their conventions. Apparently influenced (either directly or indirectly) by Cynic philosophy, Jesus taught a new wisdom through parables and aphorisms that pointed out the inherent inadequacies of usual ways of thinking. In conscious resistance to the economic and social tyranny of Roman-occupied Palestine, he proclaimed a vision of life oriented around God’s radical justice and adopted a lifestyle intended to emulate this concept. He and his followers chose to live in poverty. Even after he had gained some renown, he performed exorcisms and healings without charge. In violation of accepted taboos, he sought to demonstrate a radical egalitarianism by openly engaging in table fellowship with misfits and outcasts.<sup>2</sup>
3. *Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza* thinks that Jesus initiated a social movement that defied the hierarchical society into which he had been born in favor of a vision of inclusive wholeness. He attacked the patriarchal family system of his day by insisting that no one except God should be viewed with the authority given to a father. He sought to create a new community in which women and other basically disenfranchised people could be prominent. He denounced Jewish purity codes as preserving masculine dominance and stressed instead the wisdom tradition of Israel. Indeed, Jesus encouraged people to worship God as Sophia (the female figure portrayed in the Old Testament as a personification of divine wisdom). He thought of himself as the child or prophet of Sophia and so (in spite of being biologically male) presented himself to his followers as an incarnation of the female principle of God.<sup>3</sup>

4. *Paula Fredriksen*, a Jewish scholar of ancient Christianity, thinks that Jesus was a popular religious teacher from Galilee who, unfortunately, was acclaimed by masses of people in Jerusalem to be the Messiah when he visited that city. Fredriksen reasons that neither Jesus nor his disciples actually made such a claim, but the mere fact that the populace purported Jesus to be the Messiah led Pilate to crucify him in order to disprove that notion and dampen the crowd's enthusiasm. This, in Fredriksen's mind, explains why Pilate did not also condemn Jesus' disciples (who had been innocent of any insurgency).<sup>4</sup>
5. *Richard Horsley* sees Jesus as standing in the classic tradition of Israelite prophets, which is to say that he must be understood as someone fundamentally concerned with the social and political circumstances of his day. Jesus was a Jewish peasant whose social environment was characterized by a "spiral of violence" involving poverty, oppression, protest, and revolt. His ministry may be understood as fomenting a social revolution on behalf of his fellow peasants. He was not "political" in the sense of seeking transformation from the "top down" (e.g., a change of leadership); rather, he sought to change society from the "bottom up." His aim was to renew peasant society in a way that would respect the honored traditions of Israel.<sup>5</sup>
6. *John Meier* describes Jesus as "a marginal Jew"—that is, a Jewish teacher who by circumstance and choice lived on the margins of his own society, speaking and acting in ways that sometimes made him appear "obnoxious, dangerous, or suspicious to everyone." He began life as the eldest son of an average peasant family, but as a young adult he abandoned his job as a woodworker and left his home to become a disciple of John the Baptist, who called people to repent in preparation for some sort of imminent divine intervention. Later, he began a public ministry of his own, preaching that God was coming to gather his scattered people and to rule them as their king. Jesus also became widely known as a miracle worker, and this allowed him to claim that, in some sense, God's reign was already present. In light of this, he presented himself as an authoritative teacher of God's will, giving his followers clear directives on how God their king wanted them to live.<sup>6</sup>
7. *E. P. Sanders* presents Jesus as an eschatological prophet whose essential mission was to announce a great future event that was about to take place. God was going to intervene directly in history in a way that would involve the elimination of all evil and the dawning of a new age. His vision for this transformation was decidedly Jewish: his selection of twelve disciples was intended to represent the restoration of the twelve tribes of Israel, and his act of overturning tables in the temple court was a symbolic act presaging that God would raise up a new temple to replace the corrupt one. The most radical aspect of Jesus' vision was that he promised inclusion in God's kingdom to sinners without demanding their repentance. He emphasized forgiveness, presenting God as loving and gracious. His vision for the immediate dawn of God's kingdom turned out to be wrong, and his followers had to reinterpret his message in spiritual terms. This also made the message more appealing to non-Jews.<sup>7</sup>

8. *Geza Vermes*, a Jewish historian, draws connections between Jesus and other pious, charismatic Jews who were reputed to be miracle workers. Two such persons are especially significant because, according to the Talmud, they operated in first-century Galilee: Honi the Circle Drawer and Hanina ben Dosa. Vermes calls Jesus a *hasid*, a type of holy man who, like Honi and Hanina, claimed to draw on the power of God in ways that transcended the usual channels of religious authority. Such persons were heirs of the Israelite prophetic tradition, especially as represented by Elijah and Elisha.<sup>8</sup>
9. *Ben Witherington III* proposes that Jesus be understood as a Jewish sage who drew heavily upon the wisdom traditions of Israel and taught a way of life consonant with the will of God as revealed through nature and commonsense observations about life. Jesus did not speak primarily as a prophet (using the classic “Thus says the LORD” formula) but instead tended to speak on his own authority, as do the authors of wisdom books such as Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. The form of his speech, furthermore, was not oracles but rather riddles, parables, aphorisms, and beatitudes. Ultimately, he appears to have understood himself to be the personification of divine wisdom (Matt. 11:19, 25–27): he believed that he was the wisdom of God descended to earth in human form, and as such, he claimed to be “the revealer of the very mind of God.”<sup>9</sup>
10. *N. T. Wright* describes Jesus as one who believed that his vocation was to enact what scripture said God would do. Viewing himself as both prophet and Messiah, he understood his own destiny as symbolizing that of Israel. Thus, he performed mighty works intended to signal the fulfillment of prophecy, and he sought to create a community of followers that would represent reconstituted Israel. Eventually, he came to believe that his vocation included dying as the representative of Israel. His death, he thought, would be a way of symbolically undergoing the judgment that he had announced for Israel, and it would also serve as a prelude to his own vindication by God. This vindication (his resurrection) would initiate a new covenant with Israel and inaugurate God’s reign as king of the world. In ways like these, Jesus attempted to do and to be what scripture said God alone could do and be.<sup>10</sup>

### Where They Agree and Disagree

As these brief sketches reveal, historians disagree on various aspects of how the “historical Jesus” should be construed. There are many matters on which they completely agree (he was Jewish, he taught in parables, he befriended outcasts, he argued with Pharisees, he was crucified, and so on). But there are also disputed topics:

- *Jewish orientation*. The diversity of first-century Judaism allows various analogies for understanding Jesus: prophet, sage, rabbi, mystic, social reformer. Different historians attempt to understand Jesus in light of these different models; a few historical scholars even move away from Jewish categories altogether, arguing that Jesus was sufficiently Hellenized to be viewed as a generic philosopher.

- *Political orientation.* Most scholars think that Jesus' concern for justice was more a religious matter than a political one. But others see Jesus as a social revolutionary who challenged the existing order and advocated alternative political agendas and processes.
- *Vision for the future.* Some scholars say that Jesus announced the imminent end of the world, and he was proven wrong when this did not occur. Others think that Jesus spoke only of some radical transformation of Israel, and this did come about through the destruction of Jerusalem and the growth of the Christian church. A few scholars reject the notion that Jesus had any developed view of the future, assuming that his focus was decidedly on matters of the here and now.
- *Self-consciousness.* Some scholars believe that Jesus claimed to be the Messiah and may even have identified himself as a unique mediator or embodiment of divine presence. Others think that he probably considered himself to be a prophet or divinely chosen teacher, but that he probably did not interpret his role as unique or unprecedented in the history of Israel. Some historians think that Jesus eschewed all honorary titles for himself and that such descriptions came to be applied to him only later.

## Footnotes

1. See Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision. Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987); *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006).
2. See John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991); *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994).
3. See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983); *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet; Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (London: SCM, 1994).
4. See Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth: King of the Jews* (New York: Random House, 1999).
5. See Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002); *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987); *Sociology and the Jesus Movement* (New York: Crossroad, 1989).
6. See John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, 4 vols., ABRL (New York: Doubleday, 1991–2009).
7. See E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985); *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Penguin, 1993).
8. See Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels* (London: Collins, 1973); *The Real Jesus: Then and Now* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010).
9. See Ben Witherington III, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990); *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).
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## Early “Lives of Jesus”: An Adventure in Scholarship

During the period following the Enlightenment, scholars embarked on what came to be called “the quest for the historical Jesus.” They wrote biographies known as “lives of Jesus.” These works typically imposed some grand scheme or hypothesis upon the biblical material in order to interpret everything in accord with a consistent paradigm (e.g., “Jesus was a social reformer” or “Jesus was a religious mystic”).

Hundreds of these “lives of Jesus” were produced during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. What follows here is a sampling of some of the most influential views.

### **Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768)**

Reimarus believed that Jesus was an unsuccessful political claimant who saw it as his destiny to be established by God as king of the restored people of Israel. Reimarus was a respected professor of Eastern languages at the University of Hamburg, and his works on Jesus were not published until after his death. Apparently, he feared retribution for his controversial views during his lifetime. In any case, fragments of a large unpublished manuscript were printed between 1774 and 1778, and these mark what many consider to be the beginning of the quest for the historical Jesus. Reimarus interpreted all of the passages in the New Testament where Jesus speaks of the “kingdom of God” or the “kingdom of heaven” as references to a new political reality about to be established on earth. Thus, Reimarus said, Jesus believed he was the Messiah (Christ), but he meant this in a worldly sense. Jesus thought that God was going to deliver the people of Israel from bondage to the Romans and create a new and powerful kingdom on earth where Jesus himself would rule as king. This is why he was executed, charged with the crime of claiming to be the King of the Jews (Matt. 27:37). When he died, he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46) because he realized in his last moments that God had failed him and that his hopes had been misplaced. His disciples, however, were unable to accept this outcome. Not wanting to return to their mundane lives in Galilee, they stole his body from its tomb, claimed he had been raised from the dead (see Matt. 28:11–15), and made up a new story about how Jesus had died willingly as an atonement for sins. The message of the kingdom was spiritualized, and the teaching of the failed religious fanatic was transformed into a religion promising salvation after death to those who joined an organization led by his followers.

### **Heinrich Eberhard Gottlob Paulus (1761–1851)**

Paulus was a veteran rationalist who became best known for offering naturalistic explanations for miracle stories reported in the Gospels. As professor of theology at the University of Heidelberg, he published a two-volume work on the life of Jesus in 1828. Paulus accepted the miracle stories as reports of historical events but reasoned that a primitive knowledge of the laws of nature led people in biblical times to regard as supernatural occurrences what the advancement of

knowledge has rendered understandable. For example, Jesus may have appeared to walk on water when he strode along the shore in a mist, and he may have received credit for stilling a storm when the weather coincidentally improved after he awoke from sleep on a boat trip. Jesus healed people by improving their psychological disposition or, sometimes, by applying medicines mixed with mud (John 9:6) or spit (Mark 8:23). Likewise, his disciples were provided with medicinal oil to use for curing certain ailments (Mark 6:13). The story of the feeding of the five thousand recalls a time when Jesus and his disciples generously shared their own provisions with those who had none, inspiring others in the crowd to do the same until everyone was satisfied.

### **David Friedrich Strauss (1808–1874)**

Strauss appealed to modern understandings of mythology to steer a middle course between naive acceptance of Gospel stories and the sort of simplistic explanations for these stories offered by Paulus. In 1835, Strauss published *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, a two-volume work over fourteen hundred pages in length. He called for unbiased historical research to be done on the Gospels, establishing an orientation for scholarship that is still followed by many today. He discerned, for instance, that the stories in the first three Gospels are less developed than those in John, which, accordingly, is the least valuable book for historical reconstruction. Still, Strauss regarded most of the stories in all of the Gospels as myths, developed on the pattern of Old Testament prototypes. The point of such tales is not to record historical occurrences but rather to interpret historical events in light of various religious ideas. For example, the story of Jesus' baptism includes references to the Spirit descending as a dove upon Jesus and a voice speaking from heaven. These things did not actually happen in the strict historical sense, but they interpret the significance of something that did occur. Jesus really was baptized by John, and his sense of mission was somehow related to what he experienced on that occasion.

### **Ernst Renan (1823–1892)**

Renan combined critical scholarship with novelistic aesthetic appeal to create what was probably the most widely read life of Jesus in his day. Published in 1863, the book broke with rationalism in its attempt to discern the emotional impact of the Jesus tradition and to trace the reasons for this to the passions, individuality, and spontaneity of Jesus himself. Regarding the Gospels as "legendary biographies," Renan sought to uncover the personality that inspired the legends while also displaying his own penchant for poetic, even sentimental, description. For example, since Jesus is said to have ridden into Jerusalem on a mule (in modern Bibles, an ass or a donkey), Renan imagines that he typically traveled about the countryside seated upon "that favorite riding-animal of the East, which is so docile and sure-footed and whose great dark eyes, shaded with long lashes, are full of gentleness." Renan also attempted to fit the Gospel materials into an overall chronology for the life of Jesus. He described the initial years as "a Galilean springtime," a sunny period in which Jesus was an amiable carpenter who rode his gentle mule from town to town sharing a "sweet theology of love" that he had discerned through observation of nature. Renan dismissed the literal historicity of miracles, suggesting that the raising of Lazarus was a "staged miracle," a deliberate hoax designed to win acclaim for Jesus. In

any case, Jesus eventually visited the capital city of Jerusalem, where his winsome message met with opposition from the rabbis. This led him to develop an increasingly revolutionary stance with a harsher tone, to despair of earthly ambitions, and at last to invite persecution and martyrdom.

### **Some Conclusions**

What lessons are to be learned from these “lives of Jesus”? Reimarus’s writings were overtly hostile to Christianity, while the other three authors viewed themselves as Christian theologians who sought to discover or salvage something in the biblical tradition that could be recognized as universally true. All four were skeptical of the miracle stories, displaying a reluctance to accept anything that deals with the supernatural as a straightforward historical account. All questioned the accuracy of the Gospels at certain points and sought to supplement the stories with what they thought were reasonable conjectures at other points. The most important lesson, however, was noted with verve by Albert Schweitzer in 1906. All of these authors (and numerous others) managed to produce portraits of Jesus that they personally found appealing. For the non-Christian, the historical Jesus rather conveniently turned out to be a fraud. And, for the Christians, the historical Jesus seemed in every case to end up believing whatever the individual biographer believed and valuing things that the individual biographer valued. The so-called quest for the *historical* Jesus had tended in fact to become a quest for the *relevant* Jesus.

Adapted from Mark Allan Powell, *Jesus as a Figure in History: How Modern Historians View the Man from Galilee* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 13–16. Used by permission.



## References to Jesus in Non-Christian Literature

The New Testament is not the only book from antiquity that mentions Jesus.

### Roman Literature

#### **Josephus (37–100)**

- In describing the illegal execution of James, the leader of the Christian church at Jerusalem, Josephus identifies James as “the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ” (*Jewish Antiquities* 20.9.1).
- A second reference is more detailed, but there is a problem with it. We have no original manuscripts of Josephus’s work, and some of the ones that we do possess have been edited by later Christians who added their own description of Jesus to what the Jewish historian originally wrote. The following quotation brackets words that most scholars think were editorial additions:

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 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. (*Jewish Antiquities* 18.3.3)

#### **Tacitus (56–117)**

- Tacitus records that Jesus was “executed in Tiberius’s reign by the governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate” (*Annals* 15.44).

#### **Suetonius (69–135)**

- Suetonius reports in a writing from around 120 that the emperor Claudius expelled Jews from Rome because of trouble arising over “Chrestus” (*Twelve Caesars* 25.4). Most scholars think that this is a mangled spelling of the Latin for “Christ.”

#### **Mara bar Serapion (late first century CE)**

- A Syriac Stoic, Mara bar Serapion wrote a letter to his son that does not mention Jesus by name but says that the Jews killed “their wise king” whose wisdom (like that of Socrates and Pythagoras) continues “because of the new laws he laid down.”

#### **Pliny the Younger (ca. 61–113)**

- Pliny writes about Christians in a letter to the emperor Trajan around 111–113. He comments that they “chant verses to Christ as to a god” (*Letter to Trajan* 10.96).

### **Lucian of Samosata (115–200)**

- Lucian writes a mocking satire about Christians who are said to worship a “crucified sophist” from Palestine and to live “under his laws,” because he “introduced this new cult into the world” (*The Passing of Peregrinus* 11, 13).

### **Jewish Writings**

Scholars debate whether there may be obscure references to Jesus in some of the collections of ancient Jewish writings, such as the Talmuds, the Tosefta, the Targums, and the midrashim. Occasional polemical comments in these writings are sometimes thought to be veiled references to Jesus, but since he is not mentioned by name, no one knows for sure. The text that is most often accepted as referring to Jesus comes from the Babylonian Talmud, and the materials that make up this work were collected over a long period of time, finally coming together around 500–600 CE. Thus, there is no way of knowing how early (or how reliable) the reference may be. Nevertheless, here it is:

- “On the eve of Passover, they hanged Yeshu [= Jesus], and the herald went before him forty days saying, ‘(Yeshu) is going forth to be stoned, since he practiced sorcery and cheated and led his people astray. Let everyone knowing anything in his defense come and plead for him.’ But they found nothing in his defense and hanged him on the eve of Passover” (*b. Sanhedrin* 43a).
- A little later, this same text also says, “Jesus had five disciples: Mattai, Maqai, Metser, Buni, and Todah.”

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## The Gospel: Four Stages

The word *gospel* (in Greek, *euangelion*) means “good news,” and in the first century it appears to have passed through four stages of application:

- First, the term *gospel* was used to describe the content of Jesus’ preaching: “Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the good news [*gospel*] of God” (Mark 1:14). The “gospel” was essentially equivalent to “what Jesus said about God.”
- Second, the word *gospel* was used to describe the content of early Christian preaching, which focused on the death and resurrection of Christ. When the apostle Paul says that he preached “the gospel of God” (Rom. 1:1–5), he does not mean that he repeated what Jesus said about God but rather that he told people the good news of how Jesus had died for them and risen from the dead (see also 1 Cor. 15:1–8).
- Third, as a combination of the above, the term *gospel* came to refer to preaching that summarized the ministry of Jesus in a way that included both what Jesus had said was the good news about God and what Christians had said was the good news about Jesus. A summary of such a sermon is found in Acts 10:34–43. And Mark 14:9 indicates that such preaching included anecdotes about the life and ministry of Jesus.
- Fourth, the word *gospel* came to be used for books that offer in written form what previously had been proclaimed orally. The first such book probably was the one that we know as the Gospel of Mark, and it uses this term in its very first verse: “The beginning of the good news [*gospel*] of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

See Mark Allan Powell, *Fortress Introduction to the Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 8–9.



## Literary Characteristics of Parables

These observations on parables are drawn from Rudolf Bultmann's book *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, 3rd ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 188–92. Bultmann is discussing narrative parables, not parabolic one-line sayings.

### **Parables usually are concise.**

Only the persons who are absolutely essential to the story appear. In the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32), there is no mention of his mother. In the story of the friend at midnight (Luke 11:5–8), there is no mention of the householder's wife. There are never more than three persons or groups in the stories, and no more than two seem to appear at a time.

### **Parables usually are told from a single perspective.**

There is one series of events, always told from the point of view of one person. In the parable of the prodigal son, no information is given about the father's mood or actions while the son is away.

### **Characters in parables usually are presented to the reader through a process of showing rather than telling.**

It is rare that anyone in a parable is described by the narrator. We are told that the judge is unjust (Luke 18:2) and that the bridesmaids are wise and foolish (Matt. 25:2), but this kind of description is quite exceptional. The character of the persons involved emerges from their behavior.

### **Feelings and motives are described only when they are essential to the point of the story.**

We are told of the distress of the fellow servants of the merciless servant (Matt. 18:31), of the joy of the shepherd and the woman who found the lost sheep and the lost coin (Luke 15:6, 9), the compassion of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:33). However, in stories of the prodigal son and of the Pharisee and the tax collector, the feelings of the people involved are expressed not through descriptions offered by the narrator but rather through the words and the actions of the characters themselves.

### **There is little interest in motivation.**

There is no description of the prodigal son's motives in leaving home. Nothing is allowed to detract attention from the point of the story.

### **Often there is no expressed conclusion to the story.**

We are not told that the rich fool died (Luke 12:3–31). We are not told whether the good Samaritan had to pay additional money (Luke 10:35). The main point is made, and that is the end of the story.

### **Usually there is a bare minimum of event.**

We are not told what the prodigal son's particular brand of loose living was (Luke 15:13), nor what the widow did and said when she "kept coming" to the judge (Luke 18:3).

**Often there is direct speech and soliloquy, which makes for simplicity and vividness, and also speed of narrative.**

In a number of parables, the main characters speak to themselves. See, for example, the prodigal son (Luke 15:17–19), the shrewd manager (Luke 16:3–5), and the rich fool (Luke 12:17–19).

**Often there is repetition of phrases, which has a kind of underlining effect.**

In the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14–30), we are told repeatedly of servants presenting their accounts to the master (Matt. 25:20, 22, 24).

**Parables often exhibit end stress, which means that the most important point is scored at the last.**

The emphasis in the parable of the sower (Mark 4:1–8) is on the fourth type of seed, the only one to produce a lasting crop, just as the emphasis in the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–35) is on the third traveler, the one who does act as neighbor.

**The stories and parables of Jesus are such that they involve the hearer or the reader.**

The parables lead to a verdict, which is based on antithesis and contrast. The reader is asked to affiliate with one side or the other.

## Parables as Allegories

A couple of Jesus' better-known parables are explicitly presented as allegories.

He explains the parable of the sower (Mark 4:2–9; cf. 4:13–20) this way:

seed	=	the word
birds eating seed on path	=	Satan snatching away the word
rocky ground	=	trouble or persecution
thorns	=	cares of the world, lure of wealth
good soil	=	those who accept the word and bear fruit

He explains the parable of the weeds (Matt. 13:24–30; cf. 13:36–43) this way:

sower	=	Son of Man
field	=	the world
good seed	=	children of the kingdom
weeds	=	children of the evil one
enemy sower	=	the devil
harvest	=	end of the age
reapers	=	angels

Inspired by these explanations, biblical interpreters once wondered if all of the parables might be allegories, and they devised elaborate explanations that unveiled secret theological or spiritual messages. For example, Origen (third century) read the parable of the good Samaritan as providing an allegorical account of God's plan of salvation:

man who fell among robbers	=	Adam
Jerusalem	=	heaven
Jericho	=	the world
the robbers	=	the devil
the priest	=	the law
the Levite	=	the prophets
the Samaritan	=	Christ
the donkey	=	Christ's body
the inn	=	the church
the two coins	=	the Father and the Son
promise to return	=	second coming of Christ

Augustine (fourth century) proposed a similar reading, with additions:

binding of wounds	=	Christ's restraint of sin
pouring of oil	=	comfort of good hope
pouring of wine	=	exhortation to spirited work

the innkeeper	=	the apostle Paul
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But Augustine disagreed with Origen on the two coins. They were not “the Father and the Son” but rather Christ’s twofold commandment to love God and neighbor.

While creative, such interpretations are rejected by most scholars today. Jesus did not originally intend for his parables to be read in this way, nor did the Gospel authors anticipate that their readers would interpret them in such a fashion. Furthermore, most scholars would caution that if construals such as these are allowed, clever interpreters will be able to make parables mean almost anything they please.

## What Happens When Jesus Dies

In each of our four New Testament Gospels, the events that are narrated immediately after Jesus' death may indicate a primary concern for that particular book.

### **The Gospel of Mark**

Immediately after Jesus dies, Mark tells us that the curtain in the Jerusalem temple tore from top to bottom (15:38) and that the centurion recognized that Jesus was the Son of God (15:39).

One interpretation: Mark believes that Jesus' death has provided a ransom for sin (10:45), making the sacrificial cult of the Jerusalem temple obsolete. Mark also wants to tell his readers that it is only through the cross that one can come to understand fully who Jesus is.

### **The Gospel of Matthew**

Immediately after Jesus dies, Matthew tells us that the curtain in the Jerusalem temple tore in two and that an earthquake opened tombs in the cemetery such that the bodies of many saints came back to life and came out of their tombs. Then, the centurion proclaimed that Jesus was the Son of God (27:51–54).

One interpretation: Matthew, like Mark, believes that Jesus' death has provided a once-for-all-time sacrifice for sin, but Matthew also wants to stress that Jesus' death opens the door to life after death. It is in the context of this eternal dimension that he is to be regarded as the Son of God.

### **The Gospel of Luke**

Immediately after Jesus dies, Luke tells us that the Gentile centurion began to praise God, acknowledging Jesus' innocence, and that the multitudes who were present returned home beating their breasts in repentance (23:47–48).

One interpretation: Luke is less concerned than Mark and Matthew with reflection on the theological meaning of Jesus' death (i.e., its redemptive or atoning effect), but he is more concerned than the other Gospel writers with the proper response of people to what Jesus has done. Luke believes that the word of the cross should lead people to worship and repentance.

### **The Gospel of John**

Immediately after Jesus dies, John tells us that his side was pierced with a spear, causing water and blood to gush forth (19:31–34).

One interpretation: John's Gospel is heavily symbolic, and water and blood are almost universal symbols for life. The flow of water and blood from a person's body is reminiscent of what happens when a woman gives birth. John may be implying that, even as Jesus dies, he gives birth to a new life for all those who believe in him.

## Proposed Solutions to the Synoptic Puzzle

### **Augustine's Solution (Matthew—Mark—Luke)**

Augustine (fourth century) argued that Matthew was written first, and Mark simply abbreviated Matthew (*Harmony of the Gospels* 1.2.4 [Patrologia latina 34.1044]). Luke was written last, making use of both his predecessors. Augustine's solution thus defends the canonical order of the Gospels.

### **The Two-Gospel Hypothesis (Matthew—Luke—Mark)**

Proposed by J. J. Griesbach in 1789, this solution also posits that Matthew was written first, but it departs from Augustine in suggesting that Luke wrote second (making use of Matthew) and Mark wrote last, producing a digest of Matthew and Luke. The Two-Gospel Hypothesis is also known as the Griesbach Hypothesis.

### **The Two-Source Hypothesis (Mark and Q—Matthew and Luke)**

By the nineteenth century, the view that Mark was written first had gained widespread acceptance. Chief among the early proponents of this view were K. Lachmann and H. J. Holtzmann. In addition to positing Mark as a source for Matthew and Luke, Holtzmann proposed a second source, the sayings material that has come to be known as Q. In addition, Matthew and Luke incorporated a variety of other materials into their Gospels; this material is commonly designated M and L respectively, but those labels are not meant to designate discrete, single sources.

### **The Four-Source Hypothesis (Mark and Q and M and L—Matthew and Luke)**

In the early twentieth century, B. H. Streeter proposed a variation on the Two-Source Hypothesis known as the Four-Source Hypothesis. According to this view, M and L were actual written documents that (like Q) had been lost. This part of the theory has been rejected; almost all modern scholars recognize that the material in M and L may have derived from multiple sources, both oral and written. One potential point of confusion: modern scholars sometimes use "Four-Source Hypothesis" to refer to what is described above as the Two-Source Hypothesis.

### **The Farrer Theory (Mark—Matthew—Luke)**

Proposed in 1955 by Austin Farrer, this theory holds that Mark's Gospel was written first, Matthew used Mark as a source, and then Luke used both Mark and Matthew as sources. The theory is essentially a revision of the Two-Source Hypothesis that preserves Markan priority but dispenses with the need for positing a hypothetical Q source to explain the material Matthew and Luke have in common but that is not found in Mark. This theory has been championed by Michael Goulder and Mark Goodacre.

### **Status of the Synoptic Puzzle in the Twenty-First Century**

- almost no scholars hold to Augustine's solution
- a small minority of scholars hold to the Two-Gospel Hypothesis and a slightly larger minority hold to the Farrer Theory

- the majority of scholars hold to the Two-Source Hypothesis
- almost no scholars hold to the Four-Source Hypothesis (as described here)

## Evidence to Support the Two-Source Hypothesis

### The Synoptic Puzzle

Analysis of parallel passages in the Synoptic Gospels yields the following data:

- A large amount of parallel material is found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.
- A large amount of parallel material is found in Matthew and Luke, but not Mark.
- Some parallel material is found in Matthew and Mark, but not Luke.
- A small amount of parallel material is found in Luke and Mark, but not Matthew.

The question of how to explain these relationships is called the “Synoptic Puzzle” (or the “Synoptic Problem”).

### The Two-Source Hypothesis

- Mark was written first, and Matthew and Luke used Mark as a source.
- Matthew and Luke were produced independently of each other.
- Matthew and Luke also both used a now lost collection of Jesus’ sayings, which scholars call “Q.”

The following points are often cited by supporters of the Two-Source Hypothesis as evidence for the validity of that theory:

### Evidence That Matthew and Luke Used Mark as a Source

The significant overlap of material between Mark and the other two Synoptic Gospels suggests either (1) Mark used Matthew and/or Luke as a source; or (2) both Matthew and Luke used Mark. The latter seems more likely for these reasons:

- Omission of Markan material from Matthew and Luke is more explicable than is omission of Matthean and Lukan material from Mark.

Matthew and Luke may omit Mark’s reference to being “salted with fire” (9:49) because the expression is not easy to understand, or they may omit Mark’s story of the fleeing young man (14:51) because it seems irrelevant. But why would Mark omit the Lord’s Prayer, the Beatitudes, or the story of the good Samaritan, much less stories of Jesus’ birth or of his resurrection appearances?

- Divergences in Matthew and Luke from the sequence of material in Mark are more explicable than are divergences in Mark from the sequence of material in Matthew or Luke.

Miracles scattered throughout the first half of Mark are gathered together in Matthew 8–9, providing a topical “miracle section” comparable to the preceding “teaching section” in Matthew 5–7; the story of Jesus’ rejection at Nazareth in Mark 6:1–6 is moved forward in Luke (4:16–30) because a hometown story makes logical sense prior to stories of his ministry elsewhere and because the story introduces the rejection of Jesus as a programmatic theme to be developed in the narratives of the ministry that follows. If we were to



assume that Mark was copying from Matthew or Luke, the rationale for his altering their sequence of such events would be difficult to comprehend.

- Minor differences of language or fact are better understood as Matthean or Lukan improvements of Mark rather than as Markan corruptions of Matthew and Luke.

Greek syntax and grammar are more colloquial in Mark and more refined in both Matthew and Luke. For example, Herod is incorrectly called “king” in Mark 6:14 but is correctly called “tetrarch” in Matthew 14:1.

- Numerous inconsistencies in Matthew and Luke are more explicable on the premise that they are using Mark as a source than they would be otherwise.

Matthew actually does call Herod “king” in 14:9 but “tetrarch” everywhere else because at 14:9 he is following Mark (6:26) and neglected (this time) to correct his source; Luke 4:23 speaks of miracles in Capernaum that haven’t happened yet (cf. Luke 4:31–37) because Luke bases the story in 4:16–30 on Mark 6:1–6, which in Mark’s Gospel does come after the account of the Capernaum miracles (1:21–28; 2:1–12).

### **Evidence That Matthew and Luke Were Produced Independently of Each Other**

- With regard to sequence of events, Matthew and Luke frequently agree with one another and with Mark, but they rarely agree with one another against Mark. This suggests that Mark served as a basic outline used independently by both Matthew and Luke, who sometimes followed him and sometimes did not. If (as an alternative proposal suggests) Mark had copies of both Matthew and Luke and produced an abbreviation of their works, we would expect instances in which Mark departed from a sequence of events followed by both Matthew and Luke.
- Neither Matthew nor Luke includes the other’s major additions to the Markan text.

Matthew’s additions to Mark’s story of the temple cleansing are not found in Luke (Mark 11:15–19; Matt. 21:12–17; Luke 19:45–48); Luke’s additions to Mark’s story of Jesus’ transfiguration are not found in Matthew (Mark 9:2–8; Luke 9:28–36; Matt. 17:1–13).

- The likelihood that either Matthew or Luke used the other as a source is reduced by what would then be inexplicable omissions of material.

The story of the sheep and goats is found in Matthew (25:31–46) but not in Luke, though it would fit well with Luke’s characteristic concern for the poor; the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector is found in Luke (18:9–14) but not in Matthew, though it would fit well with Matthew’s polemic against the Pharisees.

- The material that Matthew and Luke have in common but that is not found in Mark is not found at the same place in their Gospels.

For example, Matthew places the woes against the Pharisees near the end of his Gospel, during the last week of Jesus’ life (23:13–36); Luke places them around the middle of Jesus’ ministry, while he is still in Galilee (11:37–12:1). This suggests that Matthew and Luke are independently using material from another source (Q); if Matthew were using Luke or if Luke were using Matthew, we would expect material that they have in common (but that is not found in Mark) to come at the same place in their Gospel stories.

## **Evidence for the Existence of Q as an Additional Source**

Matthew and Luke have a great deal of material in common that is not found in Mark's Gospel. If they did not derive this material from Mark, and if neither of them derived it from the other, the logical conclusion is that they derived it independently from some additional source. This conclusion is bolstered by the following observations:

- The non-Markan material that Matthew and Luke have in common exhibits strong verbal agreement. The two Gospels often say exactly the same thing, displaying more word-for-word correspondence than in passages that they have derived from Mark.
- The non-Markan material that Matthew and Luke have in common often is presented in the same general sequence. This suggests that they are inserting material from an additional source into the basic Markan story (though, as indicated above, they never insert this material in exactly the same places in the Markan story).
- The non-Markan material that Matthew and Luke have in common exhibits a high degree of linguistic and theological consistency, suggesting that it came from a single, coherent document.

## Evidence to Support the Farrer Theory

### The Synoptic Puzzle

Analysis of parallel passages in the Synoptic Gospels yields the following data:

- A large amount of parallel material is found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.
- A large amount of parallel material is found in Matthew and Luke but not Mark.
- Some parallel material is found in Matthew and Mark but not Luke.
- A small amount of parallel material is found in Luke and Mark but not Matthew.

The question of how to explain these relationships is called the “Synoptic Puzzle” (or the “Synoptic Problem”).

### The Farrer Theory

- Mark was written first.
- Matthew was written second, using Mark as a source.
- Luke was written third, using Matthew and Mark as sources.

The following points are often cited by supporters of the Farrer Theory as evidence for the validity of that hypothesis:

#### ***Evidence That Matthew and Luke Used Mark as a Source***

The significant overlap of material between Mark and the other two Gospels suggests *either* (1) Mark used Matthew and/or Luke as a source or (2) both Matthew and Luke used Mark. The latter seems more likely for these reasons:

- Omission of Markan material from Matthew and Luke is more explicable than omission of Matthean and Lukan material from Mark.  
Matthew and Luke may omit Mark’s reference to being “salted with fire” (9:49) because the expression is not easy to understand, or they may omit Mark’s story of the fleeing young man (14:15) because it seems irrelevant. But why would Mark omit the Lord’s Prayer, the Beatitudes, or the story of the good Samaritan, much less stories of Jesus’ birth or of his resurrection appearances?
- Divergences in Matthew and Luke from the sequence of material in Mark are more explicable than would be divergences in Mark from the sequence of material in Matthew or Luke.

Miracles scattered throughout the first half of Mark are gathered together in Matthew 8–9 to provide a topical “miracle section” of the Gospel comparable to the preceding “teaching section” in Matthew 5–7; the story of Jesus’ rejection at Nazareth in Mark 6:1–6 is moved forward in Luke (4:16–30) because a hometown story makes logical sense prior to stories of his ministry elsewhere and because the story introduces the rejection of Jesus as a programmatic theme to be developed in the narratives of the ministry that follow. If we were to assume that Mark were copying from Matthew or Luke, the rationale for his altering their sequence of such events would be difficult to comprehend.

- Minor differences of language or fact are better understood as Matthean or Lukan improvements of Mark rather than as Markan corruptions of Matthew and Luke.

Greek syntax and grammar is more colloquial in Mark and more refined in both Matthew and Luke; Herod is incorrectly called a “king” in Mark 6:4 but, correctly, called a tetrarch in Matthew 14:1.

- Numerous inconsistencies in Matthew and Luke are more explicable on the premise that they are using Mark as a source than they would be otherwise.

Matthew actually does call Herod a king in 14:9 but a tetrarch everywhere else because at 14:9 he is following Mark (6:26) and neglected (this time) to correct his source; Luke 4:23 speaks of miracles in Capernaum that haven’t happened yet (cf. Luke 4:31–37) because Luke bases the story in 4:16–30 on Mark 6:1–6, which in Mark’s Gospel follows the account of the Capernaum miracles (1:21–28; 2:1–12).

### ***Evidence That Matthew and Luke Were Not Produced Independently of Each Other***

Matthew and Luke contain a large amount of material in common that is not found in Mark. This implies that (1) Matthew used Luke as a source; (2) Luke used Matthew as a source (the view preferred by this theory); or (3) both Matthew and Luke used some other source. The third alternative (preferred by proponents of the Two-Source Hypothesis, who call the “other source” Q) posits that Matthew and Luke were produced independently of each other (i.e., neither Matthew nor Luke had a copy of the other author’s work). Proponents of the Farrer Theory hold that this is unlikely for the following reasons:

- There is no mention of any such source in church tradition and no evidence of its existence—it remains a purely hypothetical construct. The simplest, default solution to the Synoptic Puzzle should be to explain parallels without recourse to a hypothetical document for which there is no external evidence.
- Matthew and Luke often agree with each other against Mark in passages common to all three Gospels.

For example, with regard to the parable of the mustard seed (Mark 4:30–32), both Matthew and Luke contain the words “a person having taken it,” “becomes a tree,” and “branches” (Matt. 13:31–32; Luke 13:18–19) although those words are not found in Mark. Likewise, in the account of Jesus’ abuse by soldiers, both Matthew and Luke have the soldiers ask Jesus, “Who is it that struck you?” (Matt. 26:8; Luke 22:4), words not found in the Markan parallel (Mark 14:65).

Presumably, these passages would not have been found in Q (even scholars who believe there was a Q source do not believe it contained these particular stories). These minor agreements could all be explained if we assume that Matthew used Mark but sometimes made minor changes to the text, and then Luke used both Mark and Matthew, sometimes sticking to Mark’s text and other times accepting the changes Matthew had made. (Hypothetically, they could also be explained if Luke used only Mark, and then Matthew used Mark and Luke—but see the next section).

***Evidence That Luke Used Matthew (rather than the other way around):***

- Luke explicitly says in the prologue of his Gospels that “others” (plural) have already written accounts of Jesus—this implies that he had at least two sources for the life and teaching of Jesus at his disposal. Matthew makes no such comment.
- Luke’s editorial changes to what he would have found in Matthew’s Gospel are held to be more explicable than the changes Matthew would have to be supposed to have made in Lukan material if the situation were reversed.

For example, Luke can be understood to have split up the long teaching sections found in Matthew’s five great discourses and re-distributed that material throughout his narrative; this provides the story with a more linear flow and also serves his interest in presenting much of Jesus’ teaching with the context of a journey. It seems unlikely, however, that Matthew would have omitted many stories found only in Luke if he had known them (e.g., the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18:9–14, which would fit perfectly with Matthew’s frequent denunciation of Pharisees).

## Evidence to Support the Two-Gospel Hypothesis

### The Synoptic Puzzle

Analysis of parallel passages in the Synoptic Gospels yields the following data:

- A large amount of parallel material is found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.
- A large amount of parallel material is found in Matthew and Luke but not Mark.
- Some parallel material is found in Matthew and Mark but not Luke.
- A small amount of parallel material is found in Luke and Mark but not Matthew.

The question of how to explain these relationships is called the “Synoptic Puzzle” (or the “Synoptic Problem”).

### The Two-Gospel Hypothesis (a.k.a. Griesbach Hypothesis)

- Matthew was written first.
- Luke was written second, using Matthew as a source.
- Mark was written third, using Matthew and Luke as sources.

The following points are often cited by supporters of the Two-Gospel Hypothesis as evidence for the validity of that theory:

#### ***Evidence for Matthean Priority***

- The unanimous tradition of the church from (at least) Augustine until the eighteenth century has been that Matthew’s Gospel was the earliest of the four. This can only be challenged on the basis of so-called “internal evidence” (trying to make sense of which Gospel would be more likely to have made changes from the others). But since the external evidence unanimously identifies Matthew as first, that proposal should be the default position unless what follows from it can be shown to be improbable (which proponents of this theory maintain is not the case).
- Matthew’s Gospel is the most Jewish, apparently expressive of Jewish-Christian sensibilities and attentive to Jewish-Christian concerns. This fits best in a very early context, since the church rather quickly became a primarily Gentile institution.

For example, Matthew’s Gospel portrays Jesus as insisting that all Jewish laws should be kept by his followers (5:17–20; cf. 23:2) and in one instance he even instructs his disciples not to go to Gentiles (10:5; 18:17 could also be read as implying Gentiles are not currently part of the church).

#### ***Evidence That Luke Used Matthew***

- Matthew and Luke have an enormous amount of material in common (about two-thirds of each of these two Gospels overlap). If Matthew is presumed to have written first (see above) the simplest and most logical explanation for this common material would be that Luke used Matthew’s Gospel as one of his sources.

- Luke explicitly says in the prologue of his Gospel that “others” have already written accounts of Jesus—if Matthew’s Gospel were written first, it would likely have been one of the works to which he refers.
- Hypothetically, Luke could have derived some of the material that he has in common with Matthew from the Gospel of Mark since much of that material is also found in Mark. However, even if Luke had a copy of Mark’s Gospel (which proponents of this theory deem unlikely), he still must have used Matthew as a source because Luke often agrees with Matthew against Mark in passages common to all three Gospels.

For example, in the parable of the mustard seed (Mark 4:30–32), both Matthew and Luke contain the words “a person having taken it,” “becomes a tree,” and “branches” (Matt. 13:31–32; Luke 13:18–19) although those words are not found in Mark. Likewise, in the account of Jesus’ abuse by soldiers, both Matthew and Luke have the soldiers ask Jesus, “Who is it that struck you?” (Matt. 26:8; Luke 22:4), words not found in the Markan parallel (Mark 14:65).

- Hypothetically, Luke could have derived some of the material that he has in common with Matthew from some other source to which both Matthew and Luke had access (e.g., the so-called Q source proposed by some scholars). But there is no external evidence for the existence of such a document or reference to it in any church tradition.
- Hypothetically, the material that Luke and Matthew have in common could be explained by Matthew having used Luke as a source rather than the other way around. But this seems unlikely because (a) church tradition holds that Matthew was written first; (b) Luke (but not Matthew) refers to previous accounts being written; and (c) Luke’s editorial changes to what he would have found in Matthew’s Gospel are held to be more explicable than the changes Matthew would have to be supposed to have made in Lukan material if the situation were reversed.

For example, Luke can be understood to have split up the long teaching sections found in Matthew’s five great discourses and redistributed that material throughout his narrative; this keeps the story with a more linear flow and also serves his interest in presenting much of Jesus’ teaching with the context of a journey. It seems unlikely, however, that Matthew would have omitted many stories found only in Luke if he had known them (e.g., the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18:9–14, which would fit perfectly with Matthew’s frequent denunciation of Pharisees).

### ***Evidence That Mark Used Matthew and Luke as Sources***

- Almost all Mark’s Gospel (all but a handful of verses) overlaps with material found in either Matthew or Luke or both. If Mark had a copy of both Matthew and Luke, two distinctive types of parallels would be explained: instances in which Mark agrees with Matthew against Luke *and* instances in which Mark agrees with Luke against Matthew.
- Since Mark is much shorter than either Matthew or Luke, the assumption of this theory is that Mark’s Gospel was produced as a simultaneous conflation and condensation of the two. The desire to abbreviate would explain why many stories in Matthew and Luke are not found in Mark.

## The Q Source in Contemporary Scholarship

Many New Testament scholars believe that both Matthew and Luke made use of a source in the composition of their Gospels that has been lost to us. For reasons unknown, this lost source has come to be called “Q” (one possible explanation for the name: “Q” is short for *Quelle*, the German word for “source”).

### Written or Oral?

Some scholars have regarded Q as no more than a common body of oral tradition, but the majority now believe that it was a written document. Evidence for this includes the internal theological consistency expressed throughout the Q passages and the strength of the verbal agreements between these passages as they are reported in Matthew and in Luke, an agreement that frequently extends even to the order in which the passages occur.

### Language

Scholars have long thought that Q was originally written in Aramaic and then rendered, independently, by both Matthew and Luke into Greek. Current opinion, however, is shifting toward the belief that Q was composed in Greek and came to both evangelists in that form. This matter is still debated.

### Authorship

The church historian Eusebius (260–339) claimed to have a statement from someone named “Papias,” who said, around 135, “Matthew [i.e., the disciple of Jesus] compiled the sayings in the Hebrew [or Aramaic] language and each one interpreted them as he was able.” Eusebius took this as a reference to the book that we call the “Gospel of Matthew,” but New Testament scholars no longer believe that Matthew the disciple of Jesus wrote that book. Some scholars, however, think that Papias might have been referring to Q, and therefore that Q may have been compiled by Matthew the disciple of Jesus. This remains speculative.

### Content

Q consists almost entirely of “sayings.” In this regard, it resembles the form of the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas. The few narrative portions include the story of Jesus’ temptation (Luke 4:1–13; Matt. 4:1–11) and the healing of the centurion’s servant (Luke 7:1–10; Matt. 7:24–27), but even here the emphasis is on the sayings of Jesus preserved in the narrative. There are no stories about Jesus’ birth or baptism, and, remarkably, there is no passion narrative. It is generally thought that the original order of the sayings is better preserved in Luke than in Matthew.

### Types of Sayings

Richard Edwards finds three types of sayings interwoven in the Q material:

- *Wisdom sayings* are aphorisms that provide insight into how things really are or perhaps offer recommendations for life based on these observations:
  - “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matt. 6:21; Luke 12:34).



- “Fear not, for you are of more value than many sparrows” (Matt. 10:31; Luke 12:7).
- *Prophetic sayings* are announcements that proclaim the judgment of God or perhaps call for a particular response in light of that judgment:
  - “The kingdom of God has come near to you” (Matt. 10:7; Luke 10:9).
  - “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life will find it” (Matt. 10:39; Luke 17:33).
- *Eschatological sayings* reflect the view that the future is of primary importance and that the end of the age is rapidly approaching:
  - “You must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect” (Matt. 24:44; Luke 12:40).
  - “As it was in the days of Noah, so will it be in the days of the Son of Man” (Matt. 24:37; Luke 17:26).

These types of sayings overlap (wisdom sayings may also be eschatological, etc.), but the categories do identify the streams of tradition important for an understanding of Q.

### **Rescensions**

John Kloppenborg and other scholars have suggested that Q might have gone through two or three editions before assuming the form to which Matthew and Luke had access. According to this theory, the wisdom sayings were part of the original version of Q but the eschatological sayings were not. This theory, again, is regarded as highly speculative.

### **Theology**

1. The locus of salvation is the parousia, not the cross.

In Q, the death of Jesus is perceived only as a martyrdom, not as an atonement or sacrifice for sin. In fact, there is no mention of the cross, only allusions that imply that Jesus suffers the fate of the prophets (and of John the Baptist). Jesus saves people not by dying for them but rather by inaugurating God’s kingdom and granting fellowship in this kingdom to those who are faithful. This will occur shortly, at the final judgment, over which Jesus will preside as the glorified Son of Man.

2. Discipleship takes the form of itinerant radicalism.

True discipleship, according to the Q sayings, consists of being like Jesus (cf. Luke 6:40). This means, among other things, that disciples are expected to forgo domicile, family, and possessions. Just as the Son of Man had nowhere to lay his head (Matt. 8:20; Luke 9:58), so his disciples are called to leave their homes and families, renounce all worldly security, and devote their lives entirely to the kingdom of God.

### **Community**

Some scholars speak loosely of a “Q community,” by which they mean early followers of Jesus who used this document as their primary Christian text. Such people might be characterized as believing that they live at the very end of time, guided by the words of Jesus and totally dependent upon God for sustenance. They view their mission as a continuation of the ministry of Jesus on earth. They have collected the sayings of their coming judge to serve as a guide for living in the last days. In addition to collecting and repeating these sayings, they

continue to proclaim the dawn of God's kingdom through inspired prophets who speak in Jesus' name.

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## Content Summary: Expanded Overview of the Gospel of Matthew

- A genealogy of Jesus is presented in three sets of “fourteen generations,” emphasizing that Jesus is descended from Abraham and David. (1:1–17)
- The story of Jesus’ birth is told from the perspective of Joseph: an angel tells him that Mary (to whom he is betrothed) is pregnant from the Holy Spirit and that he is to name the child “Jesus” because the child will “save his people from their sins.” (1:18–25)
- Magi are guided by a star to Bethlehem, where they worship Jesus and offer him gifts; Herod murders babies in Bethlehem in an unsuccessful attempt to kill the newborn Messiah. (2:1–23)
- John the Baptist preaches in the wilderness and testifies to the one who is to come after him. Initially reluctant to baptize Jesus, John consents to “fulfill all righteousness.” The Spirit comes upon Jesus, and a voice from heaven identifies him as God’s Son. (3:1–17)
- Satan presents Jesus with three temptations in the wilderness. (4:1–11)
- In fulfillment of scripture, Jesus begins a ministry of teaching, preaching, and healing, marked by the message “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” He calls four fishermen to be his disciples: Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John. (4:12–25)
- Jesus preaches the Sermon on the Mount (5:1–7:28), which includes (among other material):
  - the Beatitudes
  - sayings about “salt of the earth” and “light of the world”
  - declaration that Jesus has come to fulfill the law and the prophets
  - importance of keeping even the least of the commandments (every letter, every stroke)
  - seven “antitheses”: “you have heard it said . . . but I say to you”
  - warnings against practicing piety to be seen by others
  - the Lord’s Prayer
  - no one can serve two masters (God and mammon)
  - do not be anxious: God cares for the birds of the air and the lilies of the field
  - seek first the kingdom of God
  - do not judge, lest you be judged; first take the log out of your own eye
  - do not throw pearls before swine
  - ask, and it will be given; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened
  - the Golden Rule: do to others as you would have them do to you
  - contrast between the narrow gate to life and the wide road to destruction
  - beware of wolves in sheep’s clothing
  - not everyone who calls Jesus “Lord” will enter the kingdom of heaven
  - parable of the house built on rock and the house built on sand
- Jesus cleanses a leper who comes to him in faith and worship. (8:1–4)
- Jesus heals the servant of a centurion in Capernaum. He praises the faith of this Gentile who knows that Jesus has the authority to speak a word and heal his servant from a distance. (8:5–13)

- Jesus cures Simon's mother-in-law of a fever and also heals many others, fulfilling prophecies of scripture. (8:14–17)
- Jesus encounters two would-be disciples: a presumptuous scribe to whom he says, "The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head," and a procrastinating disciple to whom he says, "Let the dead bury the dead." (8:18–22)
- Jesus stills a storm at sea and rebukes his fearful disciples for being people of little faith. (8:23–27)
- Jesus meets two demoniacs in a cemetery and casts the demons out of them and into a herd of pigs, which run into the water and drown. (8:28–34)
- Jesus heals a paralytic after first telling the man that his sins are forgiven; some scribes regard the declaration of forgiveness as blasphemy. (9:1–8)
- Jesus calls Matthew the tax collector to follow him. To the chagrin of religious leaders, he eats with Matthew and other tax collectors. He quotes the scripture "I desire mercy not sacrifice" and says, "I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." (9:9–13)
- Jesus explains to disciples of John the Baptist why his disciples don't fast: they are like wedding guests, who cannot mourn as long as "the bridegroom" is still with them. (9:14–17)
- Jesus goes to heal the daughter of a prominent man. Along the way, a woman with hemorrhages touches the hem of his garment and is healed. The man's daughter dies, but Jesus raises her from the dead. (9:18–26)
- Jesus heals two blind men, telling them to keep it secret, but they spread the news abroad. (9:27–31)
- Jesus heals a mute demoniac, but the Pharisees say that he does this by the ruler of demons. (9:32–34)
- Jesus continues to heal many people and then appoints twelve apostles and sends them out to preach the kingdom, cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons. His instructions to them describe persecutions that are to come, the need for radical faithfulness, and the promise of rewards for those who welcome them. (9:35–10:42)
- Jesus responds to a question from John the Baptist regarding whether Jesus is the one who was to come and then speaks to the crowd about John: "a prophet and more than a prophet." (11:1–15)
- Jesus upbraids those who have rejected both his ministry and that of John. He thanks God for hiding the truth from the "wise and intelligent" and offers an invitation to all who are weary to come to him and find rest: "My yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (11:16–30)
- Jesus confronts Pharisees who criticize his disciples for picking grain on the Sabbath. The Pharisees are condemning the guiltless, for "the Son of man is lord of the sabbath." (12:1–8)
- In a synagogue on the Sabbath, Jesus heals a man who has a withered hand, provoking the Pharisees to plot to destroy Jesus. (12:9–14)
- Jesus' continued healings fulfill Isaiah's prophecy about the servant of the Lord. (12:15–21)
- Jesus heals a blind and mute demoniac, and the Pharisees claim that Jesus casts out demons by the power of Beelzebul. Jesus indicates that their claim is ridiculous because a house divided against itself cannot stand, and he says that these leaders are blaspheming the Holy Spirit (an unforgivable sin). (12:22–37)



- Scribes and Pharisees want to see a sign from Jesus, but he says that no sign will be given except the sign of Jonah. They are like a man possessed by a demon that goes out and then returns with seven others. (12:38–45)
- Jesus' mother and brothers come to see him, but he says that his disciples and whoever does the will of God are his true "brother and sister and mother." (12:46–50)
- Jesus tells seven parables about the kingdom of heaven, including those of the sower and of the wheat and weeds, both of which have allegorical explanations. The kingdom is also like a mustard seed, yeast, a treasure in a field, a pearl of great price, and a dragnet. (13:1–53)
- Jesus teaches in the synagogue in Nazareth. The people take offense at him, prompting him to say, "Prophets are not without honor except in their hometown." (13:54–58)
- Jesus' ministry attracts the attention of Herod, who has beheaded John the Baptist. The daughter of his wife, Herodias, had danced for Herod; he offered to give her anything she wanted, and Herodias told her to ask for "the head of John the Baptist on a platter." (14:1–12)
- Jesus feeds over five thousand people with five pieces of bread and two fish. (14:13–21)
- Jesus walks on water and invites Peter to walk on water as well. (14:22–33)
- Jesus heals many people, including all those who touch the fringe of his garment. (14:34–36)
- Jesus' disciples are criticized for eating with unwashed hands. He responds by attacking the critics for their own hypocrisy and then by explaining that true defilement lies within the heart. (15:1–20)
- Jesus refuses to heal the daughter of a Canaanite woman, claiming that he has been sent only to the lost sheep of Israel. When she says, "Even dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs," he relents in response to her great faith. (15:21–28)
- Jesus feeds a crowd of four thousand people with seven loaves and a few fish. (15:29–39)
- Pharisees and Sadducees ask to see a sign from Jesus, but he refuses. (16:1–4)
- Jesus' disciples misunderstand a reference that he makes to leaven and become worried that they don't have enough bread. He reminds them of the miraculous feedings and explains "leaven" is a metaphor for the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. (16:5–12)
- At Caesarea Philippi, Peter identifies Jesus as "the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus says that Peter is the rock on which he will build his church, and that he will give Peter the keys to the kingdom to bind and loose on earth what will be bound and loosed in heaven. (16:13–20)
- Jesus tells the disciples that he will be crucified, and Peter objects. Jesus rebukes him, saying, "Get behind me Satan!" and then says that those who want to be his followers must deny themselves and bear the cross. (16:21–26)
- Jesus says the Son of Man will come with angels in glory and that some of those standing with him will not taste death before they see the Son of Man come in his kingdom. (16:27–28)
- Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up on a mountain with him and is transfigured before them, appearing with Elijah and Moses in dazzling glory. A voice from heaven says, "This is my Son, the Beloved . . . listen to him!" (17:1–8)

- Jesus explains to the disciples that a prophecy regarding the return of Elijah has been fulfilled by the coming of John the Baptist. (17:9–13)
- After his disciples are unable to do so, Jesus casts a demon out of a boy who has seizures. He tells his disciples that they fail because of their little faith, but with faith as a mustard seed they can move mountains. (17:14–21)
- Jesus' disciples are distressed when he predicts his passion a second time. (17:22–23)
- Jesus pays the temple tax by having Peter catch a fish that has a coin in its mouth. (17:24–27)
- Jesus addresses a discourse on community matters (18:1–35) to his competitive disciples:
  - welcome children as the greatest in the kingdom
  - take extreme measures to keep yourself from sin (cut off your hand, pluck out your eye)
  - parable of the lost sheep: shepherd leaves the flock to find the lost one
  - how to confront a sinner: alone, then with others, then before the whole church
  - how many times to forgive? not seven, but seventy-seven
  - parable of the unmerciful servant: terrible judgment awaits those who accept God's forgiveness and then withhold forgiveness from others
- As he travels, Jesus is followed by large crowds, and he heals them. (19:1–2)
- Pharisees test Jesus with a question about divorce. He says that remarriage after divorce for any reason other than unchastity constitutes adultery. This teaching, like celibacy, can be accepted only by those to whom it is given. (19:3–12)
- Jesus' disciples try to prevent people from bringing children to him, but Jesus says, "Let the little children come to me . . . to such as these belongs the kingdom of God." (19:13–15)
- A rich man goes away sad after Jesus tells him to give up all his possessions. Jesus says that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. (19:16–26)
- Jesus assures his disciples, who left everything to follow him, that they will receive abundant rewards and will sit on twelve thrones judging the tribes of Israel. (19:27–30)
- Jesus tells the parable of workers in the vineyard: hired at different hours, all receive the same wage. (20:1–16)
- After Jesus predicts his passion a third time, the mother of James and John asks that her sons be seated at his left and right in glory. The other disciples become indignant at this, and Jesus says that greatness is achieved through service. He says, "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many." (20:17–28)
- Jesus heals two blind men on the road outside of Jericho. (20:29–34)
- Jesus enters Jerusalem riding a donkey and a colt, as a crowd of people shout "Hosanna" and strew clothing and palm branches in his path. (21:1–11)
- Jesus overturns the tables of moneychangers and calls the Jerusalem temple "a den of robbers." Then he heals people in the temple while children sing his praises. (21:12–17)

- Jesus curses a fig tree, and it withers at once. He tells his disciples that this exemplifies the power of prayer: “Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive.” (21:18–22)
- Religious leaders ask Jesus by what authority he is acting, but he refuses to answer them because they will not respond to his own question regarding the baptism of John. (21:23–27)
- Jesus tells the parable of two sons: one says that he will work in the vineyard but doesn’t; the other says that he won’t but does. (21:28–32)
- Jesus tells the parable of the wicked tenants: the owner of a vineyard sends two groups of servants, and then finally his son, to collect fruit from tenants, who beat the servants and kill the son. (21:33–46)
- Jesus tells the parable of the wedding banquet: people kill the servants who bring them invitations, so the king destroys them and fills the hall with others, good and bad; but one man doesn’t have a wedding garment, and so he is thrown into the outer darkness. (22:1–14)
- Pharisees test Jesus, asking him whether it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. He says, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” (22:15–22)
- Sadducees test Jesus with a question: If a woman was married to seven men in this life, whose wife will she be in the resurrection? He replies that there is no marriage in heaven, for people are like angels. (22:23–33)
- A lawyer tests Jesus by asking which commandment is first of all. Jesus replies that the first is to love God, and the second is to love one’s neighbor as oneself. (22:34–40)
- Jesus stumps the religious leaders by asking them how the Messiah can be the son of David when David calls him “Lord.” (22:41–46)
- Jesus warns his disciples about the scribes and Pharisees, who sit on Moses’ seat but do not practice what they preach. His followers are to shun honorific titles and ostentation. (23:1–12)
- Jesus speaks seven “woes” against the scribes and Pharisees, who are hypocrites and blind fools. They will not escape being sentenced to hell. (23:13–36)
- Jesus laments the fate of Jerusalem, which he wanted to protect as a mother hen protects her brood. (23:37–39)
- Jesus tells his disciples that the Jerusalem temple will be destroyed. Then, on the Mount of Olives, he launches into a long discourse on the end times, emphasizing the terrible persecutions to come and urging people to be ready at all times. (24:1–44)
- Jesus tells three eschatological parables: the faithful and wise servant; the wise and foolish bridesmaids; the slaves given talents. In each case, wise and decisive action is contrasted with lax ineptitude, which brings terrible judgment. (24:45–25:30)
- Jesus says that at the final judgment, the Son of Man will separate the nations like sheep from goats and will admit the former to everlasting life and condemn the latter to everlasting punishment. The verdict will be based on how they treated “the least of those who are members of my family.” (25:31–46)
- Jesus predicts his passion again. Meanwhile, the chief priests and the elders plot to have him killed. (26:1–5)
- At the home of Simon the leper in Bethany, Jesus is anointed for burial by an unnamed woman. His disciples consider it a waste of ointment, but he

says that what she has done must be told throughout the whole world in remembrance of her. (26:6–13)

- Judas agrees to betray Jesus, just before the disciples and Jesus eat the Passover meal together. Jesus identifies the bread and wine as his body and blood given “for the forgiveness of sins.” He predicts his betrayal, and they go out to Gethsemane, where he prays that, if possible, God remove the cup from him. He is arrested, and his disciples desert him. (26:14–56)
- Taken to Caiaphas, Jesus is put on trial before a group of priests who decide that he deserves death and turn him over to Pilate. Meanwhile, Peter denies three times that he is a disciple of Jesus. (26:57–27:2)
- Judas regrets having betrayed Jesus and returns the thirty pieces of silver that had been paid to him. Then he goes out and hangs himself. (27:1–10)
- A crowd calls for Jesus to be crucified after Pilate gives them the choice of releasing Jesus or a notorious prisoner, Barabbas. Pilate washes his hands of Jesus’ blood, and the people cry out, “Let his blood be on us and on our children!” (27:11–26)
- Jesus is mocked by soldiers who crown him with thorns and compel Simon of Cyrene to carry Jesus’ cross to Golgotha, where Jesus is crucified. Mocked on the cross, he cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” before he dies. (27:27–50)
- At Jesus’ death, the curtain in the temple tears and an earthquake splits the ground, opening many tombs. Many dead saints come out of the tombs, go into Jerusalem, and appear to people in the days following Jesus’ resurrection. (27:51–53)
- The centurion at the cross declares, “Truly, this man was God’s son!” (27:54)
- Many women are said to have been observing this from a distance, including Mary Magdalene, another Mary, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee. Although they are mentioned for the first time here, we are told that they have been following Jesus since his early ministry in Galilee. (27:55–56)
- A rich man, Joseph of Arimathea, provides a tomb for Jesus’ burial, which the women witness. Meanwhile, the religious leaders place a guard at the tomb. (27:57–66)
- After the Sabbath, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary come to the tomb. There is a great earthquake, and an angel rolls away the stone to show them the tomb is already empty and Jesus is risen. Then they see Jesus himself and worship him. (28:1–10)
- The chief priests bribe the soldiers at the tomb to tell people that Jesus’ disciples came at night and stole his body. (27:11–15)
- Jesus gives the Great Commission to his eleven disciples: they are to make disciples of all nations by baptizing and teaching them, and Jesus promises to be with them always. (28:16–20)

## Authorship of Matthew's Gospel

### The Testimony of Papias

The church historian Eusebius (260–339) claimed to have a statement from someone named “Papias,” who said, around 135, “Matthew compiled the sayings in the Hebrew language and each one interpreted them as he was able.” Eusebius took this as a reference to the book that we call the “Gospel of Matthew.”

*On the basis of this*, some people believe that this Gospel is written by Matthew, the tax collector who was one of Jesus' original twelve disciples and who narrates the story of his own call in 9:9 (cf. Mark 2:14).

*Most scholars think that this is unlikely because:*

1. This Gospel is written in Greek, not Hebrew, and is far more than a collection of “sayings.” Therefore, Eusebius probably was wrong in thinking that Papias's statement referred to this book in its entirety. Some scholars think that Papias was referring to the now lost “Q” source, which was incorporated into this Gospel.
2. This Gospel is often thought to be dependent upon Mark and/or Q for most of its information. Therefore, it is unlikely that it was written by an eyewitness with personal knowledge of Jesus.
3. The theological concerns and perspective of this Gospel are generally considered to be those of a “second-generation” Christian rather than those of Jesus' original disciples.
4. This Gospel usually is dated after 70 (possibly after 85). It is unlikely that any of Jesus' original twelve disciples were still alive at that time, not just because they would have to be fairly aged for the time, but, more to the point, because we do not hear of any of them being alive at this time in writings of other early Christians a short time later (e.g., the letters of Ignatius of Antioch).

### The Jewish Character of Matthew's Gospel

- This Gospel strives to show that Jesus was faithful to Judaism. He pays the temple tax (17:24–27) and limits his ministry to Israel (10:5–6; 15:24).
- This Gospel shows unusual concern for the fulfillment of Jewish scriptures throughout Jesus' ministry.
- This Gospel emphasizes the endurance of the Jewish law, saying that it will remain valid until heaven and earth pass away (5:18). It recognizes that the scribes and Pharisees legitimately occupy Moses' seat and that their instructions are to be followed (23:2–3). It omits a phrase from Mark's Gospel that interpreted Jesus' words as “making all foods clean” (15:16–20; cf. Mark 7:19).
- This Gospel respects Jewish piety. It assumes that its readers practice fasting (6:16–18) and make the traditional Jewish offerings (5:23; 6:2; 23:23). It also assumes that they will be offended at the prospect of having to make a journey on the Sabbath (24:20). It is perceptive of Jewish sensitivities regard-

ing use of the divine name, substituting “kingdom of heaven” for “kingdom of God” in most cases throughout the book.

- This Gospel does not consider it necessary to explain Jewish customs such as the handwashing scruples dictated by the “tradition of the elders” (15:2; cf. Mark 7:3–4), the wearing of phylacteries (23:5), and the whitewashing of tombs (23:27).
- This Gospel conforms at times to the professional style of writing used by rabbinic scribes. The recasting of the divorce question through the addition of the words “for any cause” in 19:3 (cf. Mark 10:2) and the addition of the exception clause to Jesus’ answer in 19:9 both follow typical rabbinic formulations. The form of the Lord’s Prayer in 6:9–13 suggests Jewish liturgical usage by its address, seven petitions, and use of the word *debts*.

*On the basis of this*, some people believe this Gospel was written by an unknown Jewish Christian who may have been a converted rabbi or scribe and who may therefore provide an oblique reference to himself in 13:52. The author sometimes is considered to be a Jew who believes that Jesus is the Messiah but who would still identify himself as being “within the walls of Judaism”; he thinks of himself not as someone who has converted to another religion but rather as someone involved in a messianic movement within the ancient religion of Israel.

This view has supporters, but many modern scholars think that it fails to account for the level of hostility directed against the Jewish people and their leaders in certain passages in Matthew (see “The Anti-Jewish Character of Matthew’s Gospel” below).

### **The Non-Jewish Character of Matthew’s Gospel**

- This Gospel does not distinguish between the different parties of Judaism. It refers to “the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (16:12) as though the doctrines of the two groups were the same.
- At times, this Gospel seems to misinterpret matters that would have been clear to any Jewish person of the age. The excessively literal fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9 in 21:7 indicates that the author did not understand parallelism, a typical characteristic of Hebrew poetry.
- This Gospel does not reproduce some of Mark’s Semitic words, such as “Corban” in Mark 7:11 (cf. Matt. 15:5).
- This Gospel refers to “the Jews” in 28:15 as though they are a group distinct from the disciples of Jesus and makes references to “their cities,” “their scribes,” and “their synagogues” throughout the narrative, as though Jesus and his followers belong to some entity distinct from the Jews, for whom these institutions exist.
- This Gospel has a universalistic strain that is inclusive of the non-Jewish world. In 13:38, the “field” of ministry is designated the “world.” In 24:14, Jesus prophesies that the gospel will be preached throughout the whole world as a testimony to the Gentiles, and in 28:19 he commissions his followers to make disciples of all nations (Gentiles).

*On the basis of this*, some people have suggested that this Gospel was written by a Gentile Christian who had acquired a secondhand interest in the Hebrew Scriptures and in things Jewish.

This view has not held up well in recent scholarship. Most people believe that the aforementioned anomalies can be explained in terms of Matthew's community being Hellenistic rather than Palestinian and in terms of the distinctions between Christian Jews (who believed that Jesus was the Messiah) and non-Christian Jews (who did not).

### **The Anti-Jewish Character of Matthew's Gospel**

This Gospel infers that the Jewish people have been rejected by God.

- Jesus tells a Gentile centurion that "the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into outer darkness" (8:12).
- He tells the Jewish leaders that "the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to another" (21:43).
- The Jewish nation as a whole is pictured as cursed for all time with guilt for Christ's death (27:25).
- The words of the Great Commission in 28:19 could be interpreted to mean "make disciples of all Gentiles," thereby excluding Jews from the sphere of Christian missions.

*On the basis of this*, some people believe this Gospel was written by an ex-Jewish Christian who has left the synagogue and now considers himself to be "outside the walls" of Judaism. This would explain the love/hate attitude that this Gospel has toward the Jews. Affection for things Jewish remains, but an irreparable separation has occurred. The future of the author's community lies in the mission to the Gentiles.

## The Community of Matthew: Clues from the Gospel Itself

### The Community Includes Some Jewish Christians:

- Jewish phraseology is used (“Son of David,” “King of Israel,” “righteousness,” “kingdom of heaven”).
- Israel’s place in salvation history is emphasized (10:6; 15:24).
- The abiding importance of Jewish law is stressed (5:17; 23:2–3, 20; 24:20).
- Familiarity with Jewish tradition is presupposed (15:2; 23:5, 23, 27).
- Christian missionaries are sent to the Jewish people (10:5–6; 23:34).

### The Community Includes Some Gentile Christians:

- Certain Gentiles are cast in a favorable light (1:3, 5–6; 2:1–12; 8:5–13; 12:21; 13:38; 15:21–28; 24:14; 26:13).
- The inclusion of Gentiles in the kingdom of heaven is given a place in salvation history (21:41; 22:9–10).
- Christian missionaries are sent to the Gentiles (28:18).

### The Community Is Autonomous:

- The pronouns *their* and *your* are used in reference to Jewish institutions, implying this community is separate from those institutions.
- Distinctive terms are used for those who are “with Jesus” (“disciples,” “sons of God,” “servants,” “brothers,” “little ones”).
- A structure for governing communal life can be discerned (16:19; 18:15–20).
- Particular offices or roles for community leaders can also be discerned (10:41; 23:34).

### The Community Is Urban:

- The word *city* (*polis*) is used 27 times, *village* (*kōmē*) only 4 times (cf. Mark: *city* 8 times; *village* 7 times).

### The Community Is Prosperous:

- Larger amounts of money are referred to than in the other Gospels (cf. Matt. 10:9 with Mark 6:8; Matt. 25:14–30 with Luke 19:11–27).
- References to “the poor” are omitted or changed (cf. Matt. 5:3 with Luke 6:20; Matt. 22:9 with Luke 14:21).
- Joseph of Arimathea is described as “a rich man who was also a disciple of Jesus” (cf. Matt. 27:57 with Mark 15:43; Luke 23:50).

### The Community Faces Trouble from Without:

- They expect to suffer persecution at the hands of the Jews (5:11; 10:17, 23; 21:35–36; 23:34).
- They expect to suffer persecution also from Gentiles (10:18, 22; 24:9).



### **The Community Faces Trouble from Within:**

- They believe that some members will lose their faith and become apostate (13:21–22; 24:12).
- They believe that some members will hate other members and betray them to their enemies (24:10).
- They expect false prophets to lead some people astray (7:15; 24:11).

## Distinctive Characteristics of Matthew's Gospel

### A. Matthew likes to organize.

- 3 sets of 14 generations in the genealogy (1:17)
- 5 great speeches (see "B" below)
- 12 fulfillment citations (see "F" below)
- 10 miracles all in chapters 8–9
- 7 parables all in chapter 13
- 7 woes against the scribes and Pharisees (chap. 23)

### B. There are five great speeches given by Jesus in Matthew's Gospel.

- Sermon on the Mount (chaps. 5–7)
- Missionary Discourse (chap. 10)
- Parable Discourse (chap. 13)
- Community Discourse (chap. 18)
- Eschatological Discourse (chaps. 24–25)

### C. Matthew likes pairs.

#### *Double characters*

- two demoniacs (8:28–33; cf. Mark 5:1–14)
- two blind men (20:29–34; cf. Mark 10:46–52)
- two donkeys (21:1–11; cf. Mark 11:1–11)

#### *Double stories*

- two requests for a sign (12:38–42; 16:1–4)
- two Beelzebul accusations (9:32–34; 12:22–24)
- two healings of two blind men (9:27–31; 20:29–34)

### D. Matthew's Gospel has a strong Jewish character.

- "Go nowhere among the Gentiles" (10:5).
- "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel" (15:24).
- Jesus pays the temple tax (17:24–27).
- "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat" (23:2).
- "Pray that your flight not be on the sabbath" (24:20).

### E. Matthew's Gospel also displays anti-Jewish polemic.

Castigation of Israel's religious leaders:

- "evil" (9:4; 12:34; 16:4)
- "brood of vipers" (12:34; 23:33)
- "plants that the heavenly Father did not plant" (15:13; cf. 13:24–25)

Statements favoring Gentiles at the expense of Israel:

- “Heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into outer darkness” (8:12).
- “The kingdom of God will be taken away from you” (21:43).

Responsibility for Jesus’ blood:

- “Upon you will come all the righteous blood ever shed” (23:35).
- “Let his blood be on us and our children forever” (27:25).

### **F. The fulfillment of prophecy is important.**

Twelve “fulfillment citations” that state, “This happened to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet”:

- 1:22–23; 2:5–6; 2:15; 2:17–18; 2:23; 4:14–16; 8:17; 12:17–21; 13:14–15; 13:35; 21:4–5; 27:9–10 (cf. 3:3–4; 11:10; 15:7–9; 26:54, 56)

Numerous other prophecies fulfilled in Jesus:

- offered vinegar to drink (27:48; cf. Ps. 69:21)
- tomb of a rich man (27:57–60; cf. Isa. 53:9)

Predictions by Jesus:

- destruction of the temple (24:1–2)
- worldwide mission (24:14; 28:18–19)
- end of the age (24:3–28)
- parousia (16:27–28; 24:29–31)
- final judgment (7:21–23; 25:1–13, 31–46)

### **G. The law is important: questions about Jesus’ relationship to the law and the interpretation of the law recur.**

- Jesus fulfills the law (5:17–20)
- antitheses (5:21–48)
- tradition of the elders (15:1–20)
- binding and loosing (18:18; cf. 16:19)
- Jesus versus Moses on divorce (19:3–9)
- Pharisees preach but don’t practice (23:1–3)

### **H. Matthew’s Gospel presents an apocalyptic vision of the world.**

- The world contains “children of God” and “children of the devil” (13:24–30, 36–43).
- People may be classed as “good” or “evil,” “just” or “unjust” (5:45).

### **I. Matthew is the only Gospel in which Jesus talks explicitly about the church.**

- “On this rock I will build my church” (16:18).
- “Tell it to the church” (18:17).

**J. Peter is important: there are several references to Peter and stories about him found nowhere else.**

- walks on the water (14:28–31)
- blessed by Jesus (16:17–19)
- finds the coin for the temple tax (17:24–27)
- asks about forgiveness (18:21–22)

**K. The abiding presence of God/Jesus is important.**

- Jesus is Emmanuel, “God with us” (1:23).
- “Whoever receives you receives me, and . . . him who sent me” (10:40).
- “Where two or three are gathered, there am I” (18:20).
- “What you did to one of the least of my siblings, you did to me” (25:40).
- “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (28:20).

## The Structure of Matthew's Gospel: Two Views

Most scholars recognize that Matthew uses a variety of formulas and structural devices to organize his Gospel.

### The Fivefold Formula

1. "And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teachings" (7:28).
2. "And when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities" (11:1).
3. "And when Jesus had finished these parables, he went away from there" (13:53).
4. "Now when Jesus had finished these sayings, he went away from Galilee" (19:1).
5. "When Jesus had finished all these sayings, he said to his disciples, 'You know after two days the Passover is coming'" (26:1–2).

### The Twofold Formula

1. "From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'" (4:17).
2. "From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things" (16:21).

### Three Summary Passages

1. 4:23–25
2. 9:35
3. 11:1

### Three Passion Predictions

1. 16:21
2. 17:22–23
3. 20:17–19

Benjamin Bacon proposes an outline for Matthew's Gospel based on the fivefold formula as shown above. His outline does not assign structural relevance to the twofold formula or to the summary passages or passion predictions.

### Bacon's Outline for Matthew

Preamble: Infancy Narrative (1–2)
Book 1: Discipleship (3–7)
A. Narrative (3–4)
B. Sermon on the Mount (5–7)
Book 2: Apostleship (8–10)
A. Narrative (8–9)
B. Missionary Discourse (10)
Book 3: Hiding of the Revelation (11–13)

A. Narrative (11–12)
B. Parable Discourse (13)
Book 4: Church Administration (14–18)
A. Narrative (14–17)
B. Community Discourse (18)
Book 5: Judgment (19–25)
A. Narrative (19–23)
B. Eschatological Discourse (24–25)
Epilogue: Passion and Resurrection (26–28)

Jack Dean Kingsbury proposes an outline for Matthew’s Gospel based on the twofold formula. His outline takes into account the “summary passages” and “passion predictions,” but it does not assign structural significance to the fivefold formula.

### **Kingsbury’s Outline for Matthew**

- Part 1: The Presentation of Jesus (1:1–4:16)
- Part 2: Ministry of Jesus to Israel (4:17–11:1)—*includes the three summary passages*—and Israel’s Repudiation of Jesus (11:2–16:20)
- Part 3: Journey of Jesus to Jerusalem and His Suffering, Death, and Resurrection (16:21–28:20)—*includes the three passion predictions*

## Worship in the Gospel of Matthew

### Events

1. The magi worship (*proskyneō*) Jesus as one born King of the Jews (2:11; cf. 2:2).
2. A leper worships (*proskyneō*) Jesus, desiring to be cleansed (8:2).
3. Crowds glorify (*doxazō*) God after Jesus heals a paralytic (9:8).
4. A ruler worships (*proskyneō*) Jesus, wanting him to restore his daughter to life (9:18).
5. Jesus gives thanks (*exomologeō*) to the Father for revealing to infants what is hidden from the wise and understanding (11:25).
6. Disciples worship (*proskyneō*) Jesus as the Son of God (14:33).
7. A Canaanite woman worships (*proskyneō*) Jesus and asks him to heal her daughter (15:25).
8. A crowd glorifies (*doxazō*) the God of Israel after Jesus heals many people (15:31).
9. In a parable told by Jesus, a slave worships (*proskyneō*) his king and asks for patience in payment of debts (18:26).
10. The mother of James and John worships (*proskyneō*) Jesus and requests special positions for her sons (20:20).
11. Children offer Jesus praise (*ainos*) as the Son of David in the temple (21:16).
12. Two women worship (*proskyneō*) the risen Jesus (28:9).
13. The disciples worship (*proskyneō*) the risen Jesus (28:17).

Also:

14. Herod falsely promises to worship (*proskyneō*) Jesus (2:8).
15. Jesus refuses the temptation to worship (*proskyneō*) Satan (4:9).

### Sayings

1. Jesus quotes scripture to Satan: "Worship [*proskyneō*] the Lord your God and serve [*latreuō*] God only" (4:10).
2. Jesus tells his disciples: "Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and glorify [*doxazō*] your Father in heaven" (5:16).
3. Jesus applies to religious leaders the scripture that says, "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship [*sebomai*] me, teaching human precepts as doctrines" (15:9).

## The Presence of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew

The Matthean Jesus emphasizes that he will remain present with his community of followers in the days following his death and resurrection:

- **“Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me” (Matt. 10:40).** Here, Jesus is saying that he will manifest himself to Israel through the twelve apostles, who go out to preach and to heal in his name.
- **“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me” (Matt. 18:5).** Here, Jesus is indicating that he will be represented in his community of followers by little children, who are the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, and by others who humble themselves and become like these children.
- **“Wherever two or three come together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matt. 18:20).** Here, Jesus is promising to be with people who gather in his name to pray and who agree with one another in prayer.
- **“The king will answer them, ‘Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me’” (Matt. 25:40).** Here, Jesus is prophesying that at the final judgment people who cared for members of his family when they were hungry, thirsty, alienated, naked, sick, or in prison will have those deeds rewarded as though they were performed for the Son of Man himself.
- **“Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat, this is my body’” (Matt. 26:26).** Here, Jesus is saying that his followers will continue to realize his bodily presence among them when they eat a sacred meal together in anticipation of the coming kingdom.
- **“Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20).** Here, Jesus is promising to be with his followers as they go out to make disciples of all nations, baptizing people in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that he commanded.



## Matthew's View of the Church

### **The church is instituted by Jesus and founded on his authority.**

- Jesus says, "I will build my church" (16:18); establishing the church is part of his mission on earth.
- Jesus grounds his "Great Commission" to the disciples on the fact that he has been given "all authority in heaven and earth" (28:18).
- Jesus also says that the church will have divine authority to "bind and loose" (18:18).

### **The definitive characteristic of the church is the presence of Jesus.**

- Jesus promises that he will be present wherever two or three gather in his name (18:19) and to be with his followers to the end of the age (28:20).
- Special attention is given throughout this Gospel to characters who are said to be "with Jesus" (his mother [2:11]; outcasts [9:11]; a follower [26:51]; disciples [16:21; 20:17–19; 26:37–38, 40, 69, 71]). This is significant, since Jesus says in 12:30, "Whoever is not with me is against me" (cf. 12:14; 26:59; 27:1).

### **The church is portrayed as "the family of God."**

- Jesus, who is the Son of God, designates his disciples as his true family and says that whoever does the will of God is his "brother and sister and mother" (12:46–50). He also says that whatever is done to any member of his family is done to him (25:40).
- Followers of Jesus are called "children of God" (5:9, 45; 13:38; cf. 23:9).

### **The church is typified by limited "faith" and by "understanding" that is given by Jesus.**

- The disciples of Jesus are presented as people of "little faith" (6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; 17:20), but Jesus makes it clear that this is sufficient (17:20).
- The disciples are presented as people who "understand" Jesus (13:51; 16:12), but typically this is only after they have been given understanding by Jesus.

## Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew

The Gospel of Matthew is organized into sections:

1. Presentation of Jesus (1:1–4:16)
2. Ministry of Jesus (4:17–16:20)
3. Journey, passion, and resurrection of Jesus (16:21–28:20)

The beginning of each new section is marked by the formulaic phrase, “From that time on, Jesus began to . . .” (4:17; 16:21).

The significance of this structure is that Matthew devotes an entire introductory section of his Gospel to answering the question “Who is Jesus?”

The ultimate answer to that question is that Jesus is the Son of God.

- Jesus is the son of David and Abraham, but not of Joseph. Rather, Joseph is the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born (1:1–17).
- Jesus is born to Mary, a virgin, through the work of the Holy Spirit (1:18–25).
- God says of Jesus, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (3:13–17).
- Satan tempts Jesus by saying, “If you are the Son of God . . .” (4:1–10).

At the end of the first section of Matthew’s Gospel, the reader knows that Jesus is the Son of God. The reader also knows that it is possible to respond to Jesus the Son of God in two ways:

- God’s way is to be pleased with Jesus the Son of God.
- Satan’s way is to challenge Jesus the Son of God.

Throughout the rest of Matthew’s story, lines are drawn according to these two possible responses.

- **Disciples** confess that Jesus is the Son of God (16:16) and worship him as the Son of God (14:33).
- **Demons** challenge Jesus as the Son of God (8:29).
- **Religious leaders of Israel** sentence Jesus to death because he says that he is the Son of God (26:63–64; cf. 21:33–46; 27:41–43).
- **The crowd of people** vacillates but ultimately joins in challenging Jesus as the Son of God (27:40).

The significance of this dichotomy is heightened when it is realized what Matthew means when he calls Jesus “the Son of God.”

Basically, he means that Jesus is the one in whom and through whom God is present.

- The birth of Jesus fulfills the prophecy of Emmanuel, which means “God with us” (1:23).
- Jesus promises that his Father will do what people ask him, because “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (18:20).
- Jesus tells his disciples to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and promises, “I will be with you always, to the end of the age” (28:20).

Matthew emphasizes that God is present in Jesus and that Jesus continues to be present in the church.

- The disciples who confess Jesus to be the Son of God are the foundation on which Jesus will build his church (16:18).

Matthew is the only Gospel in which Jesus speaks of the church, much less describes it as “his” church or says that he will “build” it.

So, in Matthew’s view:

- People who follow God’s way and are pleased with Jesus the Son of God are those who are “made disciples” (28:20) and become part of the church.
- People who follow Satan’s way and challenge Jesus the Son of God are those who challenge the church in which Jesus remains present.

## Jesus as the Son of God in Matthew's Gospel

Jack Dean Kingsbury calls attention to the importance of a "Son of God" Christology in Matthew.

### Structure

Matthew uses the formula "From that time Jesus began . . ." (4:17; 16:21) to organize his Gospel into three parts. The first part (1:1–4:16) contains material that answers the question "Who is Jesus?" and the answer that this material provides to that question is invariably "the Son of God" (see 1:16, 18; 2:15; 3:17; 4:3, 6). Thus, the divine sonship of Jesus is emphasized in that section of this Gospel specifically devoted to establishing his identity.

### Chiasm

The central theological motif of the Gospel of Matthew ("In the person of his Son Jesus, God has come to dwell with his people") is expressed through a chiasm involving 1:23 and 28:20. These verses enclose the entire Gospel with the thought that God is with us and will remain with us forever through Jesus. Both of the passages that comprise this chiasm present Jesus as the Son of God. The context for 1:23 is the virginal conception of Jesus; the context for 28:20 is Jesus' commission to his disciples to baptize "in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

### The Voice of God

It is clear that, of all the characters in Matthew's narrative, God is the one whose point of view is normative: God's opinion counts more than the opinion of anyone else. Yet God speaks only twice in the narrative, and both times it is in reference to the identity of Jesus (3:17; 17:5). The only time that God ever enters Matthew's narrative as a character in the story is to declare that Jesus is God's Son.

### The Passion

The climax of Matthew's story of Jesus comes in the passion narrative; this is the point to which the entire Gospel builds. The passion in Matthew is organized around the motif of Jesus' divine sonship:

- Jesus claims that the reason his enemies want to kill him is that he is the Son of God (21:33–46).
- Jesus is sentenced to death for claiming to be the Son of God (26:63–64).
- Jesus' enemies claim that his crucifixion proves that he is not the Son of God (27:40, 43).
- Ironically, Jesus' death actually convinces people that he is the Son of God (27:54).

### The Disciples

A subplot in Matthew's Gospel concerns the disciples of Jesus and their relationship to him. The climax to this "story within the story" comes in 16:13–20, when God reveals to Peter that Jesus is the Son of God.

See Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1988).

## The Lord's Prayer

Early Christians treasured a prayer that they said Jesus had taught his disciples, and they made it part of their private devotional lives and liturgical worship services. Traditionally called “the Lord’s Prayer” or “the Our Father,” the prayer is preserved in three early documents: Matthew 6:9–13; Luke 11:2–4; *Didache* 8:2 (the *Didache* being a nonbiblical writing from the early second century). The prayer is very Jewish in form and content. Indeed, in Matthew, Jesus presents it in explicit contrast to the type of prayers said by Gentiles (6:7).

The metaphorical identification of God as *Father* is typical for Matthew, occurring ten times in 6:1–18 alone (see also 5:16, 45, 48; 6:26, 32; 7:11, 21; 10:32, 33; 12:50; 15:13; 16:17; 18:10, 14, 19, 35; 20:23; 25:34; 26:29, 42, 53; 28:19). For Matthew, this image presents God as both a caring parent and an authority figure, as the one whose unilateral decisions are to be respected by the whole family of believers (cf. 23:9). By encouraging his followers to call God “Father,” Jesus urges them both to respect God’s authority and to trust in God’s generosity and providential wisdom.

The prayers for God’s name to be hallowed, for God’s kingdom to come, and for God’s will to be done are parallel petitions that state the same basic request three times in slightly different words. For Matthew, the essential request is for God to bring to fulfillment what has begun with Jesus. The kingdom has already drawn near (4:17), Jesus and his followers are bringing God’s will to accomplishment (5:17), and God’s name is being glorified on account of them (5:16). Jesus’ followers are to pray for the work of Christ to continue.

Three more petitions make simple requests of God, ones that Jesus deems appropriate for people to make at any time. The request for “daily bread” flows from an assumption that all followers of Jesus will embrace a simple lifestyle. Bread serves as a metaphor for life’s necessities; Jesus’ followers are to ask that God provide them with what they need, no more, but also no less.

The request for forgiveness of sins (literally, “debts”) is traditional for Judaism. Jesus attaches to it a reminder that those who seek such forgiveness ought also to forgive others. To emphasize the point, Matthew quotes another saying of Jesus on this subject (6:14–15) and elsewhere records a parable that Jesus told to illustrate the lesson (18:23–35). Within the Sermon on the Mount, this need to forgive others becomes the only facet of Jesus’ moral teaching deemed so important that his followers are to remind themselves of it every time they pray.

The next petition is easily misunderstood when translated, “Lead us not into temptation,” since neither Matthew nor Jesus would have wanted to imply the possibility that God might tempt people to sin. Rather, the request is for God to guide Jesus’ followers in such a way that they will not experience trials that could test their faith (cf. 26:41). According to the parable of the sower (13:2–9, 18–23), such trials might take the form of hardship (“trouble or persecution”) or

distraction (“the cares of the world and the lure of wealth”). Elsewhere, Matthew indicates that some trials are inevitable (18:7; 24:9–13). Thus, the petition continues with the plea “Deliver us from evil” (or, “the evil one”). Jesus’ followers are to ask that they be spared trials whenever possible, and, when this is not possible, that they be protected from the potentially destructive consequences of such experiences (cf. James 1:2–4; 1 Pet. 1:6–7).

A well-known conclusion to the Lord’s Prayer (“Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever, Amen”) was not originally in the Bible. It was written by early Christians when the prayer came to be used in liturgical worship. Later, some copies of the New Testament began adding the conclusion to the text with the result that it is found today in a few English translations (including the KJV).

### **Primary Resources**

- Crossan, John Dominic. *The Greatest Prayer: Rediscovering the Revolutionary Message of the Lord’s Prayer*. New York: HarperCollins, 2010.
- Matthias, Philip. *The Perfect Prayer: Search for the Kingdom through the Lord’s Prayer*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2005.
- O’Collins, Gerald. *The Lord’s Prayer*. New York: Paulist, 2007.
- Stevenson, Kenneth W. *The Lord’s Prayer: A Text in Tradition*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004.

### **Related Resources**

- Cullman, Oscar. *Prayer in the New Testament*. OBT. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995.
- Hammerling, Roy. *The Lord’s Prayer in the Early Church: The Pearl of Great Price*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Karris, Robert J. *Prayer and the New Testament: Jesus and His Communities at Worship*. New York: Crossroad, 2000.
- Longenecker, Richard N. *Into God’s Presence: Prayer in the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001.

## Parallels between the Sermon on the Mount and the New Testament Epistles

Several passages in the Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew's Gospel have close parallels to texts in New Testament epistles. The following comparisons are especially noteworthy:

Matthew	Epistles
5:10	1 Pet. 3:14
5:11–12	1 Pet. 4:13–14
5:16	1 Pet. 2:12
5:31–32	1 Cor. 7:10–11
5:34–37	James 5:12
5:39	Rom. 12:17; 1 Thess. 5:15; 1 Pet. 3:9
5:44	Rom. 12:14; 1 Cor. 4:12
5:48	1 Pet. 1:15
6:19–20	James 5:1–3
6:25	Phil. 4:6
7:1–2	Rom. 2:1–3; 14:10
7:7	James 1:5; 1 John 5:14–15
7:16b	James 3:12
7:21–27	Rom. 2:13; James 1:22

Such parallels are striking because the authors of these epistles are not thought to have had access to either Matthew's Gospel or the Q source. The common suggestion, therefore, is that such sayings were attributed to Jesus via oral tradition in various sectors of the church.



## Theological Interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount

### The Early Church

In the early church, the Sermon on the Mount was used apologetically to combat Marcionism and, polemically, to promote the superiority of Christianity over Judaism. The notion of Jesus fulfilling the law and the prophets (Matt. 5:17) seemed to split the difference between two extremes that the church wanted to avoid: an utter rejection of the Jewish matrix for Christianity on the one hand, and a wholesale embrace of what was regarded as Jewish legalism on the other. In a similar vein, orthodox interpretation of the sermon served to refute teachings of the Manichaeans, who used the sermon to support ideas the church would deem heretical. In all of these venues, however, the sermon was consistently read as an ethical document: Augustine and others assumed that its teaching was applicable to all Christians and that it provided believers with normative expectations for Christian behavior. It was not until the medieval period and, especially, the time of the Protestant Reformation that reading the sermon in this manner came to be regarded as problematic.

### Theological Difficulties

The primary difficulties that arise from considering the Sermon on the Mount as a compendium of Christian ethics are twofold. The first and foremost is found in the relentlessly challenging character of the sermon's demands. Its commandments have struck many interpreters as impractical or, indeed, impossible, particularly in light of what the New Testament says elsewhere about human weakness and the inevitability of sin (including Matt. 26:41b). The second and related problem is that obedience to these demands appears to be closely linked to the attainment of eschatological salvation (Matt. 5:20, 22, 29–30; 6:15; 7:2, 14, 19, 21–23); thus, the sermon appears to present a theology of "works righteousness" that conflicts with the Christian doctrine of grace. The history of interpretation from the Middle Ages to the present reveals multiple attempts at dealing with these concerns.

### Does the Sermon Present an Impossible Ethic?

**Thomas Aquinas** was one of the first to call attention to these difficulties and also to attempt a resolution. Aquinas suggested that the ethic of the sermon includes not only mandates for all Christians but also optional counsels for those who would strive for perfection (such as clergy and others who pursue religious vocations). Though influential in Roman Catholic thought, this view has been largely rejected by Protestants; it has been critiqued in Catholic circles as well. Protestant polemic has tended to exaggerate Aquinas's view, such that it is often said that the "Catholic interpretation" of the Sermon on the Mount does not view its demands as applicable to the ordinary Christian. In actual fact, the two-level principle of interpretation has been applied selectively and sparingly in Catholic interpretation, usually with limited reference to individual passages (e.g., those that would be interpreted as commending absolute poverty or chastity).

**Martin Luther** stressed a distinction between enactment of the sermon's demands in personal and religious life as opposed to application within the social, secular sphere. Thus, a Christian might practice nonretaliation in personal relationships, but if he or she is a soldier or law officer, the active resistance to evil that is dictated by common sense must be allowed to prevail. Some consideration of the distinction between personal and social ethics became standard for most interpretations of the Sermon on the Mount from the Protestant Reformation to the present day. Numerous critics, however, have noted problems with this approach: such a distinction can negate the sermon's ability to address individuals who excuse unethical behavior as a necessity of political life or, indeed, impede its effectiveness at challenging social systems designed to promote values at variance with those that the sermon encourages. Exegetical interpreters question whether Matthew intended to present Jesus' teaching as personal ethics rather than as the ethic of the community (cf. Matt. 18:15–18, which emphasizes personal subscription to a community ethic); theologians also question on philosophical grounds whether any individual action is ever without social consequence.

**John Calvin** sought to resolve the issue of the sermon's impractical demands by an appeal to canon. In keeping with a hermeneutical method that he called *analogia fidei*, Calvin insisted that many dictates that seem absolute within the sermon itself may be recognized as situational or relative when considered within the broad context of scripture. Thus, the Sermon on the Mount appears to prohibit all oaths (Matt. 5:34), but this is mitigated by Hebrews 6:16 and by Paul's habit of calling upon God as witness to ensure the truth of what he says (Rom. 1:9; 2 Cor. 1:23; Gal. 1:20; Phil. 1:8; 1 Thess. 2:4). Calvin's general principle of "interpreting scripture in light of scripture" has been widely adopted in most confessional traditions, but again, many interpreters find its application problematic when it serves to dismiss the relevance of what the Matthean author (if not the historical Jesus) considered to be imperative concerns.

**Radical Anabaptists** rejected all attempts to domesticate the sermon's demands and insisted on literal obedience, even if that meant nonparticipation in a world that compromises Christ's ethic: a Christian cannot be a soldier (because of Matt. 5:39) or a judge (because of Matt. 7:1) or any official required to swear oaths of office (because of Matt. 5:34). This view always remained a minority position, but it has had prominent advocates such as Leo Tolstoy, the Russian novelist, and Leonhard Ragaz, the father of Christian socialism. In the late nineteenth century, Tolstoy summarized the sermon's demands in a popular fashion as consisting of five key rules: Be not angry, commit no adultery, swear not, go not to law, war not.

**Ulrich Zwingli** proposed a distinction between external and internal realms of application and emphasized that the sermon's main purpose was to form the "inner person." This idea did not attract significant support in the sixteenth century, but it was revived with considerable success three centuries later within the nineteenth-century movement called "Protestant liberalism." Adolf von Harnack, Wilhelm Herrmann, and others spoke of the kingdom of God as a present

and inner reality, and so they read the Sermon on the Mount as more concerned with inculcating a certain disposition within believers than with prescribing literal behavior. Indeed, literal application of the sermon's demands is impossible and undesirable, but when read as a nonlegalistic "ethic of disposition" (to use Hermann's term), the sermon bore witness to the transformed mental and spiritual orientation that marks people of godly character. This understanding was critiqued by Johannes Weiss as losing contact with the apocalyptic perspective of Jesus. Still, it influenced Rudolf Bultmann and other existentialist critics and continues to be expressed in modified or chastened terms to the present day.

**Albert Schweitzer** followed Weiss's lead and came to question the relevance of the sermon altogether. Schweitzer maintained that the radical demands of the sermon were supposed to have represented an "interim ethic": the sermon presupposes an imminent expectation of the end times and becomes impractical in contexts that have lost that sense of urgency. Martin Dibelius also couched the problem of interpretation in these terms and yet thought that the sermon could continue to provide some sort of eschatological stimulus for Christian ethics: even those whose vision of the future is not apocalyptic may be affected by knowledge of what a complete transformation of the world in accord with God's righteousness would bring.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, the notion that the Sermon on the Mount was predicated in its entirety on imminent eschatology was questioned and all but discarded by theologians who considered the attribution of an exclusively future outlook to Jesus unsustainable. Rather, Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God as both still to come (perhaps, but not necessarily in the near future) and as already present (in mysterious but readily identifiable ways). This modified understanding of Jesus' eschatology yielded a stance toward the sermon's ethic that continues to draw significant support among modern interpreters: the sermon presents the ethic of God's kingdom, and Christians seek God's kingdom (and its righteousness) by striving to live in compliance with the sermon's demands (6:33). To the extent that the kingdom is already present, they will find some success—sufficient to be salt for the earth and light for the world. Their failures serve as reminders that the kingdom is not yet fully present and that God's rule over their own lives remains incomplete. Thus, the sermon presents an ethic that Christians are to live into, striving to live in the present as they are destined to live for eternity.

### **Does the Sermon's Legalism Conflict with a Doctrine of Grace?**

**Martin Luther** was particularly bothered by the sermon's tendency toward "works righteousness," and he sought to interpret the moral expectations of the sermon as manifestations of grace: one does not behave as the sermon indicates in order to earn God's favor; rather, the Christian who has been put right with God by sheer grace will show the fruit of God's salvation in a life marked by good works, such as those that the sermon describes. This understanding, dependent on Augustine, became fairly standard for interpretations of the sermon in most confessional traditions.

**Protestant Scholasticism** (post-Reformation followers of Luther and Calvin) radicalized the tendency to interpret the sermon in this light. In both popular and scholarly treatments, the sermon was made to serve the evangelical function of preparing people for the gospel by making them aware of their need for grace: since no human can keep the sermon's demands, those who try will be brought to despair and left to trust in naught but the mercy of Christ. This manner of reading the sermon remained prominent in many Protestant circles for hundreds of years (twentieth-century advocates included Carl Strange, Gerhard Kittel, and Helmut Thielecke), but it was sharply critiqued exegetically by Joachim Jeremias (in his 1963 work, *The Sermon on the Mount*) and theologically by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (in his 1940 work *The Cost of Discipleship*).

In the modern era, all attempts to read the Sermon on the Mount in a manner that would be compatible with a Pauline doctrine of justification have fallen on hard times. The critical era of biblical studies has allowed for more theological diversity within the canon, and many interpreters today would simply grant that the Sermon on the Mount assumes a soteriology that would not be acceptable from a Pauline perspective. This view has been bolstered by the work of numerous Jewish interpreters. The theological recommendation of Christian scholars is sometimes to value the sermon for its ethical teaching while regarding its understanding of soteriology as inadequate. To force any reading of the text from the perspective of what ultimately became orthodox Christian theology does not do justice to the theology of Matthew or the intentions of the historical Jesus.

## How to Interpret the Scriptures according to Matthew

Matthew's Gospel maintains that people who do not know the scriptures have no knowledge of the things of God.

Note how Jesus upbraids the religious leaders of Israel:

- "Have you not read . . . ?" (12:3, 5; 19:4; 22:31)
- "Have you never read . . . ?" (21:16, 42)

See also: 9:13; 12:7; 22:29, 43; 26:31

It is possible, however, to "know" the scriptures in some sense without truly understanding them:

- The religious leaders do possess an academic understanding of scripture (2:3–6).
- Even Satan is able to quote scripture, albeit with perverse interpretation (4:6).

What is important, then, is to know how to interpret scripture.

### Matthew's Questionable Exegetical Tendencies

Matthew himself does not always interpret scripture in ways acceptable to scholars today.

- He quotes verses sometimes from the Septuagint, sometimes from the Hebrew, and sometimes from a "mixed text" of his own rendering.
- He creates "mosaic quotations" by joining verses that come from different sources.
- He adds or changes words in order to bring out the intended meaning.
- He quotes verses without any consideration for the original context.

### Example: Matthew 2:6

"And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for from you shall come a ruler  
who will govern my people Israel."

- The text is basically from the Septuagint, but the word "rulers" in line 2 comes from the Hebrew (and a textual variant at that).
- Lines 1–3 are from Micah 5:2, and line 4 is from 2 Samuel 5:2.
- Matthew adds the words "by no means" in line 2, reversing the original sense of both the Septuagint and Hebrew.
- In their original context, it is unlikely that either the passage from Micah or that from 2 Samuel was intended to be a prophecy concerning the Messiah (cf. Matt. 2:4–6 with John 7:27).

## The Christological Key

The key to interpreting scripture for Matthew is recognizing that all scripture is fulfilled in the life and teachings of Jesus.

- Jesus says, “I have come not to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them” (5:17).
- Twelve “fulfillment citations” (1:22–23; 2:5–6, 15, 17–18, 23; 4:14–16; 8:17; 12:17–21; 13:14–15, 35; 21:4–5; 27:9–10).

In emphasizing the fulfillment of scripture by Jesus, Matthew expresses the theological conviction that the hopes of Israel are realized in him.

Jesus is

- the Davidic Messiah
- the Isaianic Servant
- the Danielic Son of Man
- the Greater Moses

Matthew’s citations and adaptations of scripture do not provide convincing “proof” that Jesus is who Matthew believes him to be. Rather, the revelation of God in Christ sheds light upon the scriptures and reveals their true intent and meaning.

## Binding and Loosing in the Gospel of Matthew

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus gives the church the authority to bind and to loose commandments of scripture—that is, to determine when biblical commandments remain applicable to contemporary situations and when they do not.

- (Jesus says to Peter), “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (16:19).
- (Jesus says to the twelve), “Truly, I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (18:18).

### Examples of Binding and Loosing in Matthew

#### *Jesus Gets It Right*

- In 5:21–23, Jesus binds the law prohibiting murder as applicable to anger and insults, and in 5:27–28, he similarly binds the law prohibiting adultery as applicable to lust. The apparent reason is that the “heart” is the locus of human sin, and thus intentions of the heart are judged by the same standard as actions.
- In 12:1–9, Jesus looses the prohibition against performing work on the Sabbath with regard to plucking grain to satisfy one’s hunger, and in 12:9–14, Jesus looses the prohibition against performing work on the Sabbath with regard to performing works of healing. He declares, “It is lawful to do good on the sabbath” (12:12), and he says that those who do not recognize this “condemn the guiltless” (12:7).

#### *The Scribes and Pharisees Get It Wrong*

- In 15:1–2, we find that the scribes and Pharisees preserve a tradition of the elders that binds certain priestly regulations regarding ritual hand-washing as applicable to all Jews at everyday meals. Jesus rejects this interpretation for his followers, insisting that the scribes and Pharisees do not understand what truly “defiles” a person (15:19–20).
- In 15:3–9, we hear that the scribes and Pharisees have loosed commandments requiring people to care for their elderly parents in instances where they can say, “Whatever support you would have had from me is given to God.” Jesus denounces this attempt at loosing the law as “making void the word of God for the sake of human tradition” and as “teaching human precepts as doctrines.”

Elsewhere, Jesus insists that his approach fulfills the law and the prophets while that of the scribes and the Pharisees abolishes the law and the prophets (5:17–20). They ignore commandments that should be kept while interpreting others in ways that become “heavy burdens, hard to bear” (23:4). Jesus is not always more lenient, but he claims to offer a “light burden” and an “easy yoke” (11:30).

## Principles for “Binding and Loosing”

Jesus indicates that some matters are of fundamental importance and must be given priority if we are to have lives pleasing to God. The church is to remember these principles as it seeks to apply commandments of scripture to the present day.

- “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets” (7:12).
- “Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous, but sinners” (9:13).
- “If you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless” (12:7).
- “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (22:37–40).
- “You tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith” (23:23).



## People of Little Faith in the Gospel of Matthew

In the Gospel of Matthew, the disciples of Jesus are called “people of little faith.” In Greek, this phrase is a single word *oligopistoi*, and it is used by Jesus as a nickname for his disciples.

### Matthew 6:30

Jesus tells his disciples not to worry about what they will wear. “Look at the lilies of the field,” he says. “If God so clothes the grass how much more will God clothe you, *you people of little faith*.”

### Matthew 8:26

Jesus is with his disciples in a boat when a storm at sea comes up. They are terrified. He asks them, “Why are you afraid, *you people of little faith*?” Then, he miraculously calms the sea.

### Matthew 14:31

When Peter tries to walk on the water, he is afraid and begins to sink. He calls out for help, and Jesus grabs him. Lifting him up, Jesus asks, “Why did you doubt, *you person of little faith*?”

### Matthew 16:8

One day, after miraculously feeding the multitudes, Jesus is teaching his disciples and he uses the metaphor of “leaven.” They misunderstand the expression and think he is concerned about whether they will have enough real leaven to make bread when they need it. He asks, “Why do you discuss that you have no bread, *you people of little faith*?”

### Matthew 17:20

When Jesus’ disciples are unable to drive a demon out of a possessed child, Jesus tells them that it is because of their “little faith.” This is the fifth and last time that he uses that expression with them, but then he reveals something especially important:

Truly, I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, “Move from here to there,” and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.

These concluding words about the mustard seed seem to indicate that being “people of little faith” is not a devastating fault: those with a very small amount of faith can still do great things for God.

## Fear, Joy, Worship, and Doubt in the Gospel of Matthew

Matthew's Gospel pairs typically negative traits with typically positive ones in ways that are ambiguously compatible.

### Fear and Joy

"The women left the tomb quickly, with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples" (28:8).

Joy typically is a positive quality in Matthew's Gospel:

- "When the magi saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy" (2:10).
- "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he had and buys that field" (13:44).
- "Well done, good and faithful servant . . . enter into the joy of your master" (25:21, 23).

But joy also can be a sign of superficial or shallow faith:

- "As for what was sown on the rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a one has no root, but endures only for a little while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away" (13:20–21).

Fear may seem like a negative quality, but it often does accompany worship:

- "When the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, 'It is a ghost!' . . . And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, 'Truly, you are the Son of God!'" (14:26, 33).
- "When the disciples heard this [God's voice at Jesus' transfiguration], they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear" (17:6).
- "Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, 'Truly this man was God's Son'" (27:54).
- And Jesus says, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both body and soul in hell" (10:28).

*The Ambiguous Compatibility:* joy is what turns fear into worship; fear prevents worship from being shallow.

### Worship and Doubt

"When they saw him, they worshiped him; but [some] doubted" (28:17).

Worship typically is a positive quality in Matthew's Gospel:

- Magi worship Jesus (2:11).
- A leper worships Jesus (8:2).
- A ruler worships Jesus (9:18).
- A Canaanite woman worships Jesus (15:25).
- The mother of James and John worships Jesus (20:20).
- Mary Magdalene and “the other Mary” worship Jesus (28:9).

But worship also can be superficial:

- “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines” (15:8–9; cf. Isa. 29:13).

Doubt (“little faith”) seems to be a negative quality:

- “If God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith” (6:30).
- “He said to them, ‘Why are you afraid, you of little faith?’ Then he rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm” (8:26).
- “Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying, ‘You of little faith, why did you doubt?’” (14:31).

And yet it is not a fatal flaw:

- A “mustard seed” of faith is all that is required (17:20).
- Jesus encourages seeking, asking, and knocking (6:33; 7:7).

And those who doubt are able to offer sincere worship:

- Immediately after being rebuked by Jesus for doubt, Peter and the other disciples worship Jesus as the Son of God (14:31–33).
- Worship and doubt coincide in the community that receives the Great Commission (28:17–20).

*The Ambiguous Compatibility:* worship brings doubting faith to life; doubt prevents worship from being self-assured and vain.

## The Theme of Understanding in the Gospel of Matthew

### The Importance of Understanding

The parable of the sower establishes the importance of understanding for Matthew's Gospel:

- The parable of the sower: the good soil that bears fruit stands for "the one who hears the word and understands it" (13:23).
  - Cf. Mark 4:20: "the ones who hear the word and accept it"
  - Cf. Luke 8:15: "the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart."
- Also in this parable, the seed devoured by birds is explained thus: "When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart" (13:19).

### The Disciples as People Who Are Given Understanding

Three times the disciples of Jesus are portrayed as people who understand the word of Jesus, but only after that understanding is given to them:

- "Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes" (13:51).
- "Then they understood that he had not told them to beware of the yeast of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (16:12).
- "Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist" (17:13).

All three references are unique to Matthew. Indeed, a parallel reference in Mark 8:21 indicates the disciples' continued lack of understanding.

### The Disciples' Understanding Marks Them as Distinctive

The disciples are contrasted with the masses of people who follow Jesus without understanding:

To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. . . . The reason I speak to them in parables is that "seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand." With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says, "You will indeed listen, but never understand. . . ." (13:11–14)

### Concluding Observations

1. Understanding is not a prerequisite for salvation, but it is for "bearing fruit." With regard to mission, understanding almost seems more important than faith. The disciples are people of "little faith" in Matthew, yet they are given the Great Commission in 28:18–20. The Canaanite woman in 15:21–28 is a person of "great faith," yet she is not given any commission to go and make disciples (likewise, the centurion with remarkable faith in 8:5–13).

2. Understanding must be given by God (through Jesus). In 11:25, Jesus prays, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants."

## The Religious Leaders of Israel in Matthew's Narrative

The religious leaders of Israel are presented as “flat characters” in Matthew's story—that is, predictable figures who serve to embody the root trait of being evil.

### The World of Matthew's Story

The parable of the wheat and weeds in 13:24–30 offers a dualistic picture of the world that contrasts with the biblical image of Genesis. The parable is explained in 13:36–43:

- The Son of Man put people in this world (the wheat).
- The devil also put people in this world (the weeds).
- God's servants (the field hands) should not try to get rid of the devil's children, for they might mistakenly eliminate some who were put here by the Son of Man.
- The children of the Son of Man and the children of the devil must coexist.
- The angels (the harvesters) will take care of the devil's children at the end of time, throwing them into the fires of hell and separating out the righteous for salvation.

This is bleak imagery. There is no hope for children of the devil. They cannot be reached by preaching, and they cannot repent. Weeds do not become wheat. The gospel is for children of the Son of Man, and those who accept it will be saved; but people put here by the devil are destined for damnation. They will torment believers until the end and then get what is coming to them.

### Identifying the Weeds

Later in Matthew's story, Jesus identifies the religious leaders of Israel with the weeds of this parable:

- “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit” (15:13–14).

This is consistent with the rest of Matthew's story:

- Jesus (and the narrator of Matthew's Gospel) repeatedly characterize the religious leaders of Israel as “evil” (9:4; 12:34, 39; 16:4; 22:18), as “children of serpents” (12:34; 23:33), and as “children of hell” (23:15).
- In this Gospel (unlike the others), there are no exceptions to the portrayal of the religious leaders as evil. There is not a single instance in which any religious leader of Israel says, does, thinks, or believes anything that is right.
- Jesus never preaches to the religious leaders or calls them to repent (any more than he would the demons that he exorcizes). He simply tells them that they are evil and assures them of the eternal condemnation that awaits:

“You snakes, you brood of vipers, how will you escape being sentenced to hell?” (23:33).

### **The Religious Leaders’ Role as “Flat Characters” in the Story**

Did the historical author of this Gospel really believe that the scribes and Pharisees who interacted with Jesus were put on the earth by the devil, that they were irredeemably evil and thus not candidates for conversion (didn’t he know about Paul)? This seems unlikely.

Literary critics maintain that “flat characters” in a narrative function primarily to personify values. In Matthew’s narrative, the scribes and Pharisees personify the primal value *evil*; what the scribes and Pharisees do in this story is what evil does: it condemns the guiltless (12:7), blasphemes the Holy Spirit (12:31), neglects the weightier matters of the law (23:23), and so forth. Matthew’s readers probably are not expected to draw historical conclusions about scribes and Pharisees from this story but rather are expected to come to an understanding of the nature of evil. They are expected to recognize that evil tends to be hypocritical, masquerading as good (23:27–28); that evil involves unwitting self-deception, failing to recognize its own duplicity (15:14; 23:16–22); that evil perverts what otherwise would be good, ignoring motives or outcomes (6:2, 5, 16).

See Mark Allan Powell, *Chasing the Eastern Star: Biblical Adventures in Reader-Response Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

## Jewish Responsibility for the Death of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew

### Prologue: A Survey in Christian Interpretation

#### *History*

Jesus was crucified as a Jewish victim of Roman violence. On this, all authorities agree. A Gentile Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, condemned him to death and had him tortured and executed by Gentile Roman soldiers. He was, indeed, one of thousands of Jews crucified by the Romans during this period.

The New Testament testifies to this basic fact, but it also allows for Jewish involvement in two ways. First, a few high-ranking Jewish authorities who owed their position and power to the Romans conspired with the Gentile leaders to have Jesus put to death; they are said to have been jealous of him and to have viewed him as a threat to the status quo. Second, an unruly mob of people in Jerusalem called out for Jesus to be crucified; the number and, for that matter, ethnic identification of persons in this “crowd” is not given, nor is any motive supplied for their action (except to say that they had been “stirred up” by the Jewish authorities).

#### *Theology*

The Christian scriptures are less interested in recording historical facts about Jesus’ death than in explaining the meaning of that death. Christians claim that Jesus died as an *atonement for sin*. His death is interpreted as a “ransom” that frees people from the effects of sin (Mark 10:45), as a sacrifice that removes the consequences of sin (John 1:29), and as a loving act that reconciles humans with a forgiving God of love (Rom. 5:6–10).

For Christians, *historical responsibility* for the death of Jesus is *theologically irrelevant*. Christians do not believe that Jesus was overpowered by hostile Romans or Jews or anyone else. They believe that, whatever the precise circumstances of his execution, he died because it was God’s will for him to give his life as an atonement for sin, and he was obedient to this purpose (Phil. 2:8).

#### *Preaching*

Christian preachers usually try to proclaim the relevance of Jesus’ atoning death to their immediate audience. They preach not just general theology (“Christ died for the sins of the whole world”) but rather specific application of that theology (“Christ died for *our* sins”).

Christian preachers usually do not dwell on the literal historical responsibility for the death of Jesus (“The Romans killed Jesus” or “The Jews killed Jesus”) but rather emphasize a nonliteral *personal responsibility for the death of Jesus*: “We crucified Jesus—you and I. His blood was shed on our account.”



## Jewish Responsibility for the Death of Jesus in Matthew

Certain texts in the Christian New Testament seem to emphasize Jewish responsibility for the death of Jesus in a way that goes beyond the historical involvement of a few compromised authorities and an unruly mob. One such passage is 1 Thessalonians 2:14–16.

The best-known text of this nature, however, is found in Matthew's Gospel:

Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. At that time, they had a notorious prisoner called Jesus Barabbas. So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over. While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him." Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. The governor again said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas." Pilate said to them, "Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" All of them said, "Let him be crucified!" Then he asked, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!" So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." Then the people as a whole answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!" So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified. (27:15–26)

Why would the author of Matthew's Gospel want to emphasize Jewish guilt rather than Roman guilt in bringing about the death of Jesus and, indeed, extend responsibility for this blood to the descendants (children) of those who were actually present? It seems unlikely that Matthew would want to "let the Romans off the hook," exonerate them for an obvious act of injustice and sadism.

Most scholars think that Matthew himself was Jewish and that he wrote his Gospel for a congregation of Jewish persons who believed in Jesus as the Messiah. Thus, Matthew exemplifies a typical theme in Christian preaching, insisting that he and his congregation bear *personal responsibility for the death of Jesus* and so share in atonement through his blood.

Matthew is not saying, "Those Jews are to blame for killing Jesus." He is saying, "We Jews are responsible for killing Jesus. We can't just blame Pilate and the Romans. His blood is upon us."

But in terms of Christian theology, the blood of Jesus is what brings salvation and forgiveness of sins (see 26:28).

## Interpretation of Jesus' Death in an Anti-Semitic World

Presentations of the passion of Jesus in Christian history have sometimes moved from preaching to polemics. In cultures where anti-Semitism runs high, Jewish involvement in the death of Jesus has been emphasized and reinterpreted as conveying blame rather than atonement.

Thus, Matthew's Gospel and similar texts would come to be read by Gentile Christians not as saying "we crucified Jesus" but rather as saying "they crucified Jesus." The essential theological meaning of the story was lost, replaced by a political and social interpretation that explained why Jewish people ought to be despised by Gentiles. Jews were routinely condemned in such cultures as "Christ-killers," and the misfortunes of Jewish people were explained as a consequence of having been cursed by God for their involvement in the crucifixion of Jesus the Messiah.

Such interpretations of the passion have rarely (if ever) found official acceptance among Christian theologians, but they have flourished at a popular level and have been used in attempts to justify centuries of discrimination and persecution of Jewish people.

The most visible representations of these anti-Semitic interpretations of the passion were the passion plays that were performed for hundreds of years in Western Christian countries. In an era before television and cinema, such plays were a principal form of entertainment; often they were produced and performed by secular troupes apart from any official sanction of the church.

In many countries, passion plays were an annual amusement. They opened each year on Ash Wednesday and ran throughout the Lenten season (i.e., until Easter).

Features of the passion plays that exhibited and encouraged anti-Semitism:

- The Jewishness of Jesus and his disciples was minimized or completely ignored; the only characters who appeared Jewish were the "bad Jews" who conspired to kill Christ.
- Characterization of these "bad Jews" tended to be melodramatic; they were presented as sinister and demonic figures whose opposition to Jesus lacked any reasonable motive.
- Actors playing these supposedly first-century Jews portrayed them in ways associated with contemporary Jewish figures, dressing in garb worn by Jews of the current day, speaking with affected Jewish accents, and drawing for comic effect on negative stereotypes associated with Jewish people in the culture where the play was performed.
- The role of the (Gentile) Roman government in Jesus' execution was greatly minimized; Pilate was presented as a sympathetic figure, forced to sentence Jesus by the hostile Jews.

In short, Jesus became a Christian victim of Jewish violence rather than a Jewish victim of Roman violence.

In recent years (especially since the Holocaust of the Nazi era), virtually all Christian churches have repudiated the production of such inaccurate and culturally insensitive passion plays. The Roman Catholic Church, in particular, has issued guidelines for dramatic presentations of Christ's passion, in hope that mistakes of the past can be avoided.

## The Bias against Gentiles in the Gospel of Matthew

Matthew's narrative presupposes an anti-Gentile prejudice on the part of its readers:

- In 5:47, Jesus tells his disciples, "If you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?" The word *Gentiles* is used in parallel structure to the term *tax collectors* in the preceding verse ("Do not even the tax collectors do the same?").
- In 6:7, Jesus tells his disciples, "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think they will be heard because of their many words." The word *Gentiles* is used in parallel structure to the word *hypocrites* in 6:5 ("Whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites").
- In 6:25–32, Jesus tells his disciples, "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. . . . For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things."
- In 10:5–6, Jesus sends his disciples out on a healing mission to "cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons" (10:8). He tells them, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Here, the word *Gentiles* is in parallel structure to *Samaritans*.
- In 10:18, Jesus warns his disciples, "You will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles." Here, Gentiles (along with "governors and kings") are cited as one example of wolves into whose midst Jesus' disciples are sent as sheep (10:16).
- In 18:17, Jesus concludes his instructions to the disciples on how to deal with unrepentant sinners by saying, "If the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." Again the word *Gentile* is parallel to the term *tax collector*. Notably, the only other word with which *tax collector* is sometimes paired is *prostitute* (21:31–32).
- In 20:25–26, Jesus tells his disciples, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and that their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you."

Gentiles are associated with vanity, tyranny, and sin. Even their best behavior is self-serving. God does not want to hear their long-winded prayers or heal their diseases. They can pretty much be put in the same class with hypocrites, traitors, and whores—people whom Matthew's readers are expected to despise.

## Passages from Mark Omitted by Matthew

According to the dominant source theories, the author of Matthew's Gospel drew much of his material from the Gospel of Mark but chose not to use certain passages.

1:21–28	Exorcism of unclean spirit from man in synagogue
1:35–38	Morning prayer interrupted
*4:26–29	Parable of seed growing secretly ("automatic growth")
*7:31–37	Healing of deaf and dumb man
*8:22–26	Healing of blind man of Bethsaida
9:38–40	Disciples rebuke an exorcist who does not follow them
12:41–44	Story of the widow's mite
*14:51–52	Flight of young man in the garden

\*Omitted also by Luke.

## Salvation History in Matthew's Gospel: Two Views

Three chronological periods have been discerned:

- time of Israel
- time of Jesus
- time of the church

The question becomes "What is the extent of continuity and/or discontinuity between these periods?"

John Meier stresses:<sup>1</sup>

*Continuity* between time of Israel and time of Jesus:

- Jesus views the Jewish law as valid (5:17–18).
- Jesus limits his ministry to Israel (10:5–6; 15:24).

*Discontinuity* between the time of Jesus and the time of the church:

- Jesus, after his resurrection, instructs his disciples to teach his commandments (rather than those of Moses).
- Jesus says that the post-Easter mission (of the church) is to "the nations"—that is, no longer to Israel (28:19).

Jack Dean Kingsbury stresses:<sup>2</sup>

*Discontinuity* between the time of Israel and time of Jesus:

- The time of Israel is essentially one of prophecy; the time of Jesus is one of fulfillment (see the fulfillment citations throughout this Gospel).
- The coming of Jesus marks a new development in the relationship of God and people: God is now "with us" (1:23).

*Continuity* between the time of Jesus and the time of the church:

- The disciples and others respond to Jesus during his earthly ministry the same way that Christians respond to Jesus during the time of the church: they worship him as the Son of God, they have faith in him, they call him "Lord."
- The time of the church is marked by the continuing presence of Jesus (18:20; 28:20).

Meier defines continuity and discontinuity in terms of *ecclesiological* issues, while Kingsbury defines continuity and discontinuity in terms of *christological* issues.

### Footnotes

1. See John P. Meier, *The Vision of Matthew: Christ, Church and Morality in the First Gospel*, T1 (New York: Paulist Press, 1979).

2. See Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew, Structure, Christology, Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).

## John the Baptist in the Gospel of Matthew

### **The ministry of John the Baptist is reported (3:1–12).**

- His peculiar dress summons images of Elijah (2 Kings 1:8).
- His diet marks him as one who relies completely on God for sustenance (cf. 6:26).
- His preaching of the kingdom parallels that of Jesus (4:17) and the disciples (10:7); he also cites other themes that will be picked up later by Jesus: polemic against religious leaders (12:34; 23:33); metaphor of a fruitless tree (7:16–20); description of judgment (9:37–38; 13:37–42).
- He prophesies that Jesus (“the coming one”) will bring judgment upon the earth.

### **John baptizes Jesus (3:13–17).**

- John initially objects to this baptism, but Jesus responds that it is “necessary to fulfill all righteousness.”

### **John’s disciples ask why the disciples of Jesus don’t fast (9:14–15).**

- Jesus compares himself to a bridegroom and the current situation to “a wedding feast.”

### **John questions Jesus’ identity and Jesus speaks of John’s role (11:2–15).**

- The question is delivered by John’s disciples from prison: “Are you the one who is to come?” (earlier John had seemed to identify Jesus as “the coming one,” but had indicated that this “coming one” would bring judgment upon the earth).
- Jesus’ response alludes to Isaiah 29:18–19 and identifies the present day as the dawn of the messianic age; as before (9:14–15), what John’s disciples take to be an anomaly results from their failure to recognize that God’s gift of salvation precedes judgment.
- Jesus tells the crowd that John is the greatest man ever born and that he has fulfilled the prophecy of the return of Elijah (Mal. 4:5), although no earthly glory can compare to that which awaits even “the least” in the kingdom of heaven.

### **John is murdered by Herod (14:1–12).**

- Herod is an exemplar of the self-absorbed tyrants whom Jesus describes in 20:25. He divorces his own wife to marry his half-sister, who is already married to his half-brother. He lusts after his own stepdaughter and makes the sort of foolish oaths that Jesus forbids in 5:33–37. Matthew presents him as wicked, but also as a buffoon.
- Herod’s every act is motivated by fear: he keeps John alive because he fears the populace, then has him killed because he fears the opinions of his dinner guests even more. In the end, he fears that John has returned to haunt him. Thus, he illustrates those who fear people and not God (10:28).



- By killing John, Herod violently assaults the kingdom of heaven itself, robbing the earth of one of heaven's great treasures (cf. 11:12).

**Jesus speaks about John after the transfiguration (17:10–13).**

- Jesus' disciples are given to understand that John's life and death somehow fulfilled the prophecy that Elijah would return (Mal. 4:5).

**Jesus refers to John when his own authority is questioned (21:23–27).**

- The religious leaders refuse to acknowledge John's status as a prophet, but neither will they outright deny it, for, like Herod, they are driven by "fear of people" rather than by fear of God.
- Jesus indicates that "tax collectors and prostitutes" who listened to John will enter the kingdom of heaven ahead of the religious leaders who did not.

## The Passion of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew

### Theme: Jesus Dies as One Abandoned

- Peter, James, and John fall asleep while he prays in the garden (26:36–45).
- Judas betrays him (26:47–50; 27:3–10).
- Disciples forsake him and run away (26:56).
- Jewish leaders mock him as a false messiah (26:27).
- Peter denies him (26:69–75).
- The crowds call for him to be crucified (27:15–23).
- Roman soldiers mock him as a false king (27:27–30).
- Passers-by join Jewish leaders in mocking him on the cross (27:39–43).
- Crucified criminals taunt him (27:44).
- Darkness covers the land, and Jesus cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (27:45–46).

### Theme: Jesus’ Death Saves His People from Their Sins

- At birth, Jesus is identified as the one who will save his people from their sins (1:21).
- Jesus predicts and accepts his passion as the will of God, declaring that he has come to “give his life as a ransom for many” (20:28; cf. 16:21–23; 17:22–23; 20:17–19; 26:39, 42).
- Jesus speaks of his blood being shed “for the forgiveness of sins” (26:28).
- At his death, people rise from the dead, indicating that the power of death has now been broken and life after death is possible (27:50–53).

### Theme: Jesus Dies as the Son of God

- Jesus’ identity as Son of God is what arouses the most opposition from those who kill him (21:38–39; 26:63–66; 27:41–43).
- Ironically, Jesus’ death confirms his identity as Son of God (27:54).

### Theme: Jesus Remains Present with His Followers after His Death

- Jesus’ death does mark the beginning of a time when he is, in some sense, absent (9:15; 26:11).
- But in another sense, Jesus remains eternally present (28:20): among missionaries (10:40), children (18:5), those who pray (18:20), and those in need (25:31–46).

## The Disciples of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew

### **Those who are to “make disciples” of others must first be made disciples themselves.**

- Jesus calls them to fish for people (4:18–22; cf. 9:9).
- Faithful women sent to recover the unfaithful eleven (28:1–10).

### **The disciples of Jesus are called as sinners.**

- Jesus has come to save sinners (1:21).
- Jesus calls sinners, just as a physician goes to the sick (9:13).

### **The disciples of Jesus are people of “little faith.”**

- They worry about being fed and clothed (6:25–34).
- They fear a storm at sea (8:26).
- Peter is fearful and doubtful (14:30–31).
- They misguidedly discuss having no bread (16:8).
- They cannot cast out a demon (17:16, 19–20a).
- (Cf. “If you have faith the size of a mustard seed . . .” [17:20b].)

### **The disciples of Jesus worship and doubt.**

- Peter tries to walk on water (14:28–33).
- The eleven gather to receive the Great Commission (28:17).

### **The disciples increase in understanding.**

- They have ears that hear and eyes that see (13:16; cf. 11:15; 13:9, 43).
- They understand the parables of the kingdom (13:51).
- They understand about the “leaven” of the religious leaders (16:12).
- They understand about Elijah and John the Baptist (17:13).

## Matthew in the Revised Common Lectionary

Text	Content	Series	Liturgical Occasion	Calendar Date
1:18–25	Birth of Jesus	A	Advent 4	1 Sunday before Dec 25
2:1–12	Visit of magi	A, B, C	Epiphany Day	Jan 6
2:13–23	Massacre of infants	A	Christmas 1	1 Sunday after Dec 25
3:1–12	Ministry of John the Baptist	A	Advent 2	3 Sundays before Dec 25
3:13–17	Baptism of Jesus	A	Epiphany 1	Jan 7–13
4:1–11	Temptation of Jesus	A	Lent 1	6 Sundays before Easter
4:12–23	Call of disciples	A	Epiphany 3	Jan 21–27
5:1–12	Beatitudes	A	Epiphany 4	Jan 29–Feb 3
5:1–12	Beatitudes	A	All Saints' Day	Nov 1
5:13–20	Salt, light, righteousness	A	Epiphany 5	Feb 4–10
5:21–37	Antitheses	A	Epiphany 6	Feb 11–17
5:38–48	Love for enemies	A	Epiphany 7	Feb 18–24
6:1–6, 16–21	Practicing piety in private	A, B, C	Ash Wednesday	7 Wednesdays before Easter
6:24–34	On anxiety: birds and lilies	A	Epiphany 8	Feb 25–Mar 1
6:24–34	On anxiety: birds and lilies	A	Lectionary 8	May 24–28
7:21–29	Wise and foolish builders	A	Lectionary 9	May 29–Jun 4
9:9–13, 18–26	Call of Matthew; two healings	A	Lectionary 10	Jun 5–11
9:35–10:8 (9–23)	Mission charge	A	Lectionary 11	Jun 12–18
10:24–39	Perseverance in persecution	A	Lectionary 12	Jun 19–25
10:40–42	Rewards for hospitality	A	Lectionary 13	Jun 26–Jul 2
11:2–11	Question of John the Baptist	A	Advent 3	2 Sundays before Dec 25
11:16–19, 25–30	Thanksgiving to the Father	A	Lectionary 14	Jul 3–9
13:1–9, 18–23	Parable of sower	A	Lectionary 15	Jul 10–16
13:24–30, 36–43	Parable of wheat and weeds	A	Lectionary 16	Jul 17–23
13:31–33, 44–52	Parables of the kingdom	A	Lectionary 17	Jul 24–30
14:13–21	Feeding of multitude	A	Lectionary 18	Jul 31–Aug 6
14:22–33	Walking on water	A	Lectionary 19	Aug 7–13
15:(10–20) 21–28	Canaanite woman and her daughter	A	Lectionary 20	Aug 14–20
16:13–20	Peter's confession	A	Lectionary 21	Aug 21–27
16:21–28	First passion prediction	A	Lectionary 22	Aug 28–Sep 3
17:1–9	Transfiguration of Jesus	A	Transfiguration	7 Sundays before Easter
18:15–20	Confronting sinners	A	Lectionary 23	Sep 4–10

<b>Text</b>	<b>Content</b>	<b>Series</b>	<b>Liturgical Occasion</b>	<b>Calendar Date</b>
18:21–35	Parable of unmerciful servant	A	Lectionary 24	Sep 11–17
20:1–16	Parable of laborers in field	A	Lectionary 25	Sep 18–24
21:23–32	Parable of two sons	A	Lectionary 26	Sep 25–Oct 1
21:33–46	Parable of wicked tenants	A	Lectionary 27	Oct 2–8
22:1–14	Parable of wedding banquet	A	Lectionary 28	Oct 9–15
22:15–22	Question about taxes	A	Lectionary 29	Oct 16–22
22:34–46	Greatest commandment	A	Lectionary 30	Oct 23–29
23:1–12	Proper role of leaders	A	Lectionary 31	Oct 30–Nov 5
24:36–44	Coming of the Son of Man	A	Advent 1	4 Sundays before Dec 25
25:1–13	Parable of wise and foolish bridesmaids	A	Lectionary 32	Nov 6–12
25:14–30	Parable of talents	A	Lectionary 33	Nov 13–19
25:31–46	Final judgment	A	Christ the King	Nov 20–26
26:14–27:66	Passion of Jesus	A	Passion Sunday	1 Sunday before Easter
28:16–20	Great Commission	A	Holy Trinity	9 Sundays after Easter

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### **Academic Studies and Commentaries on the Sermon on the Mount**

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## Content Summary: Expanded Overview of the Gospel of Mark

- John the Baptist preaches in the wilderness and baptizes Jesus; the Holy Spirit comes upon Jesus, and a voice from heaven says, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” (1:1–11)
- Jesus is tempted by Satan for forty days in the wilderness (but in this Gospel we hear nothing about the content of those temptations). (1:12–13)
- Jesus begins a ministry of proclaiming the good news of God: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.” (1:14–15)
- Jesus calls four fishermen to be his disciples: Simon (later called “Peter”), Andrew (Simon’s brother), and James and John (two brothers, the sons of Zebedee). (1:16–20)
- Jesus casts a demon out of a man in a synagogue in Capernaum. (1:21–28)
- Jesus heals Simon’s mother-in-law of a fever in Capernaum (where Simon lives). Then, he heals so many others that he begins attracting crowds all over Galilee. (1:29–39)
- Jesus heals a leper, imploring him not to tell anyone about it, but the leper announces it freely. (1:40–45)
- Jesus heals a paralyzed man lowered through the ceiling to him in a crowded house, but first he tells the man that his sins are forgiven, which some scribes regard as blasphemy (since only God can forgive sins). (2:1–12)
- Jesus calls Levi, a tax collector, to follow him. To the chagrin of religious leaders, he eats with Levi and other tax collectors. He tells them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician. . . . I have not come to call the righteous but sinners.” (2:13–17)
- Jesus explains to Pharisees and disciples of John the Baptist why his own disciples don’t fast, likening his time with them to a wedding feast: they cannot fast while “the bridegroom” is still with them. (2:18–22)
- Jesus justifies why his disciples pick grain on the Sabbath: “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath.” (2:23–28)
- Jesus heals a man who has a withered hand in a synagogue on the Sabbath, inspiring the Pharisees to conspire with the Herodians about how to destroy him. (3:1–6)
- Jesus continues to heal people and cast out demons. The demons shout, “You are the Son of God,” but he orders them not to make him known. (3:7–12)
- Jesus appoints twelve of his followers to be “apostles,” including Peter, James and John, and Andrew. (3:13–19)
- Jesus’ family seeks to restrain him because people are saying that he has gone out of his mind. Also, scribes and Pharisees say that he casts out demons by the power of Beelzebul, the ruler of demons. Jesus says that these leaders are blaspheming the Holy Spirit (an unforgivable sin) and that his true family members are those who do the will of God. (3:20–35)
- Jesus teaches the parable of the sower publicly to a crowd and then gives an allegorical explanation of it in private to his disciples. (4:1–20)

- Jesus tells a number of other brief parables likening the kingdom of God to a lamp, seeds that grow secretly, and a mustard seed. (4:21–34)
- Jesus stills a storm at sea. He rebukes his disciples for having been afraid and for having no faith. (4:35–41)
- On the other side of the Sea of Galilee, in the area of the Gerasenes, Jesus casts a group of demons called “Legion” out of a man in a cemetery. The demons enter a herd of pigs, which run into the sea and drown. (5:1–20)
- Jesus goes to heal the daughter of Jairus, a synagogue leader. Along the way, a woman with hemorrhages touches the hem of his garment and is healed. Jairus’s daughter dies, but Jesus raises her from the dead. (5:21–43)
- Jesus returns to Nazareth to speak in the synagogue. The local people take offense at him, prompting him to say, “Prophets are not without honor except in their hometown.” (6:1–6)
- Jesus sends out the twelve to heal diseases, cast out demons, and tell people to repent; they are to take no money and must depend on others to provide for them. (6:7–13)
- Jesus’ ministry attracts the attention of Herod, who previously beheaded John the Baptist. The daughter of his wife Herodias had danced for Herod; he offered to give her anything she wanted, and Herodias told her to ask for “the head of John the Baptist on a platter.” (6:14–29)
- After the twelve return from their mission, Jesus takes them on a retreat, but multitudes follow. He feeds over five thousand people with only five pieces of bread and two fish. (6:30–44)
- Jesus walks on water to join his disciples, who are crossing the sea in a boat. (6:45–52)
- Jesus continues to heal many people, including all those who touch the fringe of his garment. (6:53–56)
- Jesus’ disciples are criticized for eating with unwashed hands. He responds by attacking the critics for their own hypocrisy and then by explaining that true defilement lies within the heart. (7:1–23)
- Jesus is approached by a Syrophenician woman in the region of Tyre who wants him to heal her daughter. He is hesitant because she is not Jewish, but he grants the request after she tells him, “Even dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” (7:24–30)
- Jesus travels through the Decapolis, where he heals a deaf mute by sticking his fingers in the man’s ears and saying, “Ephphatha!” which means “Be opened!” (7:31–37)
- Jesus feeds a crowd of four thousand people with seven loaves and a few fish. (8:1–10)
- The Pharisees ask to see a sign from Jesus, but he refuses. (8:11–13)
- Jesus’ disciples misunderstand a metaphorical reference that he makes to leaven and become worried that they don’t have enough bread. He reminds them of the miraculous feedings and upbraids them for their failure to understand. (8:14–21)
- Jesus heals a blind man at Bethsaida by putting saliva on his eyes. The man’s vision returns in stages: after the first attempt, he sees men who look like trees walking; after the second attempt, he sees clearly. (8:22–26)

- At Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asks the disciples who people say he is, and then he asks, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter responds, "You are the Messiah," and Jesus warns them not to tell this to anybody. (8:27–30)
- Jesus tells the disciples that he is going to be crucified, and Peter objects. Jesus rebukes him, saying, "Get behind me, Satan!" (8:31–33)
- Jesus teaches that any who want to be his followers must deny themselves and bear the cross. (8:34–38)
- Jesus says that some of those standing with him will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power. (9:1)
- Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up on a mountain with him and is transfigured before them, appearing with Elijah and Moses in dazzling glory. A voice from heaven says, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" (9:2–8)
- Jesus explains to the disciples that a prophecy regarding the return of Elijah has been fulfilled by the coming of John the Baptist. (9:9–13)
- After his disciples are unable to do so, Jesus casts a demon out of a boy who has seizures. He tells the boy's father, "All things can be done for the one who believes," and the man responds, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (9:14–29)
- Jesus predicts his passion a second time (9:30–32) and resolves a dispute among his disciples as to which of them is the greatest by saying that the greatest is the one who serves the others. (9:30–35)
- Jesus says that whoever welcomes little children in his name welcomes him. (9:36–37)
- Jesus' disciples try to restrain an exorcist who they say "is not following us," but Jesus insists, "Whoever is not against us is for us." (9:38–41)
- Jesus warns his disciples regarding the judgment to come upon those who cause others to stumble; he calls them to rid their lives of anything that might cause their downfall. (9:42–50)
- Pharisees test Jesus with a question about divorce. He insists that Moses allowed divorce because of "hardness of heart" but that what God joins together no one should separate. (10:1–12)
- Jesus' disciples try to prevent people from bringing children to him, but Jesus says, "Let the little children come to me . . . for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs." (10:13–15)
- A rich man goes away sad after Jesus tells him to give up all his possessions. Jesus says it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. (10:17–27)
- Jesus assures his disciples, who left everything to follow him, that they will receive abundant rewards, but with persecutions. (10:28–31)
- After Jesus predicts his passion a third time, James and John ask if they can sit at his left and right in glory. The other disciples become indignant, and Jesus teaches again that greatness is achieved through service. He says, "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (10:32–45)
- Just outside of Jericho, Jesus heals a blind beggar named "Bartimaeus," who follows him on the way. (10:46–52)
- Jesus enters Jerusalem riding a colt, as a crowd of people shout "Hosanna" and strew clothing and palm branches in his path. (11:1–11)
- Jesus curses a fig tree because he is hungry and it has no fruit. (11:12–14)

- Jesus overturns the tables of moneychangers and shuts down the Jerusalem temple, which he calls “a den of robbers.” (11:15–19)
- When Jesus’ disciples notice that the fig tree that he cursed has withered, he teaches them about the power of faith: the one who believes can move mountains, can ask for anything in prayer and receive it. (11:20–25)
- Religious leaders ask Jesus by what authority he is acting, but he refuses to answer them because they will not respond to his own question regarding the baptism of John. (11:27–33)
- Jesus tells the parable of the wicked tenants: the owner of a vineyard sends a series of servants, and then finally his son, to collect fruit from tenants, who beat the servants and kill the son. (12:1–12)
- Pharisees and Herodians combine to test Jesus, asking him whether it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. He says, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” (12:13–17)
- Sadducees test Jesus by asking him, If a woman was married to seven men in this life, whose wife will she be in the resurrection? He says there is no marriage in heaven, for people are like angels. (12:18–27)
- A scribe asks Jesus which commandment is first of all. He says that the first is to love God, and the second is to love one’s neighbor as oneself. The scribe agrees with him, and Jesus says that the scribe is “not far from the kingdom of God.” (12:28–34)
- Jesus stumps the religious leaders by asking them how the Messiah can be the son of David when David calls him “Lord.” (12:35–37)
- Jesus denounces the scribes for being ostentatious and greedy and then calls attention to the generosity of a poor widow who puts her last two coins into the temple treasury. (12:38–44)
- Jesus tells his disciples that the Jerusalem temple will be destroyed and then, on the Mount of Olives, launches into a long discourse on the end times, urging people to be ready at all times. (13:1–37)
- The chief priests decide to have Jesus arrested and killed. (14:1–2)
- At the home of Simon the leper in Bethany, Jesus is anointed for burial by an unnamed woman. His disciples consider it a waste of expensive ointment, but he says that what she has done must be told throughout the whole world in remembrance of her. (14:3–9)
- Judas agrees to betray Jesus, just before the disciples and Jesus eat the Passover meal together. Jesus identifies the bread and wine as his body and blood. He predicts his betrayal, and they go out to Gethsemane, where he prays that, if possible, God remove the cup from him. He is arrested, and his disciples desert him, including a young man who runs away naked. (14:10–52)
- Jesus is put on trial before a group of priests who decide that he deserves death; meanwhile, Peter denies three times that he is a disciple of Jesus. (14:53–72)
- Jesus is turned over to Pilate, and a crowd calls for Jesus to be crucified after Pilate gives them the choice of releasing Jesus or a rebel named “Barab-bas.” Jesus is mocked by soldiers, who crown him with thorns and compel Simon of Cyrene to carry his cross to Golgotha (which means “place of a skull”). (15:1–24)
- Jesus is crucified and mocked on the cross. He cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” before he dies. At his death, the curtain in the

temple tears, and the centurion at the cross declares, "Truly this man was God's son!" (15:25–39)

- Many women are said to have been observing this from a distance, including Mary Magdalene, another Mary, Salome, and others; although they are mentioned for the first time here, we are now told that they have been following Jesus since his early ministry in Galilee. (15:40–41)
- Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Jewish council, provides a tomb for Jesus' body and sees that he is given a proper burial. (15:42–47)
- After the Sabbath, the three women come to the tomb but find it empty. A young man dressed in white tells them that Jesus is risen, and they should go and tell his disciples and Peter. They flee in terror and speak to no one. (16:1–8)

## Distinctive Characteristics of Mark's Gospel

### A. Mark's Gospel is sparse and brief compared to the others.

- no genealogy or stories about Jesus' birth
- no Beatitudes, Lord's Prayer, or Golden Rule
- no resurrection appearances

### B. Mark's Gospel ends abruptly.

"So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (16:8).

### C. The linguistic style of Mark's Gospel tends to be unrefined.

- Verbs in the "historical present" (present-tense used for past action) are used often.
- Pronouns frequently lack clear antecedents.

### D. Mark's Gospel displays a special knack for the art of storytelling.

Narrative anticipations that "glue" independent stories together:

"have a boat ready" (3:9) (to prepare for 4:1)

Two-step progressions:

"when it was evening, after the sun set" (1:32)

Intercalation ("sandwich" stories):

disciples mission/death of John the Baptist (6:7–30)

cursing the fig tree/expulsion of moneychangers (11:12–20)

### E. Mark emphasizes Jesus' deeds over his words (as compared to the other Gospels).

- Miracle stories take up a greater part of the total book and are told in greater detail.
- Jesus' teaching takes up a lesser part of the total book and is told in less detail.

### F. Mark's story is dominated by Jesus' passion.

- plot to kill Jesus formed already in 3:6 (cf. with Matt. 12:14; Luke 19:47)
- three predictions of the passion (8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34)

### G. Mark's Gospel is marked by a sense of eschatological urgency.

- "The time is fulfilled; the kingdom of God is at hand" (1:14).
- "This generation will not pass away until all these things take place" (13:30; cf. 9:1).
- Note also the "historical presents" and the repeated use of "immediately" throughout the narrative.

### H. Mark seems to have a special interest in Galilee.

- The first half of this Gospel is devoted to Jesus' ministry in Galilee.



- Jesus predicts a postresurrection reunion with his disciples in Galilee (14:28; 16:7).
- (Cf. this to Luke's emphasis on Jerusalem.)

### **I. Mark frequently explains Jewish matters, but not Roman ones.**

- Cf. 7:3–4 (Jewish custom of purification is explained) with 10:12 (knowledge of Roman divorce law is assumed).
- Defines Aramaic words: *Boanerges* (3:17), *talitha cum* (5:41), *corban* (7:11), *ephphatha* (7:34), *Bartimaeus* (10:46), *Abba* (14:36), *Golgotha* (15:22), *eloi, eloi, lema sabachthani* (15:34).
- Does not define Latin words: *legion* (5:9, 15), *denarius* (12:15), *praetorium* (15:16), *centurion* (15:39).

### **J. Mark assumes that his readers already have a basic knowledge of Christian tradition.**

- He assumes that they know what he means by the term *gospel* (1:1, 14–15; 10:29; 13:10; 14:9).
- He assumes that they regard the scriptures of Israel as the word of God (cf. 7:8).
- He assumes that they will understand what it means to say that Jesus is the Messiah (8:29) and that he gives his life as a ransom (10:45).
- He expects them to recognize otherwise unidentified characters such as John the Baptist (1:4) and Simon and Andrew (1:16).

### **K. Mark's Gospel is imbued with a motif of secrecy.**

- Jesus' own disciples do not understand who he is (4:41; 6:51–52).
- Jesus commands others to keep his identity or miraculous deeds a secret (1:23–25, 43–44; 3:11–12; 5:43; 7:36; 8:30; 9:9).
- Jesus speaks in parables so that people won't understand what he says (4:10–12).

### **L. Mark's Gospel offers the most human portrait of Jesus.**

- Jesus becomes hungry (11:12) and tired (6:31).
- He exhibits a full range of human emotions, including pity (1:41), anger (3:5), sadness (3:5), wonder (6:6), compassion (6:34), indignation (10:14), love (10:21), and anguish (14:34).
- Jesus does not know everything (13:32), and his power is limited (6:5).

### **M. Mark highlights the failures of Jesus' disciples.**

- unperceptive (4:41; 6:51–52; 8:14–21)
- self-interest (8:32; 9:32–34; 10:35–41)
- betray, deny, and forsake Jesus (14:10–11, 17–21, 26–31, 37–38, 44–45, 50, 66–72)
- Mark's Gospel ends without recording any redress of the disciples' faithlessness, such as the remorse of Judas (Matt. 27:3–10), the recovery of Peter (John 21:15–19), or the postresurrection reconciliation of the eleven with Jesus (Matt. 28:18–20; Luke 24:36–53; John 20:19–21:14).

## Three Prominent Rhetorical Devices in Mark's Gospel

### Two-Step Progression

- "Jesus the Christ, the Son of God" (1:1).
- "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand" (1:15).
- "The leprosy went away from him, and he was made clean" (1:42).
- "What is this? A new teaching!" (1:27).
- "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" (4:40).
- "Don't be afraid! Only believe!" (5:36).
- "Keep watch and pray that you not enter into temptation" (14:38).

*Purpose:* guides the reader to take a second look, which clarifies and emphasizes (cf. 8:22–26)

### Threefold Patterns

- There are three episodes of conflict in a boat (4:35–41; 6:45–52; 8:14–21).
- There are three bread stories (6:35–44; 8:1–10, 14–21).
- Jesus predicts his death three times (8:32; 9:31; 10:33–34).
- Jesus enters the temple three times (11:11, 15, 27).
- Disciples fall asleep three times (14:37, 40, 41).
- Peter denies Jesus three times (14:66–72).
- Pilate asks three questions (15:9, 12, 14).
- Crucifixion narrated in three three-hour intervals (15:25, 33, 34).

*Purpose:* creates suspense for the reader, who comes to anticipate a buildup to a dramatic climax.

### Framing

- Jairus's daughter and the woman with the hemorrhage (5:21–43)
- mission of disciples and death of John the Baptist (6:7–30)
- cursing of fig tree and cleansing of temple (11:12–20)
- Jesus' confession and Peter's denial (14:15–15:5)

*Purpose:* creates suspense and adds commentary (the related stories interpret and illuminate each other).

## The Ending of Mark: Did Jesus' Disciples Ever Learn of the Resurrection?

In Mark 16:6–7, the young man at the tomb tells the women,

Do not be amazed; you seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here; see the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you.

But Mark 16:8 reads,

And they went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

For many Bible readers, this raises a question: If the women said “nothing to anyone,” how did the disciples ever find out about the resurrection? Indeed, quite a few scholars have suggested that Mark intends to convey the impression that the disciples of Jesus did not learn about the resurrection; they did not reunite with Jesus, and so their apostasy was never remedied.

But this seems unlikely to others. Some considerations:

1. Historically, there is no question that Jesus' disciples did proclaim him as risen from the dead and that they claimed to have met with him after the resurrection (see, e.g., 1 Cor. 15:5). This was common knowledge at the time Mark's Gospel was written. Is it really conceivable, then, that Mark could have hoped to perpetrate the notion that these disciples never even heard about the resurrection? Wouldn't his readers have known better?
2. The words of the young man in 16:7 are a prediction, not a mere statement of intention: “There you will see him.” Furthermore, the young man's words “as he told you” imply that Jesus himself has made a similar prediction (cf. 14:28). Is it conceivable that Mark intended his readers to regard predictions by God's messenger and by Jesus himself as being ultimately unfulfilled?
3. Jesus speaks elsewhere in Mark's Gospel about the role that the disciples will play after his resurrection: Peter, Andrew, James, and John will be brought before governors and kings to bear testimony for Jesus' sake (13:3, 9); James and John will share his “baptism” and drink his “cup” (10:39). Is it conceivable that Mark could attribute such a role to people whom he represents as never hearing of the resurrection, or that he would portray Jesus as being so wrong about this matter?\*

Still, the silence of the women is something of a mystery. Some scholars suggest that it must be taken as temporary: the women eventually did tell the disciples, but at first they said nothing to anyone. Most scholars regard the silence as serving a rhetorical purpose: the story is left unfinished so that readers must

put themselves into the narrative and discover what could happen next. The reader is left to ask, "What would I do?"

\*(All of the above assumes that the Gospel of Mark originally was meant to end at 16:8. This is the majority view in current scholarship. A minority position suggests that the original ending of Mark's Gospel has been lost.)

## The Passion of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark

### Theme: Jesus Dies as One Abandoned

- Peter, James, and John fall asleep while he prays in the garden (14:32–42).
- Judas betrays him (14:43–45).
- Disciples forsake him and run away (14:50).
- A young man “leaves all” to get away (14:51–52; cf. 1:18, 20).
- Peter denies Jesus (14:66–72).
- Jewish leaders mock him as a false prophet (14:65).
- The crowd calls for him to be crucified (15:6–14).
- Roman soldiers mock him as a false king (15:16–20).
- Passers-by join Jewish leaders in mocking him on the cross (15:29–32).
- Crucified criminals taunt him (15:32b).
- Darkness covers the land, and Jesus cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (15:33–34).

### Theme: Jesus Gives His Life as a Ransom

- Jesus knows of his passion in advance and says that it must take place (8:31; 9:30; 10:33–34).
- Jesus accepts his passion as the will of God (14:36).
- Jesus describes his passion as giving “his life as a ransom for many” (10:45) (in Greek, *lytron* = payment to free a slave, or, a substitute sacrifice).

### Theme: Jesus’ Death Reveals Him as the Son of God

- Jesus is declared to be the Son of God from the outset (1:1).
- Human beings do not recognize or confess him as the Son of God (1:27; 2:7; 4:41; 6:2–3; cf. 1:11, 24; 3:11; 5:7; 9:7).
- Jesus is sentenced to die because he claims to be the Son of God (14:61–62; 15:29–32).
- Ironically, his death inspires the first recognition of him as the Son of God (15:39).

### Theme: Jesus’ Death Is Linked to His Baptism

- Events at his death recall events at his baptism: ripping of the heavens and of the temple curtain (1:10; 15:38) and identification as the Son of God (1:11; 15:39).
- Jesus refers to his death as his baptism (10:38–39).

## The Crucifixion of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark

### A Mode of Execution

Pilate hands Jesus over to be crucified by Roman soldiers (15:15) after Jewish leaders convict him of blasphemy (14:61–65) and stir up the crowd against him (15:11). The execution is portrayed as sadistic, accompanied by brutality and mockery.

### A Means of Redemption

- Mark 8:31: “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering.” There is an element of divine necessity in Jesus’ suffering. The crucifixion is his appointed “cup,” which God wills him to drink (cf. 10:38; 14:23–24, 36; 15:36).
- Mark 10:45: “The Son of Man came . . . to give his life a ransom for many.” This seems to point to what theologians later called a doctrine of vicarious or substitutionary atonement.
- Mark 14:22–25: “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.” The symbolism of the Eucharist presents Jesus’ death as a sacrifice that pays for human sin.

### A Model of Discipleship

- Mark 8:34: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” The “way of the cross” becomes the governing expectation for Christian discipleship. This involves devotion to serving others (cf. 10:41–43) and a willingness to suffer for the sake of others.

## The “Messianic Secret” in Mark’s Gospel

### Elements of the “Secrecy Theme”

1. Jesus silences the demons who know him (1:34; 3:11–12).
2. Jesus tells people who are healed not to tell anyone about him (1:44–45; 7:35–37).
3. Jesus speaks in parables so that people won’t understand what he says (4:11–12).
4. Jesus’ own disciples do not understand who he is (4:41).

### William Wrede’s Explanation

Mark uses the secrecy motif as a way to present information about Jesus that was not historically accurate. Mark is reporting things about Jesus for which there is no historical substantiation, and he gets away with this by claiming that these things were secrets.

Mark’s Gospel represents a position between two poles in early Christianity:

- A. *Earliest Tradition* (Acts 2:36; Rom. 1:4; Phil. 2:6–11)  
Jesus becomes the Christ and the Son of God at his resurrection. No one thought of him as Christ or Son of God during his life on earth (nor did he think of himself in those terms).
- B. *Later Tradition* (Gospel of John)  
Jesus openly presents himself as Christ and as Son of God throughout his earthly life and ministry.

Mark is somewhere in between:

- Jesus is indeed the Christ and the Son of God throughout his earthly ministry, but he tries to keep this secret.

Mark wants to portray the earthly Jesus as the Christ and Son of God, but memories of his actual life as a nonmessianic, nondivine figure are too fresh. Thus, Mark invents the notion that the true character of Jesus’ life and ministry was a secret.<sup>1</sup>

### Paul Achtemeier’s Explanation

The secrecy motif is used to downplay those aspects of Jesus’ identity or biography that Mark does not find particularly helpful.

Mark considers the titles “Christ” and “Son of God” to be inadequate for Jesus.

- *Christ*. This title could be construed as referring to a political revolutionary (the same would be true of “Son of David” and “King of the Jews”).
- *Son of God*. This title could be construed as referring to a Greek *theios anēr* (“divine man”) like Prometheus or Hercules.

Therefore, Mark “corrects” these titles by having Jesus refer to himself as the “Son of Man.”

- Peter, who denies Jesus and proves unfaithful, calls him “Christ” (8:29).
- Demons and a pagan centurion call him “Son of God” (1:24; 3:11; 5:7; 15:39).
- But Jesus always calls himself “Son of Man.”

Instead of suggesting that Mark wants to portray Jesus as Christ and Son of God in a manner contrary to established tradition (cf. Wrede above), this theory suggests that Mark wants to correct the established tradition that Jesus is the Christ and Son of God.<sup>2</sup>

Problems with this explanation: Mark himself also calls Jesus “Christ” as well as “Son of God” (1:1). And God calls Jesus “Son” (1:11; 9:7). Furthermore, the title “Son of Man” is itself ambiguous. Jesus seems to use it publicly precisely because it does not reveal who he is. In short, Jesus’ use of “Son of Man” for himself may be yet another aspect of the secrecy theme.

### **Jack Dean Kingsbury’s Explanation**

The secrecy motif is a literary device. The proper question to ask is “What effect was the secrecy theme intended to have on readers of Mark’s narrative?”

One significant factor is that the readers are in on the secret. The readers are told that Jesus is the Christ and Son of God in the first verse of this Gospel, and as the story develops, the readers will realize that they know something that characters in the story do not.

The significant question for the reader is not “Who is Jesus?” but rather “How will people come to know what I know about Jesus? What will reveal him to people?”

As the story progresses, the reader recognizes that Jesus’ teaching and miracles do not reveal his messianic, divine nature to people (1:27; 2:7; 4:41; 6:2–3). But when Jesus dies on the cross, then, for the first time, a human being (a Gentile!) recognizes him as the true Son of God (15:39).

Thus, according to this explanation, the secrecy motif is a literary device that allows Mark to tell his story in an engaging way, and more important, in a way that underscores a crucial point: the cross is the ultimate revelation of Jesus as the Christ and Son of God.<sup>3</sup>

### **Footnotes**

1. See William Wrede, *The Messianic Secret*, trans. J. C. G. Greig (London: Clarke, 1971 [1901]).
2. See Paul J. Achtemeier, *Mark* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986).
3. See Jack Dean Kingsbury, *The Christology of Mark’s Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).



## When Will Jesus Return?

Mark 13 makes three points with regard to the time of Jesus' second coming.

### **The Time of Jesus' Coming Is Not Yet.**

Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name saying, "I am he!" and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs. (13:5–8 [see also 13:21–22])

### **The Time of Jesus' Coming Is Soon.**

From the fig tree, learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. (13:28–30)

### **The Time of Jesus' Coming Is Unknown.**

But about that day or hour, no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert, for you do not know when the time will come. (13:32–33)

### **Summary**

At the time Mark wrote his Gospel, the most prominent leaders of the Christian church recently had been murdered in horrifying spectacles, and the holy city of Jerusalem was on the verge of being decimated by pagan armies (if, indeed, it had not already suffered that fate). It probably seemed to Mark and his readers that the end was at hand (13:28–30; cf. 9:1). Nevertheless, Mark records words of Jesus that caution readers against fanaticism: the end perhaps is not yet (13:5–8, 21–22), and in any case it cannot be predicted with certainty (13:32–33). In general, Mark wants to encourage readers to live always on the edge, expecting the end to come very soon but realizing that it might not come as speedily as they hope.

## The Disciples of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark

The Gospel of Mark develops two themes regarding the disciples of Jesus.

- Jesus' disciples are faithless to him.
- Jesus is faithful to his disciples.

### **Theme One: The Disciples' Faithlessness to Jesus**

The disciples' faithlessness is developed progressively in three stages:

#### ***First, the Disciples Are Unperceptive.***

The disciples do not grasp who Jesus is. They hear his word and witness his mighty acts, but they do not realize that he is the authoritative agent of God, nor do they understand much of what he says to them. This is illustrated in three successive boat scenes:

- After Jesus stills a storm at sea, he asks them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" They huddle with fear, asking each other, "Who then is this, that even wind and waves obey him?" (4:35–41).
- After feeding the five thousand, Jesus comes to his disciples, walking on the water, and he stills another storm. Mark says that they "were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened" (6:45–52).
- When the disciples worry about not having enough bread, Jesus reminds them of the miraculous feedings that he has performed and asks, "Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see and having ears do you not hear?" (8:14–21).

#### ***Second, the Disciples Misunderstand.***

At about the midpoint of this Gospel, the disciples come to a better understanding of who Jesus is, but they draw all the wrong conclusions from this. They realize that he is the authoritative agent of God, but they think that this means glory and honor for him (and for themselves). The best examples are their reactions to his three passion predictions:

- After Jesus predicts his passion the first time, Peter (who now realizes that Jesus is the Christ [see 8:29]) rebukes him, prompting Jesus to say, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of humans" (8:31–33).
- When Jesus predicts his passion a second time, the disciples remain completely oblivious to what he has said and go on to discuss which of them is the greatest. Jesus responds by saying, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" (9:32–34).
- Immediately after Jesus predicts his passion a third time, two of his disciples ask him if they can be guaranteed seats at his right and his left in his glory (10:35–41).

### ***Third, the Disciples Reject Jesus.***

When the disciples do come to understand the nature of Jesus' mission, they betray, deny, and forsake him.

- One of the disciples, Judas, betrays Jesus, just as Jesus predicted (14:10–11, 17–21, 44–45).
- Another of the disciples, Peter, denies Jesus, just as Jesus predicted (14:29–31, 66–72).
- All of the other disciples forsake Jesus, just as he predicted (14:26–28, 50).

The faithlessness of Jesus' disciples in Mark's passion narrative is the final stage of what has been developing all along. In some sense, the disciples appear to get worse, not better, as the story progresses. Significantly, this faithlessness is reported without redress. Mark does not report the remorse of Judas (Matt. 27:3–10), the recovery of Peter (John 21:15–19), or the postresurrection reconciliation of Jesus with his disciples (Matt. 28:18–20; Luke 24:36–53; John 20:19–21:14).\*

\*On the disciples' progressive faithlessness, see Theodore Weeden, *Mark: Traditions in Conflict* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971).

### **Theme Two: Jesus' Faithfulness to His Disciples**

Jesus' faithfulness to his disciples is demonstrated throughout the Gospel of Mark in five ways:

#### ***Jesus Calls the Disciples (1:16–20; 2:13–14; 3:13–14).***

There are no "volunteer disciples" in Mark's Gospel. People become disciples at Jesus' initiative, as a result of his call.

#### ***Jesus Gathers the Disciples into a "Family" (3:34–35).***

Jesus describes his disciples (and all who do the will of God) as his "brothers and sisters and mother." The identity of the disciples as a group and their relationship to each other is based solely on their relationship to Jesus.

#### ***Jesus Teaches the Disciples, Enlightening Them with Privileged Knowledge (4:33–34).***

Jesus teaches his disciples about the mystery of the kingdom (4:11) and sometimes provides them with private explanations of his sayings (4:10–20; 7:17–23). Significantly, he responds to their misconceptions that follow each of his passion predictions with teaching on the true meaning of discipleship (8:34–38; 9:35–37; 10:42–45).

#### ***Jesus Empowers the Disciples for Mission (3:14–15; 6:7–13).***

Jesus provides his disciples with the authority that they need to preach, to heal, and to overcome Satan by casting out demons.

#### ***Jesus Keeps His Disciples in Spite of Their Faithlessness (14:26–27; 16:7).***

Jesus tells his disciples that even though they will forsake him, he will want them to rejoin him after his resurrection. Significantly, Mark does not say whether

or not the disciples accept this invitation. As the story closes, the fate of the disciples is unknown.

### **The Intended Effect on Mark's Reader**

Mark seems to assume that his readers will identify with the disciples (see, e.g., 13:14, where he assumes that readers will hear words spoken to the disciples as being spoken to them). Thus, the unresolved issue that confronts the disciples at the end of Mark's Gospel thrusts itself beyond the world of the story into the world of Mark's readers. Those readers, like the disciples, must weigh their own faithlessness to Jesus against his faithfulness to them and evaluate their relationship with him accordingly.

## Exorcism and Teaching in the Gospel of Mark

The story of an exorcism in Mark 1:21–27 is framed by two references to the teaching of Jesus:

**<sup>21</sup>He entered the synagogue and taught. <sup>22</sup>They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. <sup>23</sup>Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, <sup>24</sup>and he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” <sup>25</sup>But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” <sup>26</sup>And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. <sup>27</sup>They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority!”**

Immediately before the exorcism, Mark reports that Jesus was teaching in the synagogue and that the people were astonished because “he taught as one having authority” (1:22).

Immediately after the unclean spirit goes out of the man, the amazed spectators exclaim, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority!” (1:27). On a strictly literal level, this does not seem to make sense. Why call an exorcism a “teaching”?

References to the authority of Jesus’ teaching form a frame around the story of the exorcism.

- A Authority of Jesus’ teaching
- B Exorcism
- A Authority of Jesus’ teaching

Mark wants the story of Jesus healing the man who has an unclean spirit to be read in light of his presentation of Jesus as one whose teaching is authoritative.

### Why Is the Teaching of Jesus So Important?

Mark’s Gospel was written at least thirty-five years after Jesus’ death. Few, if any, of his readers had ever met Jesus while he was physically on earth. When Mark tells stories of the wonderful things that Jesus did, his readers may wonder what any of this has to do with them. What difference does it make if Jesus cast an unclean spirit out of a man in Capernaum over three decades ago? Mark’s readers might respond, “I wish that I had lived back then. I could have found this powerful man, Jesus, and maybe he would have fixed my problems too.”

Mark knows that his readers do not still have Jesus with them, at least not in the sense that he was once present on earth. But they still have the teaching of Jesus. Thus, Mark tells this story to indicate that the teaching of Jesus overcomes evil in a powerful way. The teaching of Jesus drives out what is unclean or debilitating in an astonishing manner. It is “teaching with authority.”

## Composition of Mark 13

A prominent theory holds that Mark 13 is a compilation of two different tracts that originally expressed different views regarding the end times. According to this theory, Mark combined the two tracts (and added v. 31 as his own editorial comment).

### Tract One: Prepare for an Imminent Apocalypse

As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs. But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be (let the reader understand), then those in Judea must flee to the mountains; the one on the housetop must not go down or enter the house to take anything away; the one in the field must not turn back to get a coat. Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days!

"Pray that it may not be in winter. For in those days there will be suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, no, and never will be. And if the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would be saved; but for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he has cut short those days. But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place."

*Summary of Tract One:* Jesus points to events that are happening at the time this tract was written as indicators that the end was at hand.

### Tract Two: Prepare for the Long Haul

When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" Then Jesus began to say to them, "Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. As for yourselves, beware; for they will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them. And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations. When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do

not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. And if anyone says to you at that time, 'Look! Here is the Messiah!' or 'Look! There he is!'—do not believe it. False messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. But be alert; I have already told you everything. But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

*Summary of Tract Two:* Jesus cautions disciples against interpreting cataclysmic events as signs that the end is near, allowing that there may still be an extended period of time that may be difficult but affords opportunity for mission.

### **The Composite Text**

Now we can read Mark 13 as it appears in our current Bibles, with the two tracts combined. In what follows, material from Tract One is printed in boldface type, material from Tract Two is printed in regular type, and Mark's editorial comment (v. 31) is printed in italics. Of course, this is only a representation of one scholarly theory. We do not know for certain that these tracts ever existed.

1

**As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!"**

2

**Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."**

3

When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately,

4

"Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?"

5

Then Jesus began to say to them, "Beware that no one leads you astray.

6

Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray.

7

When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come.

8

**For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.**

9

As for yourselves, beware; for they will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them.

10

And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations.

11

When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit.

12

Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death;

13

and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

14

**But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be (let the reader understand), then those in Judea must flee to the mountains;**

15

**the one on the housetop must not go down or enter the house to take anything away;**

16

**the one in the field must not turn back to get a coat.**

17

**Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days!**

18

**Pray that it may not be in winter.**

19

**For in those days there will be suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, no, and never will be.**

20

**And if the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would be saved; but for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he has cut short those days.**

21

And if anyone says to you at that time, 'Look! Here is the Messiah!' or 'Look! There he is!'—do not believe it.

22

False messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, the elect.

23

But be alert; I have already told you everything.

24



**But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light,**

25

**and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.**

26

**Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory.**

27

**Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.**

28

**From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near.**

29

**So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.**

30

**Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.**

31

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

32

But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

33

Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.

34

It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch.

35

Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn,

36

or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly.

37

And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

## Worship in Mark

### Events

- Crowds glorify (*doxazō*) God after Jesus heals a paralytic (2:12).
- A demoniac worships (*proskyneō*) Jesus before the demon is exorcized (5:6).
- Soldiers worship (*proskyneō*) Jesus in jest (15:19).

### Sayings

- Jesus applies to religious leaders the scripture that says, “This people honors me with their lips but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship (*sebomai*) me, teaching human precepts as doctrines” (7:6–7).

## Mark in the Revised Common Lectionary

Text	Content	Series	Liturgical Occasion	Calendar Date
1:1–8	Ministry of John the Baptist	B	Advent 2	3 Sundays before Dec 25
1:4–11	Baptism of Jesus	B	Epiphany 1	Jan 7–13
1:9–15	Baptism of Jesus	B	Lent 1	6 Sundays before Easter
1:14–20	Call of disciples	B	Epiphany 3	Jan 21–27
1:21–28	Exorcism at Capernaum	B	Epiphany 4	Jan 28–Feb 3
1:29–39	Ministry of healing	B	Epiphany 5	Feb 4–10
1:40–45	Jesus heals leper	B	Epiphany 6	Feb 11–17
2:1–12	Jesus heals paralytic	B	Epiphany 7	Feb 18–24
2:13–22	Eating with sinners; fasting	B	Epiphany 8	Feb 25–Mar 1
2:13–22	Eating with sinners; fasting	B	Lectionary 8	May 24–May 28
2:23–3:6	Sabbath laws	B	Lectionary 9	May 29–Jun 4
3:20–35	Source of Jesus' power	B	Lectionary 10	Jun 5–11
4:26–34	Parables of the kingdom	B	Lectionary 11	Jun 12–18
4:35–41	Jesus calms storm at sea	B	Lectionary 12	Jun 19–25
5:21–43	Healing of woman and girl	B	Lectionary 13	Jun 26–Jul 2
6:1–13	Jesus rejected at Nazareth	B	Lectionary 14	Jul 3–9
6:14–29	Murder of John the Baptist	B	Lectionary 15	Jul 10–16
6:30–34, 53–56	Compassion on the crowd	B	Lectionary 16	Jul 17–23
7:1–8, 14–15, 21–23	Teaching on true defilement	B	Lectionary 22	Aug 28–Sep 3
7:24–37	Syrophoenician woman; healing of deaf man	B	Lectionary 23	Sep 4–10
8:27–38	Confession and rebuke of Peter	B	Lectionary 24	Sep 11–17
8:31–38	Rebuke of Peter	B	Lent 2	5 Sundays before Easter
9:2–9	Transfiguration of Jesus	B	Transfiguration	7 Sundays before Easter
9:30–37	First passion prediction	B	Lectionary 25	Sep 18–24
9:38–50	Freelance ministers	B	Lectionary 26	Sep 25–Oct 10
10:2–16	Divorce, children	B	Lectionary 27	Oct 2–8
10:17–31	Rich man	B	Lectionary 28	Oct 9–15
10:35–45	Disciples want best seats	B	Lectionary 29	Oct 16–22
10:46–52	Healing of blind Bartimaeus	B	Lectionary 30	Oct 23–29
12:28–34	Two greatest commandments	B	Lectionary 31	Oct 30–Nov 5
12:38–44	Rich scribes and poor widow	B	Lectionary 32	Nov 6–12
13:1–8	Signs of the end	B	Lectionary 33	Nov 13–19
13:24–37	Coming of the Son of Man	B	Advent 1	4 Sundays before Dec 25

15:1–39 (40–47)	Jesus condemned, crucified	B	Passion Sunday	1 Sunday before Easter
16:1–8	Resurrection of Jesus	B	Easter Day	Easter

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## Content Summary: Expanded Overview of the Gospel of Luke

- This Gospel opens with a dedication to Theophilus, for whom the author intends to write an “orderly account.” (1:1–4)
- An angel appears to the high priest Zechariah and tells him that his wife, Elizabeth, will bear him a son to be named “John.” He is struck mute for a time for not believing this (since he and Elizabeth are aged). (1:5–25)
- The angel Gabriel tells Mary of Nazareth that although she is a virgin, she will bear a son; he is to be named “Jesus” and will be the Son of God. She says, “Let it be with me according to your word.” (1:26–38)
- Mary visits Elizabeth, who pronounces her blessed (with words later made part of what is known as the Ave Maria), and Mary responds with a song of praise (later known as the Magnificat). (1:39–56)
- Elizabeth gives birth to John; Zechariah speaks a poetic prophecy (later called the “Benedictus”). (1:57–80)
- Mary gives birth to Jesus after a census forces her and Joseph to travel to Bethlehem; she lays him in a manger; angels announce the news to shepherds (with words later known as the Gloria in Excelsis). (2:1–20)
- Jesus is circumcised, and then, when he is brought to the Jerusalem temple for the rite of purification, the priest Simeon prophesies over him (with words later known as the Nunc Dimittis); a prophet named Anna prophesies over him as well. (2:21–38)
- Jesus grows, and at age twelve travels to Jerusalem with his family and stays behind in the temple when they leave. He impresses the teachers with his wisdom, and when his concerned parents return to find him there, he says, “Did you not know I must be in my Father’s house?” (2:39–52)
- John the Baptist preaches in the wilderness, giving specific instructions regarding repentance and testifying to the one who is to come after him. After Jesus is baptized, the Spirit comes upon him while he is praying, and a voice says, “You are my Son.” (3:1–22)
- A genealogy traces Jesus’ ancestry all the way back to Adam. (3:23–38)
- Satan presents Jesus with three temptations in the wilderness. (4:1–13)
- In Nazareth, Jesus identifies himself as the one whom God has anointed to bring good news to the poor, but the people are offended when he indicates his ministry may benefit others rather than them. (4:14–30)
- Jesus casts a demon out of a man in a synagogue in Capernaum. (4:31–37)
- Jesus heals Simon’s mother-in-law of a fever, and then he heals many others and proclaims the “good news of the kingdom of God” in the synagogues of Judea. (4:38–44)
- Jesus grants Simon Peter and other fishermen a miraculously large catch of fish; Peter, James, and John become his disciples. (5:1–11)
- Jesus heals a leper and the word about him draws large crowds; he regularly withdraws to pray. (5:12–16)
- Jesus heals a paralyzed man lowered through the ceiling to him in a crowded house, but first he tells the man that his sins are forgiven, which some scribes regard as blasphemy (since only God can forgive sins). (5:17–26)

- Jesus calls Levi, a tax collector, to follow him. To the chagrin of religious leaders, he eats with Levi and other tax collectors. He says, "I have come to call sinners to repentance." (5:29–32)
- Jesus explains why his disciples don't fast, likening his time with them to a wedding feast: they cannot fast while "the bridegroom" is still with them. (5:33–39)
- Jesus justifies his disciples' picking of grain on the Sabbath: "The Son of Man is lord of the sabbath." (6:1–5)
- Jesus heals a man with a withered hand in a synagogue on the Sabbath, causing the Pharisees to discuss what they might do to him. (6:6–11)
- Jesus appoints twelve of his followers to be "apostles"—a group that includes the aforementioned Peter, James, and John. (6:12–16)
- Jesus preaches the Sermon on the Plain (6:17–49), which includes (among other material):
  - four beatitudes and four "woes"
  - love your enemies, and do to others as you would have them do to you
  - do not judge, but forgive; remove the log in your own eye first
  - every tree is known by its fruit
  - parable of two builders: the one who does what Jesus says has a solid foundation
- A centurion in Capernaum sends people to Jesus, requesting that he heal his servant from a distance; Jesus is impressed by the Gentile's faith. (7:1–10)
- Jesus encounters a funeral procession at Nain and raises to life the dead man, who is the only son of a widow. (7:11–17)
- Jesus responds to a question from John the Baptist regarding whether Jesus is the one who was to come. He then speaks to the crowd about John and upbraids them for having rejected John's ministry as well as his own. (7:18–35)
- When Jesus dines at the home of Simon the Pharisee, a prostitute weeps at his feet, drying them with her hair. Simon is aghast, and Jesus tells a parable of two debtors and praises the woman for her great love: "Whoever is forgiven much, loves much." (7:36–50)
- Many women accompany Jesus, providing for him and his other disciples out of their resources; these include Mary Magdalene, Joanna (the wife of Herod's steward), and Susanna. (8:1–3)
- Jesus tells the parable of a sower and offers his disciples an allegorical explanation of the meaning; likewise, they are to pay attention to how they listen. (8:4–18)
- Jesus' mother and brothers visit but cannot reach him because of the crowd; he says, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it." (8:19–21)
- Jesus stills a storm at sea and rebukes his fearful disciples for their lack of faith. (8:22–25)
- In the area of the Gerasenes, Jesus casts a group of demons called "Legion" out of a man in a cemetery. The demons enter a herd of pigs, which run into the lake and drown. (8:26–39)
- Jesus goes to heal the daughter of Jairus, a synagogue leader. Along the way, a woman with a hemorrhage touches the hem of his garment and is healed. Jairus's daughter dies, but Jesus raises her from the dead. (8:40–56)

- Jesus sends the twelve out to proclaim the kingdom of God and heal diseases; they are to depend on others to provide for them. Meanwhile, Jesus' ministry attracts the attention of Herod, who previously beheaded John the Baptist. (9:1–9)
- After the twelve return from their mission, Jesus takes them on a retreat, but multitudes follow. He feeds over five thousand people with only five pieces of bread and two fish. (9:10–17)
- When Peter identifies Jesus as the “Messiah of God,” Jesus warns the disciples not to tell anyone this. He predicts his passion and says that any who want to be his followers must deny themselves and bear the cross. (9:18–26)
- Jesus says that some of those standing with him will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God. (9:27)
- Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up on a mountain with him and is transfigured before them; Moses and Elijah appear and they discuss Jesus’ “departure”; a voice from heaven says, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” (9:28–36)
- After his disciples are unable to do so, Jesus casts a demon out of a boy who has seizures. (9:37–43)
- Jesus predicts his passion a second time and resolves a dispute among his disciples as to which of them is the greatest by saying that whoever welcomes little children in his name welcomes him. (9:44–48)
- Jesus’ disciples try to restrain an exorcist who they say “is not following us,” but Jesus insists, “Whoever is not against you is for you.” (9:49–50)
- Jesus begins a long journey to Jerusalem. (9:51)
- Jesus rebukes James and John after they want to call down fire from heaven to destroy a Samaritan village that will not receive them on their way to Jerusalem. (9:52–56)
- Jesus encounters three would-be disciples: an enthusiast and two procrastinators. (9:57–62)
- Jesus sends seventy disciples out for a ministry of preaching and exorcisms; he upbraids cities that reject what God is doing, and he says that he saw Satan fall like lightning. (10:1–20)
- Jesus rejoices that God hides truth from the wise and intelligent and reveals it to infants, just as the Son reveals the Father to whomever he chooses (e.g., his disciples). (10:21–24)
- Jesus tells the parable of the good Samaritan to answer the question “Who is my neighbor?” (10:25–37)
- Jesus visits a home where Martha is distracted by many tasks and criticizes her sister Mary for listening to Jesus’ words instead of helping; Jesus says that Mary has chosen the “one thing needful.” (10:38–42)
- Jesus teaches the Lord’s Prayer and then tells the parable of the friend at midnight to illustrate how God answers prayer and gives the Holy Spirit to those who ask. (11:1–13)
- The crowds say that Jesus casts out demons by the power of Beelzebul. Jesus indicates that the idea is ridiculous because a kingdom divided against itself cannot stand; but if it is by the finger of God that he casts out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon them. (11:14–23)
- Jesus says that after a demon leaves a person, it seeks to return with seven more. (11:24–26)

- When a woman indicates Jesus' mother is blessed to have borne him, he says, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!" (11:27–28)
- Jesus says that no sign will be given to his generation except the sign of Jonah, and they will be harshly judged. (11:29–32)
- Jesus likens a healthy person to a lamp that gives plentiful light. (11:33–36)
- Jesus criticizes the Pharisees as fools concerned with external purity and pronounces woes against them and against the legal experts. (11:37–54)
- Jesus warns the crowds against hypocrisy and advises people to fear God more than they fear people who persecute them; the latter will try to make them deny him or blaspheme the Holy Spirit. (12:1–12)
- Jesus tells the parable of the rich fool: a rich man builds bigger barns to hold all his possessions, but he is not rich toward God and will have nothing when he dies. (12:13–21)
- Jesus teaches his disciples about many matters (12:22–59):
  - don't worry about having clothes or food (God clothes the grass and feeds the birds)
  - trust in God, not possessions (where your treasure is, your heart will be)
  - keep alert and faithful, as slaves waiting for their master to return
  - Jesus has come to cast fire on the earth and to cause division in households
  - judge between yourselves what is right, without going to courts
- Jesus says that victims of violence or natural disasters are not necessarily worse sinners than others, but that all who do not repent will suffer similarly. (13:1–5)
- Jesus tells the parable of the fruitless tree to indicate that those who have not yet suffered calamity should not assume that judgment will not eventually come. (13:6–9)
- Jesus heals a crippled woman in a synagogue on the Sabbath, invoking the ire of the synagogue leader. (13:10–17)
- Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a mustard seed and to yeast. (13:18–21)
- Jesus answers the question "Will only a few be saved?": the gate is narrow, and many now first will be last. (13:22–30)
- Jesus calls Herod a "fox" and compares himself to a mother hen seeking to protect Jerusalem. (13:31–35)
- Jesus heals a man who has dropsy and stumps religious leaders with a question about healing on the Sabbath. (14:1–6)
- Jesus speaks about proper behavior at banquets: people should take the lowest seats when invited to banquets, and when they give a banquet, they should invite those who cannot reciprocate. (14:7–14)
- Jesus tells the parable of the banquet: those who are invited make excuses and don't come, so the host fills his house with the poor and disadvantaged instead. (14:15–24)
- Jesus speaks harsh words about the costs of discipleship (hating one's family, carrying the cross, giving up all possessions); he encourages counting the cost (like a builder who would construct a tower or a king who would go to war) so as not to become worthless salt. (14:25–35)
- Scribes and Pharisees complain that Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them; this prompts him to tell the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son. (15:1–32)

- Jesus tells the parable of the dishonest steward, encouraging people not to make friends for themselves with unrighteous mammon and stating that no one can serve two masters. (16:1–13)
- Jesus speaks to the Pharisees about self-justification, the coming of the kingdom, the enduring validity of the law, and the sinfulness of remarriage after divorce. (16:14–18)
- Jesus tells the parable of the rich man and Lazarus: after death, the rich man is in torment, beholding the poor beggar Lazarus in the bosom of Abraham. (16:19–31)
- Jesus speaks to his disciples about not causing others to stumble, about the power of faith, and about identifying themselves as “worthless slaves.” (17:1–10)
- Jesus heals ten lepers, but only one gives thanks, and he is a Samaritan. (17:11–19)
- Jesus responds to a question of when the kingdom is coming: “The kingdom of God is among you.” (17:20–21)
- Jesus speaks of the coming of the Son of Man as a time of sudden judgment. (17:22–37)
- Jesus tells the parable of the widow and the unjust judge to encourage persistence in prayer. (18:1–8)
- Jesus tells the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector as a warning against self-righteousness. (18:9–14)
- A rich man goes away sad because he cannot give up his possessions to follow Jesus. Jesus says that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. (18:18–27)
- Jesus assures his disciples, who left their homes to follow him, that they will receive abundant rewards in this life and more in the age to come. (18:28–30)
- Jesus predicts his passion a third time, but the meaning is hidden from his disciples. (18:31–34)
- At Jericho, Jesus heals a blind beggar, who follows him, glorifying God. (18:35–43)
- In Jericho, Jesus welcomes Zacchaeus, a rich tax collector who had climbed a tree to see him; Jesus says, “The Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.” (19:1–10)
- Jesus tells the parable of the pounds: the slave who does not invest the money is condemned. (19:11–27)
- Jesus enters Jerusalem riding a colt, as a crowd of people bless him and lay their cloaks in his path. (19:28–40)
- Jesus weeps over Jerusalem for having failed to recognize the time of its visitation, and then he drives out people who are selling things in the temple and teaches there for days. (19:41–48)
- Religious leaders ask Jesus by what authority he is acting, but he refuses to answer them because they will not respond to his own question regarding the baptism of John. (20:1–8)
- Jesus tells the parable of the wicked tenants: the owner of a vineyard sends a series of servants, then finally his son, to collect fruit from tenants, who beat the servants and kill the son. (20:9–18)

- Religious leaders try to trap Jesus by asking him whether it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. He says, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." (20:19–26)
- Sadducees test Jesus with a question: If a woman was married to seven men in this life, whose wife will she be in the resurrection? He says that there is no marriage in heaven, for people are like angels. (20:27–40)
- Jesus stumps the religious leaders by asking them how the Messiah can be the son of David when David calls him "Lord." (20:41–44)
- Jesus denounces the scribes for being ostentatious and greedy and then calls attention to the generosity of a poor widow who puts her last two coins into the temple treasury. (20:45–21:4)
- Jesus tells his disciples that the Jerusalem temple will be destroyed. Then, he launches into a long discourse on the end times, emphasizing the terrible persecutions to come and urging people to be ready at all times. (21:5–38)
- Satan enters into Judas, who agrees to cooperate with the religious leaders to betray Jesus. (22:1–6)
- At the Passover meal, Jesus identifies the bread and wine as his body and blood and tells the disciples to share the meal in remembrance of him; the disciples argue over which of them is the greatest, and he identifies greatness with service. (22:7–27)
- Jesus confers a kingdom on his disciples, who have stood by him in his trials. He predicts Simon's temporary denial of him and tells them that henceforth they must carry bags and swords. (22:28–38)
- Jesus and the disciples go out to Gethsemane, where he prays that, if possible, God remove the cup from him. He is arrested, and Peter denies him three times. (22:39–62)
- Jesus is put on trial before an assembly of religious leaders, who decide that he deserves death. (22:63–71)
- Jesus is turned over to Pilate, who sends him to be questioned by Herod; he is returned to Pilate, and a crowd calls for him to be crucified and a murderer named "Barabbas" to be released. (23:1–25)
- Simon of Cyrene carries Jesus' cross, and as Jesus is led to his death, he calls out to the "daughters of Jerusalem" who are weeping for him to save their tears for terrible days to come. (23:26–31)
- Jesus is crucified, and he speaks three times from the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing"; "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (to a thief crucified with him); "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit"; when he dies, the centurion says, "Certainly this man was innocent." (23:32–49)
- Joseph of Arimathea, a righteous man, provides a tomb for Jesus' burial, and the women who have been following Jesus observe where his body is laid. (23:50–56)
- On the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and another Mary come to the tomb and are told by two men in dazzling clothes that Jesus is risen; they report this to the apostles, who dismiss it as "an idle tale." (24:1–12)
- Jesus appears to Cleopas and one other person on the road to Emmaus, but they do not recognize him until they see him break bread; reporting to the others, they learn that Jesus has also appeared to Simon. (24:13–35)

- Jesus suddenly stands among his disciples and eats fish in their presence; he commissions them to proclaim repentance and forgiveness in his name and promises that they will be clothed with power from on high. (24:36–49)
- At Bethany, Jesus blesses his disciples and ascends into heaven; the disciples return to Jerusalem and worship God in the temple. (24:50–53)



## Authorship of Luke's Gospel

### What Is Generally Accepted

- The author of Luke is also the author of the book of Acts.
- The author of Luke is not an eyewitness of the ministry of Jesus but rather depends on those who were (1:2).
- The author of Luke is a well-educated person who is acquainted with both Old Testament literary tradition (especially the Septuagint) and Hellenistic literary techniques.

### What Is Disputed

#### *Was the Author "Luke the Physician," a Companion of Paul?*

##### **Evidence in favor:**

- The writer refers to himself as a companion of Paul in what are called the "we passages" of Acts (16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–28:16).

*However:* this is taken by some as a literary device or as a carryover from the author's source rather than as evidence that the author himself was present with Paul.

- Church tradition identifies the author as "Luke the physician," who Paul refers to in Colossians 4:14 as being among his companions (see also Rom. 16:21; Philem. 24; 2 Tim. 4:11). The earliest such witness is the Muratorian Canon, dated 170–180. It is unlikely that the church would invent a tradition attributing authorship to a relatively unknown and unimportant figure.

*However:* this identification may be based on a prior assumption (deduced from the "we passages") that the author is Paul's companion and so cannot be used as evidence for that point.

- Luke's Gospel and Acts use a relatively high proportion of "medical" terms.

*However:* it has been shown that Luke's so-called medical vocabulary is used by nonmedical writers and is evidence only of a well-educated author rather than of one who is necessarily a physician.

##### **Evidence against:**

- The theology of Luke's Gospel and Acts differs from that of Paul in important areas.
  - A "theology of glory" replaces Paul's "theology of the cross." The death of Jesus is not expiatory (Mark 10:45 is omitted) but rather is viewed as a martyr's death (23:47; cf. Mark 15:39).
  - Paul's imminent eschatology is replaced by a concept of salvation history that allows for an extended era of "the church."

*However:* the validity of these and other distinctions is debated. Numerous points of contact between the theology of Luke/Acts and the theology of Paul may also be pointed out. Moreover, the author could have been a companion of Paul without being his disciple and so would not necessarily conform to his theology.

- The picture of Paul presented in the book of Acts is historically inconsistent with that presented by Paul himself in his own letters.
  - The account of the Jerusalem council in Acts 15 is quite different from that given by Paul in Galatians 2.
  - Acts does not usually call Paul an “apostle,” a title that was very important for Paul (but see Acts 14:4, 14).
  - Acts presents Paul as a mighty miracle worker, but Paul’s own letters make no mention of the miracles that he is said to have performed.
  - Acts 17 portrays Paul as saying that Gentile pagans may worship God without knowing him, but Paul himself says just the opposite in Romans 1:21: “Knowing God, they worship him not.”
  - In Acts, Paul does not preach justification by faith or proclaim freedom from the law for Gentiles, although these are two of the most important recurring themes in his letters.
  - Acts reports neither the several floggings and shipwrecks that Paul refers to in 2 Corinthians 11:24–25 nor the sojourn in Arabia that he mentions in Galatians 1:17–22. It leaves out other information basic to his biography: he wrote letters to his churches; he planned to visit Spain; the collection for Jerusalem was the motive for his fatal return to that city; he was executed in Rome.

*However:* all these discrepancies may be interpreted as Luke’s idealization of Paul in the interests of making him serve the author’s own theological purpose; on the other hand, there is enough reliable historical information to infer that the author might have had limited contact with Paul and some knowledge of his travels.

### ***Was the Author Jewish or Gentile?***

#### **Evidence that he was Jewish:**

- Luke’s Gospel and Acts show a strong interest in the Old Testament and its phraseology. The infancy narrative (Luke 1–2) seems to be consciously written in a style that imitates the Old Testament, and the speech of Stephen (Acts 7) rehearses the salvation history of the Old Testament.

*However:* these and other portions of Luke’s writings that reflect Jewish heritage could be drawn from sources not written by the evangelist himself; furthermore, it is not unlikely that an educated Gentile Christian was interested and well versed in Jewish scripture.

- If the author is identified as “Luke the physician,” it may be that Paul refers to him as among his “kinsmen” in Romans 16:21.

*However:* it is not certain that the *Loukios* of Romans 16:21 is the same person as the *Loukas* of Colossians 4:14; also, it is not clear whether Luke is here referred to as the kinsman of Paul or of Tertius (Rom. 16:22).

### **Evidence that he was Gentile:**

- Luke's Gospel and Acts avoid the use of Semitic words (except *Amen*), and transform certain Palestinian details into Hellenistic counterparts.

*However:* these aspects of Luke's Gospel could be accommodations for Hellenistic and Gentile readers that do not reflect the ethnic character of the author himself.

- If the author is identified as "Luke the physician," it may be that Paul distinguishes him from his companions who are "of the circumcision" in Colossians 4:14 (cf. Col. 4:10–11).

*However:* it is not certain that the phrase "the circumcision" refers to all Jews or simply to a party within Judaism to which Luke does not belong.

## The Community of Luke: Clues from the Gospel and Acts

### The Community Includes Jews and Gentiles:

- Large conversions of both Jews and Gentiles are depicted in Acts (2:41; 4:4; 6:7; 11:20–21; 13:43; 14:1; 17:4; 18:8).
- The agreement in Acts 15:19–20 is intended to facilitate community fellowship between Jews and Gentiles.

### The Community Is Urban:

- The word *city* (*polis*) is used 82 times (39 in Luke), the word *village* (*kōmē*) only 13 times (12 in Luke).

### The Community Includes People Who Are Rich and Poor:

- A principal concern is how the rich should relate to the poor (Luke 1:53; 12:31–34; 14:12–14; 16:19–31; 19:1–10; 21:1–4; Acts 2:44–45; 4:32–35; 5:1–11; 9:36; 10:2, 4, 31).
- The “rich” and the “poor” are mentioned more often than in any other Gospel (6:20, 24; 7:22; 12:16–21; 14:21; 18:24–27; 19:1–19).

### The Community Is Well Organized:

- Offices and position of community leadership can be discerned (Luke 11:49; Acts 11:27–28; 13:1–3; 14:23; 15:32; 20:17; 21:10–11, 18).

### The Community Faces Trouble from Without:

- The Gospel speaks of persecution from Jews (Luke 6:22–23; 11:49–50; 21:12, 16).
- The Gospel speaks of persecution from Gentiles (Luke 21:12, 17).

### The Community Faces Trouble from Within:

- The Gospel speaks of people losing their faith and becoming apostate (Luke 8:13; 18:8).
- The Gospel seeks to address the question of why the kingdom of God has not yet appeared (Luke 17:20–21; 19:11; cf. Acts 1:6–7).

At one time, most scholars believed that Luke wrote his books for a particular congregation in a specific geographical locale. The information given above was taken as descriptive of that “community” (wherever it was located). Today, most scholars think that Luke assumed that his works would be distributed throughout the Roman Empire. Thus, the information given above is taken as more descriptive of a generic “community of readers”—the people whom Luke hopes to address through his Gospel and the book of Acts.

## Distinctive Characteristics of Luke's Gospel

### A. Luke's Gospel begins with an extensive prologue.

- dedication to Theophilus (1:1–4)
- announcement of births (John and Jesus) (1:5–56)
- birth of John and Jesus (1:57–2:21)
- presentation of infant Jesus in the temple (2:22–38)
- Jesus grows and at age twelve goes to the temple (2:39–52)

### B. Luke's Gospel also has a sequel, the Book of Acts.

### C. Events reported in Luke's Gospel are tied to their historical context.

- Herod the king (1:5)
- Caesar Augustus (2:1–2)
- Tiberius Caesar (3:1–2)

### D. Jerusalem receives special emphasis in Luke's Gospel.

- Jesus makes childhood visits to Jerusalem (2:22–52).
- Ten chapters are devoted to Jesus' journey to Jerusalem (9:51–19:40).
- Jesus weeps over Jerusalem (19:41–44).
- Resurrection appearances occur in and around Jerusalem (24:41–43).
- Jesus tells disciples, "Stay in Jerusalem" (24:44–49).

### E. Luke's Gospel emphasizes worship and prayer.

Luke's Gospel begins (1:8) and ends (24:53) with scenes of worship.

Liturgical material:	1:46–55	Magnificat
	1:67–79	Benedictus
	2:14	Gloria in Excelsis
	2:29–32	Nunc Dimittis
Jesus at prayer:	3:21	at his baptism
	5:16	in deserted places
	6:12	on choosing his disciples
	9:18	alone, with disciples nearby
	9:28–29	at his transfiguration
	11:1	in presence of his disciples
	22:41, 44–45	in the garden
Also:	instruction in prayer (11:2–4)	
	three parables on prayer (11:5–8; 18:1–8, 9–14)	
	encouragement to pray (6:28; 18:1; 21:36; 22:40, 46)	
	Even Jesus' death is an occasion for glorifying God (23:47).	

### **F. Luke's Gospel emphasizes the work of the Holy Spirit.**

- Jesus is conceived by the Spirit (1:35) and anointed with the Spirit (3:22; 4:1, 14, 18).
- People are filled with the Spirit (1:15, 41, 67) and inspired by the Spirit (2:25–27).
- God gives the Holy Spirit to all who ask (11:13).
- The disciples will be “clothed with power from on high” (24:49).

### **G. Luke's Gospel seems to have an unusual interest in food.**

- food for the hungry (1:53; 6:25)
- table etiquette (7:44–46; 14:7–14; 22:27)
- banquet parables (14:7–11, 12–14, 15–24; 15:25–32; 16:19–30)
- Jesus present at nineteen meals; criticized for eating too much and with the wrong people (7:34; cf. 5:30, 33; 15:2; 19:7)

### **H. Salvation is an important theme in Luke's Gospel.**

- Jesus is born as Savior (2:11; cf. 2:30).
- People are “saved” by faith (7:50; 8:48).
- Salvation comes to Zacchaeus's house (19:9).
- The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost (19:10).
- A thief finds Paradise (23:42–43).

### **I. Luke's Gospel emphasizes concern for the excluded.**

- Samaritans (9:51–56; 10:29–37; 17:11–19)
- Gentiles (2:32; 3:23–38; 4:24–27; 7:1–10; 24:47)
- Tax collectors (5:27–32; 7:34; 15:1–2; 18:9–14; 19:1–10 [cf. 3:12])
- Women (1:26–56; 2:36–38; 7:11–17, 36–50; 8:2, 42–48; 10:38–42; 21:1–4; 23:27–31; 23:55–24:11)
- The poor (1:53; 4:18; 6:20; 7:22; 14:13, 21; 16:20, 22; 19:8; 21:2–3) (cf. the rich: 1:53; 6:24; 12:16–21; 16:1–9, 19–31; 19:1–10)

## Passages from Mark Omitted by Luke

According to the dominant source theories, the author of Luke's Gospel drew much of his material from the Gospel of Mark but chose not to use certain passages.

*	3:21	Jesus' family comes to seize him
*	4:26–29	Parable of seed growing secretly
†	6:47–52	Jesus walks on water
†	6:53–56	Healings at Gennesaret
†	7:1–23	Eating with defiled hands
†	7:24–30	Teaching on defilement
* †	7:31–37	Healing of deaf and dumb man
†	8:1–10	Feeding of the four thousand
†	8:11–13	Pharisees ask for a sign
†	8:14–21	Discourse on bread and leaven
* †	8:22–26	Healing of blind man of Bethsaida
	9:9–13	Elijah must come first
†	9:41–48	Reward and punishment
†	9:49–50	On being salty
†	10:1–12	On marriage and divorce
	10:35–40	Question from the sons of Zebedee
	11:12–14	Cursing of the fig tree
	11:20–25	Lesson of the fig tree
	14:3–9	Anointing at Bethany (but see Luke 7:36–50)
	15:16–20	Mocking of Jesus by soldiers

\* Omitted also by Matthew.

† Part of the "Great Omission" (Mark 6:45–8:26) or "Little Omission" (Mark 9:41–10:12). Since Luke omits everything from these sections of Mark, some scholars wonder if his copy of Mark was defective.

## The Journey Motif in Luke

Luke 9:51–19:27 relates the journey of Jesus to Jerusalem. The reader is reminded repeatedly throughout this section that Jesus is “traveling” or “going up” or “on his way” to Jerusalem.

This section contains the bulk of the material in Luke that does not derive from Mark (according to dominant source theories). Other large non-Markan blocks in Luke include the infancy narrative (1–2), the Sermon on the Plain (6:17–49), and the resurrection appearances (24). But the journey is by far the largest such block in Luke’s Gospel.

The journey functions as a *literary device* that Luke has used to structure his material. Its significance must be evaluated from literary and theological perspectives. It does not always make sense when considered in terms of historical or geographical realities.

We might consider two oft-quoted remarks from veteran Lukan scholars:

Jesus is traveling to Jerusalem all the time, but he never makes any progress.

—Karl Schmidt

At times, Jesus seems to be in the vicinity of Jerusalem, and then suddenly he seems to be farther away. For example, in 13:31, after four chapters of traveling, he is back in Galilee again.

Jesus’ route cannot be reconstructed on the map and, in any case, Luke did not possess one.

—Hans Conzelmann

Luke does not seem to have an exact picture of Palestinian geography. For example, he has Jesus pass directly from Galilee into Judea without going through Samaria (17:11).

The *literary effect* of the journey on Luke’s Gospel is that it introduces a major new section of the story. Mark’s Gospel consisted basically of two parts: the ministry of Jesus (in Galilee) and the passion of Jesus (in Jerusalem). Luke has added a new section, the journey of Jesus (from Galilee to Jerusalem), which is just as important as his ministry and his passion.

The *emphasis* of the material in the journey section is on the teaching of Jesus. Thus the reader of Luke’s Gospel perceives that Jesus’ teaching is just as important as his earthly ministry and his passion.

### **Precedence for the journey motif:**

- The book of Deuteronomy presents the teaching of Moses to the Israelites just before they enter the promised land.



- Isaiah 40–55 presents the teaching of the prophet to the exiles just before they return to Jerusalem.

In an analogous fashion, Luke 9:51–19:27 presents the teaching of Jesus just before he enters Jerusalem to die. Compare also the journeys of Paul (to Jerusalem, where he will be arrested, and to Rome, where he will die) in Acts.

The *theological effect* of the journey motif is to place the bulk of Jesus' teachings under the "shadow of the cross." Material that would not in itself be interpreted in this way is now read in light of the impending passion, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus—the "departure" that he is said to accomplish in Jerusalem at the journey's end (Luke 9:31).

## Worship in the Gospel of Luke

### Events

- Mary magnifies (*megalynō*) the Lord when she visits Elizabeth (1:46).
- Zechariah blesses (*eulogeō*) God at the birth of John (1:64).
- Angels praise (*aineō*) and give glory (*doxa*) to God when Jesus is born (2:13–14).
- Shepherds praise (*aineō*) and glorify (*doxazō*) God after seeing the baby Jesus (2:20).
- Simeon blesses (*eulogeō*) God when presented with the baby Jesus (2:28).
- Anna serves/worships (*latreuō*) God with prayer and fasting in the temple (2:37).
- Jesus is glorified (*doxazō*) by all when he teaches in synagogues (4:15).
- A paralytic glorifies (*doxazō*) God after he is healed by Jesus (5:25).
- People glorify (*doxazō*) God after Jesus heals a paralytic (5:26).
- A crowd glorifies (*doxazō*) God after Jesus raises a widow's son from the dead (7:16).
- A woman glorifies (*doxazō*) God after Jesus heals her (13:13).
- A leper glorifies (*doxazō*) God after Jesus heals him (17:15).
- A leper prostrates himself to give thanks (*eucharisteō*) to Jesus for healing him (17:16).
- In a parable told by Jesus, a Pharisee gives thanks (*eucharisteō*) to God that he is not like other people (18:11).
- A blind man glorifies (*doxazō*) God after he is healed by Jesus (18:43).
- People give praise (*ainos*) to God after Jesus heals a blind man (18:43).
- When Jesus enters Jerusalem, a multitude of disciples praise (*aineō*) God for all the mighty works they have seen (19:37).
- A centurion glorifies (*doxazō*) God when he witnesses Jesus' death on the cross (23:47).
- Text uncertain: Jesus' disciples worship (*proskyneō*) him when he ascends into heaven (24:52).
- Wording uncertain: Jesus' disciples bless (*eulogeō*) or praise (*aineō*) God in the temple after the ascension (24:53).

Also:

- Jesus rejects the temptation to worship (*proskyneō*) the devil (4:7–8).

### Sayings

- Zechariah prophesies that, being delivered from the hands of their enemies, God's people will serve/worship (*latreuō*) God without fear (1:74).
- Jesus quotes scripture to Satan: "Worship [*proskyneō*] the Lord your God and serve [*latreuō*] only him" (4:8).
- After Jesus heals ten lepers, he asks why only one (a foreigner) returns to give glory (*doxa*) to God (17:18).

## The Last Supper and Other Suppers in the Gospel of Luke

In the Gospel of Luke, the “Last Supper” is the last in a series of suppers at which Jesus has been present throughout the narrative. It has some of the same characteristics as those other meals.

### **In Luke, Suppers Are Supposed to Be Inclusive Events.**

- Jews eat with Gentiles (4:25–26; 10:7–8).
- Saints eat with sinners (5:30; 15:1–2; 19:5–7).
- Clean eat with unclean (14:12–13; cf. 11:37–38).

At the “Last Supper,” Jesus eats with transgressors (22:21, 34).

### **In Luke, Suppers Are Occasions for Instruction in Humility and Service.**

- Lack of etiquette reveals lack of love (7:44–47).
- Guests should show humility (14:7–11; cf. 20:46).
- Hosts should show humility (14:12–14).
- People who serve Jesus act as “deacons” (*diakoneō*), literally “table waiters” (4:39; 8:3; 10:40; cf. 12:37; 17:8; Acts 6:1–6).

At the “Last Supper,” Jesus teaches about service and humility (22:24–27).

### **In Luke, Suppers Are a Symbol of God’s Blessing.**

- Servants are rewarded by eating at the master’s table (12:35–37).
- The kingdom of God is like a banquet (13:29; 14:15–24).
- Suppers are occasions for forgiveness, repentance, and reconciliation (7:48–50; 19:5–7).

At the “Last Supper,” Jesus speaks of the blessing to come in the kingdom of God (22:18, 28–30).

## Jesus as Messiah, Lord, and Savior

The question of Jesus' identity is raised repeatedly in Luke's Gospel.

- Scribes: "Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God?" (5:21)
- Table guests: "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" (7:49)
- Disciples: "Who then is this that he commands even wind and waves and they obey him?" (8:25)
- Herod: "Who is this about whom I hear such things?" (9:9)

Luke's Gospel story provides three primary answers to this question: Messiah, Lord, and Savior.

### Jesus Is the Messiah—From Birth

*Luke 9:18–20*

Jesus asks: "Who do the crowds say that I am?"

Answers are given: John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets.

Then, Jesus asks: "Who do you say that I am?"

Peter answers, "You are the Messiah of God."

But Luke also makes a point that the other Gospels do not: Jesus is the Messiah from the time that he is born.

*Luke 2:25–32*

The prophet Simeon has been told he will not die until he sees the Messiah. When the infant Jesus is brought to him, he declares that he may now die in peace, for the word has been fulfilled: even as an infant, Jesus is the Messiah.

### Jesus Is the Lord—From Birth

*Luke 20:41–44*

Jesus stymies the religious leaders with a riddle: If the Messiah is the "son of David," why does David call him "Lord"? Jesus is Messiah, but not *only* Messiah—he is also Lord.

In the book of Acts, we learn what this means: he is not simply the Jewish Messiah (Christ), he is Lord for all people (2:21, 36)—and because he is Lord, Christians pray to him, as they would to God (7:59; cf. Luke 23:46).

But Luke also makes a point that the other Gospels do not: Jesus is the Lord from the time that he is born (even before).

*Luke 1:43*

Mary, while she is pregnant with Jesus, visits her relative Elizabeth. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth exclaims, "How is it that the mother of my Lord has come to me?" Jesus, not even born yet, is already identified as Lord.

### **Jesus Is the Savior—From Birth**

Luke's Gospel is the only one of the Synoptic Gospels to call Jesus "Savior" and to identify the very purpose of his earthly life as being to bring salvation.

*Luke 19:10*

Jesus tells Zacchaeus that he has come "to seek and to save the lost." Jesus does not just become Savior at the end of his life when he dies on the cross; he is already bringing salvation to people during his earthly ministry.

Indeed, Luke makes a point here that no other Gospel makes: Jesus is Savior from the time that he is born.

*Luke 2:30*

The prophet Simeon looks upon the infant Jesus and declares that he has seen the salvation that God has prepared in the presence of all peoples. Thus, Jesus is identified as the one who brings God's salvation while he is just a tiny baby.

Compare this to Matthew's Gospel. There, the angel who announces Jesus' birth says that he *will save* his people from their sins, meaning that he will become Savior at the end of his life when he dies on the cross to bring people salvation from sin and death. Luke believes that there are many things other than sin and death from which people need to be saved (demonic influences, disease, hunger, poverty, ostracism, attachment to wealth, etc.), and he relates how Jesus saves people from these things during his life on earth. Thus, Jesus is to be identified as Savior from birth.

Here is one verse that expresses Luke's understanding of Jesus:

*Luke 2:11*

"To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."

- Messiah—born this day
- Lord—born this day
- Savior—born this day
- Jesus is Messiah, Lord, and Savior—from birth

## Jesus as the Promised One

Luke wants to identify Jesus as the one who fulfills the expectations of Jewish faith based on many different passages in the Hebrew scriptures.

- *Messiah*: The psalms and other writings speak of a promised Messiah or ideal king who will restore the fortunes of Israel (e.g., Ps. 89; cf. 2 Sam. 7:5–16). According to Luke, this is Jesus (9:20).
- *Son of Man*: The book of Daniel describes the coming of a heavenly figure called the “Son of Man” (Dan. 7:13–14). Again, Luke says that this is Jesus (22:69; cf. Acts 7:56).
- *Prophet Like Moses*: The book of Deuteronomy records a promise that God will raise up a prophet like Moses (Deut. 18:15). Luke’s Gospel identifies Jesus as the one God has sent to lead a new exodus (9:31 [NRSV: “departure”]), and the book of Acts explicitly identifies Jesus as the prophet like Moses promised in Deuteronomy (Acts 3:22; 7:37).
- *Servant of the Lord*: The prophet Isaiah speaks of a suffering Servant of the Lord, through whom God will establish justice (Isa. 42:1–4; 49:1–6; 50:4–11; 52:13–53:12). Luke identifies this figure with Jesus (22:37, referring to Isa. 53:12; cf. Acts 8:30–35).
- *Returned Elijah*: The book of Malachi predicts that the prophet Elijah will return before the day of the Lord (Mal. 4:5). Luke does not explicitly identify Jesus as the returned Elijah, but he omits a story from Mark’s Gospel that identifies John the Baptist as that figure (Mark 9:11–13), and he adds two stories that present Jesus doing things that Elijah was famous for doing: raising a widow’s son (7:11–17; cf. 1 Kings 17:17–24) and ascending into heaven (24:50–51; cf. 2 Kings 2:9–12).

### Jesus Is All These—and More

Most readers of the Jewish scriptures traditionally had assumed that these various figures were different individuals, not one person. The focusing of all of these traditions onto a single individual appears to have been an innovation of the Christian faith. Luke himself was not the prime innovator, but his writings offer what may be the best example of such a comprehensive approach to Christology. Jesus fulfills things written in *all* of the scriptures (24:27; cf. 24:44).

## Pagan Images for Jesus in the Gospel of Luke

Unlike the other Gospels, Luke seems to draw upon a number of images from the pagan world to help his Roman readers understand who Jesus is.

- *Philosopher*: Biographies of Greek or Roman philosophers often portrayed a wandering teacher instructing disciples on a journey, in a manner similar to the “journey to Jerusalem” motif that dominates Luke’s Gospel (see 9:51–19:40). Also, the latter half of such a biography often was about the school that continued the philosopher’s work after his death; when Luke-Acts is viewed as a single work, it resembles these books about philosophers and their students.
- *Benefactor*: In Roman society, important public figures sometimes were proclaimed to be benefactors whose existence was a blessing to society. The decrees that bestowed such status upon them emphasized matters of merit that Luke’s Gospel attributes to Jesus: congruence of word and deed (24:19; cf. Acts 1:1); bestowal of peace (1:79; 2:14, 29); granting clemency to enemies (23:34; 24:47); endurance of hardships and trials (22:28). In Luke 22:25, Jesus criticizes the so-called benefactors of the Roman world, but in Acts 10:38, Jesus is explicitly identified as one who “went about as a benefactor himself” (NRSV: “went about doing good”).
- *Immortal*: Greek and Roman mythology contains stories of immortals, who are the offspring of male gods and human women (e.g., Dionysius, Hercules). Such characters have both human and divine attributes: they are able to perform remarkable deeds while on earth, but eventually they ascend to Mount Olympus to live with the gods; there, they retain an interest in human affairs and sometimes intervene on behalf of those who seek their aid. Luke’s story presents Jesus as the offspring of some kind of encounter between the Jewish God and a human woman (1:35) and, likewise, presents him as ascending into heaven, where (in the book of Acts) he continues to intervene on behalf of humans (e.g., see Acts 9:1–9, where he confronts the man persecuting his followers).

Of course, Luke believes that Jesus is more than just a philosopher or benefactor, and he is quite clear that Jesus’ divine origin does not involve any sexual relationship between God and Mary (in mythology, the immortals come into being when gods mate with women out of lust). Still, people familiar with the Hellenistic literature of the Greco-Roman world probably would have recognized some contact points that enabled them to connect Luke’s story of Jesus with things they already knew: they might recognize that Luke’s Jesus is something like a philosopher or a benefactor, or one of the immortals from mythology. Thus, Luke seems inclined to provide his readers with a variety of entry points for obtaining a partial (if ultimately inadequate) understanding of who Jesus is.

## Luke's Use of "Today"

- "Today . . . a Savior is born" (2:11).
- "Today . . . this scripture is fulfilled" (4:21).
- "Today . . . we have seen strange things" (5:26).
- "Today . . . I must stay at your house" (19:5).
- "Today . . . salvation has come to this house" (19:9).
- "Today . . . you will be with me in Paradise" (23:43).



## The Passion of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke

### Theme: Jesus Is Innocent

- Pilate declares three times that Jesus is innocent (23:4, 14, 22).
- A thief on a cross says that Jesus has done nothing wrong (23:41).
- A centurion says, “Certainly this man was innocent” (23:47).

### Theme: Jesus’ Death Is His Destiny

- Jesus predicts his passion three times and says that it is “necessary” for him to die (9:22, 44; 18:31).
- Jesus says at the Last Supper, “The Son of Man goes as it has been determined” (22:22).
- Jesus views his death as the will of the Father (22:42).
- Jesus views his passion as the fulfillment of scripture (18:31; 22:37; 24:25–27; 24:44–46).
- After his resurrection, Jesus explains three times that his passion was “necessary” (24:7, 26, 44).

### Theme: Jesus’ Death Confirms His Life

- Jesus is God’s great benefactor to all, in death as in life.
- He brings healing (22:51).
- He brings forgiveness (23:34).
- He brings salvation (23:43).
- Jesus’ death causes people to praise God and to repent (23:47–48).

### Theme: Jesus’ Death Provides a Model for Discipleship

- In the events leading up to his death, Jesus explains the nature of discipleship (22:24–27), prepares his disciples for trials ahead (22:35–38), and models for them the necessary perseverance in prayer (22:39–46).
- Jesus’ trial becomes the model for the trials of Paul (Acts 16:19–24; 17:6–9; 18:12–17; 23:23–30) and his death a model for that of Stephen (Acts 7:59–60).

## Parallel Stories of Jesus and John the Baptist in Luke

Luke's Gospel tells the infancy stories of John the Baptist and Jesus through a series of parallel segments:

	<b>John the Baptist</b>	<b>Jesus</b>
Luke introduces the parents of the child-to-be.	1:5–7	1:26–27
An angel announces the child's birth.	1:8–23	1:28–38
The mother responds to God's announced plan.	1:24–25	1:39–56
The baby is born.	1:57–58	2:1–20
The baby is circumcised and named.	1:59–66	2:21–24
Prophesy is offered concerning the child.	1:67–79	2:25–39
The child grows and matures.	1:80	2:40–52

## Two Christmas Stories: Similarities and Differences

<b>Similarities</b>		
Jesus is born in Bethlehem during the days of Herod but spends his youth in Nazareth.	Matt. 2:1, 5–6, 23	Luke 2:4–6, 11, 15, 39
Jesus belongs to the family of David.	Matt. 1:1, 6	Luke 2:4; 3:31
Mary is the mother of Jesus, and Joseph is his legal father.	Matt. 1:16–21, 25	Luke 1:35; 2:16, 41, 48
Jesus is born from a miraculous virginal conception announced in advance by an angel.	Matt. 1:18–25	Luke 1:26–38
The name “Jesus” is chosen by God.	Matt. 1:21	Luke 1:31
The family of Jesus must undertake difficult travel due to oppressive political rule.	Matt. 2:7–8, 12–18	Luke 2:1–7
Jesus’ birth is presented as the fulfillment of scriptural promises to Israel.	Matt. 1:22–23; 2:5–6	Luke 1:54–55
Even at birth, Jesus is rejected by some and inspires worship in others.	Matt. 2:10, 16–18	Luke 2:7, 20

<b>Differences</b>	
Matthew explains why the family must move from Bethlehem to Nazareth.	Matt. 2:13, 19–23
Luke explains why they must travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem.	Luke 2:2–5
In Matthew, the genealogy of Jesus runs from Abraham to Jesus.	Matt. 1:1–16
In Luke, the genealogy runs in the opposite direction, from Jesus to Adam.	Luke 3:23–38
In Matthew, Joseph is the central character of the story.	Matt. 1:18–25
In Luke, the central character is Mary.	Luke 1:26–56
In Matthew, the angel comes to Joseph to announce the virginal conception.	Matt. 1:20–21
In Luke, this angelic announcement is made to Mary.	Luke 1:26–38
In Matthew, Jesus is given the additional name “Immanuel.”	Matt. 1:23
In Luke, Jesus is given the additional name (or title) “Son of the Most High God.”	Luke 1:32
In Matthew, the family of Jesus must flee the wrath of King Herod.	Matt. 2:13–22
In Luke, Caesar Augustus is responsible for the family’s burdensome travel.	Luke 2:1–5
In Matthew, the events are said to fulfill quotations from the Old Testament that are cited directly.	Matt. 1:22; 2:15, 17, 23
In Luke, Old Testament scriptures provide the background for various hymns and canticles.	Luke 1:46–55, 68–79; 2:14, 29–32
In Matthew, the birth of Jesus is noticed by the powerful and the wealthy who respond with either worship or fear.	Matt. 2:1–12

In Luke, the birth is revealed to peasants who respond with both fear and worship.

Luke 2:8–20

## Jesus as Son and Servant in Luke

### Jesus Is the Son of God in Luke

- The angel tells Mary that her child “will be called holy, the Son of God” (1:35).
- God speaks from heaven at Jesus’ baptism, addressing Jesus as “Son” (3:22).
- God speaks from heaven at Jesus’ transfiguration, identifying Jesus as “Son” (9:35).
- The high priest asks Jesus, “Are you the Son of God?” and Jesus responds, “You have said it. I am” (22:70).

In the Gospel of Luke, the title “Son of God” emphasizes Jesus’ uniqueness and oneness with God, but in this Gospel the essential ingredient of divine sonship seems to be Jesus’ absolute obedience to the will of his Father.

- Satan tempts Jesus as the Son of God, but Jesus refuses to go against God’s will (4:1–13).
- Luke replaces the “cry of dereliction” (“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”) in Mark’s Gospel with this: “Father, into thy hands, I commit my spirit” (23:46).

### Jesus as Son and Servant

- Jesus, the obedient *pais* (2:43), says, “I must be in my Father’s house.” The Greek word *pais* used in this passage can mean either “son” or “servant.” English Bibles regularly translate the term as “son,” but the ambiguity in Greek may be intentional (2:49).
- Jesus describes his mission as the fulfillment of Isaianic prophecy: he has been anointed with the Spirit to do what Isaiah says the “Servant of the Lord” will do (4:16–22; cf. Isa. 61:2). People respond by wondering if he is the “son of Joseph.” Of course, the reader knows that he is only “the son, as it was supposed, of Joseph” (3:23), and that actually he is the Son of God (1:35).

## Luke in the Revised Common Lectionary

Text	Content	Series	Liturgical Occasion	Calendar Date
1:26–38	Annunciation	B	Advent 4	4 Sundays before Dec 25
1:39–45 (46–55)	Magnificat	C	Advent 4	4 Sundays before Dec 25
2:1–20	Birth of Jesus	A, B, C	Christmas Eve	Dec 24
2:22–40	Presentation of infant Jesus in temple	B	Christmas 1	1 Sunday after Dec 25
2:41–52	Jesus at age twelve in temple	C	Christmas 1	1 Sunday after Dec 25
3:1–6	Ministry of John the Baptist	C	Advent 2	3 Sundays before Dec 25
3:7–18	Preaching of John the Baptist	C	Advent 3	2 Sundays before Dec 25
3:15–17, 21–22	Baptism of Jesus	C	Epiphany 1	Jan 7–13
4:1–13	Temptation of Jesus	C	Lent 1	6 Sundays before Easter
4:14–21	Jesus reads from Isaiah at Nazareth	C	Epiphany 3	Jan 21–27
4:21–30	Rejection of Jesus at Nazareth	C	Epiphany 4	Jan 28–Feb 3
5:1–11	Miraculous catch of fish	C	Epiphany 5	Feb 4–10
6:20–31	Blessings and woes	C	All Saints	Nov 1
6:39–49	Hypocrisy and obedience	C	Epiphany 8	Feb 25–Mar 1
6:39–49	Hypocrisy and obedience	C	Lectionary 8	May 24–28
7:1–10	Healing of centurion's servant	C	Lectionary 9	May 29–Jun 4
7:11–17	Raising of widow's son at Nain	C	Lectionary 10	Jun 5–11
7:36–8:3	Woman washes Jesus' feet	C	Lectionary 11	Jun 12–18
8:26–39	Healing of Gerasene demoniac	C	Lectionary 12	Jun 19–25
9:28–36 (37–43)	Transfiguration of Jesus	C	Transfiguration	7 Sundays before Easter
9:51–62	Samaritan rejection; hard sayings	C	Lectionary 13	Jun 26–Jul 2
10:1–11, 16–20	Mission of the seventy	C	Lectionary 14	Jul 3–9
10:25–37	Parable of good Samaritan	C	Lectionary 15	Jul 10–16
10:38–42	Jesus at Mary and Martha's house	C	Lectionary 16	Jul 17–23
11:1–13	Lord's Prayer; parable of friend at midnight	C	Lectionary 17	Jul 24–30
12:13–21	Parable of rich fool	C	Lectionary 18	Jul 31–Aug 6
12:32–40	Preparation for the Lord's return	C	Lectionary 19	Aug 7–13
12:49–56	Jesus a source of division	C	Lectionary 20	Aug 14–20
13:1–9	Siloam tower; parable of fig tree	C	Lent 3	4 Sundays before Easter
13:10–17	Healing of crippled woman	C	Lectionary 21	Aug 21–27

13:31–35	Ode to Jerusalem	C	Lent 2	5 Sundays before Easter
14:1, 7–14	Parables of table etiquette	C	Lectionary 22	Aug 28–Sep 3
14:25–33	Counting costs and hating life	C	Lectionary 23	Sep 4–10
15:1–10	Parables of lost sheep and lost coin	C	Lectionary 24	Sep 11–17
15:1–3, 11b–32	Parable of lost son	C	Lent 4	3 Sundays before Easter
16:1–13	Parable of unjust steward	C	Lectionary 25	Sep 18–24
16:19–31	Parable of rich man and Lazarus	C	Lectionary 26	Sep 25–Oct 1
17:5–10	Tiny faith; expect no reward	C	Lectionary 27	Oct 2–8
17:11–19	Healing of ten lepers	C	Lectionary 28	Oct 9–15
18:1–8	Parable of widow and unjust judge	C	Lectionary 29	Oct 16–22
18:9–14	Parable of Pharisee and tax collector	C	Lectionary 30	Oct 23–29
19:1–10	Jesus meets Zacchaeus	C	Lectionary 31	Oct 30–Nov 5
20:27–38	Question from Sadducees	C	Lectionary 32	Nov 6–12
21:5–19	Signs of the end	C	Lectionary 33	Nov 13–19
21:25–36	Coming of the Son of Man	C	Advent 1	4 Sundays before Dec 25
23:1–49	Jesus condemned, crucified	C	Passion Sunday	1 Sunday before Easter
23:33–43	Crucifixion of Jesus	C	Christ the King	Nov 20–26
24:1–12	Resurrection of Jesus	C	Easter Day	Easter
24:13–35	Walk to Emmaus	A	Easter 3	2 Sundays after Easter
24:36b–48	Risen Jesus appears to disciples	B	Easter 3	2 Sundays after Easter
24:44–53	Ascension of Jesus	A, B, C	Ascension Day	6 Thursdays after Easter

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## Content Summary: Expanded Overview of the Gospel of John

- A poetic prologue introduces Jesus as the Word of God made flesh. (1:1–18)
- John the Baptist testifies that, as one sent to prepare the way, he saw the Spirit descend upon Jesus, who is the Son of God and “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” (1:19–34)
- Two of John’s disciples become followers of Jesus. One is Andrew, who brings his brother Simon to Jesus as well. Jesus gives Simon a new name: “Cephas” (or “Peter”). (1:35–42)
- Jesus calls Philip to follow him, and Philip brings Nathanael, who is initially hesitant, asking, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip says, “Come and see.” (1:43–51)
- Jesus changes water into wine at a wedding in Cana. (2:1–12)
- Jesus expels vendors and animals from the Jerusalem temple, overturning tables and claiming that these people have turned his Father’s house into a marketplace. He says, “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up”—an oblique reference to his own body. (2:13–25)
- Nicodemus, a leading Pharisee, comes to Jesus at night for conversation. Jesus speaks to him about the need to be “born again” (or “from above”) and about how “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.” (3:1–21)
- While Jesus and his disciples are baptizing in the Judean countryside, John the Baptist has a conversation with a Jew, testifying to Jesus as the Messiah, bridegroom, and Son of God. (3:22–36)
- Jesus has a conversation with a Samaritan woman at a well, speaking of “living water” and of true worship. He discloses knowledge of her private life and ends up spending two days with others whom she tells about him. Many Samaritans come to believe that he is “the Savior of the world.” (4:1–42)
- A royal official asks Jesus to come to Capernaum to heal his son, but Jesus performs the healing from a distance simply by speaking the word. (4:43–54)
- On a Sabbath day, Jesus heals a crippled man by the Pool of Bethzatha. The Jews begin persecuting him for healing on the Sabbath and for speaking of God in a way that seemed to make himself equal to God. (5:1–18)
- Jesus speaks to the Jews further of his unique relationship with the Father and claims to have supporting testimony from John the Baptist and from Moses. (5:19–47)
- Jesus feeds over five thousand people with five loaves and two fish provided by a boy. He then flees the scene because the crowd wants to force him to be their king. (6:1–15)
- Jesus walks on water to join his disciples in a boat; then, the boat immediately arrives at its destination. (6:16–21)
- The multitude fed by Jesus follows him to Capernaum, and he speaks to them about the “living bread” that comes down from heaven; to have this bread, they must eat his flesh and drink his blood. (6:22–59)
- Jesus’ disciples are confounded by his teaching, and some of them turn away, but Simon Peter says, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.” (6:60–71)

- Jesus goes to the Festival of Booths in secret, but then he teaches publicly in the temple and engages in extended disputation with Jews concerning his claims and origin. (7:1–52)
- Jesus is questioned by a group of scribes and Pharisees about their intention to stone an adulterous woman; he responds by suggesting that the one who is without sin should cast the first stone. (7:53–8:11)
- Jesus continues his disputation with the Jews, claiming to be the light of the world and to be “not of this world.” Those who continue in his words will know the truth and be made free, but the Jews who reject him are children of the devil. (8:12–59)
- On a Sabbath day, Jesus, using mud made from dirt and his saliva, heals a man who had been born blind. The Jews interrogate the man’s parents and then the man himself, who comes to believe in Jesus as the Son of Man. (9:1–41)
- Jesus describes himself as the good shepherd who has come to bring abundant life. (10:1–18)
- Jesus continues to argue with the Jews, who are divided in their opinions about his identity and authority. (10:19–42)
- Jesus visits the home of Mary and Martha in Bethany and raises their brother Lazarus from the dead. This miracle attracts so much attention that the high priest Caiaphas says that Jesus must be put to death before the Romans hear about him and take action against the nation. (11:1–57)
- Mary of Bethany anoints Jesus with costly perfume; she is criticized by Judas (who wanted to sell it and steal the money) but defended by Jesus. (12:1–8)
- The chief priests decide to kill Lazarus as well as Jesus because so many Jews are believing in Jesus on account of his having raised Lazarus from the dead. (12:9–10)
- Jesus rides into Jerusalem seated on a donkey, while cheering crowds meet him with palm branches. (12:12–19)
- Some Greeks want to see Jesus, and they approach Philip about this. (12:20–22)
- Jesus speaks at length about his mission and impending death; when he prays “Father, glorify your name,” a voice like thunder speaks from heaven, declaring, “I have glorified it and will glorify it again.” (12:23–50)
- Jesus and his disciples gather for a final supper, and he washes their feet. (13:1–17)
- Jesus predicts that Judas will betray him, and Satan enters into Judas when Jesus gives him a piece of bread. (13:18–30)
- Jesus offers an extended farewell discourse to his disciples (13:31–16:33). Among other things,
  - he speaks of his death as glorification
  - he gives his followers a new commandment to “love one another”
  - he says that he goes to prepare dwelling places for them in his Father’s house
  - he says that he and the Father are one; he is the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except by him
  - he promises that the Holy Spirit will come as a helper, advocate, and teacher
  - he speaks of his disciples continuing to abide in him like branches on a vine
  - he describes his own origin as being in God and describes his death as a return to the Father, who sent him into this world

- Jesus offers an extended prayer to the Father for his followers, emphasizing a plea that they might be one, just as he and the Father are one. (17:1–26)
- Betrayed by Judas, Jesus is arrested and questioned by Annas, father-in-law of Caiaphas, the current high priest; meanwhile, Peter denies Jesus three times. (18:1–27)
- Jesus is turned over to Pilate, who asks about the nature of his kingdom and poses the philosophical conundrum “What is truth?” The Jews are persistent in demanding Jesus’ crucifixion, and Pilate yields to their demands. (18:28–19:16)
- Jesus carries his own cross to Golgotha and is crucified. While on the cross, he entrusts the care of his mother to the “beloved disciple”; he also says, “I am thirsty,” in order to fulfill scripture, and then he dies with the words “It is finished.” (19:17–30)
- A soldier pierces Jesus’ side with a spear, and water and blood flow out. (19:31–37)
- Joseph of Arimathea, a secret disciple of Jesus, and Nicodemus, who had come to Jesus at night, receive the body of Jesus and place it in a tomb. (19:38–42)
- On the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene finds the stone rolled away from the tomb. Peter and the “beloved disciple” inspect the tomb and find it empty. Then Jesus appears to Mary, who at first mistakes him for the gardener. (20:1–18)
- Jesus appears to ten of his disciples in a locked room and commissions them with the spiritual authority to forgive or retain sins. Thomas is absent, and he refuses to believe. (20:19–25)
- A week later, Jesus appears to all eleven disciples, and Thomas exclaims, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus says, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet come to believe.” (20:26–29)
- John’s Gospel initially closes with an affirmation that Jesus did many things not written in the book, but these that have been written are meant to help the reader come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and have life. (20:30–31)
- An epilogue relates a story of a third appearance to the disciples. Jesus comes to a group of disciples in Galilee, and they catch a miraculous haul of 153 fish. (21:1–14)
- After breakfast, Jesus asks Peter three times, “Do you love me?” and he responds to Peter’s affirmative answer by saying, “Feed my sheep.” (21:15–17)
- Jesus predicts how Peter will die (by crucifixion); Peter asks about the “beloved disciple,” and a misinterpretation of Jesus’ answer leads to a rumor in the church that the “beloved disciple” will continue to live until Jesus returns. (21:18–23)
- John’s Gospel finally closes with a notation that this “beloved disciple” is the one who wrote down the testimony to Jesus contained within the book. (21:24–25)

## Three Persons Named “John”?

### **John the Apostle**

*The son of Zebedee.* He and his brother James were called to be among Jesus’ first disciples (Mark 1:19–20). He ministered alongside Peter (Acts 3–4) and came to be known as a pillar of the church (Gal. 2:9). Some people believe that he may be “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” whose testimony is incorporated into the Gospel of John (John 21:24).

### **John the Elder**

*Author of the Johannine Epistles?* We hear of this person in writings from the early church, including Eusebius’s *Ecclesiastical History*. He is said to have belonged to the same community as the apostle John and to have been that person’s disciple (such that the two often were confused by later generations). He is probably the “elder” responsible for at least two of the Johannine Epistles (2 John 1:1; 3 John 1:1). Most scholars think that he also wrote the first of those letters (1 John), which actually is anonymous. He may have served as the editor or final author of the Gospel of John.

### **John the Seer**

*Visionary author of Revelation.* We know nothing about this person except what he tells us: he wrote the book of Revelation while in exile on the island of Patmos (Rev. 1:1, 9). Although he often is identified with the two persons mentioned above, most scholars think that he probably was a completely different individual who happened to have the name “John.”

## Distinctive Characteristics of John's Gospel

### **A. John's Gospel begins with a hymnic prologue that presents Jesus as the preexistent Logos made flesh (1:1–18).**

### **B. John's Gospel appears to be related in some way to the three Johannine Epistles.**

It sometimes has been thought that they might have the same author or come from the same community. Tradition has also connected John's Gospel with the book of Revelation, whose author is identified as "John" (1:4), but this connection is not widely accepted by scholars today.

### **C. John's Gospel claims to be based on the testimony of someone called the "beloved disciple" (19:35; 21:23–24).**

He leans on Jesus' chest at the Last Supper (13:23) and is entrusted with the care of Jesus' mother (19:26–27). Numerous texts also compare or contrast this disciple's experiences with those of Peter (13:24–25; 18:15–16; 20:4, 8; 21:7, 21–23).

Church tradition often has identified this disciple with John the son of Zebedee.

### **D. John's Gospel shows signs of having been edited.**

The story of the woman caught in adultery (7:53–8:11) is missing in some manuscripts and is located at different places in John's Gospel in others. (In fact, at times, it is found in the Gospel of Luke.)

Some passages don't make sense in present context:

- "you seek to kill me" (8:37)  
(addressed to the Jews who believe in him [8:31])
- "it was Mary who anointed the Lord" (11:2)  
(but not until 12:3)
- Jesus says, "Rise, let us be on our way" (14:31) (but then he continues talking for two more chapters)

Chapter 21 appears to be an addition, and 20:30–31 sounds like it was intended to be an ending.

References to enumerated "signs" (e.g., 2:11; 4:54) may derive from an earlier source (a "signs" Gospel that could have concluded with 20:30–31).

### **E. Ninety percent of the content in John's Gospel is unparalleled, and stories in John that are found elsewhere are told quite differently from the parallels.**

- feeding of five thousand (featuring a boy with a basket and the "Bread of Life" speech) (6:1–15)



- anointing at Bethany (by Mary, sister of Martha, rather than by an unnamed woman) (12:1–8)
- crucifixion (with three unparalleled words from the cross) (19:17–37)

**F. John appears to know numerous minor details not reported by the other Gospels (especially with regard to the passion narrative).**

- name of slave whose ear was severed: Malchus (18:10)
- name of disciple who struck Malchus: Simon Peter (18:10)
- name of high priest’s father-in-law: Annas (18:13)

**G. John’s Gospel presents a very different chronology for Jesus’ ministry than that of the other Gospels.**

- References to three Passovers indicates that ministry lasts three years (2:13; 6:4; 11:55).
- Jesus travels back and forth between Galilee and Judea.
- Jesus’ ministry overlaps with that of John the Baptist (3:22–24; cf. Matt. 4:12; Mark 1:14).
- Events: temple cleansing occurs at beginning of ministry (2:14–22; cf. Matt. 21:12–13; Mark 11:15–19; Luke 19:45–46); miraculous catch of fish occurs after Easter (21:1–11; cf. Luke 5:4–11).
- Jesus’ death takes place on the day before the Passover meal (18:28; 19:13–14, 31) rather than on the day after (cf. Matt. 26:17; Mark 14:12; Luke 22:7).

**H. The content and style of Jesus’ teaching in John’s Gospel is different from the other Gospels.**

- *Content*: instead of talking about the kingdom of God or the Mosaic law, Jesus talks primarily about himself (Bultmann: “He reveals that he is the Revealer”).
- *Style*: instead of using parables and proverbial aphorisms, Jesus delivers long philosophical discourses (5:19–47; 6:25–70; 7:14–52; 8:12–59; 10:1–18, 22–39; 12:23–36; 14:1–16:33).

**I. In John’s Gospel, the miracles of Jesus are depicted as signs (2:11; 4:54; 6:2, 14; 12:18) that are intended to lead people to believe (20:30).**

In the other Gospels, “signs” are associated with false prophets, and Jesus refuses to work them (e.g., Matt. 12:38–39; 16:1–4; 24:24). Even in John, their effectiveness as signs is mixed: some people believe because of the signs (2:23; 6:2, 14; cf. 20:30), while others do not (11:47; 12:37; cf. 4:48).

**J. Misunderstanding is a common motif in John’s Gospel. (See Bonus Track 8.6.)**

- “this temple” (2:19–22)
- “born again” (3:3–5)
- “living water” (4:10–15)
- “sleep” (11:11–14)

See also 4:31–34; 6:32–35, 51–52; 7:33–36; 8:21–22, 31–33, 51–53.

### **K. John's Gospel makes abundant use of symbolism.**

See, for example, the metaphorical "I Am" sayings (6:35, 51; 8:12; 9:5; 10:7, 9, 11, 14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1, 5).

In some cases, it is not clear whether a matter has symbolic meaning or not (e.g., the untorn net and 153 fish of 21:11).

### **L. John's Gospel identifies Jesus' opponents as "the Jews," a term that is not widely used in the other Gospels (only Matt. 27:18 and Mark 7:3).**

Note also John's references to people who believe in Jesus being expelled from the synagogue (9:22; 12:42; 16:2).

### **M. John's Gospel emphasizes love for one another as the single new commandment of Jesus and as the distinctive mark of his followers (13:34–35).**

- Jesus does not reinterpret the law in detail as he does in the other Gospels (e.g., Matt. 5:17–6:18).
- Jesus does not speak of love for neighbors or for enemies as he does in the other Gospels (e.g., Luke 6:27–31; 10:25–37).

### **N. John's Gospel emphasizes the role of the Spirit, the Paraclete.**

- promised by Jesus (7:37–39; 14:16–17)
- given after the resurrection (20:22)
- enables believers to continue Jesus' works (14:12)
- teaches and reveals truth (14:25–26; 16:13)

In some sense, the coming of the Spirit is a "second coming" of Jesus (14:15–20).

### **O. John's Gospel has its own special vocabulary for salvation.**

As in the other Gospels, salvation can be described as entering God's kingdom (3:3–5).

More often, it is described as:

- having "life" or "eternal life" (3:14–17, 36; 5:39–40; 10:10; 20:31; cf. 1 John 5:12)
- knowing "the truth" (8:32; cf. 1:14, 17; 3:21; 5:33; 16:13; 17:17–19; 18:37); cf. "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (14:6)

### **P. John's Gospel presents Jesus' crucifixion as his exaltation.**

Three passages refer to Jesus being "lifted up" (3:14; 8:28; 12:32–34). These references parallel the three "passion predictions" found in each of the other Gospels (Matt. 16:21; 17:22–23; 20:17–19; Mark 8:31–32; 9:31; 10:33–34; Luke 9:22, 44; 18:31–33).

## Comparison of John and the Synoptics

John's Gospel obviously differs from the three Synoptic Gospels with regard to content. John tells many stories that the Synoptic Gospels do not tell; conversely, John lacks many well-known stories that the Synoptic Gospels do tell. All told, about 90 percent of the material in John's Gospel is without parallel in the other Gospels. But John also differs from the Synoptic Gospels in other ways.

### Chronology

Certain events occur at radically different times: the cleansing of the temple comes at the beginning (2:13–22) rather than at the end (cf. Mark 11:15–19); the miraculous catch of fish comes at the end (21:1–11) rather than at the beginning (cf. Luke 5:4–11). The chronology of Jesus' crucifixion is also slightly different: Jesus is crucified on the day before Passover (18:28; 19:13–14, 31) rather than on the day after he and his disciples eat the Passover meal (cf. Matt. 26:17; Mark 14:12; Luke 22:7). In a broader sense, the mention of three Passovers in this Gospel gives the impression that Jesus' public ministry was conducted over a period of three years (see 2:13; 6:4; 11:55); the other Gospels give no indication of how long Jesus' ministry lasted, but apart from the information in John, we probably would have surmised that it was a much shorter time, probably less than a year. Furthermore, in John's Gospel, Jesus' ministry overlaps with that of John the Baptist (3:22–24), which is not the impression that we would have gotten from the other Gospels (cf. Matt. 4:12–17; Mark 1:14).

### Geography

The focus of John's Gospel is different geographically from that of the other Gospels. In the Synoptic Gospels, the adult Jesus confines himself mostly to Galilee and surrounding territories, until he embarks on one fateful journey to Jerusalem, where he is crucified. John's Gospel narrates a largely Judean ministry: Jesus visits Jerusalem twice before the end of chapter 7, and all of chapters 8–20 are set in Judea.

### The Style of Jesus' Teaching

In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus' teaching is marked by parables, proverbs, beatitudes, and other short pithy sayings. In John's Gospel, Jesus delivers long, philosophical discourses (5:19–47; 6:25–70; 7:14–52; 8:12–59; 10:1–18, 22–39; 12:23–46; 14:1–16:33). These speeches, furthermore, do not consist of numerous individual passages that could have circulated independently; rather, they tend to focus on single themes that are developed at length.

### The Focus of Jesus' Teaching

The Synoptic Gospels summarize the content of Jesus' proclamation as "the good news of the kingdom of God" (see, e.g., Matt. 4:17; Mark 1:14–15), and indeed most of his teaching in those Gospels seems to be about the nature of God's kingdom and the life expected of those who enter God's kingdom. In John, Jesus talks mostly about himself: he talks about his identity as the one who comes to reveal the Father and about what it means for people to believe in him, love him, obey him, and abide in him. Far from seeking to keep his identity

or status a secret (cf. Mark 1:23–25, 34, 43–44; 3:11–12; 5:43; 7:36; 8:26, 30; 9:9), he openly announces who he is (4:26; 5:18; 6:35–51; 8:12–30; cf. 7:1–29) and reflects at length on the significance of being in a relationship with him (and with God through him).

### **Literary Features**

John's Gospel is also different from the Synoptics in basic linguistic ways. It is written in a style of Greek that retains Semitic syntax, probably reflecting the Palestinian roots of the apostles and early Christian missionaries (as opposed to the less Semitic Greek employed by Diaspora Jews). John also displays a strong tendency to use dualistic categories, such as "above and below" (3:31; 8:23), "light and darkness" (1:5; 3:19; 8:12; 12:35, 46), "truth and lies" (8:44–45). Overall, the language of John's Gospel (and of Jesus in that Gospel) has been described as rhythmic, poetic, mystical, philosophical, and mysterious. Two related features contribute to this impression: (1) John's Gospel is heavily *symbolic*, using metaphors to describe Jesus in terms that are never absolutely defined (see, e.g., 6:35; 8:12; 10:7, 11; 15:1); (2) John's Gospel employs the literary device of *misunderstanding*, whereby characters in the story misconstrue something that Jesus says (e.g., 2:19–22; 3:3–5; 11:12–14) and the narrator or Jesus himself needs to clarify the matter (unless the correct meaning is assumed to be obvious).

## Symbolism in the Gospel of John

Jesus is the “Lamb of God” (1:29, 36) and the “Bridegroom” (3:29).

### Seven Metaphorical “I Am” Sayings

Jesus describes himself repeatedly with the words “I am,” which recall God’s self-designation in Exodus 3:14; Deuteronomy 32:39; Isaiah 48:12.

- “I am the bread of life” (6:35, 51)
- “I am the light of the world” (8:12; 9:5)
- “I am the door” (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)
- “I am the true vine” (15:1, 5)

See also 4:26; 6:20; 8:24, 28, 58; 13:19; 18:6—key verses that in the Greek text use the expression “I am” (*egō eimi*).

### Sacramental Symbols?

There are no accounts of Jesus being baptized or instituting the Eucharist, but the elements of water, bread, and wine are featured throughout the Gospel.

- water (3:5; 4:10–15; 5:2–7; 7:37–39; 9:7; 13:3–10; 19:34)
- bread (6:5–13, 28–58; 21:9–13)
- wine (2:1–10; 6:53–56)

### Obscure Symbols

Are these matters symbolic, and if so, what do they symbolize?

- stone water jars (2:6)
- Lazarus’s bandages (11:44)
- Jesus’ towel (13:5)
- Jesus’ seamless robe (19:23)
- hyssop branch (19:29)
- water and blood from Jesus’ side (19:34–35)
- Jesus’ grave clothes (20:5–7)
- 153 fish (21:11)
- untorn net (21:11)

## Misunderstanding in the Gospel of John

- When Jesus says “destroy this temple,” people think that he is talking about the temple in Jerusalem, not the temple of his body (2:19–22).
- Nicodemus wonders how a person can reenter the womb in order to be born anew (3:3–5).
- Jesus speaks of “living water,” and a Samaritan woman thinks that there must be a running stream nearby (4:10–15).
- Jesus says that his food is to do the will of God, and his disciples wonder who has been bringing him provisions (4:31–34).
- Jesus speaks of himself as the bread from heaven, and people think that he is talking about the manna that Moses offered people in the wilderness (6:32–35).
- Jesus speaks of people eating his flesh, and they think that he is advocating some bizarre form of cannibalism (6:51–52).
- Jesus speaks of the time when he will go where no one can find him (i.e., to heaven), and people think that he is planning to hide out in the Diaspora (7:33–36).
- Jesus says that he is going where no one can follow him, and people think that he is planning to commit suicide (8:21–22).
- Jesus says, “The truth will set you free,” and people think that he is talking about emancipation from literal slavery (8:31–33).
- Jesus says that those who keep his word will never see death, and people think that he means that they will never physically die (8:51–53).
- Jesus says that his friend Lazarus has fallen asleep (i.e., died), and his disciples think that Lazarus is getting some healthy rest (11:12).

## Competition among the Pillars?

Certain passages in John's Gospel signal what could be competitive notes.

- *The Beloved Disciple and Peter.* The beloved disciple is portrayed as closer to Jesus than Peter (13:23–25) and as quicker than Peter in getting to the tomb on Easter morning (20:4), coming to faith (20:8), and recognizing the risen Lord when he appears (21:7).
- *The Beloved Disciple and James.* The beloved disciple is entrusted with the care of Jesus' mother when Jesus says from the cross, "Woman, here is your son!" (19:26–27). But typically, that responsibility would have fallen to Jesus' oldest brother, James. Jesus' word from the cross characterizes the beloved disciple as "a brother of Jesus" also and effectively promotes him ahead of James in terms of familial authority.

Notably, the apostle Paul maintains that there were *three* "pillars" in the early church (Gal. 2:19): the disciple Peter, James the brother of Jesus, and the disciple John, who most scholars would identify with the "beloved disciple" responsible for this Gospel.

These competitive tendencies may simply be instances of local pride: the community treasured stories that portrayed their founder in a prominent and favored light. But many scholars speculate that the community associated with this Gospel may have experienced some tension with other Christian groups (ones associated with Peter or James). This might also explain the Gospel's strong emphasis on the need for Christians to love each other (13:24–35; 15:12, 17) and on Jesus' earnest plea for all of his followers to be one (17:20–23).

## The Passion of Jesus in the Gospel of John

### **Theme: Jesus Is in Control**

- Jesus chooses Judas, knowing that Judas will betray him (6:70–71; 13:27–30).
- Jesus claims that no one can take his life, but he will freely lay it down, knowing that he can take it up again (10:17–18).
- Satan has no power over Jesus (14:30).
- Soldiers have no power over Jesus: they fall down at his word (18:6).
- Pilate has no power over Jesus, save that which is allowed him (19:10–11).

### **Theme: Jesus' Death Is His Glorification**

- Jesus (as the Word) was in the beginning with God and was God (1:1–2).
- Jesus comes to earth as the Word made flesh to dwell among us (1:14).
- Even while on earth, Jesus and the Father are one (14:8–10).
- Jesus' death is the hour when he departs this world and goes to the Father (13:1).
- Through death, Jesus returns to his preexistent state of glory (17:5).

### **Theme: Jesus' Death Is a Sacrifice**

- Jesus is called the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (1:29).
- Jesus dies at noon on Passover, the time when the Passover lamb is slain (19:14).

### **Theme: Jesus' Death Is an Exaltation and Victory**

- Three times, Jesus refers to his death as his being “lifted up” (3:14; 8:28; 12:31–32).
- At his death, Jesus cries, “It is finished!” (19:30), a claim to have accomplished what he intended to do.



## John in the Revised Common Lectionary

Text	Content	Series	Liturgical Occasion	Calendar Date
1:1–14	Logos Hymn	A, B, C	Christmas Day	Dec 25
1:(1–9) 10–18	Logos Hymn	A, B, C	Christmas 2	2 Sundays after Dec 25
1:6–8, 19–28	Witness of John the Baptist	B	Advent 3	2 Sundays before Dec 25
1:29–42	Witness of John the Baptist	A	Epiphany 2	Jan 14–20
1:43–51	Call of Disciples	B	Epiphany 2	Jan 14–20
2:1–11	Wedding at Cana	C	Epiphany 2	Jan 14–20
2:13–22	Cleansing of temple	B	Lent 3	4 Sundays before Easter
3:1–17	Nicodemus and Jesus	A	Lent 2	5 Sundays before Easter
3:1–17	Nicodemus and Jesus	B	Holy Trinity	9 Sundays after Easter
3:14–21	Jesus and Nicodemus	B	Lent 4	3 Sundays before Easter
4:5–42	Woman at well	A	Lent 3	4 Sundays before Easter
5:1–9	Healing at Bethzatha pool	C	Easter 6	5 Sundays after Easter
6:1–21	Feeding five thousand, walking on water	B	Lectionary 17	Jul 24–30
6:24–35	Teaching on bread of life	B	Lectionary 18	Jul 31–Aug 6
6:35, 41–51	Teaching on bread of life	B	Lectionary 19	Aug 7–13
6:51–58	Teaching on bread of life	B	Lectionary 20	Aug 14–20
6:56–59	Teaching on bread of life	B	Lectionary 21	Aug 21–27
9:1–41	Healing of man born blind	A	Lent 4	3 Sundays before Easter
10:1–10	Jesus the good shepherd	A	Easter 4	3 Sundays after Easter
10:11–18	Jesus the good shepherd	B	Easter 4	3 Sundays after Easter
10:22–30	Jesus' sheep are secure	C	Easter 4	3 Sundays after Easter
11:1–45	Raising of Lazarus	A	Lent 5	4 Sundays after Easter
11:32–34	Raising of Lazarus	B	All Saints' Sunday	Nov 1
12:1–8	Anointing at Bethany	C	Lent 5	2 Sundays before Easter
12:20–33	Jesus glorifies the Father	B	Lent 5	2 Sundays before Easter
13:1–17, 31b–35	Washing the disciples' feet	A, B, C	Maundy Thursday	Thurs before Easter

13:31–35	New commandment	C	Easter 5	4 Sundays after Easter
14:1–14	Jesus the way to the Father	A	Easter 5	4 Sundays after Easter
14:8–17 (25–27)	Jesus will send the Paraclete	C	Pentecost	7 Sundays after Easter
14:15–21	Jesus will send the Paraclete	A	Easter 6	5 Sundays after Easter
14:23–29	Jesus with his followers	C	Easter 6	5 Sundays after Easter
15:1–8	Jesus the true vine	B	Easter 5	4 Sundays after Easter
15:9–17	Love one another	B	Easter 6	5 Sundays after Easter
15:26–27; 16:4b–15	Jesus will send the Spirit	B	Pentecost	8 Sundays after Easter
16:12–15	Spirit guides into all truth	C	Holy Trinity	9 Sundays after Easter
17:1–11	Jesus' "high priestly" prayer	A	Easter 7	6 Sundays after Easter
17:6–19	Jesus' "high priestly" prayer	B	Easter 7	6 Sundays after Easter
17:20–26	Jesus' "high priestly" prayer	C	Easter 7	6 Sundays after Easter
18:1–19:42	Passion of Jesus	A, B, C	Good Friday	Friday before Easter
18:33–37	Jesus before Pilate	B	Christ the King	Nov 20–26
20:1–18	Resurrection of Jesus	A, B, C	Easter Day	Easter
20:19–23	Jesus gives disciples the Spirit	A	Pentecost	7 Sundays after Easter
20:19–31	Jesus appears to Thomas	A, B, C	Easter 2	1 Sunday after Easter
21:1–19	Catch of fish; words to Peter	C	Easter 3	2 Sundays after Easter

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## Content Summary: Expanded Overview of the Book of Acts

- A preface addressed to Theophilus identifies this book as the follow-up to a previous work about Jesus; a brief summary recalls his resurrection and promise of the Holy Spirit. (1:1–5)
- Jesus ascends into heaven after telling the disciples that they will receive power from the Holy Spirit to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (1:6–11)
- The eleven disciples devote themselves to prayer, along with Mary and the brothers of Jesus; at the instigation of Peter they cast lots to replace Judas with a new apostle, Matthias. (1:12–26)
- On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit fills 120 believers, who speak in tongues (unlearned languages); Peter preaches to the crowd that gathers, and about three thousand persons respond to his invitation to repent and be baptized. (2:1–41)
- The early church is marked by apostolic teaching, fellowship, signs and wonders, prayer, daily temple worship, the breaking of bread, and a daily increase of those being saved. (2:42–47)
- Peter heals a lame man at the temple gate in the name of Jesus and preaches to the crowd that gathers. Peter and John are arrested, and Peter preaches boldly to the religious leaders, who place them on trial. They are ordered not to teach in the name of Jesus again. (3:1–4:22)
- The church prays for boldness, and the place where the believers have gathered is shaken by the power of the Holy Spirit. (4:23–31)
- Members of the Jerusalem church hold all things in common. Barnabas sells a field and gives the money to the church, but a married couple, Ananias and Sapphira, try to cheat the church by holding money back, and both of them are struck dead. (4:32–5:11)
- Many signs and wonders are worked through the apostles. When Peter's shadow falls on people, the sick and the demon-possessed are healed. (5:12–16)
- The high priest has the apostles arrested, but an angel lets them out of prison; guards bring them back before the council, where Peter says, "We must obey God rather than human authority." (5:17–32)
- Gamaliel (a member of the council) recommends that no action be taken against the apostles, since their movement will die out on its own if it is not of God; the apostles are flogged, but they rejoice to have been found worthy of suffering in Jesus' name, and they continue to teach daily in the temple. (5:33–42)
- A dispute arises between Hellenists and Hebrews concerning provision for widows; the apostles appoint seven men to be in charge of "waiting tables" and other matters, two of the men being Stephen and Philip. (6:1–6)
- Stephen's ministry arouses opposition, and he is stoned to death after delivering a long speech that recounts the history of Israel and attributes the building of the temple to obstinacy. (6:7–7:60)

- Saul (later known as Paul) leads a violent persecution against Christians that scatters the church to different areas. (8:1–3)
- Philip evangelizes the Samaritans, and Peter and John come to impart the Holy Spirit to those whom Philip had baptized; one of these converts, Simon Magus, tries to purchase the ability to give the Spirit. (8:4–25)
- An angel leads Philip to evangelize an Ethiopian eunuch, and after he is baptized, the Spirit snatches Philip away for other ventures. (8:26–40)
- Jesus appears to Saul on the road to Damascus and sends Ananias to baptize him and remove his temporary blindness. (9:1–19)
- Now a believer, Saul is introduced to other believers and confounds Jews with his arguments; he evades plots to kill him, at one point being lowered over the wall of Damascus in a basket. (9:19–31)
- Peter heals Aeneas in Lydda and raises Dorcas (Tabitha) from the dead in Joppa. (9:32–43)
- Peter baptizes a Gentile centurion, Cornelius, after receiving a vision of unclean animals accompanied by the command “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” The Gentiles speak in tongues as the disciples did at Pentecost. (10:1–48)
- Peter justifies the baptism of Gentiles by recounting the story of Cornelius to others. (11:1–18)
- The church at Antioch initiates a mission to Gentiles, and Barnabas and Saul are summoned to become leaders there; the believers are now called “Christians” for the first time. (11:19–26)
- Agabus, a prophet, predicts a famine that inspires a collection on behalf of believers in Judea; it is delivered to Jerusalem by Barnabas and Saul. (11:27–30)
- Herod kills James the disciple of Jesus and has Peter put in prison. (12:1–5)
- An angel releases Peter from prison, and he seeks refuge in the house of John Mark’s mother, where people are praying on his behalf. A servant, Rhoda, is slow to let him in. (12:6–19)
- After an adoring crowd proclaims Herod to be a god, he is struck by an angel, eaten by worms, and dies. (12:20–23)
- Barnabas and Saul return to Antioch with John Mark and are then sent out by that church on a missionary journey. (12:24–13:3)
- On the island of Cyprus, the proconsul Sergius Paulus believes after Paul curses his magician Elymas, who is struck temporarily blind. (13:4–12)
- Paul preaches to Jews in a synagogue at Pisidian Antioch with some success, but eventually he meets with so much opposition from the Jews that he decides to evangelize Gentiles instead; this pattern is repeated in Iconium. (13:13–14:7)
- After healing a lame man in Lystra, Paul and Barnabas are identified as Hermes and Zeus; they subsequently enjoy evangelistic success in the area until Jews from Antioch and Iconium intervene, stoning Paul and leaving him for dead. (14:5–20)
- Saul and Barnabas complete their missionary journey by revisiting some places, appointing elders, and warning of persecutions to come. (14:21–28)
- A council is held in Jerusalem to determine whether Gentiles may be saved without first being circumcised; James the brother of Jesus presides, and the decision reached is that Gentiles need not be circumcised, provided they keep certain other regulations. (15:1–35)

- Paul sets out on a second missionary journey, parting company with Barnabas, who wants to take John Mark along, and taking Silas as his companion instead. Paul objects to the inclusion of John Mark because he did not complete the previous journey. (15:36–41)
- Paul circumcises Timothy so as not to offend Jews, and then the Spirit both restricts and guides their travels so that they will cross over to Macedonia. (16:1–10)
- In Philippi, Lydia, a dealer of purple cloth, becomes a believer on the Sabbath day in a place of prayer by a river; she opens her house to Paul and his team. (16:11–15)
- Paul exorcizes a divination spirit from a slave girl who works as a fortune-teller. He and Silas are arrested and put in stocks; they sing hymns in prison and, after an earthquake sets them free, baptize the jailer and his household. When Paul reveals that he is a Roman citizen, the magistrates apologize. (16:16–40)
- In Thessalonica, Paul has some success evangelizing Jews in a synagogue, but when the opposition grows, an angry mob attacks Jason, with whom Paul's company has been staying. The mob refers to the Christians as "those who have been turning the world upside down." (17:1–9)
- In Beroea, the Jews are more receptive and check the scriptures to see if what Paul says holds up, but trouble starts when Jews from Thessalonica come to incite the crowds. (17:10–15)
- Paul preaches to philosophers on the Areopagus in Athens; most scoff at his mention of resurrection from the dead. Dionysius the Areopagite and Damaris become believers. (17:16–34)
- Paul arrives in Corinth and lives with Aquila and Priscilla, Jewish Christians who, like him, make a living as tent-makers; he spends eighteen months there and eventually is brought before the proconsul Gallio, who refuses to rule on matters of Jewish religion. (18:1–17)
- Paul has his hair cut as one under a vow and then returns to Antioch by way of Ephesus and Jerusalem. (18:18–22)
- Paul sets out on a third missionary journey. Meanwhile, Priscilla and Aquila instruct an eloquent believer, Apollos, to know the way of God "more accurately," and he becomes a powerful teacher of the faith. (18:23–28)
- Paul comes to Ephesus and encounters disciples who know only the baptism of John and have not received the Holy Spirit; he baptizes them in the name of Jesus, and they are filled with the Spirit, speaking in tongues and prophesying. (19:1–7)
- Paul continues to teach and work miracles in Ephesus for two years; when handkerchiefs or aprons that touched his skin are brought to the sick, diseases are cured and demons are expelled. (19:8–12)
- Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish priest, try to exorcize demons in the name of "the Jesus whom Paul proclaims," but the demons overpower them; as a result, those who practice magic burn their books. (19:13–20)
- A riot erupts in Ephesus after Demetrius the silversmith convinces people that the city's economy and honor are threatened by the Christian affront to the temple of Artemis. (19:21–41)
- As Paul continues to travel, he ends up in Troas, where he preaches long into the night; a young man, Eutychus, falls asleep and tumbles out of a

third-floor window; Paul embraces him, declares him alive, and continues to preach. (20:1–12)

- As Paul continues toward home, he invites the elders of Ephesus to join him in Miletus and preaches a farewell homily to them, claiming that they will not see him again. (20:13–38)
- As Paul's third journey comes to an end, he is told through the Spirit not to go to Jerusalem; he stays at the home of Philip, who has four daughters with the gift of prophecy; the prophet Agabus from Judea binds himself with Paul's belt to symbolize what will happen to Paul in Jerusalem. (21:1–16)
- Paul goes to Jerusalem and on the advice of James goes through a purification rite to please Jewish believers there; then Jews from Asia incite a riot by falsely claiming that he has brought Gentiles into the temple. (21:17–36)
- The Roman tribune allows Paul to address the crowd, and he tells the story of his conversion; they are angered when he claims that the Lord sent him to Gentiles; the tribune, after hearing Paul declare himself to be a Roman citizen, realizes that Paul cannot be flogged. (21:37–22:29)
- Paul is brought before the Jewish council, where he exploits the division between Pharisees and Sadducees by claiming that he is on trial for believing in the resurrection of the dead. (22:30–23:10)
- The Lord tells Paul that he must bear witness in Rome. (23:11)
- Paul is transferred by night to the care of the governor Felix in Caesarea after his nephew informs the Roman officials of a plot by some Jews to murder Paul. (23:12–35)
- Ananias the high priest and other Jews bring charges against Paul before Felix, and Paul offers a defense speech; Felix leaves Paul in prison for two years to please the Jews and in hopes of receiving a bribe. (24:1–27)
- Paul has another hearing before the next governor, Festus; he appeals to the emperor to avoid being sent to Jerusalem, since the Jews were planning to kill Paul en route. (25:1–12)
- Agrippa and Bernice visit Festus and listen to Paul relate the story of his conversion one more time; Agrippa says that Paul could have been set free if he had not appealed to the emperor. (25:13–26:32)
- Paul is taken as a prisoner on a sea voyage intended for Rome, but storms and a shipwreck strand Paul and the other travelers on the island of Malta. (27:1–28:1)
- On Malta, Paul is unharmed after being bitten by a deadly viper, and he heals the father of Publius, a leading man among the island's friendly natives. (28:2–10)
- After three months, Paul is brought to Rome, where he is placed under house arrest and argues with Jews over his teachings; finally, he announces that the salvation of God has been sent to Gentiles because they will listen. (28:11–29)
- Paul continues to preach freely in Rome for two years. (28:30–31)

## The “We Passages” in the Book of Acts

The author of Acts occasionally employs the pronoun *we* when recounting the travels of Paul and his companions (16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–8; 27:1–28:16). Scholars call these portions of Acts the “we passages.”

Throughout history, most Bible readers have assumed that the author of Acts means to include himself as being among Paul’s company in these portions of the narrative. Thus, it is traditionally held that the author of Acts accompanied Paul for portions of his second and third missionary journeys.

Some scholars, however, do not think that Acts could have been authored by one of Paul’s companions. The book is anonymous, after all, and (these scholars claim) it presents a rather different picture of Paul from the one that we obtain from his own letters. But what, then, should we make of the “we passages”? Those scholars who question whether the author of Acts was actually a companion of Paul usually explain them in one of the following ways (objections to the explanations are given beneath each one):

- Some anonymous author is falsely claiming to have been a companion of Paul in order to gain more credibility for his work.

But why wouldn’t that person simply write the book pseudepigraphically? Why not write the book falsely in the name of some famous or illustrious companion of Paul and pass it off as that person’s work, as opposed to taking the subtle approach and leaving readers to guess whether the book might be written by someone who occasionally traveled with the apostle Paul?

- An unknown author is using a source (a travel diary?) kept by someone who worked with Paul and is copying from that work without changing the pronouns.

But in the Gospel of Luke, this same author does make stylistic changes in the material that he takes from Mark’s Gospel. Why would he copy a source so slavishly when writing the book of Acts?

- The use of the pronoun *we* is simply a literary device to help readers experience the story firsthand. The “we” is not meant to include the author in the story so much as it is meant to include the book’s readers. Luke wants to put his readers on the boat with Paul so that they will witness what transpires in the story as though they were there when it was happening.

But why use this device in such a hit-and-miss fashion? Why not use it elsewhere in the story, or, for that matter, why not use it consistently throughout the narrative? What is there about these specific passages that would call for such intimate involvement of readers when other passages apparently do not?



Due to the objections noted, most scholars think that the “we passages” are best understood in a straightforward manner: the author of Acts (and thus, also, of Luke’s Gospel) did travel with Paul on a few occasions.

## The Name of Jesus in the Book of Acts

In Acts, the name of Jesus continues to convey the power and presence of the person who bore it.

### **First, people do things in the name of Jesus that Jesus himself would do were he still physically present on earth.**

- They speak and teach in the name of Jesus (4:17–18; 5:28, 40; 9:27–28).
- They perform signs and wonders in the name of Jesus (4:30).
- They exorcize demons in the name of Jesus (16:18; cf. 19:13–17).
- They heal the sick in the name of Jesus (3:6, 16; 4:10).

The reader is expected to realize that it is actually Jesus doing these things: there is no real difference between Peter saying that someone is healed “in the name of Jesus Christ” (3:6) and his telling a person, “Jesus Christ heals you” (9:34).

### **Second, people receive divine benefits through the name of Jesus.**

- Salvation is in the name of Jesus (4:12).
- Forgiveness of sins is received through the name of Jesus (10:43; 22:16).

These benefits are received by

- calling on the name of Jesus (22:16; cf. 2:21)
- having faith in the name of Jesus (3:16)
- being baptized in the name of Jesus (2:38; 8:16; 10:48; 19:5; 22:16).

### **Third, the name of Jesus stands for him who bore it and makes him present.**

- The “good news of the name of Jesus” is the good news of Jesus (8:12).
- To “invoke the name of Jesus” is to invoke Jesus (9:14, 21).
- To “praise the name of Jesus” is to praise Jesus (19:17).
- To “oppose the name” is to oppose Jesus (26:9).
- To “suffer for the name” is to suffer for Jesus (5:41; 9:16).

The one essential difference is that the name of Jesus remains present and accessible in a way that Jesus himself does not (cf. 1:11; 3:20–21).

## The Ministry of Peter in the Book of Acts

The principal events involving Peter in Acts seem to parallel key events in the life and ministry of Jesus as related in the Gospel of Luke.

### **Peter is filled with the Holy Spirit while praying (2:1–13; cf. 1:14).**

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is filled with the Holy Spirit while praying (3:21–22).

### **Peter preaches a sermon explaining why this has happened (2:14–40).**

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus preaches a (short) sermon that explains why the Spirit of the Lord has come upon him (4:16–30). He claims that what has happened is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy (from the book of Isaiah), just as Peter claims that the Spirit's descent on the apostles is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy (from the book of Joel).

### **Peter heals a lame man in the name of Jesus and encounters trouble with the religious leaders (3:1–4:22).**

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus gets in trouble with the religious leaders of Israel for the first time when he heals a man who cannot walk (5:17–26).

### **Peter raises a widow from the dead (9:36–43).**

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus raises a widow's son from the dead (7:11–17).

### **Peter ministers to a Gentile centurion (10:1–48).**

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus ministers to a Gentile centurion by healing his servant (7:1–10). Note that in both stories the question of whether it is appropriate for a Jewish man to enter the house of a Gentile poses an obstacle that must be overcome.

### **Peter is criticized by Pharisees for association with “the wrong sort of people” (11:1–18; 15:5).**

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is criticized by Pharisees for association with the wrong sort of people (5:30; 7:39; 15:2). In the case of Jesus, the issue is eating with sinners; in the case of Peter, it is eating with Gentiles.

### **Peter is delivered from prison by an angel (12:1–9).**

There is no exact parallel to this regarding Jesus in the Gospel of Luke, but if the tomb of Jesus is understood to be something like a prison, then there is an account of Jesus being freed from that prison (24:1–12). Note that both stories involve an angel who opens the enclosed space.

## Distinctive Characteristics of the Book of Acts

**A. The book of Acts is a sequel to Luke's Gospel, which is referred to as "the first book" (1:1).**

**B. The book of Acts relates stories that parallel events reported in Luke's Gospel.**

	Luke	Acts
Preface and dedication to Theophilus	1:1–4	1:1–5
Coming of the Spirit during prayer	3:21–23	2:1–13
Inaugural sermon on fulfillment of prophecy	4:16–30	2:14–40
Healing of lame man	5:17–26	3:1–10
Conflicts with religious leaders	5:29–6:11	4:1–8:3
Invitation to visit house of centurion	7:1–10	10:1–23
Story involving a widow and a resurrection	7:11–17	9:36–43
Missionary journeys to Gentiles	10:1–12	13:1–19:20
Journey to Jerusalem, where hero is arrested	9:51–19:28	19:21–21:17
Series of four trials	22:26–23:13	23:1–26:32

**C. Acts offers heroic portrayals of people in the life of the early church.**

- Peter (chaps. 1–5; 10–12)
- Stephen (chaps. 6–7)
- Philip (chap. 8)
- James (chap. 15)
- Paul (chaps. 9; 13–28)

The words and deeds of these individuals are reported in ways that parallel those of Jesus in Luke's Gospel (in fulfillment of Luke 6:40).

- Stephen's dying words (7:59–60; cf. Luke 23:34, 46)
- Paul's apron (19:11; cf. Luke 8:43–48)

**D. The author of Acts claims to have sometimes been a companion of Paul.**

See the "we passages" (16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–8; 27:1–28:16).

**E. Almost one-third of Acts consists of speeches.**

- Missionary Speeches (2:14–36; 13:16–41; 17:22–31)
- Speeches to Christians (1:16–22; 11:5–17; 15:7–11, 13–21; 20:18–35)
- Defense Speeches (7:2–53; 22:1–21; 24:10–21; 26:2–23)

**F. Acts records the advance and progress of the church's mission.**

- geographical expansion (1:8)

- numerical growth (1:14; 2:41; 4:4; 5:14; 6:7; 9:31; 11:21, 24; 12:24; 14:1; 16:5; 19:20; 28:30–31)
- ethnic diversity: Jews and Gentiles (e.g., chap. 15)

**G. In Acts, the success of ministry to Israel is ambiguous.**

- Jews accept the gospel (2:41; 4:4; 6:7; 21:20)
- Jews reject the gospel (13:46; 18:6; 28:25–28)

**H. In Acts, Jerusalem appears to have special prominence.**

- starting point for mission (1:8; cf. Luke 24:49)
- location for church council (chap. 15)
- headquarters to which Paul reports (9:26; 11:27–30; 12:25; 18:22; 21:15)

**I. Acts presents an idealized portrait of the church.**

- a unified, peaceful community (2:44–45; 4:32–37)
- Peter, James, and Paul are of one mind (chap. 15; cf. Gal. 2:11–14)

**J. Acts takes a positive attitude toward the Roman Empire.**

- sympathy for Christians from Rome (18:12–16; 19:35–41; 23:10–35)
- Roman converts to Christianity (10:1–48; 13:7–12; 16:25–34)
- Paul is proud of his citizenship (16:37–40; 22:25–29)

**K. Acts presents Jesus as seated in heaven (7:56) but still active on earth.**

- through the Holy Spirit (16:7)
- through use of his name (2:21; 3:6; 4:12, 30; 10:43; 16:18)
- through preaching of the word (13:26)
- through lives of his followers (9:5)

Thus Acts continues the account in Luke's Gospel, which narrated only what Jesus began to say and do (Acts 1:1).

**L. Acts emphasizes the role of the Holy Spirit.**

- empowering people to be witnesses (1:8)
- directing the life and mission of the church (8:29; 10:19; 11:28; 13:2; 15:28; 20:23; 21:4, 11)
- coming upon and filling people (2:4; 4:31; 8:14–17; 10:44–48; 19:1–7)

**M. Promise and fulfillment is a prominent theme in Acts.**

- fulfillment of scripture (2:16–21; 3:18; 15:15–17; 28:25–28)
- fulfillment of what is "necessary" (1:22; 9:6; 16; 13:46; 14:22; 17:3; 19:21; 23:11; 25:10; 27:24)

**N. Salvation is a prominent theme in Acts.**

- salvation bestowed by Jesus (2:33–40; 5:31; 13:23–39; 15:1–11; 16:30–31) or received through his name (2:21; 3:16; 4:12)
- salvation may consist of
  - eternal life (13:46)
  - forgiveness (2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38–39)
  - the gift of the Holy Spirit (2:38; 11:15)

– temporal blessings (3:8; 7:25; 14:9; 27:22, 34, 44)

## Speeches in the Book of Acts

Almost one-third of the book of Acts consists of speeches.

### **Missionary Speeches**

- Peter's sermon to Jews from many nations at Pentecost (2:14–36)
- Paul's synagogue sermon at Pisidian Antioch (13:16–41)
- Paul's discourse to philosophers at Athens (17:22–31)

### **Speeches to Christians**

- by Peter, regarding the replacement of Judas (1:16–22)
- by Peter, regarding the baptism of Cornelius (11:5–17)
- by Peter at the Jerusalem council (15:7–11)
- by James at the Jerusalem council (15:13–21)
- by Paul to the Ephesian elders (20:18–35)

### **Defense Speeches**

- by Stephen to the Jerusalem council (7:2–53)
- by Paul, when arrested in Jerusalem (22:1–21)
- by Paul to the governor Felix (24:10–21)
- by Paul to King Agrippa (26:2–23)

## Roman Rulers Mentioned in the Book of Acts

### Roman Rulers in Palestine

#### ***Herod Agrippa: Ruled Galilee (37–44 CE) and All of Palestine (41–44 CE)***

- a grandson of Herod the Great who was allowed to rule all Palestine in what was a short-lived restoration of the Herodian Empire
- persecuted the fledgling Christian movement in Jerusalem; put James the disciple of Jesus to death and imprisoned Peter (12:1–3)
- politically popular and successful but, according to Acts, was struck by an angel of the Lord for not giving glory to God; eaten by worms and died (12:20–23)

#### ***Felix: Ruled Judea (53–60 CE)***

- ruled as a procurator or prefect, similar to Pontius Pilate
- a former slave of the emperor Claudius's mother
- his brother Pallas was a close advisor to both Claudius and Nero
- had a Jewish wife, Drusilla (24:24), who was the sister of Agrippa II
- presided at a hearing in Caesarea regarding the fate of Paul, who had been arrested in Jerusalem (chaps. 23–24); described as well informed about Christianity (24:22)
- keeps Paul in prison in Caesarea for two years and passes him on to Festus

#### ***Festus: Ruled Judea (60–62 CE)***

- another procurator or prefect, successor to Felix
- presided over a new hearing in Caesarea concerning Paul, after which Paul appeals to have his case heard in Rome (25:1–12)
- plays host to Agrippa II and his sister Bernice and gives Paul a chance to preach to them (25:13–27)

#### ***Herod Agrippa II: Ruled Galilee (44–100 CE)***

- had an unusually long tenure: ruler of Galilee for more than fifty years, including the tumultuous period of the Jewish war with Rome (66–73)
- in the New Testament known only in Acts, for his visit (with sister Bernice) to Festus in Caesarea, where he listens to Paul's account of his conversion (25:13–26:32)

### Roman Rulers outside Palestine

#### ***Sergius Paulus: Proconsul of Cyprus (Date Unknown)***

- in Acts, invites Paul and Barnabas to share the Christian message with him and witnesses a punishment miracle when his court magician is struck blind (13:4–12)



***Gallio: Proconsul of Achaia (ca. 51–52 CE)***

- in Acts, dismisses a mob that has seized Paul, refusing to rule on charges that have to do with religious beliefs rather than substantive criminal matters (18:12–17)

**Summary: References to Roman Rulers in the Book of Acts**

- Herod Agrippa I (12:1–23)
- Felix (23:23–24:27)
- Festus (chaps. 25–26)
- Herod Agrippa II (chaps. 25–26)
- Sergius Paulus (13:4–12)
- Gallio (18:12–17)

## Acts in the Revised Common Lectionary

Text	Content	Series	Liturgical Occasion	Calendar Date
1:1–11	Preface, ascension of Jesus	A, B, C	Ascension	6 Thursdays after Easter
1:6–14	Ascension of Jesus	A	Easter 7	6 Sundays after Easter
1:15–17, 21–26	Selection of Matthias	B	Easter 7	6 Sundays after Easter
2:1–21	Outpouring of the Spirit	A, B, C	Pentecost	7 Sundays after Easter
2:14a, 22–32	Peter's Pentecost sermon	A	Easter 2	1 Sunday after Easter
2:14a, 36–41	Baptism of Pentecost believers	A	Easter 3	2 Sundays after Easter
2:42–47	Life of early church	A	Easter 4	3 Sundays after Easter
3:12–19	Peter's sermon at the temple	B	Easter 3	2 Sundays after Easter
4:5–12	Peter addresses the council	B	Easter 4	3 Sundays after Easter
4:32–35	Marks of early church	B	Easter 2	1 Sunday after Easter
5:27–32	Peter testifies before the council	C	Easter 2	1 Sunday after Easter
7:55–60	Martyrdom of Stephen	A	Easter 5	4 Sundays after Easter
8:14–17	Samaritans receive the Spirit	C	Epiphany 1	Jan 7–13
8:14–17	Samaritans receive the Spirit	A, B, C	Easter Day	Easter
8:26–40	Philip and Ethiopian eunuch	B	Easter 5	4 Sundays after Easter
9:1–6 (5–20)	Conversion of Paul	C	Easter 3	2 Sundays after Easter
9:36–43	Resuscitation of Dorcas	C	Easter 4	3 Sundays after Easter
10:34–43	Peter and Cornelius	A	Epiphany 1	Jan 7–13
10:34–43	Peter and Cornelius	A, B, C	Easter Day	Easter
10:44–48	Gentiles receive the Spirit	B	Easter 6	5 Sundays after Easter
11:1–18	Peter tells story of Cornelius	C	Easter 5	4 Sundays after Easter
16:9–15	Gospel to Macedonia	C	Easter 6	5 Sundays after Easter
16:16–34	Paul and Silas in Philippi	C	Easter 7	6 Sundays after Easter
17:22–31	Paul on the Areopagus	A	Easter 6	5 Sundays after Easter
19:1–7	Ephesians receive the Spirit	B	Epiphany 1	Jan 7–13

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## What's the Difference between a "Letter" and an "Epistle"?

Some biblical scholars have sought to make a distinction between letters and epistles. According to this distinction:

- A *letter* represents an actual correspondence written on a particular occasion to address matters of the moment. Most people who write a letter do not imagine that the correspondence will ever be read by anyone other than those to whom it is addressed.
- An *epistle* is a public treatise that uses the letter format to present an essay or homily intended for general reading.

With regard to the New Testament writings, Paul's brief note to Philemon is said to be a classic example of a letter, whereas the exposition to the Hebrews is said to be an epistle.

Most modern scholars, however, do not find this sort of distinction to be very helpful: all twenty-one of the New Testament writings were targeted for specific contexts (like letters), but none of them was intended to be kept private or confidential. Today, the terms *letter* and *epistle* often are used synonymously, with a recognition that all twenty-one books are public documents linked to particular audiences and particular occasions.

## Pseudepigraphy as an Affront to Religious Faith

Academic discussion of whether some New Testament letters are pseudepigraphical letters is complicated by confessional concerns and by different notions of what it means to view such writings as scripture. For many Christians, including responsible and respected scholars, the notion that some writings of the New Testament are pseudepigraphical is an affront to religious faith.

**The question is quite different from issues regarding authorship of the New Testament Gospels.** Academic scholars question church traditions regarding the authorship of the Gospels, but the Gospels themselves are anonymous, and it is only traditions concerning them that are being challenged. With the letters, the challenge concerns what is said in the biblical books themselves: the disputed letters clearly state that they are written by Paul, James, Peter, or Jude, but some scholars think that they were not actually (or literally) composed by those individuals.

**For some, the authority of the writings as scripture is at stake.** Some Christians maintain that any letter that claims to be authored by a person who did not actually write it should be regarded as erroneous (if not deceptive) and, accordingly, ought not be accepted as scripture. Even those who would consider such a judgment extreme often discover that, in practice, writings deemed pseudepigraphical are regarded as less valuable or important than writings judged to be authentic. Thus, the New Testament letters most often regarded as pseudepigraphical tend also to be the ones most neglected in biblical study; they are not rejected outright, but, for some, they seem to become unofficially regarded as “second-tier scripture.”

**Some Christians claim that an a priori confession of these writings to be scripture rules out any possibility of them being pseudepigraphical.** For example, J. I. Packer asserts that if the Pastoral Epistles (1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus) are regarded as scripture, then “their claim to authorship [by Paul], like all other assertions, should be received as truth from God; and anyone who rejects this claim ought also to deny that they are Scripture” (*Fundamentalism and the Word of God* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958], 184).

### The Effect on Biblical Studies

Academic discussion about pseudepigraphy can become stalled, hampered by an unusually high degree of suspicion and intimidation:

- Those who are opposed in principle to the notion of New Testament letters being pseudepigraphical may have little interest in the topic apart from learning arguments to refute what they take to be a troubling position.
- Interpreters who are open to the possibility that some writings might be pseudepigraphical are naturally frustrated by the prospect of debating



such matters on academic grounds with people who are not likely to be persuaded by academic arguments.

- This frustration sometimes produces a backlash in academic circles, according to which arguments that would be supportive of a position that is favored by some for confessional reasons get easily ignored or dismissed without regard for their intrinsic validity.
- Within some circles, conformity to the conventional wisdom of the guild (particularly on matters challenging to those who hold resistant confessional postures) can come to be regarded as a test of an interpreter's level of commitment to true, unbiased scholarship.
- The guild's "conventional wisdom" can then become, in effect, a confessional position of another kind.
- Scholarship can become polarized along ideological grounds: interpreters may be labeled "conservative" or "liberal" and expected to defend the positions most amenable to the camp in which they have been placed (by peers or opponents).

**These problems are real, but their scope and intensity can be exaggerated.** The great majority of biblical scholars try to analyze the evidence for and against pseudepigraphy as fairly as possible. Most are also able to identify their own presuppositions and to note ways in which their stance or perspective might influence their evaluation of the data. Indeed, there are scholars who reject claims to pseudepigraphy even though their theological position would in no way necessitate such a decision, and there are scholars who admit that in certain cases an objective evaluation of data would favor a decision for pseudepigraphy even though their personal religious convictions prevent them from accepting that verdict.

## Pseudepigraphy and the Problem of Personal Reference

Many New Testament letters contain autobiographical references—specific allusions to the life circumstances of their presumed authors. This is a complicating factor when those letters are thought to be pseudepigraphical.

The letters attributed to Paul do not simply continue his teaching in a new vein; they offer travel plans, greetings to and from associates, news regarding various trials and triumphs, and other tidbits of information that would make little sense if Paul were not still alive and actually writing the letters himself (see, e.g., 2 Tim. 4:13).

Likewise, the author of 2 Peter makes specific reference to the time that he stood on the mountain of transfiguration with Jesus (2 Pet. 1:17–18).

Some scholars think that such autobiographical references count against pseudepigraphy: the letters obviously are written by persons of high moral character who would not claim to be someone they are not; thus, the letters must be authentic or else they would not contain such references.

Other scholars regard the references as a literary device intended to give the letters verisimilitude (i.e., a realistic air). The pseudonymous writer takes on the character of the named author, just as an actor portrays a historical person in a play. The attempt is not to deceive the reader but rather to write as if the letter were being composed by the person whose name it bears.

Still others view the references as instances of well-intended deception, employing what the ancient world called a “therapeutic lie.” Throughout history, prominent church leaders (Origen, Jerome, Chrysostom) have maintained that mild deception is commendable if it serves a higher purpose, and granting apostolic authority to sound doctrine might have been thought to qualify as such a purpose.

Finally, some scholars think that these autobiographical references require the letters to be regarded as forgeries (if they are not authentic). Such features suggest deliberate subterfuge, which, had it been recognized, would have rendered the works unacceptable as scripture.

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## Paul's Mission Sites

This chart lists areas of Paul's missionary work mentioned in his letters (names in italics = cities mentioned in Paul's "undisputed letters").

### Province of Achaia

Romans 15:26; 1 Corinthians 16:15; 2 Corinthians 1:1; 9:2; 11:10; 1 Thessalonians 1:7–8; cf. Acts 18:12; 19:21

#### *Cities in the Province of Achaia*

- *Athens* (1 Thess. 3:1; cf. Acts 17:15–16; 18:1)
- *Cenchreae* (Rom. 16:1; cf. Acts 18:18)
- *Corinth* (1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1, 23; cf. 2 Tim. 4:20; Acts 18:1)

### Province of Asia

Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; 2 Corinthians 1:8; cf. 2 Timothy 1:15; Acts 16:6; 19:10, 22, 26–27, 31; 20:4, 16, 18; 21:27; 24:19; 27:2

#### *Cities in the Province of Asia*

- Colossae (Col. 1:2)
- *Ephesus* (1 Cor. 15:32; 16:8; cf. Eph. 1:1; 1 Tim. 1:3; 2 Tim. 1:18; 4:12; Acts 18:19, 21; 19:1, 17, 26; 20:16–17)
- Hierapolis (Col. 4:13)
- Laodicea (Col. 2:1; 4:13, 15–16)
- Miletus (2 Tim. 4:20; cf. Acts 20:15, 17)
- *Troas* (2 Cor. 2:12; cf. 2 Tim. 4:13; Acts 16:8, 11; 20:5–6)

### Province of Crete

Titus 1:5

### Province of Galatia

1 Corinthians 16:1; Galatians 1:2; cf. 2 Timothy 4:10; Acts 16:6; 18:23

#### *Cities in the Province of Galatia*

- Iconium (2 Tim. 3:11; cf. Acts 13:51; 14:1, 19, 21; 16:2)

### Province of Illyricum

Romans 15:19

#### *Cities in the Province of Illyricum*

- Dalmatia (2 Tim. 4:10)

### Province of Lycaonia

Not mentioned in Paul's letters; cf. Acts 14:6

#### *Cities in the Province of Lycaonia*

- Lystra (2 Tim. 3:11; cf. Acts 14:6, 8, 21; 16:1–2)

## **Province of Macedonia**

Romans 15:26; 1 Corinthians 16:5; 2 Corinthians 1:16; 2:13; 7:5; 8:1; 9:2; 11:9; Philippians 4:15; 1 Thessalonians 1:7–8; 4:10; cf. 1 Timothy 1:3; Acts 16:9–10, 12; 18:5; 19:21–22; 20:1, 3

### ***Cities in the Province of Macedonia***

- *Philippi* (Phil. 1:1; 1 Thess. 2:2; cf. Acts 16:12; 20:6)
- *Thessalonica* (Phil. 4:16; 1 Thess. 1:1; cf. 2 Thess. 1:1; 2 Tim. 4:10; Acts 17:1, 11, 13; 20:4; 27:2)

## Developing a Chronology for Paul

### Problems with Developing a Chronology of Paul's Life

- Neither Paul's letters nor the book of Acts specifies any dates for the events that they report.
- The book of Acts is notoriously fond of using imprecise terms with regard to time intervals (e.g., "for some time" in Acts 14:28; "for a considerable time" in Acts 18:18).
- The book of Acts also uses approximations that frustrate scholars desirous of more precision (e.g., Acts 19:8–10 indicates that Paul stayed in Ephesus for two years and three months, but Acts 20:31 seems to round this number off to three years).
- Paul is also ambiguous with temporal references: in Galatians 1:18–2:1, he says that he made his first visit to Jerusalem "after three years" and his second visit "after fourteen years." But does he mean that the first visit was three years after his encounter with Christ (1:15–16) or after his return to Damascus (1:17)? And what about the second visit? Was it fourteen years after the first visit? Or fourteen years after the encounter with Christ? Or fourteen years after the return to Damascus?

### Promising Reference Points

- Acts 22:3 indicates that Paul was educated in Jerusalem under Gamaliel, whose school flourished in that city from 20–30 CE.
- Acts 7:58 says that Paul was a "young man" at the time of Stephen's martyrdom.
- 2 Corinthians 11:32 places Paul in Damascus at a time when King Aretas had some influence in that city, which would fit well with the political situation during the years 37–41 CE.
- Acts 18:1–2 indicates that Paul arrived in Corinth at a time when Claudius had "recently" expelled the Jews from Rome. Roman records indicate that this occurred in 49 CE.
- Acts 18:12 says that Paul was in Corinth when Gallio was the proconsul, which position he held from the summer of 51 CE to the summer of 52 CE.\*
- Acts 24:27 indicates that Paul was a prisoner in Caesarea at the time Festus replaced Felix as the Roman governor there. Records indicate this was in 59 or 60 CE.
- Paul calls himself an "old man" in his letter to Philemon (v. 9).

\*Of these "promising reference points," the mention of Gallio in Acts 18:12 has turned out to be the most useful. Scholars working out a chronology for Paul typically start with his time in Corinth (51–52 CE) and work forward and backward from there.

### Chronology for Paul's Letters

Once we have developed a reasonable chronology for Paul's life, can we tell when his letters were written or in what order? These things can be determined with varying degrees of certainty for different letters.

### ***The Seven Undisputed Letters***

- **1 Thessalonians, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, and Romans** appear to have been written in that order during the decade of the 50s while Paul was engaged in what Acts presents as his second and third missionary journeys. First Thessalonians was written from Corinth toward the end of the second journey; the two Corinthian letters were written from Ephesus and Macedonia while he was on the third journey; the letter to Romans was written from Corinth a few months later on that same trip.
- **Philippians** and **Philemon** were written from prison, which suggests to many that they were written near the end of Paul's life, when he was imprisoned in Caesarea or, more likely, in Rome. Many scholars, however, think that the letters might have been written earlier, during some imprisonment not mentioned in Acts. The most popular of these alternative suggestions holds that either or both of the letters might have been written during that prolific third missionary journey, assuming that Paul spent some time in prison during his long tenure in Ephesus (cf. 1 Cor. 15:32; 2 Cor. 1:8–11). Discussion of all these options continues, but the best time period for these two letters remains uncertain.
- **Galatians** is the most difficult of the undisputed letters to date. It does not fit obviously or easily into any part of Paul's itinerary narrated in the book of Acts, and there is uncertainty as to whether the letter is addressed to a northern or southern region. Scholars who think that it is addressed to "South Galatia" tend to date it early, at the conclusion of the first missionary journey (making it the earliest of all Paul's extant letters). Those who think that it is addressed to "North Galatia" place it later, perhaps around the time of Romans.

### ***The Six Disputed Letters***

Chronology of the "Disputed Letters" depends upon whether those letters are viewed as authentic or pseudepigraphical.

- If **2 Thessalonians** is considered to be authentic, it is usually thought to have been written shortly after 1 Thessalonians (i.e., near the end of the second missionary journey).
- If **Ephesians** and/or **Colossians** are considered to be authentic, they usually are grouped with Philemon and considered to come from a period close to the time when that letter was written (but the date of that letter—which imprisonment?—remains in dispute).
- If **1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and/or Titus** are considered to be authentic, they often are thought to stem from the time of a "second career" that Paul is presumed to have had following his Roman imprisonment. In particular, 2 Timothy would be seen by those who consider the letter to be authentic as coming from a time close to Paul's execution by the Roman authorities.

When any or all of these letters are considered to be pseudepigraphical, they are viewed as coming from a time after Paul's death.



## The New Perspective on Paul: A Brief Essay

Toward the end of the twentieth century, a revolution in Pauline studies brought to the fore an understanding of Paul's theology called the "New Perspective."<sup>1</sup> This terminology assumes that there was an "old perspective" on Paul (though, of course, no one ever called it that at the time).

The discussion concerns an assessment of Paul's belief in "justification by grace" and of the importance that this had for his understanding of his own life and theology. The theme of justification by grace is prominent in two of Paul's letters (Romans, Galatians): Paul insists that people are put in a right relationship with God at God's initiative, as a result of God's mercy and love rather than because of anything that they have done to earn God's favor. The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century produced an understanding of Paul that focused on this motif in two ways. First, the Reformers saw justification by grace as the center of Paul's thought; all the other things that he said could be regarded as implications of this one fundamental concept. Second, the Reformers understood justification by grace to be the doctrine that separated Paul from the Judaism of his day, which taught some form of "works righteousness" (i.e., the notion that people gain a right standing with God by doing good works and being obedient to God's commandments). Thus, the "old perspective" on Paul was that he was converted from a legalistic Pharisaism that told him that he had to earn favor with God to a grace-oriented Christianity that told him that God accepted him just as he was. He was converted from a religion of guilt to a religion of love.

This understanding of Paul went virtually unchallenged for four hundred years, and then scholars began to question some of its key presuppositions. First, scholars asked whether it is proper to make justification by grace so central to Pauline thought. He does not mention it at all in several of his letters, and in the critical sections where it is discussed, his primary purpose seems to be defending the rights of Gentiles as full heirs of God's promises to Israel.<sup>2</sup> The specific question for Paul was whether Gentile converts must accept the Jewish law in order to become part of God's chosen people, and what he says about justification by grace must be understood in that context.<sup>3</sup>

Second, a number of scholars have insisted that the Pharisaism of Paul's day was not in fact a legalistic religion of works righteousness. The Pharisees believed that they stood in a right relationship with God through grace, on account of God's covenant with Israel. They did not believe that they had to keep the law in order to earn God's favor; rather, they delighted in keeping the law as a way of observing the covenant that God had made with them. Furthermore, Paul never indicates that he found his pre-Christian life burdensome, nor does he refer to his life prior to his encounter with Christ as a time when he felt the need to attain salvation through his own efforts or merit (cf. Phil. 3:6).<sup>4</sup>

The new perspective suggested that Paul's ongoing conflict with his Jewish contemporaries concerned tendencies not toward legalism but rather toward

separatism and exclusivism. God had revealed to Paul that, through Christ, salvation was available to all humanity. Thus, Paul objected to “works of the law” not because they were construed as good works that could earn God’s favor but rather because they were regarded as marks of ethnic privilege. Circumcision, dietary regulations, Sabbath laws, and the like were intended to set Israel apart from other nations so that Israel might remain God’s elite chosen people. According to the new perspective on Paul, justification by grace in itself was not a new concept; the Jews had always believed that they were justified by grace through God’s covenant with Israel. What was new in Paul’s gospel was that justification by grace now came through faith in Jesus Christ, and this claim had radical implications for all humanity: it was no longer exclusive to Israel. The controversial point in Paul’s teaching was not the basic idea of people being put right with God through grace rather than through works; the controversial point was that Gentiles could now become equal partners with Jews as part of the people of God.

### **New Perspective on Paul: An Example**

What does this verse of scripture mean?

A person is justified by faith, apart from works of the law. (Rom. 3:28)

#### ***Traditional Interpretation***

People are put right with God by trusting in what God has graciously done through Jesus Christ rather than by doing things that would earn God’s favor. In this view, *works of the law* = meritorious acts of human achievement (keeping commandments, performing good works, etc.).

#### ***New Perspective***

People are put right with God by trusting in what God has graciously done through Jesus Christ rather than by being faithful to the covenant that God made with Israel. In this view, *works of the law* = covenant markers that identify Jews as belonging to God’s chosen nation (circumcision, Sabbath observance, dietary restrictions, etc.).

This new perspective on Paul has met with widespread acceptance and has altered the way many scholars understand various matters that come up in Paul’s letters.<sup>5</sup> Many interpreters think the new perspective offers a more authentic way of understanding Paul’s writings, reading them in light of first-century conflicts between Jews and Gentiles rather than in light of sixteenth-century conflicts between Protestants and Roman Catholics. Some critics, however, caution that the “new perspective” has gone too far.<sup>6</sup> They maintain that some Jews in the first century did indeed view obedience to the law as a means of earning God’s favor (just as some Christians in every age have thought this) and that part of Paul’s emphasis on grace is directed against such notions (Rom. 4:4–5; 10:3).<sup>7</sup> More to the point, some scholars claim that the new perspective on Paul shifts the primary focus of Paul’s concern from a vertical emphasis on how people relate to God to a horizontal emphasis on how God’s people relate to each other. Critics of the new perspective grant that Paul addresses manifold questions of how Jews and Gentiles should relate to each other, but they claim that these are only the implications of a fundamental concern for how all human

beings (Jew or Gentile) are brought into a right relationship with God. Thus, justification by grace is not just important to Paul as a means to an end, the end being reconciliation of humanity; it is, in itself, of primary importance, and the reconciliation of humanity follows as an inevitable consequence.

Discussion of these matters will continue. The debates (What is primary? What is secondary?) may seem somewhat pedantic to beginning students, but decisions on such matters do end up affecting interpretation of individual Bible passages, which in turn affect the preaching and teaching of scripture in various Christian communities.

## Footnotes

1. James D. G. Dunn is credited with coining the phrase “new perspective on Paul” during a 1982 lecture now published as “The New Perspective on Paul,” in *Jesus, Paul, and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 123–33. See also James D. G. Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007).

2. See Krister Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976).

3. E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (London: SCM, 1983), 20.

4. See E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

5. Well-known advocates include James D. G. Dunn, E. P. Sanders, and N. T. Wright. See also Terence L. Donaldson, *Paul and the Gentiles: Remapping the Apostle's Convictional World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997); Francis Watson, *Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles: Beyond the New Perspective*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007).

6. For a good summary of the criticisms, see D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 375–85. See also Seyoon Kim, *Paul and the New Perspective: Second Thoughts on the Origin of Paul's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); Timo Laato, *Paul and Judaism: An Anthropological Approach*, trans. T. McElwain SFSHJ 115 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995); Thomas R. Schreiner, *The Law and Its Fulfillment: A Pauline Theology of Law* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1993); Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The “Lutheran” Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); and the essays collected in D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, and Mark O. Seifrid, eds., *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001–2004).

7. See Mark Seifrid, *Christ, Our Righteousness: Paul's Theology of Justification*, NSBT (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000); *Justification by Faith: The Origin and Development of a Central Pauline Theme*, NovTSup 68 (Leiden: Brill, 1992); Peter Stuhlmacher, *Revisiting Paul's Doctrine of Justification: A Challenge to the New Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

## Words for Describing Humanity in Paul's Letters

When Paul talks about human beings and the qualities of human life, he uses a number of different terms, which do not always mean what we might think they mean:

- Paul uses two words to refer to one's physical being: *body* (in Greek, *sōma*) and *flesh* (in Greek, *sarx*). His tendency is to use *body* in a neutral sense and *flesh* in a negative sense (what one is apart from God), but there are many exceptions (e.g., 2 Cor. 4:10–11).
- Paul uses two words to refer to one's innermost being: *spirit* (in Greek, *pneuma*) and *soul* (in Greek, *psychē*). To English readers, *spirit* sometimes suggests something specifically religious, and *soul* suggests something more generic, but Paul simply uses the terms as synonyms. Both refer to the aspect of humanity that can be energized by God.
- Paul uses two words to refer to the aspect of humanity that allows people to make conscious decisions: *mind* (in Greek, *nous*) and *heart* (in Greek, *kardia*). English readers might associate *mind* with intellectual activity and *heart* with emotional responses, but Paul uses the terms as synonyms.

See Joseph Fitzmyer, *Paul and His Theology*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989), 82–84.

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## Recycling Romans?

Scholars have long noted two peculiarities regarding early copies of Romans: (1) the words “in Rome” are missing from 1:7 and 1:15 in some manuscripts; (2) the entire last chapter (and sometimes the last two chapters) are missing from some manuscripts. Why? Our best guess is that the letter was recycled: copies were made and sent around to other churches with the more specific references to Rome and the Roman Christians omitted.

Indeed, a few scholars have wondered whether our copy of the letter perhaps is not the one sent to Rome. Paul greets an unusually large number of people in chapter 16. Could he have known that many people in a church that he had never visited? Or, instead, is it more likely that this section of the epistle is an addendum attached to a copy of the letter sent to some other church (some of the people mentioned appear to have been associated with Ephesus)? That is possible, but most scholars think that Paul knew people who had moved to Rome, and he may have made a special point to mention them all in order to establish connections with the church there.

More serious discussion attends the last three verses of the letter as it appears in English Bibles (16:25–27). Due to a host of manuscript problems, many scholars believe these verses were composed by someone other than Paul and added to one of the truncated versions of the letter to provide a suitable closing.

## Romans 7: Who Is Wretched?

There has been considerable discussion over the years concerning Paul's seemingly self-deprecating remarks in Romans 7 (especially 7:7–24). He appears to call himself a "wretched man" (7:24), and he says, "I do not do what I want but I do the very thing I hate. . . . I can will what is right, but I cannot do it" (7:15, 18). He even says that he is "sold into slavery under sin" (7:14), which seems to contradict what he said earlier about Christians being set free from slavery to sin (6:16–22).

Many readers take these verses as a classic expression of the dilemma faced by those who desire to be holy but struggle unsuccessfully with temptation. Paul testifies to the ultimate futility of human attempts at godliness; even the best efforts of the most morally conscientious will fail. Thus, all people, including Paul, must depend upon God's grace and mercy.

Other readers think that Paul is employing a rhetorical device in this section of the letter to describe what life is like apart from Christ. Paul does not speak with his own voice as a Christian in 7:7–24 but rather adopts the voice of one under the law who has not been made right with God by faith or endowed with the gift of the Holy Spirit. His use of the first person indicates that he can identify with this wretched state, for it is from such that he has been delivered (7:24–25).

The debate on this question continues, and different church traditions have appealed to their interpretation of Romans 7 to support different understandings of the Christian life: is it a life of struggle with sin or of triumph over sin?

## The Rhetoric of Romans

Paul's letter to the Romans is often examined with an interest in how the apostle chooses to make his points. Paul evinces a breadth of knowledge and employs a variety of persuasive strategies, some of which appear to be devised from his background in Judaism and others from his cosmopolitan experience of the Greco-Roman world.

### Biblical Citation

Paul draws heavily on the scriptures throughout the letter, quoting Bible passages to back up the points that he wants to make. In certain instances he uses what are called "testimony lists," presenting his readers with a whole string of verses that speak to the matter at hand. For example, the testimony list in 3:10–18 quotes the following passages in rapid succession: Psalm 14:1–3; Psalm 53:1–2; Psalm 5:9; Psalm 140:3; Psalm 10:7; Isaiah 59:7–8; Psalm 36:1. Two more testimony lists in Romans occur in 9:25–29; 15:9–12. Some scholars think that testimony lists on various topics were developed for liturgical use in the early church and that Paul is drawing upon lists that he or someone else had developed previously.

### Biblical Interpretation

Paul employs techniques of biblical interpretation associated with Jewish rabbis, taking well-known stories from the scriptures and explaining their contemporary meaning in creative ways. In chapter 4, he recalls the story of Abraham, whose faith was "reckoned to him as righteousness" (4:3). The significant point is that God did not regard Abraham as righteous because Abraham kept the Jewish law. That law had not even been given yet. Rather, God regarded Abraham as righteous because he trusted in God's promise. Furthermore, Paul points out that this was before Abraham was circumcised, which means that he was essentially still a Gentile (4:9–12). Thus, Abraham, the great ancestor of the Jewish people, becomes an ironic example of how Gentiles (and Jews) are put right with God through faith. Later, in chapter 5, Paul pushes the frame of reference back beyond Abraham to Adam, the ancestor of all humanity. Both Jews and Gentiles are descended from Adam, and both inherit the consequences of his sin. But Jesus Christ comes as a new Adam, and his act of righteousness changes those consequences. Paul sets up an analogy: one man's transgression meant condemnation for all, and now one man's righteousness can mean justification for all (5:18).

### Stoic Philosophy

In his letter to the Romans, Paul seems to draw upon some key concepts from Stoic philosophy, which might have been part of the conceptual background for his Gentile readers. This is seen most clearly in the first part of the letter, where Paul contends that God's invisible nature is discernible through reflection on the natural world (1:20). The idea that certain patterns of behavior are "unnatural" (1:26) also invokes the Stoic tradition of grounding ethics in "natural law," and Paul's appeal to "conscience" in 2:15 employs a word that never occurs in the Old Testament but figures mightily in Stoic thought (see also 9:1; 13:5; 1 Cor. 8:7, 10, 12; 10:29; 2 Cor. 1:12; 4:2; 5:11).

## Diatribes

At several points in this letter, Paul employs a rhetorical style of argument known as “diatribe.” In essence, this consists of dialogue with an imaginary partner. In addition to posing questions for his readers to consider (2:3–4, 21–23; 7:1; 8:31–35; 9:19–21, 30; 10:14–15; 11:34–35), Paul responds to questions that he anticipates they might want to ask him. For example, he asks, “Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision?” (3:1). And later he begins a new discussion by asking, “What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?” (6:1). In such cases, Paul appears to be anticipating objections that could come up in response to his letter (see also 3:3, 5, 8; 6:15; 7:7, 13; 11:1, 11). He then demonstrates that he is a step ahead of potentially argumentative readers: he has already thought about the points that they will raise and is able to address their concerns.

## Analogies from Daily Life

Paul tries to explain some of his theological points by drawing comparisons to social institutions and other phenomena with which his readers would be familiar. He invokes the institution of *slavery* to liken the new life Christians experience to a transfer of ownership: those who were once “slaves of sin” are now “slaves of righteousness” (6:16–19) or even “slaves of God” (6:22). In a different vein, he uses *adoption* to indicate that those who were once slaves are now full-fledged children of God and, indeed, heirs (8:14–17; cf. Gal. 4:5–7). He also uses *widowhood* to illustrate how someone’s death can set one free from the law: just as a woman is freed from marital laws when her husband dies, so Christians are freed from the covenant laws of Israel by the death of Christ (7:1–6). Finally, in a particularly memorable illustration, Paul uses the agricultural practice of *grafting* to explain the inclusion of Gentiles among the people of God: the Gentiles are like branches from a wild olive tree that have been grafted into the rich root of a cultivated olive tree (11:17–24).

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## Romans in the Revised Common Lectionary

Text	Series	Liturgical Occasion	Calendar Date
1:7	A	Advent 4	1 Sunday before Dec 25
1:16–17; 3:22b–28	A	Lectionary 9	May 29–Jun 4
4:1–5, 13–17	A	Lent 2	5 Sundays before Easter
4:13–25	B	Lent 2	5 Sundays before Easter
4:13–25	A	Lectionary 10	Jun 5–11
5:1–5	C	Holy Trinity	9 Sundays after Easter
5:1–8	A	Lectionary 11	Jun 12–18
5:1–11	A	Lent 3	4 Sundays before Easter
5:12–19	A	Lent 1	6 Sundays before Easter
6:1b–11	A	Lectionary 12	Jun 19–25
6:12–23	A	Lectionary 13	Jun 26–Jul 2
7:15–25a	A	Lectionary 14	Jul 3–9
8:1–11	A	Lectionary 15	Jul 10–16
8:6–11	A	Lent 5	2 Sundays before Easter
8:12–17	B	Holy Trinity	9 Sundays after Easter
8:12–25	A	Lectionary 16	Jul 17–23
8:14–17	C	Pentecost	8 Sundays after Easter
8:22–27	B	Pentecost	8 Sundays after Easter
8:26–39	A	Lectionary 17	Jul 24–30
9:1–5	A	Lectionary 18	Jul 31–Aug 6
10:5–15	A	Lectionary 19	Aug 7–13
10:8b–13	C	Lent 1	6 Sundays before Easter
11:1–2a, 29–32	A	Lectionary 20	Aug 14–20
12:1–8	A	Lectionary 21	Aug 21–27
12:9–21	A	Lectionary 22	Aug 28–Sep 3
13:8–14	A	Lectionary 23	Sep 4–10
13:11–14	A	Advent 1	4 Sundays before Dec 25
14:1–12	A	Lectionary 24	Sep 11–17
15:4–13	A	Advent 2	3 Sundays before Dec 25
16:25–27	B	Advent 4	1 Sunday before Dec 25

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## Corinthian Bronze

One of the most highly valued metals of the Roman world was “Corinthian bronze,” a compound of gold and silver mixed with either copper or bronze. The metal was produced in Corinth and used throughout that city to gild the tops of columns that were carved in a distinctive floral pattern. Corinthian columns (with or without the decorative overlay) became famous throughout the empire.

The origin of Corinthian bronze is lost in legend, but all sources agree that it was invented by accident. Plutarch reports that a house containing the right proportions of gold, silver, and copper caught fire, and the three metals melted together to yield a happy surprise (*Oracles* 395.2). Petronius says that the Carthaginian general Hannibal produced the first batch when he destroyed the city of Illium and burned its treasures (*Satyricon* 50). Whatever the metal’s origin, the Roman philosopher Seneca expresses sardonic disgust for consumers who were so driven by the metal’s faddish popularity that they would pay outlandish prices to own anything made of Corinthian bronze (*On Shortness of Life* 12.2; *Helvia on Consolation* 11.3). Seneca was the brother of Gallio, the proconsul of Achaia mentioned in Acts 18:12–17. Gallio was a wealthy and powerful citizen of Corinth, and we probably can assume that he had a different attitude toward avid consumers of his city’s chief export than that expressed by his intellectual sibling.

Indebted to Paul J. Achtemeier, Joel B. Green, and Marianne Meye Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 329.

## 1 Corinthians in the Revised Common Lectionary

Text	Series	Liturgical Occasion	Calendar Date
1:1–9	A	Epiphany 2	Jan 14–20
1:3–9	B	Advent 1	4 Sundays before Dec 25
1:10–18	A	Epiphany 3	Jan 21–27
1:18–25	B	Lent 3	4 Sundays before Easter
1:18–31	A	Epiphany 4	Jan 28–Feb 3
2:1–12 (13–16)	A	Epiphany 5	Feb 4–10
3:1–9	A	Epiphany 6	Feb 11–17
3:10–11, 16–23	A	Epiphany 7	Feb 18–24
4:1–5	A	Epiphany 8	Feb 25–Mar 1
4:1–5	A	Lectionary 8	May 24–28
6:12–20	B	Epiphany 2	Jan 14–20
7:29–31	B	Epiphany 3	Jan 21–27
8:1–13	B	Epiphany 4	Jan 28–Feb 3
9:16–23	B	Epiphany 5	Feb 4–10
9:24–27	B	Epiphany 6	Feb 11–17
10:1–13	C	Lent 3	4 Sundays before Easter
11:23–26	A, B, C	Maundy Thursday	1 Thursday before Easter
12:1–11	C	Epiphany 2	Jan 14–20
12:3b–13	A	Pentecost	8 Sundays after Easter
12:12–31a	C	Epiphany 3	Jan 21–27
13:1–13	C	Epiphany 4	Jan 28–Feb 3
15:1–11	C	Epiphany 5	Feb 4–10
15:12–20	C	Epiphany 6	Feb 11–17
15:19–26	C	Easter Day	Easter
15:35–38, 42–50	C	Epiphany 7	Feb 18–24
15:51–58	C	Epiphany 8	Feb 25–Mar 1
15:51–58	C	Lectionary 8	May 24–28

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## Generous Giving: Stewardship Principles from 2 Corinthians

Here is one sample of how 2 Corinthians 8–9 and related passages are used in Christian churches today. Fifteen “Stewardship Principles” for modern Christians are drawn from the writings of Paul.

1. Giving is both a duty and a delight, something that we ought to do and something that we are pleased to do (Rom. 15:27).
2. Giving is to be regular and systematic, according to a plan (1 Cor. 16:2).
3. Giving is a demonstration of God’s grace (2 Cor. 8:1; 9:14).
4. Giving need not be hampered by difficult circumstances, for even those who suffer affliction and experience poverty may exhibit generosity (2 Cor. 8:2).
5. Giving is to be voluntary, not compulsory (2 Cor. 8:3; 9:5, 7).
6. Giving should be proportionate to one’s income and circumstances, as each is expected to contribute according to his or her means (2 Cor. 8:3, 11–13).
7. Giving can also be undertaken as a sacrifice, as some will feel inspired to give “beyond their means” (2 Cor. 8:3).
8. Giving is a privilege, something that we appreciate being able to do as a result of God’s grace (2 Cor. 8:4).
9. Giving involves more than financial contributions: we first commit ourselves to the Lord and to the church at large (2 Cor. 8:5).
10. Giving is a witness to the gospel, demonstrating the genuineness of the church’s love (2 Cor. 8:8, 24).
11. Giving may involve making a pledge that the giver is committed to fulfilling over time (2 Cor. 8:10–11).
12. Giving is to represent a personal commitment: each person is to make up his or her own mind how much to give (2 Cor. 9:7).
13. Giving is to be undertaken not reluctantly, but cheerfully (2 Cor. 9:7).
14. Giving is conducted in faith that God will provide for those who give (2 Cor. 9:8–11).
15. Giving brings glory to God and leads people to give thanks to God (2 Cor. 9:11–13).

Adapted from Mark Allan Powell, *Giving to God: The Bible’s Good News about Living a Generous Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 116–17. Used by permission.

## 2 Corinthians in the Revised Common Lectionary

Text	Series	Liturgical Occasion	Calendar Date
1:18–22	B	Epiphany 7	Feb 18–24
3:1–6	B	Epiphany 8	Feb 25–Mar 1
3:1–6	B	Lectionary 8	May 24–28
3:12–4:2	C	Transfiguration	7 Sundays before Easter
4:3–6	B	Transfiguration	7 Sundays before Easter
4:5–12	B	Lectionary 9	May 29–Jun 4
4:13–5:1	B	Lectionary 10	Jun 5–11
5:6–10 (11–13), 14–17	B	Lectionary 11	Jun 12–18
5:16–21	C	Lent 4	3 Sundays before Easter
5:20b–6:10	A, B, C	Ash Wednesday	7 Wednesdays before Easter
6:1–13	B	Lectionary 12	Jun 19–25
8:7–15	B	Lectionary 13	Jun 26–Jul 2
12:2–10	B	Lectionary 14	Jul 3–9
13:11–13	A	Holy Trinity	9 Sundays after Easter

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## Galatians in the Revised Common Lectionary

Text	Series	Liturgical Occasion	Calendar Date
1:1–12	C	Lectionary 9	May 29–Jun 4
1:11–24	C	Lectionary 10	Jun 5–11
2:15–21	C	Lectionary 11	Jun 12–18
3:23–29	C	Lectionary 12	Jun 19–25
4:4–7	B	Christmas 1	1 Sunday after Dec 25
5:1, 13–25	C	Lectionary 13	Jun 26–Jul 2
6:(1–6) 7–16	C	Lectionary 14	Jul 3–9



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## Literary Siblings: Relationship of Ephesians to Colossians

Ephesians is remarkably similar to the letter of Paul to the Colossians:

- Somewhere between one-half and one-third of the 155 verses in Ephesians have close parallels to the material found in Colossians.
- In many cases, these parallels occur in the same order of presentation.
- A few passages are very close in wording (cf. Eph. 1:4 with Col. 1:22; Eph. 1:15 with Col. 1:4; Eph. 6:21–22 with Col. 4:7–8).

Most scholars believe that Colossians was written first and that whoever wrote Ephesians was familiar with the contents of that letter. This seems to make sense because Ephesians has the more generic tone, presenting general reflection on points that, in Colossians, are made with reference to a specific situation.

This allows for a number of possibilities:

- Paul wrote Colossians as a specific letter to a particular church, and then he wrote Ephesians as a more general letter dealing with the same subject matter.
- Paul wrote Colossians, and later someone else used Colossians as a template for creating Ephesians as a pseudepigraphical letter written in Paul's name.
- Paul wrote neither Colossians nor Ephesians; some pseudonymous author wrote both letters.
- One pseudonymous author wrote Colossians, and later a different pseudonymous author used Colossians as a template for creating Ephesians.

## Authorship of Ephesians

At least three different scenarios are possible, and all three have attracted considerable support from interpreters in the modern era.

### **Ephesians Was Written by the Apostle Paul.**

A common proposal is that Paul wrote the letter to the Colossians to deal with specific issues in that congregation, and then, while those thoughts were still fresh in his mind, he composed a more general letter to be taken to various churches in Asia Minor, perhaps sending the original to the favored church of Ephesus and entrusting them with the responsibility of copying and disseminating it for him. A rough analogy to such a process might be found in the letters of Galatians and Romans, the first written to deal with a particular situation, and the second covering much of the same ground in more general terms. Scholars who favor this scenario usually play down the significance of the letter's distinctive features and explain them in light of context and circumstances. Paul may have used an amanuensis or secretary to compose the letter, and the fact that he was in prison (literally in chains? [see 6:20]) may have meant that he had to grant that person more latitude with regard to the actual wording than he would have done under ideal circumstances. Furthermore, the letter reflects Paul's mature thinking, presenting more settled reflection than is evident in letters that were composed in response to immediate crises in his congregations. Its distinctive perspectives do not have to be viewed as contradictory to what is in the other letters; they may be considered representative endpoints for the trajectories of thought that are evident elsewhere.

### **Ephesians Was Written by One of Paul's Disciples after His Death.**

According to this view, the author was someone who wanted to express what the apostle Paul would have said were he still around. One version of this theory holds that Ephesians is simply a posthumous publication, composed soon after Paul's execution as "the letter that Paul had intended to write" and presenting (in the language of one of his disciples) what had been on the apostle's mind in his final days. Another version of this theory allows that Ephesians may have been written some years later (in the 70s or 80s) by someone who felt authorized to speak for Paul and who thought that writing in his name was an appropriate way to honor him and keep the Pauline tradition alive. In any case, if the letter was in fact produced by one of Paul's disciples, who might that person have been? Timothy is listed as a co-author for Colossians, so his name comes to mind. Other suggestions are more creative: Onesimus, the runaway slave whom Paul sent back to Philemon and who, according to some traditions, later became a bishop in Ephesus (see pages 424–25 of the printed book); Luke the physician, who may be the author of the Gospel and Acts, and who is said to have been with Paul during his Roman imprisonment (Col. 4:14; Philem. 24); or Tychicus the presumed bearer of the letter, who is then thought to have copied what Paul said about him in Colossians (4:7) and placed it at the end of Ephesians (6:21) as something of a secret signature. This is all speculation, of course, and



scholars who hold to this theory of authorship usually are content to ascribe Ephesians to “Paul’s best disciple,” by which they mean one who possessed the brilliance and eloquence to produce a theological masterpiece, along with the humility to give his departed teacher the credit for it. Those who hold this view maintain that it accounts both for the basic continuity with Pauline thought that is evident in Ephesians and for those elements that they do not believe can be attributed to the apostle: what we have in Ephesians is the ideas of Paul filtered through the mind of an extraordinarily gifted apprentice.

### **Ephesians Was Written by a Later Admirer of Paul Who Had Not Actually Known Him.**

A third position allows that Ephesians was written by someone who wanted to use Paul’s revered name to promote their own ideas (and who, no doubt, thought that he was honoring the apostle by giving him credit for those ideas and so continuing his legacy). Scholars who hold to this view often claim that Ephesians has much in common with the works of church leaders who wrote in the second century. Its elevation of the church, in particular, marks a transition from the Christianity of Paul’s day to what may be termed “early catholicism.” The assumption is that the person or group responsible for Ephesians was familiar with Colossians and accentuated the movement toward high ecclesiology that was already evident in that writing; in copying the style and format of that letter, the author of Ephesians for some reason failed to reproduce the greetings and other personal elements that would have made Ephesians look more like a typical Pauline production. Nevertheless, the letter managed to gain acceptance almost immediately as a genuine letter of Paul; such acceptance may have been facilitated by its intrinsic appeal (as beautiful and elegant), by its superficial contact with Pauline terminology, and by its elevation of ecclesiastical authorities (2:20; 3:5; 4:11), who, after all, were in the position to make judgments on whether a work was genuine or not. Scholars who hold to this view tend to read Ephesians as expressive of a decidedly post-Pauline perspective that reveals how Christians of a later generation had developed some of his ideas in directions that he himself may not have taken.

### **Conclusion**

These different views regarding the authorship of Ephesians lead to different ways of interpreting the letter. As one scholar has noted, Ephesians is variously read as

- “the mature fruit of Paul’s thought”
- “an inspired re-interpretation of Paul’s thought”
- “the beginning distortion of Paul’s thought”\*

\*See Nils Dahl, “Ephesians,” in *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible: Supplementary Volume*, ed. Keith Crim (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), 268.

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## A Life Worthy of the Calling

Ephesians 4:1–5:20 offers these “dos and don’ts” with regard to Christian behavior.

### Do

- be humble and gentle (4:2)
- be patient, bearing with one another in love (4:2)
- make every effort to maintain unity and peace (4:3)
- speak the truth in love to others in the body (4:15)
- speak truth, not falsehood, to neighbors (4:25)
- work honestly at manual labor (4:28)
- be sufficiently productive to share with the needy (4:28)
- speak only words that impart grace and edify others (4:29)
- be kind to one another (4:32)
- be tenderhearted, forgiving one another (4:32)
- be imitators of God (5:1)
- live in love, as Christ loved us (5:2)
- offer thanksgiving (5:4)
- try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord (5:10)
- expose the secret and shameful works of darkness (5:11–12)
- be careful to live wisely (5:15)
- make the most of the time (5:16)
- understand what the will of the Lord is (5:17)
- be filled with the Spirit (5:18)
- sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs (5:19)
- give thanks to God at all times and for everything (5:20)
- be subject to one another in reverence for Christ (5:21)
- be strong in the Lord and stand firm (6:10, 14)
- pray at all times (6:18)

### Don’t

- be tossed about by every wind of doctrine (4:14)
- fall prey to people’s trickery, craftiness, or deceitful scheming (4:14)
- pursue licentiousness or impure practices (4:19–20)
- yield to lust (4:22)
- let the sun go down on anger (4:26)
- make room for the devil (4:27)
- steal (4:28)
- let evil talk come out of your mouth (4:29)
- grieve the Holy Spirit of God (4:30)
- hold on to bitterness, wrath, anger, wrangling, slander, or malice (4:31)
- even mention fornication, impurity of any kind, or greed (5:3)
- make any allowance for obscene, silly, or vulgar talk (5:4)
- let anyone deceive you with empty words (5:6)
- associate with deceivers or the disobedient (5:7)
- take part in the unfruitful works of darkness (5:11)
- be foolish (5:17)
- get drunk with wine (5:18)

## Ephesians in the Revised Common Lectionary

Text	Series	Liturgical Occasion	Calendar Date
1:3–14	A, B, C	Christmas 2	2 Sundays after Dec 25
1:3–14	B	Lectionary 15	Jul 10–16
1:11–23	C	All Saints' Day	Nov 1
1:15–23	A, B, C	Ascension Day	6 Thursdays before Easter
1:15–23	A	Christ the King	Nov 20–26
2:1–10	B	Lent 4	3 Sundays before Easter
2:11–22	B	Lectionary 16	Jul 17–23
3:1–12	A, B, C	Epiphany Day	Jan 6
3:14–21	B	Lectionary 17	Jul 24–30
4:1–16	B	Lectionary 18	Jul 31–Aug 6
4:25–5:2	B	Lectionary 19	Aug 7–13
5:8–14	A	Lent 4	3 Sundays before Easter
5:15–20	B	Lectionary 20	Aug 14–20
6:10–20	B	Lectionary 21	Aug 21–27

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## Paul in Prison

What was prison like in the days of Paul?

The purpose of imprisonment in the Roman world was neither reform nor punishment; it was simply a means of confining those awaiting judgment. Prisoners were held prior to trial; once a verdict was rendered, they might be executed, beaten, or sent into exile, but normally they would not be sentenced to more time in captivity.

In terms of physical accommodations, most prison cells were basically dungeons—dark, dank facilities where people could be kept captive, often in chains, until the authorities were ready to deal with them. Sometimes, however, respectable individuals could be held under a form of “house arrest,” guarded by soldiers but allowed a relative measure of comfort and freedom. According to the book of Acts, Paul experienced both the best (28:16, 30–31) and the worst (16:23–24) of these possible forms of captivity at different points in his career (cf. 2 Cor. 11:23).

In Philippians, Paul says that he is “in chains” (1:7, 13, 14, 17 [the Greek word *desmos*, translated “imprisonment” in many English Bibles, actually means “chain”). Is he literally in chains, or does he mean that in a metaphorical sense? Many interpreters think that his ability to converse with his colleagues, receive gifts, and dictate this letter implies something closer to “house arrest.” Whatever the conditions, imprisonment always brought social disgrace, casting aspersions on the prisoner’s reputation and generating a significant loss of honor. Paul tries to turn this factor to his own ironic advantage: he will not be put to shame if his own humiliation results in the exaltation of Christ (1:20).

The New Testament contains four other letters that indicate they were written by Paul from prison: Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, and 2 Timothy. Together with Philippians, the five books are sometimes called the “Captivity Epistles” or the “Prison Letters.”



## How Many Letters to Philippi?

Polycarp, a second-century bishop, mentions letters of Paul to the Philippians. Did Paul write more than one letter to this church? Some scholars believe that the letter to the Philippians in our Bibles is actually a composite of two or three letters that Paul wrote at different times.

- 3:1a; 4:8–9; 4:21–23 sound like possible conclusions to letters.
- 3:1b–4:3 has a different tone than the rest of the letter (warnings against enemies in a letter that is otherwise happy and confident).
- 4:10–20 expresses thanksgiving for a gift, which typically came at the beginning of a letter rather than at the end.
- 2:25–30 speaks of Epaphroditus returning to Philippi after a protracted illness, but 4:18 refers to him as if he has just arrived.

A *Two-Letter Theory* suggests that Paul wrote one letter (3:1b–4:20) when Epaphroditus first arrived and another letter (1:1–3:1a; 4:21–23) after Epaphroditus recovered from sickness. A *Three-Letter Theory* suggests that Paul wrote an early thank-you note (4:10–20), a follow-up letter that was hopeful and confident (1:1–3:1a; 4:4–7, 21–23), and a third letter to address problems in the church (3:1b–4:3; 4:8–9). In either case, a later editor is supposed to have woven the different letters together to form the one that we now have in our Bibles.

There is no solid evidence to support these proposals, but many scholars think that Philippians makes better sense when its contents are reorganized into two or three different compositions. Others find such theories an unnecessary imposition; they assume that Paul dictated the letter over a period of time in a way that allows shifts in his thought and mood.

## Philippians in the Revised Common Lectionary

Text	Series	Liturgical Occasion	Calendar Date
1:3–11	C	Advent 2	3 Sundays before Dec 25
1:21–30	A	Lectionary 25	Sep 18–24
2:1–13	A	Lectionary 26	Sep 25–Oct 1
2:5–11	A, B, C	Passion Sunday	1 Sunday before Easter
3:4b–14	C	Lent 5	2 Sundays before Easter
3:4b–14	A	Lectionary 27	Oct 2–8
3:17–4:1	C	Lent 2	5 Sundays before Easter
4:1–9	A	Lectionary 28	Oct 9–15
4:4–7	C	Advent 3	2 Sundays before Dec 25

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## The Letter from Laodicea

The recipients of the letter to the Colossians are told,

When this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans, and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea. (Col. 4:16)

What was this “letter from Laodicea” that the Colossians were to read?

- The traditional view is that Paul wrote a letter to the Laodiceans that has not survived. Some Christians throughout history have been bothered by the notion of such a work being lost, and at least two different people in the second century took it upon themselves to “fill the gap” by writing letters from Paul to the Laodiceans that could be included in the Christian canon. One of these apparently reflected the ideas of the heretic Marcion, and we know of it only because certain documents (e.g., the Muratorian Canon) warn churches not to be tricked into using it. But another “Letter to the Laodiceans” was very brief and uncontroversial: a pastiche of pious verses that seem to have been stitched together from other letters of Paul. This latter book became extremely popular and was found in Latin manuscripts of the New Testament down through the Middle Ages. The text of this apocryphal work appears in Bart Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It into the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 164.
- An alternative suggestion holds that the letter mentioned in Colossians 4:16 is actually the letter that we know as Paul’s epistle to the Ephesians; the fact that it is called “the letter *from* Laodicea” might indicate that it was sent to Ephesus with instructions for it to be passed on to Laodicea and then, from there, sent to Colossae. This theory receives some support from the fact that a second-century writer (the aforementioned heretic Marcion, ironically) refers to the letter that we know as Ephesians as Paul’s “Letter to the Laodiceans.” Did he have a copy of “Ephesians” that was associated with Laodicea? We can only speculate, but if our letter to the Ephesians was in fact the “letter from Laodicea” that Paul had in mind, then that letter has not been lost after all.

## What Was the “Colossian Heresy”?

More than forty different proposals have been offered regarding the nature of the philosophy that the letter to the Colossians seeks to oppose. Here are some sample suggestions:

- a Jewish-Christian movement that insisted Gentile Christians must be circumcised and keep the law of Moses, similar to “the Judaizers” opposed by Paul in Galatians (see Gal. 3:19; 4:3–9)
- an esoteric and rigorous form of Judaism, comparable to that practiced by the Essenes at Qumran
- a mystical form of Judaism, like the Merkabah tradition, so named because asceticism and strict adherence to the law allowed devotees to travel in the spirit to the heavenly throne room in a celestial chariot called a *merkabah*
- a syncretistic religious amalgam of beliefs, combining elements from Jewish tradition with elements of astral religion
- some variety of a Greco-Roman “mystery religion” that emphasized the hidden nature of spiritual truth revealed only to the spiritually elite
- incipient Gnosticism, a precursor of what would develop into prominent antimaterialist religious systems in the second century CE
- Pythagorean philosophy—based on the teaching of Pythagoras (sixth century BCE), who thought that the sun, moon, and stars were spirits that control human destiny, and that the human soul must be purified through ascetic practices (see Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 8.24–33)

## Authorship of Colossians

Colossians is somewhat different from the undisputed letters of Paul in both style and theology.

- *Style*: Colossians uses more long sentences (both 1:3–8 and 2:8–15 are just one sentence in Greek), more redundant adjectives (e.g., “holy and blameless and irreproachable” [1:22]), far more participles and relative clauses, and far fewer conjunctions.
- *Theology*: Colossians is said to evince a higher Christology, a more developed ecclesiology, and a more “realized” view of eschatology (i.e., more emphasis on present benefits than future hope).

These observations lead scholars to question whether the letter was actually written by Paul or whether it should be regarded as a pseudepigraphical composition. At least three different scenarios are possible.

### Colossians Was Written by Paul the Apostle.

A number of scholars think that Colossians was indeed written by Paul. They note that there are stylistic differences between Colossians and the other letters of Paul, but they assume that these can be explained by Paul’s use of a secretary or amanuensis—someone who did not simply “take dictation” but instead had responsibility for crafting the letter as a literary composition. This person’s role may have been weightier with regard to this particular letter because Paul was in prison and unable to participate as actively in the composition of the letter as he might have done otherwise. Furthermore, those who believe that Paul wrote the letter think that the theological developments noted above can be explained as a consequence of Paul responding to the false philosophy at Colossae. Most scholars who see Paul as the author of Colossians think that it probably was written near the end of his life, from his final imprisonment in Rome (since that would allow for the greater development of ideas that do not recur in other letters). It is also assumed, however, that he wrote the letter prior to the earthquake that hit the city in 61. Thus a likely date for Colossians would be around 60, early in Paul’s Roman imprisonment. He sent the letter to the church by Tychicus (4:7) with instructions that it be read aloud to the church and then exchanged with the church of Laodicea, which was in possession of another letter (4:16).

### Alternative Suggestions

- *Suggestion 1*: The letter may have been written by Paul from Caesarea, where he was kept in prison for two years prior to being sent to Rome (see Acts 23:31–26:32). See Bo Reicke, “Caesarea, Rome and the Captivity Epistles,” in *Apostolic History and the Gospel*, ed. W. Ward Gasque and Ralph P. Martin (Exeter: Paternoster, 1970), 277–86.
- *Suggestion 2*: Colossians was written by Paul during a still earlier imprisonment in the city of Ephesus. See Ralph P. Martin, *Colossians and Philemon*, 2nd ed., NGenBC (London: Oliphants, 1978), 22–32.



### **Colossians Was Written by a Disciple of Paul.**

A second proposal allows that Paul did not write this letter himself but rather that the author was someone closely associated with Paul and well versed in his theology. For instance, the letter might have been written by Timothy, who, doing his best to express what Paul would have wanted to say, included Paul's name as co-author. Some scholars have even suggested that Paul was still alive and was willing to authorize the letter (and sign it), even if everything was not worded exactly as he would have preferred had the conditions of his imprisonment not prevented him from taking a more active part in the actual composition. If some such scenario lies behind the production of Colossians, then the date and provenance would still be as suggested above, around 60 from Rome.

### **Colossians Was Written by Later Followers of Paul's Theology.**

Some scholars think that the development of ideas evident in the letter evinces a second generation of thought not likely to have been embraced by Paul or his contemporaries. Accordingly, the letter must have been written several years after Paul's death. It may have been produced within a circle of Pauline devotees who felt that they could confidently affix his name to the piece. This proposal resolves both the anomaly of the letter's distinctive style and the problem of its distinctive theology. It does seem curious to some, however, that Pauline students would choose Colossae as the destination for a pseudepigraphical letter—a church that Paul did not found and had never visited, in a town that in the year 61 had been destroyed by an earthquake. The usual rationale offered for this seemingly odd choice of Colossae is that the Pauline students were using Paul's letter to Philemon as a reference, and that letter had been sent to Colossae (where Philemon apparently lived). Other scholars, however, think that if this theory is accepted, then the alleged signature to Colossians (4:18) and putative personal references that are contained in this letter would have to be regarded as a deliberate attempt to deceive readers into believing that the letter had been penned at an earlier time, by Paul himself. Would Paul's students have perpetrated such a fraud? Those who advocate for such a scenario believe that this is an anachronistic view of "authorship": the ancient world, they claim, was open to the literary fiction of pseudepigraphical writing and did not consider it deceptive. Proponents of this view usually date Colossians to the 80s and view it as marking a transitional phase between the authentic theology of Paul represented by the seven undisputed letters and the "deutero-Pauline theology" that comes to fuller expression in the (also pseudepigraphical) letter to the Ephesians.

### **Conclusion**

The decision about whether Paul wrote Colossians usually depends on the amount of latitude that an interpreter is willing to grant Paul with regard to consistency of expression and development of thought. The question becomes this: Is it possible (or likely) that the person responsible for the undisputed letters could also have thought this way and allowed his thoughts to be expressed in this manner?

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## Divine Wisdom and the “Colossian Hymn”

Colossians 1:15–20 describes the exalted Christ in words that probably derive from an early Christian hymn or confession:

<sup>15</sup>He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation;  
<sup>16</sup>for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible,  
 whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers  
 —all things have been created through him and for him.  
<sup>17</sup>He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.  
<sup>18</sup>He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead,  
 so that he might come to have first place in everything.  
<sup>19</sup>For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,  
<sup>20</sup>and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things,  
 whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

These verses also provide us with a clue as to how such an understanding of Christ might have developed in the early church. Many of the ideas attributed to Christ in Colossians 1:15–20 were also attached to the personified figure of Wisdom in certain Jewish writings that were familiar to Paul and other Jewish Christians at the time. Look at these statements from the book of Proverbs and two writings from the Old Testament Apocrypha, Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon:

- Wisdom is “a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness” (Wis. 7:26; cf. Col. 1:15, 19).
- Wisdom was “before all things” (Sir. 1:4; cf. Col. 1:17).
- Wisdom was present with God before creation (Prov. 8:22–31; cf. Col. 1:15).
- Wisdom served as God’s agent through whom everything in heaven and earth was made (Prov. 3:19; 8:27–31; Wis. 7:22; 8:4–6; 9:2; cf. Col. 1:16).
- Wisdom “holds all things together” and “orders all things well” (Wis. 1:7; 8:1; cf. Col. 1:17).
- Wisdom reconciles people to God, making them to be “friends of God” (Wis. 7:14, 27; cf. Col. 1:20).

This is poetic language, and we do not know how literally readers would have taken it (did they believe that Wisdom was an actual divine being?). Still, the words of what is sometimes called the “Colossian Hymn” (Col. 1:15–20) apply to Christ what these sacred Jewish texts said about Wisdom. This is a good indication of one prominent resource that early Christians used in coming to understand who Jesus Christ was in relation to God and in relation to the world.

## “Realized Eschatology”: What Would Paul Think?

The letter of Colossians is often said to espouse a “realized eschatology” according to which believers have already been “raised with Christ” (2:12; 3:1). This is different from what Paul says in his “undisputed letters” (the letters that all scholars agree were written by him). Paul says in his undisputed letters that believers have been “crucified with Christ” (Rom. 6:6; Gal. 2:20); he says that they have “died with Christ” (Rom. 6:8); he even says that they have been “buried with Christ” (Rom. 6:4). But he does not say that they have been raised with Christ.

Scholars who think that Colossians is pseudepigraphical point to the “realized eschatology” of the letter as a prime example of a development in Pauline thought that the apostle himself would have rejected. Paul, they say, did not like the idea of “realized eschatology” because it encourages an unrealistic faith that cannot hold up to the experience of suffering in the present age. Paul regards “sharing in Christ’s resurrection” as an experience that is reserved for the future (Rom. 6:5, 8; Phil. 3:10–12). He is careful to preserve a distinction between what is “already” and what is “not yet.”

Scholars who think that Paul is the author of Colossians grant that the language used here is not characteristic of him, but they claim that the basic concept of Christ’s resurrection empowering one’s present life (Phil. 4:13) and defining one’s current status (Phil. 3:20) is consistent with Paul’s general outlook. Furthermore, they maintain that Colossians does not relax the dichotomy between what is “already” and what is “not yet” completely. In Colossians, the mystery of the gospel is expressed in one phrase: “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (1:27; cf. 2:2; 4:3). In that defining dictum, the dichotomy remains: “Christ in you” is *already* (it is a present experience); “glory” is *not yet* (it remains a future hope [cf. 1:5; 3:4]).

## Slaves and Masters

Colossians 3:18–4:1 presents a *Haustafel* (table of household responsibilities) similar to the one found in Ephesians 5:21–6:9. This one emphasizes the duties of slaves, perhaps because of a recent issue in the congregation in which Onesimus, the slave of Philemon, had run away from his master, only to be sent back to him by Paul (Philem. 8–18; cf. Col. 4:9). As in Paul's approach to that situation, the attitude toward slavery here in Colossians is ambiguous.

On the one hand, slaves are instructed to obey their masters in everything (3:22 [on this, cf. Eph. 6:1–5; 1 Tim. 6:1–2; Titus 2:9–10; 1 Pet. 2:18–21]). On the other hand, masters are instructed to treat their slaves with *isotēs* (the word translated "fairly" by the NRSV in 4:1) in recognition of their equality before God. For those whom Christ has clothed with a new way of being human (3:10), the distinction between "slave and free" has become ultimately meaningless (3:11).

## Colossians and the Nicene Creed

The influence of Colossians can be seen in the language of the Nicene Creed, recited regularly by many Christians as a summary of their faith.

The Nicene Creed affirms that through Christ “all things were made,” including “heaven and earth” and “all that is, seen and unseen.”

Compare Colossians: “In him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible” (1:16).

The Nicene Creed identifies Christ as “true God of true God” and “of one Being with the Father.”

Compare Colossians: Christ is “the image of the invisible God” (1:15) and the one in whom “all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (1:19).

The Nicene Creed says that Christ “became incarnate” and “became truly human.”

Compare Colossians: Christ, who was before all things (1:17), took on a “fleshly body” (1:22) so that God could dwell in him “bodily” (2:9).

The Nicene Creed affirms that Christ was raised from the dead and that he ascended into heaven, where he is “seated at the right hand of the Father.”

Compare Colossians: Christ has been raised and “is seated at the right hand of God” (3:1).

The Nicene Creed affirms that Christ “will come again in glory.”

Compare Colossians: Christ will be revealed “in glory” (3:4).

## Colossians in the Revised Common Lectionary

Text	Series	Liturgical Occasion	Calendar Date
1:1–14	C	Lectionary 15	Jul 10–16
1:11–20	C	Christ the King	Nov 20–26
1:15–28	C	Lectionary 16	Jul 17–23
2:6–15 (16–19)	C	Lectionary 17	Jul 24–30
3:1–4	A	Easter Day	Easter
3:1–11	C	Lectionary 18	Jul 31–Aug 6
3:12–17	C	Christmas 1	1 Sunday after Dec 25

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## 1 Thessalonians in the Revised Common Lectionary

Text	Series	Liturgical Occasion	Calendar Date
1:1–10	A	Lectionary 29	Oct 16–22
2:1–8	A	Lectionary 30	Oct 23–29
2:9–13	A	Lectionary 31	Oct 30–Nov 5
3:9–13	C	Advent 1	4 Sundays before Dec 25
4:13–18	A	Lectionary 32	Nov 6–12
5:1–11	A	Lectionary 33	Nov 13–19
5:16–24	B	Advent 3	2 Sundays before Dec 25

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## Authorship of 2 Thessalonians

### Reasons for Doubting Pauline Authorship

- Some scholars think it odd that Paul would repeat so much of what he said in 1 Thessalonians in a second letter written to the same people a few months later. Although 2 Thessalonians is a relatively short letter, about one-third of its contents overlap closely with what Paul just told the Thessalonians in the previous letter. Even the format of the two letters is similar. For example, 1 Thessalonians contains two thanksgivings (1:2; 2:13) and two benedictions (3:11–13; 5:23), a peculiarity that is not typical of Paul's style but that is repeated in 2 Thessalonians, which also has two thanksgivings (1:3; 2:13) and two benedictions (2:16–17; 3:16). Such duplicated irregularities give the impression that someone might have used 1 Thessalonians as a template for creating "a typical Pauline letter" without realizing that these features were not actually characteristic of Paul's style.
- Some scholars think that the advice given in 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12 actually contradicts what Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5:1–3. In the latter text, Paul indicates that the day of the Lord could come at any time and will come without warning. The "new teaching" in 2 Thessalonians claims that the day of the Lord cannot come until other things happen, events that will allow believers to know when Jesus is about to return.
- The fact that the Thessalonians were previously alarmed when some members of their church died before the second coming (see 1 Thess. 4:13–18) seems hard to reconcile with the claim here that Paul believed that the end was not yet at hand and that he had taught this to the Thessalonians when he was with them (2 Thess. 2:5). At the very least, some scholars say, if Paul actually believed the teaching about the end times expressed in 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12, he would have responded to the crisis dealt with in 1 Thessalonians differently: he would have told them, "Of course some people are going to die, because the end is not yet at hand!"
- Some scholars think that 2 Thessalonians' overt "claim to authenticity" actually counts against its acceptance as one of Paul's genuine letters. The author alludes to the possibility that some forged letters from Paul might be circulating (2:2) and then goes out of his way to prove that this one is not a forgery: "I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the mark in every letter of mine. This is the way I write" (3:17). Some scholars claim that this is exactly the kind of thing that a forger would do in order to pass a letter off as being by Paul. Furthermore, such a claim to authenticity would be anachronistic for a letter actually written by Paul early in his ministry because we have no reason to believe that anyone was forging letters by Paul at that point. The forgeries came later, when the controversial missionary had come to be more highly respected within the church and his letters had been accorded some degree of authority.

### Reasons for Affirming Pauline Authorship

First, none of the arguments given above are totally convincing:



- It is possible that Paul would have repeated much of the content from one letter in a follow-up letter (especially since he seems to think that the Thessalonians need to be reminded of things).
- It is possible that his thinking on a subject as mysterious as the end times could have been inconsistent or paradoxical. We note, for example, that the author of Mark's Gospel has no trouble including material that maintains that the end is coming soon and will be unpredictable (13:30–37) alongside material that describes events that must happen first and that may be regarded as signs for knowing the moment is near (13:5–8, 10, 14, 21–29).
- It is possible that Paul emphasized different aspects of his beliefs at different times, depending on which pastoral concern needed to be addressed. When comforting grief-stricken people who longed to be reunited with their loved ones, he stressed that the end was coming soon; when dealing with folks who worried that the time may have already come and that they had missed it, he indicated that other things must happen first.
- It is possible that Paul in fact did have to worry about people using his name to promote their own ideas even when his status as an apostolic authority in the church was more limited and localized.

Second, pseudepigraphy in this instance is highly unlikely:

- The strong, explicit claim that 2 Thessalonians makes to authenticity (with words in Paul's own handwriting) rules out any consideration of it having been produced pseudepigraphically under honorable conditions (e.g., by disciples who wanted to continue their master's work and humbly give him credit for what he had inspired). In this case, if the letter is not by Paul then it must be regarded as a forgery, offered by someone guilty of perpetrating the very sort of fraud that 3:17 warns against. The pseudepigraphical author would have to be regarded as an unscrupulous hypocrite. It is unlikely that such a person would be motivated to produce a letter that evinces the high moral values of this composition.
- The letter was unanimously accepted as an authentic composition of Paul in the early church (from the mid-first century on). It is intrinsically unlikely that all Christians would have been so easily hoodwinked by a letter claiming to be from the first part of Paul's ministry if it had in fact been produced some decades after his death. Church officials were on the lookout for pseudepigraphical writings and in fact rejected dozens of works for which authorship was doubtful; however, no one ever questioned the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians.
- One of the letter's central claims is that the day of the Lord will not come until after the "lawless one" perpetrates some sort of abomination in the temple of God (2 Thess. 2:3–4). It seems unlikely that a pseudepigraphical author would have written this after 70, the year when the temple was destroyed; and if the letter was written before 70, it might much more easily have been produced during Paul's lifetime, and thus by Paul himself.

## Some Sample Views

- One proposal is that 2 Thessalonians represents a claim to speak for “the real Paul” on the part of some strand of post-Pauline Christianity that is competing with other strands of Pauline Christianity that may be making similar claims. See Frank Witt Hughes, *Early Christian Rhetoric and 2 Thessalonians*, JSNTSup 30 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989).
- Another proposal regards both letters as coming from Paul and explains their differences in terms of pastoral responses to diverse crises. See Charles H. Giblin, *The Threat to Faith: An Exegetical and Theological Re-Examination of 2 Thessalonians 2*, AnBib 31 (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1967); Colin R. Nicholl, *From Hope to Despair in Thessalonica: Situating 1 and 2 Thessalonians*, SNTSMS 126 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
- A mediating position holds that the letter was not written by Paul but that it was written to the Thessalonian church, probably by Timothy or one of Paul’s other companions. See Karl P. Donfried, “The Theology of 2 Thessalonians,” in *The Theology of the Shorter Pauline Letters*, NTT (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 84–87.
- A minority position holds that 2 Thessalonians might have been written (by Paul) prior to 1 Thessalonians. See Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 37–45.

## Conclusion

The bottom line is that scholars remain undecided on this issue. Many think it likely that Paul did not write this letter and that he would not even have approved of it, but many others think it more likely that Paul did write it. Most interpreters will admit that the evidence is not completely compelling either way.

## Antecedents for an Antichrist

Several New Testament writings speak of an ultimate enemy of God who will arise in the last days to deceive many people and establish himself as an object of worship. In 2 Thessalonians this person is called “the lawless one” (2:3–9); elsewhere he is referred to as the “beast” (Rev. 13:1–18) or the “antichrist” (1 John 2:18).

Christian teaching about this eschatological foe has prototypes in biblical and secular history:

- The king of Babylon is depicted as God’s archenemy in Isaiah 14:12–15.
- The prince and king of Tyre are described as setting themselves against God in Ezekiel 28:1–19.
- A beast that opposes God is referred to in the writings of Daniel (7:7–8, 19–27; 8:9–14, 23–25; 9:26–27; 11:21–45; note especially the abomination in the temple in 11:31; cf. Matt. 24:15; 2 Thess. 2:4).
- In 39–41 CE the Roman emperor Caligula decided to put a statue of himself inside the Jerusalem temple for the Jews to worship; he died before actually doing so, but Jews and Christians remained appalled by the intended abomination.
- In the years following Nero’s death in 68 CE, rumors circulated that the emperor would rise from the dead as a god opposed to the Jewish-Christian God; this myth of *Nero redivivus* seems to have inspired some comments about the beast in Revelation 13.

## 2 Thessalonians in the Revised Common Lectionary

<b>Text</b>	<b>Series</b>	<b>Liturgical Occasion</b>	<b>Calendar Date</b>
1:1-4, 11-12	C	Lectionary 31	Oct 30–Nov 5
2:1-5, 13-17	C	Lectionary 32	Nov 6–12
3:6-13	C	Lectionary 33	Nov 13–19

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## Authorship of the Pastoral Letters

### Arguments for the Letters Being Pseudepigraphical

Scholars who argue that these letters are pseudonymous usually do so with reference to six key points.

#### ***The Language and Style Are Not Typical of Paul's Letters.***

In 1 Timothy and Titus there is no thanksgiving in the opening, which is out of character with Paul's letters (except for Galatians, where he seems to have omitted it in anger); likewise, they have no formal closing, other than a brief blessing. Furthermore, the vocabulary of the Pastoral Letters is strikingly different from that of other letters ascribed to Paul. In general, the Pastoral Letters employ a vocabulary closer to that of popular Greek philosophers and ethical teachers, whereas Paul's undisputed letters have more in common with the Septuagint (a Greek translation of the Old Testament). Curiously, the distinctive language of the Pastoral Letters bears many similarities to the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, and comparisons to the writings of second-century Christians are even more pronounced. This distinctive vocabulary might be explained as a result of Paul trusting an amanuensis with the task of composing the letters, but Paul uses secretaries for other letters without such noticeable effect; for example, Tertius serves as his amanuensis for Romans (Rom. 16:22), but the language and style of that letter is wholly compatible with other Pauline letters.

#### ***Certain Theological Ideas Are Different.***

Many scholars believe that numerous ideas are developed in the Pastoral Letters in ways that differ from or even conflict with what is found in letters universally acknowledged as Pauline. Salvation is linked to the epiphany (appearance) of Christ (1 Tim. 3:16; 2 Tim. 1:9–10; Titus 2:11; 3:4), while the cross and resurrection of Christ are virtually ignored (except for 2 Tim. 2:8). The Pastoral Letters speak of Christ in exalted language: Jesus is not just "Lord"; he is "King of kings and Lord of lords" (1 Tim. 6:15); he is "our great God and Savior" (Titus 2:13). In another vein, words such as *righteousness* and *faith* are used here in a way that accents the human dynamic ("right behavior," "correct belief") rather than an activity of God that inspires trust. And in general terms, the Pastoral Letters seem to betray an increased sense of accommodation with the world. They envision Christianity as making a home for itself in Roman society, achieving social respectability, and settling in for the long haul (see box 21.6 in the printed textbook). This might be at odds with the usual perspective of Paul, who thought that the end of all things was near (1 Cor. 7:29–31; 1 Thess. 4:16–18 [but see 1 Tim. 4:1–5]).

#### ***The Description of Church Government Seems Too Developed for Paul's Lifetime.***

The Pastoral Letters seem to envision a broader and more securely established role for authority figures in the church than we encounter in other letters attributed to Paul. In 1 Timothy and Titus, we hear a great deal about bishops, elders, and other officials who seem to be in charge of numerous ecclesiastical functions (1 Tim. 3:1–13; 5:3–22; 2 Tim. 2:2; Titus 1:5–7). We know from later Christian writ-

ings (*1 Clement*, the *Didache*, Ignatius) that such offices did develop as the church became more institutionalized, but our usual perception is that things were a bit looser during the time of Paul. The overall picture for Paul's day is one in which all members use their diverse gifts for the benefit of the community (Rom. 12:6–8; 1 Cor. 12:27–28) and reputed leaders are regarded with an element of suspicion (Gal. 2:6). Of course, Paul's letters do contain some references to church leaders (Rom. 12:8; 1 Thess. 5:12–13), and Paul even mentions "bishops and deacons" in Philippians 1:1 (see pages 404–5 in the printed textbook). However, he never appeals to these leaders for help in resolving the various problems that arise within his churches, and this leads many scholars to believe that the offices were not as well developed as they appear to be in the Pastoral Letters.

### ***The Nature of the False Teaching Is Distinctive.***

All three of the Pastoral Letters exhibit a concern to stop the spread of false teaching within the church (1 Tim. 1:3–7; 6:3–5; 2 Tim. 2:17–18; 3:6–9; 4:3–4; Titus 1:9–16). The exact nature of this teaching is unclear, but it seems to have certain points in common with Gnosticism, a religious system that posed a serious challenge to Christianity in the second century, but not much before then (see pages 39–41 in the printed textbook). Some sort of proto-gnostic ideology may have been around earlier, but scholars question whether such thinking would have been prominent in Christian churches at the time of Paul. It seems odd, at least, that these ideas would be regarded as a major threat in the Pastoral Letters but not be treated as a potential problem in other letters attributed to Paul.

### ***The Manner of Dealing with False Teaching Is Not Characteristic of Paul.***

Usually, when Paul believes that a church has been led astray by false teachers, he writes to the church as a whole (see Galatians, 2 Corinthians) rather than to an individual. More to the point, he usually seeks to refute objectionable ideas with cogent arguments, often drawn from scripture (see, e.g., Rom. 3–6; Gal. 3–4). The Pastoral Letters seem more inclined simply to label ideas as acceptable or unacceptable and then call upon church leaders to preserve what is regarded as sound doctrine and reject what is not (1 Tim. 4:1; 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:13–14; 2:2; 4:2–3; Titus 2:1; 3:9–11). It would be an exaggeration to claim that the Pastoral Letters offer no substantive arguments to refute what is objectionable (see 1 Tim. 1:8; 4:3–5, 7–8; 6:5–10), but they do not engage the opposition in the manner exhibited by Paul in Galatians 3–4 or 2 Corinthians 10–13. Five times in these letters a formulaic phrase is used: "the saying is sure" (1 Tim. 1:15; 3:1; 4:9; 2 Tim. 2:11; Titus 3:8). This phrase never occurs in any other writings attributed to Paul, and it seems to express a reliance on confessional material that has achieved a certain level of authority within the church.

### ***Historical Circumstances Presumed for the Letters Do Not Find Support Elsewhere.***

The letters addressed to these individuals presume particular situations in the life of Paul that do not seem to fit with what we know of Paul's career from his other letters and from the book of Acts:



1. The letter addressed to Titus presumes that Paul and Titus have been ministering together in Crete but that Paul has left, entrusting Titus to continue the work (1:5); he is now writing to Titus from some unspecified location (possibly Ephesus), and he plans to spend the winter in Nicopolis, where he hopes Titus will be able to join him (3:12). We have no knowledge, however, of Paul ever being in Crete; the only mention of that island elsewhere is found in the book of Acts, when a ship on which Paul is a prisoner sails past Crete on the way to Rome (Acts 27:7–16).
2. The letter known as 1 Timothy presumes that Paul and Timothy have been ministering together in Ephesus, but that Paul has now left there for Macedonia; he is writing back to Timothy, who is now in charge of the Ephesian church (1:3). At first, this seems sensible because Paul did spend almost three years in Ephesus during his third missionary journey (in the mid-50s), and he did go to Macedonia from there (Acts 20:1–3). According to Acts, however, Timothy had already left Ephesus by this time (Acts 19:21–22). Paul may have also traveled from Ephesus to Macedonia around the time he wrote 2 Corinthians (see 2 Cor. 1:16; 2:12–13; 7:5–6), but again, Timothy appears to have accompanied him on that trip (2 Cor. 1:1).
3. The letter known as 2 Timothy presumes that Paul is in prison (1:16; 2:9; 4:16) in Rome (1:17), where he expects to be executed (4:6); he wants Timothy (whose whereabouts are unspecified) to come to him, passing through Troas on the way (4:9, 13). Of the situations proposed for each of the three Pastoral Letters, this one is the most tenable. Paul was indeed imprisoned in Rome and executed there. Some scholars, however, think that some of the letters co-authored by Timothy were written from Rome (Philippians, Colossians, Philemon). If so, Timothy would have already been with Paul during the first part of his Roman imprisonment (before he knew that he was to be executed [cf. Phil. 1:25 or Philem. 22 with 2 Tim. 4:6, 16]).

Most scholars are willing to admit that no one of these six points would, on its own, lead to a necessary conclusion that Paul did not write the Pastoral Letters. Each one of these points can be explained in terms that allow for Pauline authorship. Still, the cumulative effect of considering all of the points together leads the majority of scholars to posit a likelihood that the letters were written twenty or more years after Paul's death. Thus, they would be pseudepigraphical compositions, probably by someone within the Pauline tradition who wanted to honor his mentor and keep the tradition alive for a new generation.

### **Arguments against the Letters Being Pseudepigraphical**

Scholars who favor Pauline authorship are in a minority, but their numbers have been increasing in recent years. They tend to offer arguments under three headings.

#### ***The Apparent Anomalies Can Be Explained.***

Literary and linguistic differences may be accounted for by a heavier reliance on an amanuensis (or reliance on a different amanuensis) for these letters than for others. Likewise, the fact that the letters are directed to individuals rather than to congregations may affect their style. Claims that the letters are theo-

logically inconsistent with Paul's thinking or historically incompatible with his biography presume a more systematic and comprehensive account of Paul's life and thought than we actually possess.

### ***The Suggestion of Pseudepigraphy Is Illogical.***

It seems unlikely that an author producing pseudepigraphical Pauline letters would create letters so obviously different from Paul's known writings. Why would such an author compose letters to individuals when Paul was known for writing letters to churches? Why posit settings for the letters that didn't fit with Paul's known biography? Why not pick more plausible settings mentioned in the book of Acts? Why present Paul as greeting individuals not mentioned anywhere else (the Pastoral Letters refer to fifteen persons not mentioned in any other New Testament writing)?

### ***The Decision in Favor of Pseudepigraphy May Be Ideologically Driven.***

Scholars who favor Pauline authorship sometimes also claim that allegations of pseudepigraphy for these letters are fueled by ideological resistance to their content. Early on, the scholars who said that these letters were pseudepigraphical often were Protestants who saw the positive appraisal of church hierarchies in these letters as a step away from the pure gospel toward "early catholicism." More recently, scholars who object to the problematic nature of certain passages in the letters (e.g., the silencing of women in 1 Tim. 2:8–15) are said to favor pseudepigraphy under a tacit assumption that this renders the letters less reliable or authoritative.

### **Compromise Proposals**

Finally, we note two ideas that present something of a compromise with regard to Pauline authorship of the Pastoral Letters.

- *Expansions of Personal Notes.* Some scholars have suggested that although the Pastoral Letters as we have them are pseudepigraphical, they may be expansions of personal notes that Paul actually did write to his colleagues; this could explain some of the personal touches in the letters (e.g., 1 Tim. 1:18–20; 3:14–15; 2 Tim. 1:16–18; 4:9–21; Titus 3:12–15), passages that do not otherwise seem to serve much purpose.
- *2 Timothy as Authentic.* A recent trend in scholarship has sought to separate 2 Timothy from the other two Pastoral Letters and regard it alone as an authentic Pauline composition. Many of the points raised above in support of pseudepigraphy actually apply to 1 Timothy or Titus but not to 2 Timothy. Thus, some scholars maintain that 2 Timothy is judged to be pseudepigraphical only because it suffers from "suspicion by association." The usual logic has been that if the three letters come from the same author, and if 1 Timothy and Titus are pseudepigraphical, then 2 Timothy must be pseudepigraphical as well. An alternative proposal now contends that Paul could have written 2 Timothy, and then some pseudonymous author could have used 2 Timothy as his model or template for creating the other two letters. This would account for the similarities between 2 Timothy and the other two pseudepigraphical

letters while allowing the least problematic of the three Pastoral Letters to be regarded as an authentic letter of Paul.

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## Church Leaders in the New Testament

- *Bishops*. The Greek word *episkopos* means simply “overseer” and could be used in the secular world to refer to many types of administrators or supervisors. In 1 Peter 2:25, it is used of Christ. See also Acts 20:28; Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:1–6; Titus 1:7–9.
- *Deacons*. The Greek word *diakonos* means “one who serves” and is often translated “minister” or “servant” in English Bibles. It is used widely in the New Testament and is not always intended to designate a formal office. It is applied to Phoebe (Rom. 16:1), Apollos (1 Cor. 3:5), Tychicus (Eph. 6:21), Epaphras (Col. 1:7), and Paul himself (1 Cor. 3:5; 2 Cor. 3:6; Eph. 3:7). In the book of Acts, the seven men appointed to “wait on tables” (Acts 6:2–5) are usually regarded as deacons. See also Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:8–13.
- *Elders*. The Greek word *presbyteros* can refer to one who is advanced in age or experience. We read of elders in Israel throughout the Old Testament (e.g., Exod. 3:16; 1 Sam. 8:4), and Jewish elders are frequently mentioned in the New Testament Gospels (e.g., Matt. 21:23; Luke 7:3). In the book of Acts, elders are appointed in many Christian churches (Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23; 16:4; 20:17; 21:18), and in the book of Revelation, elders have a privileged position in heaven (Rev. 4:4, 10; 5:5, 6, 8, 11, 14; 7:11, 13; 11:16; 14:3; 19:4). Elders are never mentioned in any of the undisputed letters of Paul, but see 1 Timothy 4:14; 5:17–19; Titus 1:5–6; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1–5.
- *Widows*. We hear of widows who have been enrolled for special service in the church only in 1 Timothy 5:3–16. Paul, however, does encourage all widows to devote themselves to “the affairs of the Lord” rather than remarrying in 1 Corinthians 7:8, 34, 39–40. The church’s commitment to caring for widows is apparent in Acts 6:1; 9:39; James 1:27. See also Luke 2:37.
- *Others*. Paul refers to other varieties of church leadership in Romans 12:8; 1 Corinthians 12:28; Galatians 6:6; 1 Thessalonians 5:12.

Other early Christian writings testify to the development of these offices. In *1 Clement* (ca. 96) and the *Didache* (ca. 100) there is mention of “bishops” and “deacons” as separate positions, giving the impression of a two-tiered hierarchy. By the time of Ignatius (ca. 110), a three-part structure had developed, according to which “bishops,” “deacons,” and “elders” represented three distinct offices. Ignatius also refers to “the virgins who are called widows” (Ignatius, *To the Smyrnaeans* 13:1). Is this a later development of the tradition: never-married women taking vows of lifelong celibacy?

## What Was the False Teaching Opposed by the Pastoral Letters?

All three of the Pastoral Letters exhibit concern to correct false teaching in the church (1 Tim. 1:3–7; 4:1–3, 7; 6:3–5; 2 Tim. 2:14, 16–18, 25–26; 3:6–9; 4:3–4; Titus 1:9, 10–16). Who are the false teachers, and what do they teach?

The second letter to Timothy gives us the most specific information: two men, Hymenaeus and Philetus, are teaching that *the resurrection has already taken place* (2 Tim. 2:17–18; cf. 1 Cor. 15:12; 2 Thess. 2:1–3); a third man, Alexander the coppersmith, has strongly *opposed Paul's teaching and caused him great harm* (2 Tim. 4:14). We hear of a Hymenaeus and an Alexander (same one?) in 1 Timothy also (1 Tim. 1:20; cf. Acts 19:33). Still, the problems that have arisen may go beyond specific concerns attributable to these individuals. There are references to *myths* (1 Tim. 1:4; 4:7; 2 Tim. 4:4; Titus 1:14), *genealogies* (1 Tim. 1:4; Titus 3:9), and *quarrels about the law* (Titus 3:9; cf. 1 Tim. 1:7–11; 4:3–4). In one instance we hear of people who *forbid marriage and demand abstinence from foods* (1 Tim. 4:3).

One possibility is that some form of Jewish asceticism was being touted in Christian communities: believers were being encouraged by Jews or Jewish Christians (see 1 Tim. 1:7; Titus 1:10, 14) to keep ritual purity laws and, perhaps, to go beyond these by remaining celibate and making other strict lifestyle choices. The Pastoral Letters respond by insisting that the law is for those who don't know the gospel (1 Tim. 1:8–11), that all things created by God are good and may be received with thanksgiving (1 Tim. 4:4), and that “to the pure, all things are pure” (Titus 1:15).

Many scholars would go further: the ideas resisted in the Pastoral Letters bear resemblance to second-century Gnosticism. The first letter to Timothy refers specifically to people who profess “what is falsely called knowledge” (1 Tim. 6:20; cf. Titus 1:16a), and gnostics claimed to be the recipients of secret, revealed knowledge (the Greek word *gnōsis*, from which Gnosticism takes its name, means “knowledge”). Gnostics also despised material aspects of reality, often insisting on extreme asceticism: the line “to the pure, all things are pure” (Titus 1:15) would have made an excellent anti-gnostic slogan. Many gnostic groups kept track of elaborate genealogies for various divine beings, tracing angels, spirits, and the gods of other religions back to some transcendent, universal deity. Thus, the false teaching opposed in the Pastoral Letters may have involved a mixture of ideas, some drawn from Jewish circles and others drawn from what would later be known as Gnosticism.

## Polemic against False Teachers in the Pastoral Letters

All three of the Pastoral Letters are concerned that false teachers have come into the church, but the letters do not describe or debunk the content of the errant teaching as such. Rather, they attack the teachers themselves. The methods, morals, and motives of those teachers are put on display as examples of what Christians should avoid.

- The problematic teachers are described as “perverted and sinful” (Titus 3:11).
- They are “detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work” (Titus 1:16).
- They are “wicked people who will go from bad to worse” (2 Tim. 3:13).
- They “understand nothing” (1 Tim. 6:4).
- They are “bereft of the truth” (1 Tim. 6:5).
- They are proponents of a “counterfeit faith” that is “opposed to the truth” (2 Tim. 3:8).
- They hold to “the outward form of godliness” while denying its power (2 Tim. 3:5).
- They are in “the snare of the devil,” held captive by him to do his will (2 Tim. 2:26).
- Their teaching comes from demons and deceitful spirits (1 Tim. 4:1).

The letters also offer some reflection on how the false teachers came to be the way they are.

1. These teachers seem to have lost or ignored the value of conscience (1 Tim. 4:2; Titus 1:15), and people who reject conscience often “suffer shipwreck in the faith” (1 Tim. 1:19).
2. They have pretended to be something they are not; thus, they are hypocrites and liars (1 Tim. 4:2), impostors who tried to deceive others and, in the process, ended up deceiving themselves (2 Tim. 3:13; cf. Titus 1:11).
3. They have sought to minister in the church with impure motives, such as envy (1 Tim. 6:4) and a desire for sordid financial gain (1 Tim. 6:5; Titus 1:11).
4. They are divisive, harboring “a morbid craving for controversy and disputes about words” (1 Tim. 6:4; cf. 2 Tim. 2:14, 23; Titus 3:9–11).

Such factors have corrupted their minds (1 Tim. 6:5; 2 Tim. 3:8; Titus 1:15), which is why they do not know the truth (1 Tim. 6:4–5).

Thus, the Pastoral Letters do not urge church leaders to debate with such persons or even try to convince them that they are wrong (see Titus 1:11, 14; 3:10–11). The situation is not hopeless, but if these false teachers do come to know the truth, it probably will be because they repented of the sins that corrupted them in the first place rather than because they rethought their position in light of superior arguments.

## Women and Ministry in the Pastoral Letters

The Pastoral Letters evince attitudes toward women and toward the role of women in church and society that have been the focus of much discussion.

### What the Pastorals Say about Women and Ministry

In general, women are to concentrate on bearing children (1 Tim. 2:15; 5:14), managing their households (1 Tim. 5:14; Titus 2:5), and being submissive to their husbands (1 Tim. 2:11; Titus 2:5). Modesty is a prime virtue for women (1 Tim. 2:9, 15); they should shun such worldly distractions as jewelry, fashionable hairstyles, and expensive clothing (1 Tim. 2:9) and cultivate a life of good works that demonstrate reverence for God (1 Tim. 2:10). Such attention is needed because young women in particular tend to become alienated from Christ by sensual desires (1 Tim. 5:11); they are also prone to becoming idle busybodies and gossips, gadding about from house to house (1 Tim. 5:13). They need to learn to be quiet and to “learn in silence with full submission” (1 Tim. 2:11). In terms of ministry, there is an office in the church for aged widows (1 Tim. 5:9–10), and some women may also serve as deacons (1 Tim. 3:11), but women should not be permitted to teach or to have authority over men (1 Tim. 2:12). One reason for this seems to be that women are more likely than men to be flighty or “silly” and to be confused by their desires (2 Tim. 3:6); they are, at any rate, more easily deceived than men, as has been evident ever since Eve was tricked by the serpent in the garden of Eden (1 Tim. 2:14; cf. Gen. 3:1–7; 2 Cor. 11:3; but see also Rom. 5:12–19, where Eve is not even mentioned).

### Reception and Interpretation

Not surprisingly, this theme has been considered problematic by many Christians. It seems sexist and unreasonable, and much of the language employed seems unduly harsh (e.g., 1 Tim. 5:6). The restrictions also seem incompatible with the fact that Paul is elsewhere depicted as having female co-workers (e.g., Prisca/Priscilla in Acts 18:2, 18, 26; cf. Rom. 16:3; 1 Cor. 16:19; 2 Tim. 4:19), and as encouraging respect for women in positions of leadership (e.g., Phoebe in Rom. 16:1–2; Junia in Rom. 16:7).

A few attempts have sought to explain the situation that would give rise to these texts:

- Some scholars argue that gnostic movements in the second century sometimes granted high visibility to female leaders; the Pastoral Letters perhaps represent a backlash against the egalitarianism of women in those heretical communities. See Stevan L. Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows: The Social World of the Apocryphal Acts* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980); Dennis R. McDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983).
- Some think that the harsher comments are specifically directed to wealthy women, the ones who could afford gold and pearls (1 Tim. 2:9) and lives of leisure (1 Tim. 5:6, 13); these women had become targets of teachers who



wanted them as patrons (2 Tim. 3:6–7). See Paul J. Achtemeier, Joel B. Green, and Marianne Meye Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 450.

- Some suggest that the cult of the goddess Artemis, which was prominent in Ephesus (Acts 19:24–41), might account for a Christian bias in that city against women as spiritual leaders. See Sharon Hodgkin Gritz, *Paul, Women Teachers, and the Mother Goddess at Ephesus: A Study of 1 Timothy 2:9–15 in Light of the Religious and Cultural Milieu of the First Century* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1991).
- Some think that the prohibition against teaching men is directed against “unlearned teachers” (under the assumption that women in this setting were “unlearned”). See Craig Keener, *Paul, Women and Wives: Marriage and Women’s Ministry in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 101–32.

## Conclusion

Three general views are discernible among Christian interpreters today:

1. Many interpreters believe that the comments made in the Pastoral Letters regarding women and ministry need to be considered in light of their original social context: they should be read as socially conditioned remarks for a particular venue rather than as timeless truth for every setting. See Linda L. Belleville, *Women Leaders and the Church: Three Crucial Questions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), 162–80; Richard Clark Kroeger and Catherine Clark Kroeger, *I Suffer Not a Woman: Rethinking 1 Timothy 2:11–14 in Light of Ancient Evidence* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1992).
2. Not all interpreters are convinced that such caveats apply. Churches that do not ordain women usually appeal to the Pastoral Letters (especially 1 Tim. 2:12) as justification for the restriction, and many Christians do regard the comments in these letters as indicative of divinely mandated gender roles. See Andreas J. Köstenberger, Thomas R. Schreiner, and H. Scott Baldwin, eds., *Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:11–15* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1995).
3. Some Christians simply reject this teaching of the letters outright, questioning whether teaching that denigrates women should be regarded as the revealed or inspired word of God. See Linda M. Maloney in *Searching the Scriptures*, vol. 2, *A Feminist Commentary*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 361; Frances Young, *The Theology of the Pastoral Letters*, NTT (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 145–47.

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## Genre of the Pastoral Letters

What sort of letters are these? New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson has challenged traditional notions.

### 1 Timothy and Titus

These two letters often have been viewed as representing a literary form in between that of a traditional personal letter and a more formal handbook on church order (such as the *Didache*, which appeared around the end of the first century). Johnson suggests, rather, that their form is adapted from a type of royal correspondence called *mandata principis*—a public document from a ruler to an appointed official spelling out the office's responsibilities and authorizing the occupant to fulfill them.

### 2 Timothy

This letter often has been thought to embody the popular format of a “last testament” or “farewell speech” in which inspiring words, along with various exhortations and warnings, were pseudonymously attributed to some revered figure from the past (see Gen. 49; Deut. 33; Josh. 23–24; 2 Sam. 23:1–7; 1 Chron. 28–29; John 14–17; Acts 20:17–38). Johnson suggests that 2 Timothy has the form of a “personal parenetic letter,” an actual letter that seeks to exhort the recipient by pointing out good and bad examples of what is to be commended.

See Luke Timothy Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*, AB 35A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 2000), 137–42, 320–24.

## The Distinctive Vocabulary of the Pastoral Letters

The Pastoral Letters use about nine hundred vocabulary words. Scholars compare these with the vocabulary of other letters attributed to Paul.

1. *Many distinctive words.* Over one-third of the words used in these letters do not occur in any other New Testament writing attributed to Paul. Two-thirds of these distinctive words occur in the writings of second-century Christians.
2. *Absence of typical words.* Many words that are used regularly in Paul's other letters are not used here, including numerous characteristic words (conjunctions, particles, adverbs) that Paul tends to use regardless of topic or circumstance.
3. *Words with different meanings.* Some important words that are found in both the Pastoral Letters and Paul's undisputed writings seem to be used differently. For example:
  - Paul uses the word *righteousness* to mean "being in a right relationship with God" (Rom. 5:17; 10:3–4; Gal. 3:21); in the Pastoral Letters it means "being a morally upright person" (1 Tim. 6:11; 2 Tim. 2:22; 3:16; Titus 1:8).
  - Paul uses the word *faith* to mean "trust in Jesus Christ" (Rom. 1:16; 2 Cor. 5:7; Gal. 2:20); in the Pastoral Letters it means "Christian doctrine" (1 Tim. 1:19; 3:9; 4:1; 2 Tim. 3:8; 4:7; Titus 1:13).
  - Paul uses the word *common* to mean "unclean" (Rom. 14:14); in the Pastoral Letters it means "shared" (Titus 1:4).

## Pastoral Letters in the Revised Common Lectionary

Text	Series	Liturgical Occasion	Calendar Date
1 Tim. 1:12–17	C	Lectionary 24	Sep 11–17
1 Tim. 2:1–7	C	Lectionary 25	Sep 18–24
1 Tim. 6:6–19	C	Lectionary 26	Sep 25–Oct 1
2 Tim. 1:1–14	C	Lectionary 27	Oct 2–8
2 Tim. 2:8–15	C	Lectionary 28	Oct 9–15
2 Tim. 3:14–4:5	C	Lectionary 29	Oct 16–22
2 Tim. 4:6–8, 16–18	C	Lectionary 30	Oct 23–29
Titus 2:11–14	A, B, C	Christmas Eve	Dec 24
Titus 3:4–7	A, B, C	Christmas Day	Dec 25

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## Where Was Paul When He Wrote to Philemon?

We know that Paul wrote to Philemon from prison (see Philem. 1, 9, 23), but he appears to have been in prison many times and in many places (2 Cor. 6:5; 11:23). Of course, some of his multiple imprisonments may have been overnight lockups, such as those reported in Acts at Philippi (Acts 16:23–39) and Jerusalem (Acts 23:10–31). He would not have had time for crafting letters on those occasions.

Most scholars believe that Paul was in prison for a considerable time in three locations:

- *Ephesus* (ca. 54–55). The New Testament never actually mentions an imprisonment of Paul in Ephesus, but Paul does say that he experienced ordeals there (1 Cor. 15:32; 2 Cor. 1:8–9), and it seems likely that these included imprisonment.
- *Caesarea* (ca. 58–60). The book of Acts reports that Paul was in prison in Caesarea for what appears to be a two-year period (Acts 23:33–26:32).
- *Rome* (early 60s). The book of Acts also says that Paul was in prison in Rome (Acts 28:16, 30).

A majority of scholars think that Paul writes to Philemon from either Ephesus or Rome. The decision between these two locations (and dates) usually is related to another decision about a completely different matter: the question of whether Paul wrote the letter to the Colossians.

Philemon and Colossians have many similarities (e.g., they name many of the same people, including Archippus and Onesimus). Scholars generally conclude that these similarities must be explained in one of two ways: either (1) Paul wrote the letter to the Colossians around the same time that he wrote Philemon and under similar circumstances; or (2) someone else had a copy of Paul's letter to Philemon and borrowed the personal references to make a pseudonymous letter to the Colossians appear to be an authentic Pauline composition.

Let's take the last possibility first. If Paul did not write Colossians, then we may consider the letter to Philemon on its own terms, without any reference to what is contained in Colossians. Where is Paul? Ephesus seems to be the most likely location, because it is a much shorter distance from Colossae; Onesimus could have made his way to Ephesus much more easily than to Rome. In addition, Paul's request to Philemon to have a guest room ready for him in Colossae when he is released from prison (Philem. 22) would make more sense if he were only 110 miles away.

But what if Paul did write Colossians? That would complicate matters because the ideas expressed in that letter are more developed than what we find in other letters of Paul. Most scholars who think that Paul wrote Colossians assume that he did so very late in life (otherwise, why wouldn't some of those ideas pop

up in other letters, ones written later than Colossians?). If Colossians has to be regarded as one of Paul's last letters, and if Philemon was written at the same time as Colossians, then both Philemon and Colossians probably should be viewed as products of the Roman imprisonment rather than the Ephesian one. In support of this position, scholars also note that some of the persons named in Philemon (and Colossians) are associated with Rome in other New Testament writings: Mark (if it is the same Mark) is associated with Rome in 1 Peter 5:13; Luke is associated with Rome in 2 Timothy 4:11 (and in Acts 28:16 if Luke is the author of Acts); Demas is associated with Rome in 2 Timothy 4:10; Aristarchus is said to have been with Paul in both Ephesus (Acts 19:29) and Rome (Acts 27:2).

A few scholars have suggested the "compromise" solution that Paul is writing to Philemon from Caesarea, but this has not gone over well: Caesarea is also a long way from Colossae, and the imprisonment there does not allow for Colossians to be produced at the end of Paul's life.

### **Conclusion**

- Most scholars who believe that Paul wrote Colossians think that both Philemon and Colossians were written in Rome around 60–61 and then carried to Colossae by Tychicus (Col. 4:7–8), accompanied by Onesimus (Col. 4:9).
- Most scholars who believe that Paul did not write Colossians usually think that he wrote Philemon from Ephesus around 54–55 and that someone else later used Philemon as a guide for creating a pseudonymous letter to the church at Colossae.

## Paul's Persuasive Tactics in the Letter to Philemon

Paul employs a number of persuasive tactics in this brief letter to ensure that Philemon will do as he wishes.

- In the address of this letter, he includes the entire church that meets in Philemon's house (v. 2), even though most of the content seems to be intended for Philemon personally (every occurrence in Greek of the word *you* in vv. 4–21 is singular). Thus, there will be public knowledge of the request that Paul is making, and the whole congregation will know whether Philemon responds as Paul hopes.
- Paul tells Philemon that he has a reputation for generosity (vv. 4–7). The implication is that if he now does as Paul suggests, that reputation will be allowed to continue.
- Paul says that Philemon has refreshed “the hearts of the saints” (v. 7) and then appeals to him with the words “Refresh my heart in Christ” (v. 20). If Philemon were to refuse, he would be declining to do for Paul what he is renowned for doing for others.
- Paul indicates that he, as an apostle, has the authority to command Philemon to do what he wants done in this matter (v. 9), but he refrains from giving such a command so that Philemon's good deed might be voluntary (v. 14). If Philemon were to refuse Paul's request, he would appear to be taking advantage of this gracious allowance.
- Paul reminds Philemon that the one making this request is an “old man” and a “prisoner for Christ Jesus” (v. 9). Philemon would have to be quite heartless to turn down such a supplicant.
- Paul emphasizes his personal affection for Onesimus: the man has become like a son to Paul (v. 10), and in sending him back to Philemon, Paul feels like he is giving up his own heart (v. 12). Thus, if Philemon does not do Paul the favor of returning Onesimus to him, he will, in effect, be keeping something very dear to the apostle for himself.
- Paul also reminds Philemon of what he has done for him (v. 19): Philemon owes him his very “self” (i.e., his life as a new person in Christ and as an heir to eternal salvation). What favor could Paul possibly ask in return that would be too great?
- Paul asserts that he is absolutely confident that Philemon will comply, and do more besides (v. 21). Thus, if Philemon were to fail to comply, he would be letting Paul down and disappointing someone who thinks highly of him.
- Paul concludes by telling Philemon that he plans to come for a visit as soon as he is released from prison (v. 22). Thus, if Philemon fails to do as Paul suggests, he will have to deal with the disappointed apostle face-to-face, an awkward encounter to say the least.

In short, Paul manages in a few sentences to place Philemon in a position in which granting the request will be the only way to maintain honor with Paul, with his own family, and with his church. We do not know whether Paul did

this because he suspected that Philemon would need this sort of pressure, or because the situation was particularly delicate, or simply because this was how one made requests of this sort in those days. It is possible that Philemon would have been delighted to grant Paul's request apart from any social pressure or rhetorical encouragement, but in any case, Paul's letter would have made it difficult for him not to do as Paul wished.

## New Testament References to Slaves and Slavery

### Literal References to Slavery

- On two occasions, Jesus heals a slave (Matt. 8:5–13; Luke 22:50–51).
- Paul casts a demon out of a slave (Acts 16:16–17).
- Slaves have equal status before God (1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11; Rev. 6:15; 13:16; 19:18).
- Instructions are given regarding how slaves should behave and how their masters should treat them (Eph. 6:5–9; Col. 3:22–4:1; 1 Tim. 6:1–2; Titus 2:9–10; 1 Pet. 2:18–21).
- Advice is given concerning whether slaves should seek their freedom (1 Cor. 7:20–24).
- There is condemnation of slave traders (1 Tim. 1:10; Rev. 18:13).
- Paul writes a letter in regard to his return of a runaway slave to the owner (Philemon).

### Metaphorical References to Slavery

- Jesus tells parables in which slaves are characters (Matt. 13:24–30; 18:23–35; 22:1–13; 24:45–51; 25:14–30; Mark 12:1–9; 13:34–36; Luke 12:37–48).
- Jesus uses slavery as a metaphor for discipleship (Matt. 6:24; 10:24–25; Mark 10:42–44; Luke 17:7–10; cf. John 8:31–36).
- Paul uses slavery as a metaphor for devotion to others (1 Cor. 9:19; 2 Cor. 4:5; Gal. 5:13; Phil. 2:7).
- Slavery can be a metaphor for the controlling influences over one's life (Rom. 6:16–20; 7:6, 14, 25; 8:15; 2 Cor. 11:20; Titus 2:3; 3:3; 2 Pet. 2:19; cf. Matt. 6:24).
- Slavery can be a more general symbol for a negative spiritual condition, to be contrasted with freedom in Christ (Gal. 4:1–7; 4:22–5:1; Heb. 2:15).

## An All-Star Cast

The brief letter to Philemon features cameo appearances by some very big names. All those who send greetings in vv. 23–24 are mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament.

- *Epaphras* (Col. 1:7; 4:12). He is the missionary who evangelized Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis.
- *Mark* (Acts 12:12, 25; 15:37, 39; Col. 4:10; 2 Tim. 4:11; possibly 1 Pet. 5:13). Also known as John Mark, he is a relative of Barnabas. Paul has troubles with him in Acts, but letters ascribed to Paul indicate that the two men are on good terms at a later point in his ministry. Mark is identified in church tradition as the author of the Gospel of Mark.
- *Aristarchus* (Acts 19:29; 20:4; 27:2; Col. 4:10). From Thessalonica, he was a longtime companion of Paul and sometimes was imprisoned with him.
- *Demas* (Col. 4:14; 2 Tim. 4:10). This sometime companion of Paul later, according to 2 Timothy, deserted him.
- *Luke* (Col. 4:14; 2 Tim. 4:11; and possibly all of the “we passages” of Acts 16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–28:16). Known as the “beloved physician,” he is traditionally identified as the author of the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, and as a companion of Paul on portions of his first and third missionary journeys, and on his voyage to Rome.

And, of course, the letter is co-written by Paul with *Timothy* (Acts 16:1, 3; 17:14–15; 18:5; 19:22; 20:4; Rom. 16:21; 1 Cor. 4:17; 16:10; 2 Cor. 1:1, 19; Phil. 1:1; 2:19; Col. 1:1; 1 Thess. 1:1; 3:2, 6; 2 Thess. 1:1; 1 Tim. 1:2, 18; 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:2; see also Heb. 13:23).

## Philemon in the Revised Common Lectionary

Text	Series	Liturgical Occasion	Calendar Date
1-21	C	Lectionary 23	Sep 4-10



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## The Audience for the Letter to the Hebrews

For whom was the letter to the Hebrews written? Who were its original, intended recipients?

Most scholars believe that the letter is addressed to Christians who were attracted to the Jewish religion and that it aims to forestall apostasy and/or compromise: the author wants to dissuade Christians from abandoning their faith and/or adopting Jewish practices that would be inconsistent with that faith.

This much seems clear. But can we be more specific?

### **Jewish Christians**

The letter might be addressed to Jewish Christians: the emphasis on “descendants of Abraham” in 2:16 suggests this, as does the traditional ascription (“To the Hebrews”) that was applied to the letter by the early church. If the letter is in fact addressed to Jewish Christians, then those believers might be thinking about returning to the fold from which they had supposedly been converted. Why would they do that? Perhaps they missed the liturgical grandeur and the historical grounding that such a long-established religion had to offer. Or maybe they had suffered too much government-sponsored persecution leveled against Christianity (as a new, unsanctioned faith) and realized that Judaism was more widely recognized and tolerated. Maybe they wanted a relief from tensions that their Christian faith produced with Jewish relatives and neighbors. Or perhaps they had grown impatient and frustrated by the fact that Jesus had not returned as expected. The letter to the Hebrews can be read as addressing all these concerns.

### **Gentile Christians**

The letter might be addressed to Gentile Christians. The list of items on which the readers were instructed when first coming to the faith includes some matters (resurrection of the dead, final judgment) that would not have been new for Jews (6:1–2); there would have been no reason for Jewish Christians to have been instructed in such matters. If the letter is addressed to Gentile Christians, then, the readers would have been Christians converted from paganism who were beginning to think of Christianity as a stepping-stone to the older, deeper religion of Judaism. The author wants to tell them that Jewish faith is preparatory for Christian confession, not vice versa.

### **Christians Attracted to “Jewish Christianity”**

It is also possible (whether the recipients were ethnically Jewish or Gentile or both) that the attraction was not to the non-Christian religion of Judaism but rather to some version of Jewish Christianity that the author of Hebrews considers a breach with the true faith. If so, then the intended recipients might not have thought that they were flirting with apostasy by incorporating more Jewish elements into their religion: they saw themselves converting not from Christianity to Judaism but rather from one form of Christianity (Gentile Christianity) to another form of Christianity (Jewish Christianity). The author of Hebrews,

however, wants to convince them that such a change will constitute a falling away from Christ and, indeed, a turning away from the living God (3:12).

### **Specific Proposals for Location**

#### ***Palestine***

- Were the letter's recipients the sect of Jerusalem Christians who are contrasted with "the Hellenists" (Acts 6:1)?
- Were they converted Jewish priests who had been barred from offering sacrifices after confessing faith in Christ (Acts 6:7)?
- Were they converts from the sect at Qumran?
- Were they Jewish Christians who had fled Jerusalem rather than join in the revolt against Rome?

These guesses are intriguing, but none has carried the day. Notably, all of these guesses assume that the readers were Jewish Christians and, further, that they were in Jerusalem or Palestine. This idea that the letter to the Hebrews was written for believers in Palestine is based on the assumption that all of the attention to the Jewish priesthood and to sacrificial practices would be especially appropriate for readers in that part of the world (where the ancient tabernacle and successive temples had been erected). But would an author write a letter in elegant Greek to a setting where Hebrew and Aramaic were the native languages?

#### ***Rome***

In recent years, more scholars have thought that the letter might be written to Christians in Rome. These points are noted:

- The Jewish Christian heritage was strong in Rome.
- Timothy (who is mentioned in 13:23) would have been well known to Roman Christians.
- The gospel had been preached in Rome by people who had known Jesus (cf. Heb. 2:3).
- Believers had been persecuted in Rome (cf. Heb. 10:32–34).
- There are parallels between the thought and style of Hebrews and Paul's letter to Roman Christians.
- Our first references to Hebrews outside the New Testament come from Clement, who was the bishop of Rome in the late 90s.

But such factors do not allow for certainty, and most scholars will grant that the intended recipients of this letter could have been located in almost any city of the Roman Empire (Ephesus and Corinth have also been suggested). In fact, if the letter was written some time after the mid-60s, its comment that so far no one in the community had suffered bloodshed for the faith (12:4) would make no sense in a letter addressed to Rome.

*A side note:* The letter does offer one reference that seems to provide a clue for situating its readers (or at least its author) geographically, but in actuality this clue has not proved very helpful. At the end of the letter the author says, "Those from Italy send you greetings" (13:24). Some scholars have said this means the author is writing to Rome and offering greetings from people who have trav-

eled from Rome to wherever the author is. That interpretation is possible. Or, the author could be writing from Rome and extending greetings on behalf of all Roman Christians. For that matter, the author could be writing from almost anywhere to almost anywhere and simply passing along greetings from some associates who were popularly known as “the Italians.”

### **Letter to the Hebrews: Facts about Its Intended Readers**

The letter to the Hebrews does not specify who its original readers were or where they lived, but it does reveal a number of facts about them:

- They are Christians (3:6; 4:14; 10:23).
- They are Christians with a strong interest in sacrificial practices and other matters of Jewish faith.
- They heard the message of salvation from people who heard it from Jesus (2:3); thus, they are second-generation Christians, but not third- or fourth-generation Christians.
- They have witnessed signs and wonders and various miracles and have received diverse gifts of the Holy Spirit (2:4).
- They are sufficiently educated and astute to understand arguments that employ both Hellenistic rhetoric and allusive reasoning based on the Jewish scripture.
- They have gone through a hard time that required them to endure abuse, persecution, and suffering (10:32–33).
- Some of them had their property plundered (10:34), but thus far the abuse has not involved bloodshed (12:4).
- They have been exemplary in good works (6:10), such as showing compassion to those who suffer (10:34).
- They nevertheless have now become “dull in understanding” (5:11) and potentially “sluggish” (6:12; cf. 12:12).
- They seem to be in danger of apostasy, renouncing their faith or drifting away from the truth (2:1–3; 3:12–14; 4:1; 10:35–36); some are already neglecting to meet with the community (10:25).

## Hebrews in the Christian Canon

The fact that Hebrews is anonymous proved to be something of an obstacle to its being accepted into the canon of scripture. It was not included in our earliest list of New Testament scriptures, the list that scholars call the “Muratorian Fragment” or “Muratorian Canon” (ca. 170–200).

As time went by, however, the letter gained a broad audience, and it was especially favored by church leaders who found its christological teaching helpful in combating various sectarians whom they held to be heretical. Increasingly, the letter came to be ascribed to Paul, but this seems to have been motivated by a desire to help it achieve canonical status. The scholars of the church protested such ascriptions, but not too loudly. Origen (mid-third century) said, “The thoughts of the epistle are marvelous and in no way inferior to the acknowledged writings of the apostle” (see Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.25). A canonical list from the mid-fourth century called the “Mommesen Catalogue” (or “Cheltenham List”) did not include Hebrews, but in the late fourth century Jerome said that it should be accepted as canonical because it is “honored daily by being read in the churches” (*Epistle* 129.3).

In short, Hebrews seems to represent a case in which canonical acceptance influenced decisions about authorship rather than the other way around. It came to be widely recognized as authoritative on the basis of intrinsic merit in spite of being anonymous. The prevailing opinion seemed to be that this book comes from the same time period as other New Testament books, and it testifies brilliantly to matters that are wholly compatible with what is said in works attributed to apostolic witnesses; thus, it should be accorded a place among them even if we do not know the identity of the author.

## Authorship of Hebrews

Hebrews is anonymous; it does not identify its author. Nevertheless, interpreters have investigated the matter over the centuries and tried to figure out who the author might be.

### The Traditional Suggestion: Paul

Hebrews came to be associated with Paul in the second and third centuries. The primary reasons for suggesting Paul wrote the letter seem to be:

- Paul is known to have written many letters, including lengthy ones.
- In 13:23, this letter mentions Timothy (who was a companion of Paul).
- The benediction and greetings with which the letter closes (13:20–24) are reminiscent of Pauline letter closings.

Even in the early church, however, most scholars granted that these reasons were not terribly convincing. The real motivation behind ascribing the letter to Paul seems to have been to help the letter attain canonical status as a work of scripture.

The Council of Trent in 1546 insisted on Pauline authorship of Hebrews and supposedly established this as the official position of the Roman Catholic Church. Likewise in 1611, the King James Version of the Bible (a Protestant work) credited Paul as the author in its title for the work: “The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews.” Nevertheless, almost no scholar in the modern world, Catholic or Protestant, would argue for Pauline authorship of Hebrews.

### Reasons for Doubting That Paul Is the Author

- The linguistic style of Hebrews is radically different from that of Paul, and many of Paul’s characteristic expressions cannot be found here (e.g., “Christ Jesus,” used over ninety times in Paul’s letters, never appears in Hebrews).
- Paul regarded himself as “an apostle to the Gentiles” (Rom. 11:13; Gal. 2:8).
- Paul claimed that he was an eyewitness to the risen Jesus (1 Cor. 15:8); contrary to what is suggested in 2:3–4, he would not have described himself as someone who had come to faith through the preaching of others or as someone whose authority as an apostle was dependent on the testimony of others (see Gal. 1:11–17).
- Many of Paul’s most prominent themes are not found here, and conversely, the dominant theme of Hebrews (the high priesthood of Jesus) is never mentioned by Paul.

There are, of course, statements and themes in Hebrews that parallel things that can be found in Paul’s letters, but these are no more pronounced than what we would expect to find in the writings of any two Christian theologians from the same era.

### Alternative Suggestions

Many other suggestions regarding the author of this book have been offered.



- *Barnabas*. As an alternative to Paul, some scholars have suggested one of Paul's closest companions: Barnabas, who worked with Paul in his early years. Barnabas would have known Timothy, and he had a Levitical background (Acts 4:36). This suggestion was first offered by Tertullian in the early third century (*On Modesty* 20).
- *Luke*. Quite a few interpreters have suggested that Hebrews might be the work of the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. Luke's Greek is more polished and closer in style to the Greek of Hebrews than any other writer in the New Testament. Clement of Alexandria (150–215) thought that Luke was translating a letter into Greek that Paul had written in Hebrew. This same view was espoused later by Thomas Aquinas. But modern scholars note that many of the rhetorical wordplays used in Hebrews would only work if the letter were written originally in Greek. John Calvin thought that either Luke or Clement of Rome was the most likely author of Hebrews.
- *Philip*. Many scholars have suggested Philip or one of the other Hellenists who were colleagues of Stephen (Acts 6:5; 8:5–40; 21:8–9). The reason for this is that Stephen's speech in Acts 7:2–53 is said to recount Jewish history and deprecate Jewish shrines in a manner similar to Hebrews (cf. Acts 7:2–34 with Heb. 11; Acts 7:44–50 with Heb. 9). Since Stephen himself cannot be the author (having been martyred immediately after delivering that speech), the "next best thing" may be to ascribe the book of Hebrews to one of his colleagues, who presumably would have thought in a similar vein. Philip was the most prominent of those colleagues. One problem with this thesis is that Hebrews deals with the tabernacle, not the temple, and it does not question the historical legitimacy of either institution (cf. Acts 7:48) but merely claims that sacrificial institutions have now been rendered obsolete (Heb. 8:13; 9:25–26).
- *Apollos*. The suggestion that Apollos might be the author of Hebrews was put forward by Martin Luther. Apollos had Alexandrian connections, he was said to be well versed in the scriptures, and he was famous for his eloquence (Acts 18:24–28; 19:1; 1 Cor. 1:12; 3:4–22; 4:6; 16:12; Titus 3:13). This view continues to attract support. Paul Ellingworth calls it the "least unlikely of the conjectures that have been put forward" (see Ellingworth, *The Epistle to Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993], 21). Luke Timothy Johnson is intrigued by the possibility that Apollos might have written Hebrews to Corinth prior to Paul's writing of 1 Corinthians to that same city (see Johnson, *Hebrews*, NTL [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006], 42–44).
- *Priscilla*. Some modern scholars have favored Priscilla (Acts 18:2, 18, 26; cf. Rom. 16:3; 1 Cor. 16:19; 2 Tim. 4:19), whose name would have been subsequently removed to avoid the scandal of instruction being offered by a woman. This view was first put forward by Adolf von Harnack in 1900. It was more recently championed in Ruth Hoppin, *Priscilla: Author of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (New York: Exposition Press, 1969). An obstacle for many is that Hebrews 11:32 employs a masculine construction in Greek implying that the "I" who is speaking is male; this probably requires an assumption that Priscilla is intentionally hiding her identity.

- *Clement of Rome*. A number of scholars have thought that the letter could be the work of Clement, a bishop of Rome who is probably the author of at least one letter utilizing much of the same language employed here (*1 Clement*). According to Origen (third century), some Christians in his day thought that Clement had written the letter based on notes from things that Paul had said (see Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.14.13). This possibility was taken seriously by John Calvin. There are many undeniable parallels between the letter known as *1 Clement* and the letter to the Hebrews, but those similarities usually are explained as the result of Clement having a copy of Hebrews and quoting from it. Furthermore, modern scholars note that *1 Clement* espouses a positive attitude toward Levitical sacrifices that may be incompatible with the attitude taken toward those sacrifices in Hebrews.
- *Mary the Mother of Jesus*. This proposal was put forward in a journal article by Josephine Massyngbearde Ford (*The Bible Today* 82 [1976]: 673–94). Raymond Brown averred that this proposal wins “the prize for dubious ingenuity” (Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, ABRL [New York: Doubleday, 1996], 695).
- *Others*. Other suggestions include *Silas* (Acts 15:22–18:17; cf. 2 Cor 1:19; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1; 1 Pet. 5:12) and *Epaphras* (Col. 1:17; 4:12; Philem. 23).

### Accepting the Letter as Anonymous

Virtually all scholars today would grant that the definitive view on this question was offered by Origen, a prominent Christian teacher in the third century: “Who wrote this epistle? Only God knows!” (reported in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.25.13).

Raymond Brown has summed up the matter this way: “We have to be satisfied with the irony that the most sophisticated rhetorician and elegant theologian of the New Testament is an unknown” (*Introduction to the New Testament*, 695).

Many interpreters note that the letter comes to us like Melchizedek the priest, “without father or mother or genealogy” (Heb. 7:3); Abraham was expected to recognize the divine voice in Melchizedek though he knew nothing of his origins, and Christians are in a similar position regarding the anonymous letter to the Hebrews.

### The Author of Hebrews—What We Can Know

- The author of Hebrews was a person of prominence in the early church.
- He knew people who had known Jesus (2:3).
- He was well educated with regard to both Greek rhetoric and the Jewish scriptures.
- He knew the readers personally.
- He assumes a mandate to speak to these readers authoritatively, even though he does not appear to have been the founder of their community.
- He is planning to visit the readers soon (13:19, 23), which may indicate that he exercises a supervisory role for the congregation beyond that of its local leaders (13:7, 17, 24).

## The First Christian Platonist?

In the fourth century BCE, the Greek philosopher Plato introduced a two-tiered scheme of reality that appears to have been influential for the author of Hebrews. Plato claimed that the world of “ideas” was the most real and true world and that the physical world in which we live contains only representations of those ideas that are in some sense less real and less true.

Jews who were attracted to this notion often translated it into a contrast between what was heavenly and earthly (though that is not exactly the same thing). The writings of Philo of Alexandria, produced around the same time as the letter to the Hebrews, provide illustrations of Jewish Platonism. Philo read Genesis 1:26–27 as reporting the creation of the “idea” (or “ideal form”) of humanity and Genesis 2:7 as reporting the creation of a material representation of this idea (a physical man formed from the dust of the earth).

Likewise, the author of Hebrews has sometimes been called “the first Christian Platonist.” He argues that the Jewish tabernacle is only “a sketch and a shadow” of a heavenly sanctuary in which Jesus exercises his office as high priest (8:5–6; cf. 9:23; 10:1). The earthly sanctuary made by human hands is only a material representation of the more real heavenly sanctuary that was not so made. Obviously, a more true and more real salvation is to be obtained in the heavenly sanctuary than in the earthly one. Notably, Hebrews does not denigrate what is physical as evil or wrong: the contrast between earthly and heavenly is not between “bad” and “good” (as it would be in Gnosticism); it is between “good” and “better.”

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## Images and Titles for Jesus Christ in Hebrews

One way of examining the Christology of Hebrews is to note the various titles, images, and categories that it uses to describe Jesus.

As in most writings of the New Testament, he is called:

- “Lord” (1:10; 2:3; 7:14; 13:20)
- “Son of God” or simply the “Son” (1:2, 5, 8; 3:6; 4:14; 5:5, 8; 6:6; 7:3, 28; 10:29)

What is most intriguing, however, are all the designations applied to Jesus in this book that are not used widely (if at all) elsewhere. Jesus is referred to as:

- “heir” (1:2; cf. Mark 12:7; Rom. 8:17)
- “firstborn” (1:6; cf. Rom. 8:29; Col. 1:15, 18)
- “pioneer” (2:10; 12:2)
- “the one who sanctifies” (2:11; cf. John 17:19; Acts 26:18; 1 Cor. 1:2, 30)
- “apostle” (3:1)
- “builder of a house” (3:3; cf. 1 Pet. 2:5)
- “source of eternal salvation” (5:9)
- “forerunner” (6:20)
- “guarantee” (7:22)
- “minister” (8:2)
- “mediator” (8:6; 9:15; 12:24; cf. 1 Tim. 2:5)
- “perfecter” (12:2)
- “great shepherd of the sheep” (13:20; cf. John 10:1–18; 1 Pet. 2:25)
- “God” (1:8; cf. John 20:28; Titus 2:13)

Luke Timothy Johnson has noted that many of these affirmations might be understood as applying to two aspects of Christ’s work.\* First, Jesus Christ brings salvation from God to humanity; thus, he is apostle, source of eternal salvation, the one who sanctifies, shepherd, minister, builder, guarantee. Second, Jesus Christ brings humans to God (as the first human being to realize the complete obedience that is God’s plan for all); thus, he is heir, firstborn, pioneer, perfecter, forerunner. The image of mediator fits both aspects, as does the letter’s favorite image for Jesus: high priest.

\*See Luke Timothy Johnson, *Hebrews*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 48–49.

## Honor and Shame in Hebrews

The author of Hebrews has the difficult task of addressing people who have committed themselves to a way of life that lacks social approval, and of doing so in a culture that puts a very high premium on the acquisition of public honor and the avoidance of public disgrace or shame. He does not challenge the importance of honor and shame as such but rather suggests a reappraisal of what will ultimately count as “honorable” and “shameful”: conventional wisdom has gotten this wrong, defining the values in ways that do not concur with the judgment of God.

First, the book encourages its readers to consider any loss of status or social reputation that they have experienced because of their faith as an ironic badge of honor. Since God disciplines those whom God favors (12:5–6), such trials may be viewed as an indication of divine approval.

Second, the book reminds the readers that they are in good company. The heroes of the Bible also were people who suffered loss of wealth and prestige in this life in exchange for greater, lasting honor in the world to come (11:8–10, 13–16, 24–26). Even those who seemed to be the lowest of the low—people who were imprisoned or chained, who suffered horrible torments and disgraceful deaths, who wandered homeless in the wilderness and lived in caves, who wrapped their bodies in animal skins because they had no clothes, who were utterly destitute and miserable—ultimately would be recognized as ones “of whom the world was not worthy” (11:36–38). In short, those whom the world despised turned out to be the ones who were ultimately accorded the greatest honor. Indeed, they ended up being regarded as people who put the world to shame.

Finally, the book of Hebrews draws upon the image of an athletic contest or a race (12:1; cf. 10:35–36; 12:12–13): the Christian pilgrimage may be viewed as a competition for honorable victory; yielding to society’s pressures and “giving up” would constitute ignoble defeat.

See David A. deSilva, *Despising Shame: Honor Discourse and Community Maintenance in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, SBLDS 152 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995).

## Structure of Hebrews

### Exposition and Exhortation

The book of Hebrews alternates back and forth between sections expounding Christian doctrine and sections exhorting the readers to persevere in faith and act in ways appropriate to their confession:

1:1–14	exposition	2:1–4	exhortation
2:5–3:6	exposition	3:7–4:16	exhortation
5:1–10	exposition	5:11–6:20	exhortation
7:1–10:18	exposition	10:19–13:25	exhortation

### Concentric Circles?

One scholar has proposed that the book of Hebrews is organized in a chiasmic pattern of concentric circles: the outer material at the beginning and end of the book deals with eschatological concerns (the revelation of Christ and culmination of God's plan in the last days), an inner circle deals with ecclesiological concerns (living faithfully for Christ as a community in the present world), and the center of the book presents its principal theme, an exposition on sacrifice.

A	eschatology	the name superior to the angels (1:5–2:18)
B	ecclesiology	Jesus faithful and compassionate (3:1–5:10)
C	sacrifice	the central exposition (5:11–10:39)
B'	ecclesiology	Faith and endurance (11:1–12:13)
A'	eschatology	the peaceful fruit of justice (12:14–13:19)

See Albert Vanhoye, *Structure and Message of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, SubBi 12 (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1989).

## Hebrews and Paul: Some Parallels

Although modern scholars do not believe that Paul wrote Hebrews, they do recognize that some parallel expressions and ideas can be found in Paul's letters and the letter to the Hebrews:

- exalts Christ above angelic spirits (Heb. 1:5–14; 2:2; cf. Gal. 4:9; Col. 1:16; 2:18)
- indicates that the gospel was confirmed through “signs and wonders” and miracles (Heb. 2:4; cf. Rom. 15:18–19; 2 Cor. 12:12; Gal. 3:2–5)
- refers to Christ taking on the likeness of humanity (Heb. 2:14–18; cf. Phil. 2:7–8)
- describes Christ as having greater glory than Moses (Heb. 3:2–3; cf. 2 Cor. 3:7–8)
- reads Israel's desert wanderings as a warning against laxity (Heb. 3:7–4:13; cf. 1 Cor. 10:1–13)
- claims that Christ has granted believers access to God and to divine blessings (Heb. 4:16; 10:19–22; cf. Rom. 5:1–2)
- says that the recipients are infants needing milk not solid food (Heb. 5:12–13; cf. 1 Cor. 3:1–2)
- refers to the Hebrew scriptures as “the oracles of God” (Heb. 5:12; cf. Rom. 3:2)
- refers to Christ's death as an expiation (in Greek, *hilastērion*) (Heb. 9:5; cf. Rom. 3:25) and as an act of obedience (Heb. 5:8; cf. Rom. 5:19; Phil. 2:8)
- refers to Christ as one who has been sacrificed (Heb. 9:26, 28; cf. 1 Cor. 5:7)
- cites Abraham as an example of faith (Heb. 11:8; cf. Gal. 3:6–9)
- refers to perseverance in the Christian life as running a race (Heb. 12:1; cf. 1 Cor. 9:24)
- calls the recipients “saints” (Heb. 13:24; cf. Rom. 1:7)



## Use of the Old Testament in Hebrews

The letter to the Hebrews refers to Old Testament scriptures more frequently than any other New Testament writing except the Gospel of Matthew. All of the quotations are from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Bible that was used primarily by Diaspora Jews who could no longer read Hebrew. This explains why the quotations do not always match word for word what the Old Testament texts actually say in our Bibles.

Scholars have devoted considerable attention to understanding how this letter employs these texts. The following tendencies are often noted:

- The author makes widespread use of typology, according to which persons and events in the Old Testament are thought to correspond to persons and events in the present era.
- Hebrews evinces a broad understanding of prophecy (as something more than just literal prediction).
- Hebrews exhibits an exegetical tendency to interpret specific texts in light of the full sweep of God's dealings with God's people (i.e., in light of what is sometimes called "salvation history").
- The author likes to use catenas (chains) of verses that are connected by the occurrence of a common word. Thus, in Hebrews 1:1–13, the supremacy of Christ to angels is established by quoting seven Old Testament texts one after the other: Psalm 2:7; 2 Samuel 7:14; Deuteronomy 32:43; Psalm 104:4; 45:6–7; 102:25–27; 110:1.
- The author is also clever in noting the meaning of names and other key words: the name "Melchizedek" means "king of righteousness," and his title "king of Salem" also establishes him as "king of peace" (7:2).
- The author is also adept at using certain scriptures to interpret others. In 3:7–4:13, he uses Psalm 95:7–11 to interpret the meaning of the Moses and Joshua stories: the psalm reveals that the Israelites did not enter God's rest; still, the plea to listen to God's voice "today" (Ps. 95:7) implies that God's rest is still available. This cannot mean a literal exodus from Egypt or conquest of Canaan, so what does it mean? To what rest could it refer? The author of Hebrews looks elsewhere, to Genesis 2:2, which speaks of a "sabbath rest" (Heb. 4:9). This must be the rest that is still available today.

### The Word of God

The author of Hebrews clearly believes that the Jewish scriptures (which Christians now call the "Old Testament") are authoritative and inspired by the Holy Spirit (3:7; 10:15). Furthermore, biblical passages often can be regarded as conveying the voice of God to the readers as well as to the ancestors to whom the words were originally addressed (10:15; 12:5; cf. 1:1). In part, this appropriation of the scriptures seems to derive from the author's conviction that the last days have now dawned (1:2): all the words of God and the entire history of God's dealings with God's people are finding ultimate fulfillment and relevance in the era that heralds the culmination of all things.

Scripture is regarded as a *living* word. One well-known passage in Hebrews says that “the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (4:12). This acclamation could refer to the preached or proclaimed word of God, but surely it refers to scripture as well. Indeed, whereas Paul typically introduces biblical quotes with the words “It is written,” Hebrews introduces quotes with some variation of the phrase “God says” (twenty-three times) or “the Holy Spirit says” (3:7; 10:15, 17; see also 9:8) or “Jesus says” (2:12, 13; 10:5). This pattern renders somewhat humorous the one anomalous reference in 2:6: “Someone somewhere has testified. . . .” Did the author perhaps forget where the quoted text (Psalm 8) was found, or did he just think the particular context (author, book) was irrelevant. Either way, the overall impression of Hebrews is that God speaks through scripture and that God’s words constitute a dynamic force that judges humanity with privileged discernment (4:13–14).

### **Christological Interpretation**

More precisely, interpretation of scripture is overtly and unapologetically christological: many of the Old Testament passages cited are held to be about Jesus (e.g., 1:6; 10:37–38); some of them are even understood to have been spoken to Jesus (e.g., 1:5, 8–9, 10–12, 13; 5:5–6) or, indeed, by Jesus (2:12, 13; 10:5–7).

One example of christological interpretation is found in 11:24–26, which talks about Moses:

By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called a son of Pharaoh’s daughter, choosing rather to share ill treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered abuse suffered for the Christ to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt.

This report draws upon the story of Moses in Exodus 2:10–15, but it identifies the hardships he endured as “abuse suffered for the Christ.” How could Moses have suffered for Christ? Was this the preexistent Christ? Moses becomes a paradigm for the readers of Hebrews, who also must endure financial loss and social ostracism as abuses suffered for Christ (10:32–34; 13:13).

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## Hebrews and the Dead Sea Scrolls

Many scholars have noticed interesting connections between Hebrews and the Dead Sea Scrolls. The latter documents apparently were preserved by Jews who were contemporaries of Jesus in a remote desert community called Qumran.

The scrolls make much of the figure of Melchizedek (see Gen. 14:18–20), as does Hebrews (see 5:6, 10; 6:20; 7:1–17). This probably is because the community that preserved these scrolls remained enamored of priestly and liturgical theology even though they no longer accepted the legitimacy of the priesthood associated with the current temple in Jerusalem. The same could be said of the Christian writer who was the author of Hebrews.

The Qumran sectarians also made much use of the “new covenant” passage in Jeremiah 31:31–34 (cf. Heb. 8), and they took a harsh stance toward apostasy (cf. Heb. 6:4–6; 10:26–31; 12:16–17).

The most intriguing connection between Hebrews and Qumran, however, may have to do with messianic expectation. The Qumran sectarians were expecting two messiahs: one a priestly messiah, and the other a royal messiah. The book of Hebrews presents Jesus both as a high priest after the order of Melchizedek and as a royal messiah who rules the universe from a throne in heaven (1:3, 8, 13; 2:5, 7, 9; 4:16; 7:1–2; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2, 28).

We have no way of knowing whether the author of Hebrews knew about the community at Qumran or whether he was familiar with their teachings, but it is interesting that Hebrews has so many contact points with their writings and, in particular, that it presents Jesus as the fulfillment of their dual expectation: he is both the priestly messiah and the royal messiah (see 10:12–13).

## Hebrews in the Revised Common Lectionary

Text	Series	Liturgical Occasion	Calendar Date
1:1-4 (5-12)	A, B, C	Christmas Day	Dec 25
1:1-4; 2:5-12	B	Lectionary 27	Oct 2-8
2:10-18	A	Christmas 1	1 Sunday after Dec 25
4:12-16	B	Lectionary 28	Oct 9-15
5:1-10	B	Lectionary 29	Oct 16-22
5:5-10	B	Lent 5	2 Sundays before Easter
7:23-28	B	Lectionary 30	Oct 23-29
9:11-14	B	Lectionary 31	Oct 30-Nov 5
9:24-28	B	Lectionary 32	Nov 6-12
10:11-14 (15-18), 19-25	B	Lectionary 33	Nov 13-19
10:5-10	C	Advent 4	1 Sunday before Dec 25
11:1-3, 8-16	C	Lectionary 19	Aug 7-13
11:29-12:2	C	Lectionary 20	Aug 14-20
12:18-29	C	Lectionary 21	Aug 21-27
13:1-8, 15-16	C	Lectionary 22	Aug 28-Sep 3

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## Parallels between James and Proverbs

	<b>James</b>	<b>Proverbs</b>
Wisdom is given by God.	1:5	2:6–7
Wealth is ephemeral, and riches will “wither away.”	1:10–11	11:28
It is a virtue to be “slow to anger.”	1:19	14:29
Impartiality is to be encouraged.	2:1	18:5
Partiality to the rich dishonors the poor.	2:6	14:20–21
The wise are attentive to controlling their speech.	3:2	10:19
The tongue can be a deadly “fire.”	3:6	16:27
It is arrogant to boast of tomorrow.	4:13–14	27:1
Multiple sins may be “covered” by worthy acts of love.	5:20	10:12

See Paul J. Achtemeier, Joel B. Green, and Marianne Meye Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 501.

## Parallels between James and the Sermon on the Mount

The Letter of James	Sermon on the Mount (Gospel of Matthew)
"Whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy" (1:2).	"When people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you . . . rejoice and be glad" (5:11–12).
"You may be mature [ <i>teleioi</i> ] and complete, lacking in nothing" (1:4).	"Be perfect [ <i>teleioi</i> ] . . . as your heavenly Father is perfect" (5:48).
"Ask God . . . and it will be given you" (1:5).	"Ask, and it will be given you" (7:7).
"Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers" (1:22).	"Everyone then who hears these words . . . and acts on them will be like a wise person" (7:24).
"Has not God chosen the poor in the world . . . to be heirs of the kingdom?" (2:5).	"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (5:3).
"Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it" (2:10).	"Whoever, then, relaxes one of the least of these commandments . . . shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven" (5:19).
"Judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy" (2:13).	"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy" (5:7).
"What good is it . . . if you say you have faith, but do not have works? Can faith save you?" (2:14).	"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father" (7:21).
"Can a fig tree . . . yield olives, or a grapevine figs?" (3:12).	"Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles?" (7:16).
"A harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace" (3:18).	"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (5:9).
"Friendship with the world is enmity with God" (4:4).	"You cannot serve God and wealth" (6:24).
"Purify your hearts" (4:8).	"Blessed are the pure in heart" (5:8).
"Who, then, are you to judge your neighbor?" (4:12).	"Do not judge, so that you may not be judged" (7:1).
"Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten; your gold and silver have rusted" (5:2–3).	"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal" (6:19).
"Do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged" (5:9).	"Do not judge, so that you may not be judged" (7:1).
"Do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your 'Yes' be yes and your 'No' be no" (5:12).	"Do not swear at all, either by heaven . . . or by the earth. . . . Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'" (5:34–37).

Other passages in James that parallel sayings of Jesus include 1:6 (cf. Matt. 21:21); 1:9 and 4:10 (cf. Matt. 23:12); 1:12 (cf. Matt. 10:22); 1:21 (cf. Mark 4:14); 4:9 (cf. Luke 6:21, 25); 4:17 (cf. Luke 12:47); 5:1–6 (cf. Luke 6:24); 5:9 (cf. Matt. 24:33); 5:17 (cf. Luke 4:25).

## Authorship of James

Three views regarding the authorship of James have been expounded: (1) the letter was written by an unknown person named “James”; (2) the letter was written, as tradition holds, by James of Jerusalem, the brother of Jesus; (3) the letter was written pseudonymously by someone using the name of James of Jerusalem, the brother of Jesus.

### **James as the Work of an “Unknown James”**

This suggestion seizes on the fact that the author does not actually identify himself as “the brother of Jesus” or as the leader of the church in Jerusalem. Hypothetically, he could be anyone named “James” who considered himself to be a servant of Christ (1:1). Thus, the letter could have been written by someone otherwise unknown to us. This view has had prominent supporters, including Martin Luther, but it is not widely held today. The main attraction of the proposal is that it accounts for the problems scholars have with regarding James of Jerusalem as the author (see below) without alleging pseudonymity—an allegation that is offensive to those who regard the practice as deceptive or dishonest. Still, the author of this letter clearly expects his readers to know which James he is, and he seems to be writing to a broad audience, assuming that they will regard his words as authoritative. Most scholars throughout history have concluded that the readers surely are expected to regard such words as the teaching of the only James who is ever called a pillar of the church (Gal. 2:9). Such a conclusion becomes even more likely if the letter is addressed to Christians living outside of Palestine (1:1 [see box 24.3 in the printed textbook]) by a church leader who presumably is within Palestine, where James of Jerusalem was in charge. Thus, some modern scholars grant the possibility that the letter could have been written by an unknown Christian named “James,” but most consider this unlikely; the great majority think that the author must either be James of Jerusalem or someone using his name.

### **James as the Work of James, the Brother of Jesus**

Interpreters who accept the traditional view that the letter really was written by James of Jerusalem, the brother of Jesus, emphasize points of continuity with traditions that would have been known by that individual. The author of this letter was familiar with Jewish wisdom literature, and James, leading the church in Jerusalem, could easily have become immersed in the wisdom tradition. The author of this letter also evinces knowledge of “Jesus sayings,” and obviously, the brother of Jesus would have had firsthand knowledge of things that Jesus taught and said. In addition, the letter’s sensitivity to the poor and its emphasis on economic equality (1:9–11; 2:1–7; 5:1–6) fit well with what is said elsewhere about James (Gal. 2:10) and the Jerusalem church (Acts 2:44–45; 4:34–37; 5:1–11; 6:1). In a broader sense, many references in this letter are said to be suggestive of Palestinian conditions: the mention of early and late rain (5:7) is appropriate for the climate, the references to figs and olives and grapes (3:12) match the produce, and the descriptions of economic exploitation (2:5–7; 5:1–6) match what is known of inequities in the land during this time period. None of these

points clinches the deal or proves that the letter is by James the brother of Jesus, but they do offer evidence that coheres with the letter's self-claim.

### **James as a Pseudepigraphical Composition**

The possibility that the letter is pseudepigraphical is at least suggested by the fact that we have copies of four other writings from early Christianity attributed to James that clearly were not written by him: the Protevangelium of James, the Apocryphon of James, the First Apocalypse of James, and the Second Apocalypse of James. The first of these (written ca. 150) became a very popular book in Christian circles, being the first major writing to encourage the veneration of Mary and testifying to her perpetual virginity. The latter three writings are gnostic works found among the Nag Hammadi collection. Although none of these writings makes for a fair comparison with the first-century, Jewish-flavored letter attributed to James found in our New Testament, they do attest to the fact that James was a popular choice for pseudonymous attribution.

Scholars who think that the New Testament letter of James might be pseud-epigraphical raise a number of objections to its ascription to James of Jerusalem, the brother of Jesus.

1. The letter is written in elegant Greek, and when the author refers to the scriptures, he appears to be reading from the Septuagint (a Greek translation) rather than from the original Hebrew (see, e.g., 4:6, citing Prov. 3:34). The letter also makes use of concepts and rhetoric derived from Greek philosophy (e.g., the diatribe). Many scholars question whether a Jewish peasant from Galilee would have been capable of writing such a letter. And, even if he were, why would he write it in Greek rather than in Aramaic or in Hebrew (especially if it were addressed to other Jewish believers)?

Supporters of the traditional view point out that Palestine was largely Hellenized at this time; the Greek language was widely used, and elements of Greek philosophy had worked their way into the culture. They also caution against writing James off as "an ignorant peasant," since it is a historical fact that he led the church in Jerusalem for many years and was able to hold his own in conversations and conflicts with Paul (Gal. 1:18–2:12). Further, we might assume that someone of James's stature would have been able to secure an amanuensis to produce a letter in keeping with his wishes and that such a scribe (a person with training in rhetoric and composition) would have taken responsibility for presenting the author's thoughts in a way that was considered to be effective and pleasing according to the standards of the day.

2. The author does not make any reference to the personal life of Jesus or even bother to identify himself as the brother of Jesus. Wouldn't he want to cite his relationship with Jesus to give his teaching more authority?

Interpreters who support the traditional ascription claim that the author did not have to do this (his readers knew who he was), and he probably avoided flaunting his credentials as "the Lord's brother" (cf. Gal. 1:19) because it would be considered unseemly to do so (cf. Jude 1:1). Notably, James is never explicitly referred to as the brother of Jesus in Acts either. Indeed, this point may be turned on its head: wouldn't a pseudonymous

author, trying to capitalize on James's authority and notoriety, have been careful to spell out who he was (i.e., who he was claiming to be), and to milk that for all it was worth? Wouldn't a pseudonymous author claim the letter was by James the *brother* of Jesus rather than by James a *servant* of Jesus (cf. 1:1)?

3. The letter does not display the same concern for Jewish Christians to abide by Torah and to keep ritual laws (including dietary regulations) that we would expect to find in a writing from James, given that such insistence is what precipitated the conflict with Paul at Antioch (Gal. 2:11–14). In fact, when the author of this letter refers to the love commandment as “the law of liberty” (1:25; 2:12), he seems to endorse the position taken by Paul with regard to that controversy: Christians fulfill the whole law when they keep the love command, and thus they are freed from other laws (Gal. 5:13–14). This is often regarded as the strongest argument against this letter actually being written by James of Jerusalem, the brother of Jesus.

Supporters of the traditional view point out that the argument is based entirely on silence. The author could very well have thought that Jewish Christians should observe dietary and other regulations of Torah but did not address those matters in this particular missive because they did not happen to be concerns at that moment.

4. The section of the letter that maintains that justification comes by works, not by faith alone (2:14–26), is usually thought to have been written in response to a misunderstanding of Paul's teaching on the topic of justification by faith (Rom. 3:28; Gal. 2:16). Thus, scholars claim, the letter of James must have been written later than Paul, and probably several years later to allow time for Paul's views to have circulated and become widely known. By this reasoning, the letter must be written later than 62, when James the brother of Jesus was killed.

Other interpreters claim that a *misunderstanding* of Paul's teaching actually suggests an early date. James may have heard garbled reports of what Paul was saying and written this letter to counter ideas that probably would have been understood more clearly a few years later. The letter could have been written during the time of Paul's active ministry, around the same time as Galatians and Romans, or even before those letters, which spell out Paul's teaching on justification in a way distinct from the caricature that the letter of James appears to be addressing.

5. The letter of James was one of the last books admitted to the Christian canon. Some scholars say that if the early church had been confident that this book was written by Jesus' own brother, there would have been unanimous approval of it from the start; the slow and halting acceptance of the book is a sure sign that there was uncertainty regarding its author.

Other scholars suggest that authorship was not the primary issue with regard to the book's being accepted as scripture: even teachers of the church who accepted this book as written by James the brother of Jesus were wary of it because it was favored by legalistic sects and movements that lay outside the mainstream of developing orthodoxy (e.g., the Ebionites in the second century and the Pelagians in the fourth century).

6. The letter is sometimes thought to assume a developed church structure that would not have been in place during the lifetime of James. The roles



of “teacher” (3:1) and “elder” (5:14–15) apparently have been elevated to the status of recognized church offices.

Supporters of the traditional view maintain that we have no sure information regarding when such offices developed in the church. Paul refers to bishops and deacons (Phil. 1:1; cf. Rom. 16:1) and other authorities (1 Cor. 12:28; 1 Thess. 5:12) in letters written during the lifetime of James.

## Conclusion

Most scholars grant that there is no decisive reason why James of Jerusalem, the brother of Jesus, could not be the author of this letter, as the ascription in 1:1 is almost certainly meant to imply. Still, others believe that the cumulative weight of all the different considerations mentioned above make it more likely that the letter was written pseudonymously by someone who revered James and wanted to pass along teaching coherent with the image of pious Jewish Christianity with which James had come to be associated.

Ultimately, the decision on this question may be determined by the attitude that one takes toward tradition and toward pseudepigraphy in general.

- Scholars who tend to respect the reliability of ancient church traditions and who think that pseudepigraphy typically was regarded as a spurious practice usually conclude that the letter of James can be attributed with some confidence to the actual brother of Jesus and leader of the Jerusalem church.
- Scholars who tend to be suspicious of church traditions, or who think that pseudepigraphy was a common and accepted practice, usually conclude that James is a pseudepigraphical work, produced with the best of intentions as a tribute to the great church leader.

In neither case is James regarded as a deceitful forgery; the content of the letter evinces high moral values and it is hard to imagine what a dishonest person would hope to gain by producing such a work fraudulently.

## The Royal Command of Love

The letter of James not only contains teaching similar to the sayings of Jesus; it also adopts the hermeneutic of Jesus, maintaining that love is the key to fulfilling God's law and doing God's will.

Jesus said that love for God and love for neighbor are the greatest commandments, the ones on which "all the law and the prophets" depend (Matt. 22:36–40; cf. Mark 12:29–31; Luke 10:25–28). He summarized ethics with the Golden Rule: "Do to others as you would have them do to you, for this is the law and the prophets" (Matt. 7:12).

James likewise identifies "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18) as "the royal law" (2:8), "the law of liberty" (1:25; 2:12), and "the perfect law" (1:25). Faced with the prospect of keeping the whole law, with all its various points, believers do well to concentrate on this commandment (2:8–10).

James further interprets this royal law in context. He appears to have examined the Old Testament section in which the command to love one's neighbor appears and incorporated more of what that part of the Bible says into his moral exhortations:

- Leviticus 19:12 forbids swearing false oaths (cf. James 5:12).
- Leviticus 19:13 forbids withholding wages from laborers (cf. James 5:4).
- Leviticus 19:15 forbids showing partiality to the rich (cf. James 2:1–12).
- Leviticus 19:16 forbids slander and evil talk (cf. James 4:11–12).
- Leviticus 19:17 commends reproof as a way to reconciliation (cf. James 5:20).
- Leviticus 19:18a discourages vengeance and holding grudges (cf. James 5:9).
- Leviticus 19:18b commands "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (cf. James 2:8).

See Luke Timothy Johnson, *Brother of Jesus, Friend of God: Studies in the Letter of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 123–35.

## An Epistle of Straw: What Martin Luther Said about James

“Though this Epistle of St. James was rejected by the ancients, I praise it and hold it a good book, because it sets up no doctrine of men and lays great stress upon God’s law. But to state my own opinion about it . . . I consider that it is not the writing of any apostle. My reasons are as follows. First: Flatly against St. Paul and all the rest of Scripture, it ascribes righteousness to works. . . . Second, its purpose is to teach Christians, and in all this long teaching it does not once mention the Passion, the Resurrection, or the Spirit of Christ. . . . James does nothing more than drive to the law and its works; and he mixes the two up in such disorderly fashion that it seems to me he must have been some good, pious man, who took some sayings of the apostles’ disciples and threw them thus on paper; or perhaps they were written down by someone else from his preaching. . . . In a word, he wants to guard against those who relied on faith without works, and is unequal to the task. . . . and would accomplish by insisting on the Law what the apostles accomplish by inciting men to love. Therefore, I cannot put him among the chief books, though I would not thereby prevent anyone from putting him where he pleases and estimating him as he pleases; for there are many good sayings in him.”<sup>1</sup>

“In a word, St. John’s Gospel and his first epistle, St. Paul’s epistles, especially Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, and St. Peter’s first epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that it is necessary and salvatory for you to know, even if you were never to see or hear any other book or doctrine. St. James’ epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to the others, for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it.”<sup>2</sup>

### Footnotes

1. See *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35, *Word and Sacrament I* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960), 362.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 395–97.

## James in the Christian Canon

The letter of James was one of the last books of the New Testament admitted to the Christian canon. It was not listed in the Muratorian Canon of scripture for the Western church (ca. 170–210). More than a hundred years later (ca. 311), Eusebius reported that it was still one of the disputed books, though he thought that it should be accepted because it was recognized by many, evinced an “apostolic style,” and was orthodox in its teaching. Although no one rejected the book outright, many authorities were hesitant to allow it full canonical status until Athanasius included it in a definitive list developed around 367. Under the influence of Athanasius and Augustine, Jerome included James in his early fifth-century translation of the Bible, the Latin Vulgate (which secured the letter’s place in the canon of the Western church). Jerome noted, however, that the book had only come to be accepted “little by little” (*De viris illustribus* 2). The letter of James has been found in Christian Bibles ever since, but Martin Luther moved it to the back of his 1522 German Bible in order to distinguish it from what he regarded as the more “true and certain” books of the New Testament.

The reasons why James was slow to be accepted into the canon are not clear, but several factors are possible: there was uncertainty about authorship; the book was popular among groups deemed to be heretical; its contents may have seemed practical and generic rather than theological and specifically Christian; parts of James (2:21–24) appeared to conflict with Paul (cf. Rom. 4:3–25; Gal. 3:6–14); and the book has a very Jewish flavor, which probably did not help its reception in an increasingly Gentile (and often anti-Jewish) church.

## Was James the Son of Joseph and Mary?

The New Testament simply identifies James as the brother of Jesus without any further specification of family relationships. At first, this seems to indicate that Jesus' parents, Joseph and Mary, had more children in the years after Jesus was born. But, from the second century on, some interpreters have demonstrated that there could be other explanations for how Jesus came to have brothers and sisters. The siblings of Jesus mentioned in Mark 6:4 may have been Joseph's children from a previous marriage (which, if so, means that James was older than Jesus). Or, Joseph and Mary may have adopted children, possibly the orphaned offspring of relatives.

These suggestions appear to be motivated by a desire to preserve the virginity of Mary: in the developing piety of the Christian church, Mary came to be viewed as "forever virgin," and eventually, her perpetual virginity was affirmed as a point of sacred doctrine for the Roman Catholic Church. Thus, Roman Catholic interpreters tend to regard Jesus and James as legal siblings but not as blood relatives. Most Protestant interpreters view this as a nonissue: the Roman Catholic position on James and the other siblings of Jesus is possible, but it is not supported by anything in the Bible or made necessary by any (Protestant) theological doctrine.

See Richard Bauckham, *Jude and the Relatives of Jesus in the Early Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990).

## James in the Revised Common Lectionary

Text	Series	Liturgical Occasion	Calendar Date
1:17–27	B	Lectionary 22	Aug 28–Sep 3
2:1–10 (11–13), 14–17	B	Lectionary 23	Sep 4–10
3:1–12	B	Lectionary 24	Sep 11–17
3:13–4:3, 7–8a	B	Lectionary 25	Sep 18–24
5:7–10	A	Advent 3	2 Sundays before Dec 25
5:13–20	B	Lectionary 26	Sep 25–Oct 1

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## Authorship of 1 Peter

In the 1950s and 1960s, the great majority of New Testament scholars regarded 1 Peter as an obviously pseudepigraphical writing, but that judgment was based on arguments that would be deemed inconclusive today.

### Arguments for Pseudepigraphy That No Longer Hold Up

- *Argument:* The sufferings referred to in 1 Peter are references to state-sponsored, empire-wide persecutions, which did not occur during the apostle Peter's lifetime.

*Rebuttal:* There is now widespread recognition that the letter is addressing suffering of another kind (harassment and abuse from neighbors), which could have been experienced almost anytime, anywhere.

- *Argument:* The relatively refined Greek of 1 Peter is beyond what we would expect of a Galilean fisherman (cf. Acts 4:13). The author, furthermore, cites Old Testament passages from the Septuagint without, apparently, consulting the Hebrew Bible. He also demonstrates some knowledge of Greco-Roman rhetorical practices.

*Rebuttal:* Most modern scholars recognize that letter writers in the ancient world often employed professional scribes who were responsible for the actual composition, conveying what the author wanted to say in a more polished style than the author might have been able to produce. This was particularly true when the author was a person of prominence (as Peter would have been) writing an official communication like this one (a circular letter to multiple churches). Furthermore, many scholars now contend that a well-traveled man like Peter could have had much more facility with Greek than was previously thought.

- *Argument:* The numerous parallels between 1 Peter and other New Testament books are evidence that the author of 1 Peter had read some of those books; thus, 1 Peter must be one of the last books of the New Testament to have been written, and accordingly, it could not have been written by the apostle, who died in the mid-60s.

*Rebuttal:* Today, most scholars think that the parallels can be attributed to mutual use of shared traditions (catechetical and liturgical materials). Furthermore, the connections most suggestive of direct literary dependence are ones that do not necessarily pose any problem for Petrine authorship. It is often noted that 1 Peter uses a number of "Paulinisms," distinctive words and expressions usually associated with Paul; for example, the expression "in Christ" is used 164 times by Paul but does not occur anywhere else in the New Testament except here, in 1 Peter, where it turns up three times (3:16; 5:10, 14). That is interesting, but it is not particularly relevant for the question of authorship, since there is no reason why Peter, in Rome, could not have read Paul's letter to the Romans and picked up some "Paulinisms" from that. Or, he might have been influenced by Paul's former colleagues Silvanus and Mark, who, he says, are currently with him (5:12–13).

The major arguments that once led scholars to regard 1 Peter as pseudepigraphical have thus been discounted, and authorship by the apostle has increasingly come to be regarded as a viable option. The matter is still disputed by many (probably most) scholars, but with a different tenor than before. Almost everyone will at least admit that 1 Peter is not certainly or obviously pseudepigraphical.

### **Factors Favoring 1 Peter as a Work Produced during Peter's Lifetime**

- The encouragement to honor the emperor would make more sense before the persecutions under Nero than afterward: how could any Christian write words describing the Roman emperor as a promoter of justice (2:13–14) in the years after Peter's martyrdom, much less attribute those words retroactively to Peter himself?
- The confident declaration that the end of the ages is near (4:7; cf. 1:5; 4:17) also suggests the perspective of a first-generation Christian.

### **Factors Suggesting That 1 Peter Comes from a Time after Peter's Death**

- The use of "Babylon" as an epithet for Rome (5:13) did not become popular among Jews and Christians until after 70 CE, when Rome destroyed the Jerusalem temple, just as Babylon had destroyed an earlier temple in 587 BCE.
- A later date for 1 Peter also allows more time for various Christian trajectories to have synthesized into the common tradition that we find expressed in the letter.
- A later date also allows more time for the churches in Asia Minor to have developed into the established institutions that they appear to be.

### **Specific Proposals That Have Been Offered**

- Wayne Grudem suggests that, contrary to church tradition, Peter survived the Neronian persecution and wrote the letter sometime later (in the 70s?) with former colleagues of the deceased Paul now helping him. See Grudem, *The First Epistle of Peter*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 10–11; cf. J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter*, WBC 49 (Waco: Word, 1988), lvii–lxvii.
- E. G. Selwyn suggests that Silvanus (cf. 1 Pet. 5:12) shaped some fragmentary themes and exhortations of Peter's into a coherent letter after the apostle's death. See Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter*, 2nd ed., TC (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1981 [1947]), 9–17.
- Leonhard Goppelt suggests that the Roman church in the 80s had become so identified with Petrine tradition that it felt it could speak to other churches "with the mind of Peter" (and thus in his name). See Goppelt, *A Commentary on 1 Peter*, trans. John E. Alsup (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 51–52.

### **The Central Argument Today: Is the Letter Compatible with What Is Known of Peter?**

The main question for most modern scholars is whether what is presented in 1 Peter is consistent with what we know of Peter's post-Easter life and teachings. There are things in the letter that do not match perfectly with what is said of Peter elsewhere in the New Testament. But how significant are these matters? And can they be explained?

Here are the two most frequently cited examples:

1. *Apostle to the Jews, not to the Gentiles.* Paul describes Peter as the “apostle to the circumcised” (Gal. 2:7–8), indicating that Peter was more focused on ministry to Jews than to Gentiles; it is a little odd, then, that Peter would be writing a letter to Gentile Christians. Still, we should not take Paul’s remark as providing us with some kind of permanent or binding job description for Peter. Elsewhere, we do hear that Peter was involved in church work at Antioch (Gal. 2:11–12) and at Corinth (1 Cor. 1:12; 9:5), which seems to imply some level of commitment to ministry among Gentiles (and see Acts 10:1–11:18; 15:6–11).
2. *No Mention of the Incident at Antioch.* Paul refers to a confrontation he had with Peter in Antioch (Gal. 2:11–14), alleging that Peter acted hypocritically out of fear. One might think that Peter (writing also to the Galatians, among others) would now want to set the record straight and offer his version of what happened. But there is no mention in 1 Peter of the Antioch incident, nor is there any discussion of the issues that provoked it. That seems odd to some interpreters, but of course, such an omission could simply indicate that the controversy had passed, or that Peter and Paul had reconciled, or that Peter had accepted Paul’s rebuke and now agreed with him. It could even be that Peter, following his own advice, simply chose not to return “abuse for abuse” (1 Pet. 3:9; cf. 2:23).

Where does this leave us? We do not really know very much about Peter’s post-Easter career or teaching, save for the fact that he was a missionary who traveled with his wife (1 Cor. 9:5), that he was highly respected as a leader in the church (Gal. 1:18; 2:9), and that many people traced their identity in Christ to his ministry or influence (1 Cor. 1:12; cf. Acts 2:41; 4:4; 8:25). He does not seem to have been regarded as an innovative theologian or as one who was clearly identified with distinctive doctrines or practices. Even Paul seems to regard him as a key player in the church who is just one among many who are all basically doing the same thing: proclaiming the true gospel of Christ (1 Cor. 1:12; 3:22; 15:11).

The bottom line seems to be this: there is nothing in 1 Peter that necessitates it having been written by the apostle Peter, but at the same time, there is nothing in the letter that makes authorship by Peter impossible.

### **The Two Key Factors Influencing Decisions**

In adjudicating this question, two factors inevitably come to the fore:

- *The degree of confidence that can be placed in traditions of the early church.* Scholars who view church tradition as “innocent unless proven guilty” usually judge 1 Peter to be an authentic composition of the apostle Peter (the problems raised are not sufficient to undermine a unanimous and early tradition of the church); scholars who think that the early church often got such things wrong tend to think that the letter probably is pseudepigraphical.
- *The attitude that the early church took toward pseudepigraphy.* Scholars who think that Christians in the early church usually regarded pseudepigraphy

as a spurious or dishonest practice usually view 1 Peter as an authentic composition of the apostle Peter (the problems raised are outweighed by the unlikelihood of respected Christians in the first century producing a fraudulent work or managing to pull off such a hoax in a church that was cautious and watchful in that regard); scholars who think that certain types of pseudepigraphy were widely accepted as honorable tend to see 1 Peter as pseudepigraphical (produced by disciples or admirers of Peter for a church that welcomed such postmortem contributions).

### **The Significance of the Question**

The significance of whether 1 Peter is to be regarded as authentic or pseud-epigraphical is minimized by certain factors:

- The letter does not claim to present anything that only Peter could know (e.g., secret teachings imparted to him by Jesus). The apocryphal writings attributed to Peter in later centuries often do make such a claim.
- Both defenders of authenticity and proponents of pseudonymity agree that the letter presents Peter's own thoughts (or, at least, thoughts consistent with the tradition in which he stood), and they also agree that those thoughts have been cast into language different from that which Peter himself typically would have used (either by an amanuensis during his lifetime or by disciples after his death).
- The question of authorship need not be resolved to understand the letter's message, which is fairly general and intended to deal with issues faced by Christians "in all the world" (5:9).

Nevertheless, a few specific passages in this letter attain a special poignancy if written by the man Peter who actually walked with Jesus.

- In 5:1, the author refers to himself as "a witness of the sufferings of Christ." This could simply mean that he is one who can testify faithfully to the sufferings that Christ bore and that others bear for him. The disciple Peter, however, may have meant this in a more literal sense: he speaks as one who was actually present to witness Christ's suffering firsthand (cf. 2:23).
- In 1:8, the author writes, "Although you have not seen (Jesus), you love him." The words might strike readers differently if written by someone who, unlike them, has in fact seen Jesus face to face.

In short, the question of whether or not 1 Peter is pseudepigraphical perhaps is irrelevant for understanding the book's theological message, but the question could be significant for appreciation of the work's emotional impact or sentimental appeal.

## Honor and Shame in 1 Peter

The letter of 1 Peter tries to help its readers evaluate what is happening to them in light of the enormous weight placed upon honor and shame in their culture. They have suffered terrible disgrace and a loss of status in a world that prizes social reputation above all else.

Against this background, the author calls the readers to realize that they are actually in a position of much greater honor than they were before. They have gone

- from living in darkness to living in marvelous light (2:9);
- from being “not a people” to being God’s people (2:10);
- from being ignorant (1:14) to being people who are obedient to the truth (1:22);
- from living in futility (1:18) to living in hope (1:3).

If their neighbors do not recognize this, it is because those neighbors lack the ability to determine what is truly honorable or shameful; they are ignorant and foolish people who do not know God (2:15; 4:3–4). They are like the people who rejected Christ, the way foolish and incompetent builders would toss aside what they took to be a worthless rock without realizing it was actually the chief cornerstone (2:4–8).

With keen psychological insight, the author of 1 Peter discerns that the abusers are actually motivated by fear, and he urges his readers not to be afraid of their fear (or, possibly, not to “fear what they fear,” as the NRSV has it [see 3:14]).

Furthermore, the author can promise his readers that those who believe in Jesus “will not be put to shame” (2:6); indeed, the current experience of suffering may provide them with an opportunity to attain even greater honor before God when Jesus Christ is revealed (1:7).

See Barth L. Campbell, *Honor, Shame, and the Rhetoric of 1 Peter*, SBLDS 160 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998).

## Resident Aliens: A Social Class?

One of the most influential studies on 1 Peter in recent years demonstrates that the terms used in this letter for “aliens and exiles” (*parepidēmos* in 1:1; 2:11; *paroikia* in 1:17; *paroikos* in 2:11) were used in the Roman world to refer to a particular social class of people with the legal status of “resident aliens.” Such persons lived without recognized citizenship; they were “homeless” in a social-cultural sense and often were subjected to abuse and oppression. This observation leads to the contention that 1 Peter was written to Christians who belonged to this marginalized social class. Many aspects of the letter may be understood from such a perspective.\*

Most scholars, however, think that Peter uses this label in a metaphorical way to refer to his readers’ spiritual status. An analogy may be seen in the manner in which he treats slavery. Many of the readers were actually slaves, but all Christians become slaves in a metaphorical sense and thus stand to learn from the actual slaves how to bear up under unjust suffering (see 2:18–21). Likewise, some of the recipients of this letter probably were “resident aliens” in a literal sense, but even those who were not should realize that they have become such as a result of their faith. Thus, the pastoral counsel to those who are literally “homeless” in this world applies to all Christians, who are separated from their true home in heaven.

\*See John H. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless: A Sociological Exegesis of 1 Peter* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981).

## 1 Peter in the Christian Canon

The Muratorian Canon (ca. 170–210), our earliest written list of books regarded as scripture in the Christian church, does not list 1 Peter. This is strange because the book was already well known in the church at that time, and if it was regarded as noncanonical by the composers of this list, they almost certainly would have mentioned it as a book to be rejected, as they do other apocryphal writings that had attained popularity. The canonical status of 1 Peter is not questioned in any other document of the church, as is the status of the four other New Testament writings missing from the Muratorian Canon (Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 3 John). Furthermore, the identification of the letter's author as the apostle Peter found unanimous acceptance in the early church and has been questioned only in recent times. Accordingly, some scholars think that the omission of 1 Peter from the Muratorian Canon is accidental: the manuscript containing that list is fragmentary, so it is possible that 1 Peter was listed in a portion of the manuscript that is missing (though this would mean that it was listed in an odd sequence, not with other epistles). No one really knows why 1 Peter was not included in this one early list of canonical books, but the fourth-century historian Eusebius lists it as an "undisputed work" that has been "acknowledged as genuine and true by the tradition of the church" (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.25, 1–7).



## Descent into Hell

Two curious passages in 1 Peter have been the subject of much speculation.

### 1 Peter 3:19–20

These verses indicate that Christ was made alive in the spirit after his death and made a proclamation to spirits that had been imprisoned from the days of Noah. Different interpretations have been offered for what this might mean.

1. *Preaching to Deceased Human Beings.* An ancient tradition of the church holds that Jesus descended spiritually into the world of the dead during the interim between his crucifixion and resurrection (cf. Rom. 10:7; Eph. 4:9–10). This tradition is developed in several apocryphal writings and is referenced by one line of the Apostles' Creed, a fourth-century confessional statement that asserts, "He descended into hell" (or, in some versions, "to the dead"). In some traditions, the purpose of this descent is construed as being to deliver righteous persons from the Old Testament period who were waiting on God to be vindicated, but in 1 Peter, proclamation to the "disobedient" is emphasized (3:20). Thus, the purpose envisioned here could have been to preach the gospel to condemned sinners from the age of Noah and give them a chance to be saved.
2. *Preaching to Disobedient Angels.* A completely different interpretation of the passage suggests that the imprisoned spirits are not deceased persons but rather are disobedient angels. Specifically, they are the "sons of God" who in the days before the flood mated with earth women and produced a race of giants, as reported in Genesis 6:1–4 (a story expanded upon in numerous Jewish apocryphal writings, especially 1 Enoch). If this is the case, then 1 Peter may be reporting that Jesus visited the place where these troublesome spirits are imprisoned (whether in heaven or hell—the text does not say) to confirm God's final victory and triumph over them. The point would be to emphasize Jesus' power over cosmic forces (cf. 3:22).

The second interpretation is preferred by the great majority of scholars today.

### 1 Peter 4:6

This verse alludes to the gospel being preached "even to the dead" (4:6). Again, two different interpretations have been offered: (1) this could be a reference to the tradition of Jesus visiting the underworld to deliver or evangelize persons from the Old Testament period (as indicated above); (2) it might simply be a reference to the gospel having been preached to persons who are now dead but who will live again (cf. 1 Thess. 4:13–18).

Whatever interpretations of these two passages are adopted, both of them testify to what theologians sometimes call the "temporal universality" of Christ's action: what Jesus did had consequences for the past as well as for the present and the future.

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## 1 Peter in the Revised Common Lectionary

Text	Series	Liturgical Occasion	Calendar Date
1:3–9	A	Easter 2	1 Sunday after Easter
1:17–23	A	Easter 3	2 Sundays after Easter
2:2–10	A	Easter 5	4 Sundays after Easter
2:19–25	A	Easter 4	3 Sundays after Easter
3:13–22	A	Easter 6	5 Sundays after Easter
3:18–22	B	Lent 1	6 Sundays before Easter
4:12–14; 5:6–11	A	Easter 7	6 Sundays after Easter

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## Authorship of 2 Peter

The New Testament letter known as 2 Peter leaves no doubt that it is to be read as correspondence from the apostle Peter (see 1:1, 17–18), but nevertheless it is considered to be pseudepigraphical by almost all New Testament scholars, including many who are reluctant to grant the pseudepigraphy of other New Testament writings.

1. The letter that we know as 2 Peter actually refers to 1 Peter as an earlier correspondence (2 Pet. 3:1); accordingly, scholars who believe that 1 Peter is pseudepigraphical, written after Peter's death, will logically conclude that 2 Peter too must be pseudepigraphical, written later than 1 Peter and therefore also after Peter's death. But what if 1 Peter is not pseudepigraphical? Then the problem is that 1 Peter and 2 Peter are so different from each other that most interpreters conclude that they could not have been written by the same person (thus, if 1 Peter is not pseudepigraphical, 2 Peter must be). The differences are not just matters of language and style (which might be explained by the employment of two different scribes) but also extend to theology and overall tone. For example, 1 Peter urges not returning abuse for abuse and being open to outsiders (3:9), whereas 2 Peter relies on polemic and innuendo to vilify opponents (e.g., 2:12–22).
2. The author of 2 Peter usually is assumed to have had a copy of the letter of Jude, and many scholars think that Jude was written sometime after Peter's death. Even if Jude was written a few years before Peter's martyrdom, it seems unlikely that Peter would have obtained a copy of that letter so soon after it was written.
3. The letter appears to be written from a very Hellenistic viewpoint that does not fit well with what we would expect of Peter, the Galilean fisherman who was prominent in the Jerusalem church and became known as an apostle to Jews (Gal. 2:7–8). For example, 2 Peter describes salvation as becoming "participants in the divine nature" (1:4), and the letter refers to rebellious angels being imprisoned in "Tartarus" (most English translations: "hell"), the realm of the underworld in Greek mythology (2:4).
4. The letter refers to a skepticism that has arisen among Christians who note that the promise of Christ's coming has not been fulfilled (3:4). Most scholars think that this sort of problem would have arisen after the deaths of Jesus' followers (including Peter). Furthermore, the author responds to this skepticism by indicating that the parousia could still be thousands of years away (3:8). Scholars do not think it likely that Peter or anyone else in the first generation of believers would have developed such a nuanced stance toward the second coming; other evidence indicates that the first Christians expected Jesus to return very soon (1 Cor. 7:26, 29–31; 1 Thess. 4:5–17; Heb. 10:37; James 5:8; 1 Pet. 4:7; cf. Mark 13:30).
5. The letter speaks of apostolic tradition as a norm to be defended: the readers are told to remain "established in the truth that has come to you" (1:12) and to remember "the commandments of the Lord and Savior spoken through your apostles" (3:2). Some interpreters take these references

as implying a virtual equation of “what is true” with “what is apostolic,” a notion of authority that did not take hold in the church until the second century. Furthermore, the author refers to these apostles as though they are a group to which he does not himself belong; if the apostle Peter were actually writing this letter, wouldn’t he tell them to remember “the commandments of the Lord and Savior spoken through us” (cf. 3:2)?

6. The letter makes an explicit reference to the deaths of “our ancestors” (3:4), which most scholars take to mean “the apostles” or “the first generation of Christians.” If it does mean that, then 2 Peter almost certainly would be pseudepigraphical, written after the death of Peter (one of the ancestors). It is possible, however, that the word *ancestors* is used here to mean “all those who have gone before us” or refers to Jewish ancestors from biblical history.
7. In 3:15–16, Paul’s letters are referred to as a group of writings that are being studied and interpreted in divergent ways within the church; furthermore, the author of 2 Peter regards those letters as scripture and assumes that his readers think of them as scripture also. But scholars do not believe that the letters of Paul were copied or collected in a way that would allow them to have received this sort of attention during the lifetime of Peter (i.e., during the lifetime of Paul himself, who was martyred at the same time as Peter, ca. 64–65). Furthermore, scholars do not think that Paul’s letters were regarded as scripture until many years after the passing of Peter and Paul.
8. The letter shifts back and forth between use of the future tense, when it presents Peter predicting things that will happen after his death (2:1–3; 3:1–4), and the present tense, when it addresses its readers as though those predictions are now coming true (2:10–22; 3:5–7). The strong impression is that the letter is intended for Christians who live a generation or so after Peter’s death (during the time when the predictions are coming true). Most interpreters think it more likely that a pseudonymous author wrote a letter to address those believers “in Peter’s name” than that Peter himself wrote such a letter proleptically.
9. The letter had considerable trouble gaining recognition and acceptance within the church, something that would not have happened if there had been confidence that it actually had been written by Peter. Indeed, 2 Peter is never even mentioned in church writings until the third century, and then it is only alluded to in a writing from the Eastern church (by Origen of Alexandria) that questions its legitimacy. It is not mentioned in the Western church until the fourth century, and then again, it comes up only as a “disputed” writing. If 2 Peter is not pseudepigraphical, we certainly would want to know how a letter written in Rome by Peter during his last days (1:14–15) could be either ignored or rejected by Christians in that city for more than three hundred years. This question becomes even more pointed when we realize that the contents of the letter would have served the interests of the Roman church well (which could explain why the letter eventually was accepted). This letter appears to have been regarded with suspicion and used with caution for one reason only: it was widely regarded as pseudepigraphical. In fact, the only writings by Christians that appear to have drawn upon 2 Peter in these first few centuries are two apocryphal



writings, the Apocalypse of Peter (ca. 110–140) and the Acts of Peter (ca. 180), both of which also claim to have been written by the apostle.

10. Finally, 2 Peter is usually thought to belong to the literary genre of “testament,” and all testaments were, by definition, pseudepigraphical. A testament was a work that presented a fictive “deathbed speech” of some famous person from the past, addressing issues of the day. The idea was to apply the perspective and insights of the past individual to current events; ancient readers who understood this genre of literature did not imagine that the work offered the literal words of the historical individual (as though some long-lost writing by that person had just been discovered). In 2 Peter we find all of the standard literary conventions of a testament, with the exception that it is cast in the form of a letter.

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A few scholars dispute the accuracy or significance of the points listed above, insisting that a case can be made for regarding 2 Peter as having been written by the apostle Peter.

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## 2 Peter in the Christian Canon

No other book in the New Testament had more trouble than 2 Peter in gaining admittance to the Christian canon of scripture.

- The Muratorian Canon (ca. 170–210) does not list it as part of the Christian scriptures.
- Origen of Alexandria (ca. 215–250) says that “Peter left behind one letter that is acknowledged, and possibly a second, but it is disputed.”
- Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 311) lists 2 Peter among “disputed books which are nonetheless known by many.”
- Didymus the Blind (who died in 398) urged people not to “overlook that the epistle is forged,” insisting that “though it is read publicly, it is nevertheless not in the canon.”
- Athanasius of Alexandria, in 367, accepted 2 Peter without question in a list of canonical books that was ratified by an important regional council of churches (the Third Synod of Carthage) in 393.

## 2 Peter in the Revised Common Lectionary

Text	Series	Liturgical Occasion	Calendar Date
1:16–21	A	Transfiguration	7 Sundays before Easter
3:8–15a	B	Advent 2	3 Sundays before Dec 25

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## Authorship of the Johannine Letters

None of the three books known as the Johannine Letters in our New Testament identifies its author by name. The book called “1 John” is completely anonymous, and the letters called “2 John” and “3 John” are written by someone who calls himself “the elder.”

### How the Books Came to Be Ascribed to John the Apostle

The early church came to ascribe these three writings to the apostle John (a disciple of Jesus) through the following process of reasoning:

1. Christians noticed that the language, style, and outlook of the book that is now called “1 John” is remarkably similar to that of the book that we identify as the Gospel of John. They decided that both books must have the same author.
2. The book that we now call the “Gospel of John” is also anonymous, but it indicates that some of its material was put into writing by “the beloved disciple” (John 21:24). Many interpreters in the early church thought that this “beloved disciple” must be the apostle John because he is the only prominent member of Jesus’ twelve disciples who is not otherwise mentioned in that book (except for 21:2).

Thus, it was said that the apostle John wrote that Gospel (a bit of an exaggeration, since this Gospel only claims that he wrote certain things down, not that he wrote the whole book), and that the apostle John also wrote the book that we call “1 John” (because it is so similar to the Gospel that the two books must have the same author).

3. Many interpreters noted that the language, style, and outlook of 2 John and 3 John are also very similar to that of 1 John (and the Gospel of John). Thus, they began saying that those two writings must also be works of the apostle John, though this was affirmed with considerably less confidence.

By the end of the fourth century (e.g., in the writings of Athanasius, ca. 367), it was commonly held that four books of the New Testament had been written by the apostle John, who, for some reason, didn’t like to use his name: he called himself “the beloved disciple” in one book, “the elder” in two others, and left a fourth one completely anonymous.

### Modern Support for This Traditional View

A few modern scholars maintain that the construal outlined above holds up to scrutiny: the early church (at least by the time of Athanasius) got the authorship of the Johannine writings almost exactly correct. Proponents of this view include D. A. Carson, *The Johannine Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming); I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978).

### Caveats to the Traditional View

Most scholars would want to amend the traditional view in light of a few observations that have been made regarding these writings over the years:

- Almost all modern scholars think that the Gospel of John was produced in stages; the apostle John (the “beloved disciple”) may have started the process, but others continued it after he was gone. Thus, similarities between the Gospel and the letters do not necessarily mean that the apostle John wrote the letters; the letters might have been written by one of the authors or editors associated with the Gospel at a later stage. This seems much more likely to most modern scholars.
- According to the church historian Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.4), Papias, in the second century, claimed that there were two prominent leaders named “John” in the church that produced our Fourth Gospel: John the apostle (the disciple of Jesus) and John the elder (a disciple of the apostle). Thus, many interpreters have speculated that John the elder wrote 2 John and 3 John (which are by someone who calls himself “the elder”). And if all of these works have the same author, wouldn’t that mean that John the elder wrote 1 John and part of the Gospel as well?
- A number of scholars have noted minor differences between the writings and have questioned whether they actually do have the same author: the Gospel says that Jesus is the light (John 1:4–9; 8:12; 9:5; 12:46) and calls the Holy Spirit a “Paraclete” (14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7), whereas 1 John says that God is light (1:5) and calls Jesus the “Paraclete” (2:1); the Gospel uses words such as *glory* and *glorify* never found in the letters, and 1 John uses words such as *seed* and *anointing* never found in the Gospel; the Gospel rarely mentions the parousia, which figures prominently in 1 John (see 2:28; 3:1–3; 4:17).

## Conclusion

The dominant view today is as follows:

- The three letters probably have a common author (though this is not certain).
- Their author was a leader in the community where the Gospel of John was produced.
- Their author probably was one of the people responsible for writing, editing, or refining the Gospel of John (perhaps the person called “John the elder” by Papias).
- The three letters probably were written at about the same time and probably after the Gospel of John (or at least at a time when that Gospel was in its penultimate form).

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## Analogous Heresies

Although we don't know for sure what the secessionists opposed in the Johannine letters taught, we are aware of certain movements in early Christianity that may have espoused similar ideas.

- *Docetists*. The docetists taught that Christ was a divine being who only seemed to be human (his humanity was an illusion or a disguise); he appeared to suffer but, being divine, could not really suffer or die. Ignatius of Antioch (ca. 110) writes about the docetists, indicating that they were active in Asia Minor in the early second century.
- *Gnostics*. Christian gnostics claimed that Christ brought spiritual knowledge that would provide salvation from an evil material world. They rejected the notion of anything good being associated with "flesh." Some gnostic writings present the claim that those who are spiritually purified live without sin, regardless of obedience to any external moral code (cf. 1 John 1:8–2:2).
- *Cerinthians*. The followers of a particular teacher named "Cerinthus" believed that "Jesus" and "the Christ" were two different entities, the one a human figure and the other a divine power. The Christ descended upon Jesus at his baptism, and for a time Jesus exhibited the hallmarks of divinity (speaking divine secrets and working miracles). But the Christ departed from Jesus prior to his crucifixion, such that Jesus' death was merely that of a mortal man, without saving power. We know about Cerinthus from the writings of Irenaeus (ca. 180) and others.

## The Johannine Letters in the Christian Canon

Acceptance of the Johannine Letters as scripture came in stages: 1 John met with universal, early acceptance; 2 John and 3 John came later.

- The Muratorian Canon (ca. 170–210) says that two letters by John are accepted; most scholars think that this means 1 John and 2 John, but it could mean 1 John and 3 John.
- Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–215) mentions 1 John and 2 John, but not 3 John.
- Origen of Alexandria (ca. 215–250) says that the apostle John “left behind one epistle . . . and possibly a second and a third, but not everyone agrees that these are genuine”; the disputed works clearly are 2 John and 3 John, because Origen notes that “taken together, they do not contain a hundred lines.”
- Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 311) places “the epistle bearing the name of John” on his list of “acknowledged books”; he then offers a second list of “disputed books,” and on this list he places “those works called the second and third epistles of John.” The question regarding the latter two books concerns “whether they came from the evangelist or from someone with the same name.”
- Athanasius of Alexandria (367) says unequivocally that “the three letters of John” are to be considered among “the books of the New Testament.” This was also the judgment of the Council of Hippo (393) and the Council of Carthage (397).
- The Syrian church was more cautious in its acceptance of 2 John and 3 John; they were not added to the New Testament in that part of the church until 508.

Note that in the modern church, 2 John and 3 John (like the letter of Jude) are not used in the lectionary; thus, for many Christian denominations, they are never read publicly in church.

## Johannine Letters in the Revised Common Lectionary

Text*	Series	Liturgical Occasion	Calendar Date
1 John 1:1–2:2	B	Easter 2	1 Sunday after Easter
1 John 3:1–3	A	All Saints' Day	Nov 1
1 John 3:1–7	B	Easter 3	2 Sundays after Easter
1 John 3:16–24	B	Easter 4	3 Sundays after Easter
1 John 4:7–21	B	Easter 5	4 Sundays after Easter
1 John 5:1–6	B	Easter 6	5 Sundays after Easter
1 John 5:9–13	B	Easter 7	6 Sundays after Easter

\*2 John and 3 John are not used in the lectionary (for Sundays or major festivals).

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## Which Jude? Jude Confusion in the Bible and in the Church

The New Testament letter of Jude identifies its author as “Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James” (v. 1). There are actually two people known to us who might fit that designation.

### **Jude the Brother of Jesus**

Jesus had four brothers: James, Simon, Joseph, and Jude (Matt. 13:55). While Jesus was alive on earth, Jude probably would not have been referred to as “Jude, the brother of James”; he would have been called “Jude, the brother of Jesus” (out of respect for the eldest sibling). But after Jesus’ death, it would have been natural for him to be called “Jude the brother of James,” since James would now be his oldest living brother. This would be especially likely in view of his brother James becoming widely known throughout the Christian world as the leader of the Christian church. As a Christian, Jude may also have thought it inappropriate to refer to himself as “Jude, the brother of Jesus” because, like other Christians, he thought of himself as “a servant of Jesus.” But he may have continued to identify himself as a “brother of James” even after that sibling was martyred (ca. 62).

### **Jude the Disciple of Jesus**

One of Jesus’ twelve disciples was named Jude (Luke 6:16; John 14:22; Acts 1:13), and, by coincidence, this Jude was also related to someone named “James.” The Greek expression used to identify him in Luke 6:16 (literally, “Jude of James”) probably means “Jude the son of James,” but it was translated “Jude the brother of James” in the King James Version of the Bible. Thus, in that particular translation of the Bible, Jesus has both a brother who could be called “Jude the brother of James” and a disciple who could be called “Jude the brother of James,” though these are clearly two different people.

Throughout the centuries, almost all biblical interpreters have thought that the “Jude the brother of James” identified as the author of the letter of Jude is the first of these two figures—the Jude who was one of Jesus’ four siblings, not the Jude who was one of his twelve disciples. Not surprisingly, however, there has been considerable “Jude confusion” over the years; the two Judes often are mixed up, and sometimes they are morphed together into one person (such that Jesus ends up calling one of his four siblings to be one of his twelve disciples).

## Jude in the Christian Canon

The acceptance of Jude into the canon of Christian scripture followed a peculiar route: accepted early but then questioned later. The letter is listed without qualification in the Muratorian Canon (ca. 170–210), but a hundred years later, Eusebius listed it as one of the “disputed books.”

What would explain this? Scholars think that the letter was initially accepted because it was believed to have been written by a member of Jesus’ family. It was never very popular, however, and its references to Jewish legends and nonbiblical materials made it problematic. Thus, by the fourth century, many Christians were reluctant to regard Jude as scripture even if it had been written by Jesus’ own brother (an ascription that does not appear to have been challenged until modern times).

By the end of the fourth century, the letter’s official acceptance as Christian scripture was well established, but Jude continued to be regarded with suspicion. At the time of the Protestant Reformation, both Martin Luther and Cardinal Cajetan (Luther’s chief opponent) questioned the legitimacy of Jude as scripture.

In the modern world, the canonical status of Jude is rarely challenged outright, but the book is often neglected or ignored. It is one of the only books of the New Testament (along with 2 John and 3 John) for which there are no assigned readings in the Revised Common Lectionary; thus, in most Christian denominations throughout the world, Jude is never read publicly in worship.



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## Other Apocalypses

### Sample Jewish Works

- *1 Enoch* (third century–first century BCE). Enoch (from Gen. 5:24) reports on things that he has witnessed in heaven, including astronomical phenomena and preparations for a great judgment to be carried out by one identified as the Son of Man (cf. Dan. 7:9–14).
- *Apocalypse of Abraham* (first century CE). Abraham reports visions granted to him long ago, including ones that explain why God would allow the temple to be destroyed and ones that preview the ultimate vindication of the righteous in the aftermath of that tragedy.
- *2 Baruch* (first century CE). Baruch (the scribe of Jeremiah) recounts visions of the future that depict the successive kingdoms to come, from Babylon to Rome, and describe the ultimate coming of the messiah after a time of calamity.

Apocalyptic elements are found also in the Old Testament books of Ezekiel (40–48), Zechariah (1–8), and Daniel (7–12).

### Sample Christian Works

- *Shepherd of Hermas* (second century CE). A Roman named “Hermas” reports five visions, twelve sets of commandments, and ten parables (or similitudes) given to him by an angel who appeared to him in the form of a shepherd.
- *Ascension of Isaiah* (second century CE). This work describes the martyrdom of the prophet Isaiah and his ascent into heaven, where he is witness to Jesus leaving heaven for earth and returning when his work is done.
- *Apocalypse of Peter* (second century CE). Jesus provides Simon Peter with a guided tour through hell and heaven, recounting in some detail the torments and blessings to be found in those places.

Apocalyptic elements are found also in an “eschatological discourse” of Jesus recorded in the Synoptic Gospels (Matt. 24:4–51; Mark 13:3–37; Luke 21:8–36).

For a good collection of Jewish apocalypses, see James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1, *Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983). For Christian apocalypses, see Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It into the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

## Symbolism in Revelation

Some symbols are interpreted for us:

- seven lampstands are churches; seven stars are angels (1:20)
- four horses are conquest, slaughter, famine, death (6:1–8)
- red dragon is Satan (12:9)
- seven heads are seven mountains, but also seven kings (17:9–10)
- ten horns are ten kings yet to receive their kingdoms (17:12)
- the woman is “the great city” (17:18)

Colors can have symbolic associations:

- white = victory or purity (1:14; 2:17; 3:4–5, 18; 4:4; 6:2, 11; 7:9, 13–14; 14:14; 19:11, 14; 20:11)
- red = destruction (6:4; 12:3), bloodshed (6:12), fire (9:17)
- purple = royalty, luxury (17:4; 18:12, 16)
- scarlet = perverse luxury (17:3–4; 18:12, 16)
- black = mourning (6:5, 12)
- pale green = death (6:8)

Numbers can have symbolic associations:

- 3 = the spiritual realm (8:13; 16:13; 21:13)
- 3½ = tribulation (11:9; cf. Dan. 7:25; 9:27; 12:7); likewise, 1,260 days = 42 thirty-day months or 3½ years (11:3; 12:6)
- 4 = the earth (4:6–8; 5:6, 8, 14; 6:1–8; 7:1–2, 11; 9:13–15; 14:3; 15:7; 19:4; 20:8; 21:16)
- 6 = failure (13:18 [three sixes])
- 7 = perfection or completion (1:4, 12, 16, 20; 3:1; 4:5; 5:1, 6; 8:2; 10:3; 11:13; 12:3; 13:1; 15:1, 7; 17:9); but sometimes 7 appears to signify Rome, which was built on seven hills (12:3; 13:1; 17:3, 7, 9, 11)
- 10 = totality (2:10; 12:3; 31:1; 17:3, 7, 12, 16)
- 12 = Israel (12:1; 21:12–14, 16, 21; 22:2); likewise 24 (4:4, 10; 5:8, 14; 11:16; 19:4) and 144 (7:4–8; 14:1–5; 21:17)
- 1,000 = a very great number; thousands of thousands = unimaginably large (5:11); 144,000 = a large Jewish multitude (7:4–8; 14:1–5); 7,000 = a “complete” large number, as many as necessary (11:13); 1,000 years = a very long time (20:2–7)

Animals can have symbolic associations:

- lamb = sacrifice (5:6–8, 12–13; 6:1, 16; 7:9–10, 14, 17; 8:1; 12:11; 13:8, 11; 14:1, 4, 10; 15:3; 17:14; 19:7, 9; 21:9, 14, 22–23; 22:1, 3)
- lion = might, royalty (5:5; 10:3; cf. 13:2)
- eagle = perseverance, victory (8:13; 12:14)

Imagery often recalls the Old Testament:

- trumpet blasts (1:10; 4:1; 8:2–11:15): see Genesis 19:16–19; Joel 2:1
- blackened sun, moon like blood, falling stars (6:12–13): see Isaiah 13:10; 50:3; Joel 2:10
- plagues (8:7–9:20): see Exodus 7:17; 9:18; 10:4, 21
- hybrid beast (13:2): see Daniel 7:4–6

Some imagery is simply poetic and doesn't appear to stand for anything specific:

- “a rainbow that looks like an emerald” (4:3)
- “a sea of glass, like crystal” (4:6)

### **What Is the Purpose of the Symbolism?**

The symbols probably are not a secret language intended to conceal the message from potential enemies. Symbolism is simply the most appropriate language for conveying the fantastic and mysterious nature of what is being revealed. The symbols offer more vague association than direct correspondence, and even when we “get” the symbols, we may feel like there is much that we don't understand. That is partly the point.

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#### ***On Feminine Imagery***

- Pippin, Tina. *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992.

#### ***On Imagery Involving Wealth***

- Royalty, Robert M. *The Streets of Heaven: The Ideology of Wealth in the Apocalypse of John*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998.

## Authorship of Revelation

Unlike most apocalypses, Revelation does not pretend to be written by some famous religious figure from the distant past. The person responsible for this book identifies himself as a Christian named “John” who was on the island of Patmos “because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (1:9). The latter reference probably indicates that he had been banished from the mainland for witnessing to his faith and sent into exile on this island. But who was this man? Even in the early church, there was no agreement as to which John wrote the book of Revelation.

### The Tradition of Apostolic Authorship

Several early authorities (Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, Polycrates) volunteer that the John who received this vision on Patmos may have been John the apostle, one of Jesus’ twelve disciples. This seemed sensible for a couple of reasons:

- Similarities can be traced between Revelation and the Gospel of John, which was commonly thought to be the work of the apostle.
- Various traditions connected the apostle John with the city of Ephesus, which is not very far from Patmos and is the location of one of the churches to which the book is addressed.

In time, this tradition of apostolic authorship for Revelation became firmly established in Christian piety, and it has been widely reflected in popular expressions of the Christian faith (hymns, artwork, etc.).

### The Challenge to Apostolic Authorship

Even in the early church, however, there were voices that challenged this identification. In particular, Dionysius of Alexandria (third century) thought that the literary styles of Revelation and the other Johannine writings were so distinct that the same person could not have written both. Over time, the tradition came to be discounted by scholars for many reasons:

- The literary and linguistic style (as noted by Dionysius) is in fact radically different: Revelation is less refined in terms of its use of Greek grammar, vocabulary, and syntax.
- Key themes from John’s Gospel are completely absent in Revelation: there is no mention in the latter of “eternal life,” of “knowing the truth,” or even of “believing.”
- The author of Revelation uses scripture differently than does the author of John’s Gospel: the Gospel quotes scripture frequently, whereas Revelation is rich in biblical imagery but never actually cites scripture as such.
- The theological perspectives of Revelation and the Gospel of John are completely different: for example, the Gospel of John evinces very little interest in such future events as the final judgment or the second coming of Christ—themes that dominate Revelation.

- The author of Revelation actually refers to the apostles (18:20; 21:14) without any indication that he is one of them. Indeed, if the twenty-four elders mentioned in 4:4 are to be identified as the twelve patriarchs of Israel and the twelve apostles of Jesus, then are we to imagine that John is watching himself among their company?
- Most scholars also think that this book was written in the 90s, and they question whether the apostle John is likely to have lived to so advanced an age (if, indeed, he escaped the martyrdom that Jesus predicts will befall him in Mark 10:39).
- The book of Revelation had considerable trouble finding acceptance in the Christian canon of scripture. This would not have been the case if authorities in the early church had thought that it could be traced with any confidence to the apostle John.

### **Minority View: Supporters of Apostolic Authorship**

Apostolic authorship of this book is not impossible, and a few prominent interpreters hold to it:

- D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 700–707.
- Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 932–48.
- Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, rev. ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).
- Stephen S. Smalley, *Thunder and Love: John's Revelation and John's Community* (Milton Keynes: Word, 1994).

The most significant defense of apostolic authorship is found in a work, cited by many of the above authors and yet to be translated, by Gerhard Maier, *Die Johannesoffenbarung und die Kirche*, WUNT 25 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1981).

These supporters of apostolic authorship think that the differences (literary and theological) between Revelation and John's Gospel can be attributed to the diverse circumstances under which the books were composed. John's Gospel was produced under controlled and ideal conditions; the apostle may have used a secretary (as Paul did for his letters), or he may have written only an early draft that later was expanded and edited. Revelation, by contrast, perhaps preserves the apostle's unedited work, possibly produced while he was in an ecstatic state.

Despite such explanations, however, most scholars think that attributing Revelation to the apostle John is a stretch. As an alternative, some scholars suggest that the book could have come from "John the elder," another first-century Christian who may have written the Johannine Letters and served as a final editor for John's Gospel. The dominant trend in recent scholarship, however, has been to view the author of Revelation as simply a Christian prophet named "John" who is otherwise unknown to us.

## What We Can Gather from the Book Itself

The preference of most scholars is not to make claims for the book of Revelation that it does not make for itself. The book does not claim to be written by the apostle John, and so we should not make that claim for it (or imply that its authority somehow rests on the establishment of such a claim).

Scholars do seek to surmise what they can about the author from the book itself. These facts may be noted:

- He is steeped in the Old Testament.
- He is more familiar with the imagery and style of Jewish apocalypses than any other first-century Christian author.
- He appears to write Greek as one whose native language was Hebrew or Aramaic. Accordingly, it seems possible that he may have been a Jewish Christian from Palestine who emigrated to Asia Minor at some point during or after the Jewish war with Rome.
- He assumes that the churches in Asia Minor will regard him as a prophet (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18–19). He does not feel the need to do or say anything to establish his credentials; thus he must be well known and respected among Christian congregations in that part of the world.

## Conclusion

The author of Revelation was a Jewish Christian named “John” who addressed fellow Christians living in Asia Minor during the last third of the first century. He was regarded as a prophet by these Christians, and he may have served them in an itinerant capacity similar to that described for the prophet Agabus in Acts 21:10–11. Eventually, he ended up on the island of Patmos, probably banished from the mainland by political authorities. There, he had a vision that he put into writing and sent to the churches.



## The Date of Revelation: Clues within the Book Itself?

Scholars have questioned whether the book of Revelation was written during the reign of Nero (54–68) or that of Domitian (81–96). The latter idea was the common view of the early church and remains the favored position today. But arguments can be advanced in support of the earlier time period (Nero).

Some scholars have thought that certain clues to the dating of Revelation may be found within the book itself.

### Revelation 17:9–11

Revelation 17:9–11 is usually thought to refer to the Roman emperors and to enumerate them as follows:

- five have fallen;
- one (i.e., the sixth) is living;
- the other (i.e., the seventh) has not yet come;
- an eighth belongs to the seven.

Some scholars suggest that this means that the emperor at the time the book of Revelation was written was the sixth Roman emperor (the one who was “still living”), and Nero was the sixth emperor.

Unfortunately, this does not solve the problem with absolute certainty. For one thing, Nero can be counted as the sixth emperor only if one begins the list with Julius Caesar. Julius did begin the line of Caesars, but he did not rule the empire in a manner that would necessarily merit his inclusion as one of the numbered rulers in this passage. Most historians would say that, strictly speaking, Caesar Augustus was the first Roman emperor (which would make Nero the fifth). In any case, the passage is perhaps too poetic or symbolic to provide an absolute chronology: it could mean that the sixth emperor (Nero?) is still living in some metaphorical sense (his influence continues to be felt).

### Revelation 11:1–2

Scholars have also pointed out that Revelation 11:1–2 portrays the temple as still standing, which would make more sense if John was writing before the year 70 (when the temple was destroyed). But others point out that John is reporting a visionary experience, and it is quite possible that his visions include elements from Israel's past without concern for historical anachronism. Furthermore, the city of Rome is referred to in this book as “Babylon” (14:8; 16:19; 17:5; 18:2, 10, 21), an epithet that would make more sense after the temple had been destroyed (by Rome, just as an earlier temple had been destroyed by Babylon).

## **Conclusion**

Neither of these points is considered to be decisive, though for some scholars they give more credence to the hypothesis of an earlier date for Revelation than might be assumed otherwise.

## Revelation and Other Johannine Writings

### Similarities

- Jesus as “the Word” (John 1:1, 14; 1 John 1:1; Rev. 19:13)
- Jesus as “Lamb of God” (John 1:29; Rev. 5:6–14)
- application of Zechariah 12:10 to Jesus (John 19:37; Rev. 1:7)
- Jesus as “faithful witness” (John 5:32; 8:14; 1 John 5:9; Rev. 1:5; 3:14; 19:11)
- use of “I am” sayings (John 6:35, 51; 8:12; 9:5; 10:7, 9, 11, 14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1, 5; Rev. 1:8, 17; 21:6; 22:13, 16)
- Jesus present with God from the beginning (John 1:1–2; 1 John 1:1; Rev. 3:14)
- Jesus referring to God as “my God” (John 20:17; Rev. 3:2, 12) and “my Father” (John 5:17, 43; 14:2; Rev. 2:28; 3:5, 21)
- Jesus giving living water (John 4:10, 14; 7:37–39; Rev. 7:17; 21:6; 22:1)
- Jesus as lamp or light (John 8:12; 9:5; 1 John 2:8; Rev. 21:23–24)
- portrayal of Jewish opponents as false Jews who serve Satan (John 8:39–47; Rev. 2:9; 3:9)
- linked to Asia Minor (Revelation to Patmos; Gospel and letters to Ephesus)

### Differences

- Revelation has a vastly different literary style, much less refined with regard to vocabulary, grammar, and syntax.
- Key themes from John’s Gospel are absent from Revelation: no reference to “new birth,” “eternal life,” “knowing the truth,” “abiding in Christ,” or even “believing.”
- The way of using scripture differs: John’s Gospel often quotes from the Old Testament; Revelation is rich in Old Testament imagery but never cites scripture as such.
- The overall theological emphases are different: unlike Revelation, the Gospel of John shows little interest in such future events as the final judgment or the second coming of Christ.

## Revelation in the Christian Canon

The book of Revelation had some trouble gaining acceptance as a work of scripture. Our knowledge on this subject is limited, but from what resources we do possess, two observations stand out.

First, Revelation appears to have met with initial acceptance and then came to be questioned later on.

- In our earliest list of canonical writings, the Muratorian Canon (ca. 170–200), Revelation is listed as a book that is to be received as scripture.
- But about a hundred years later (ca. 311), when the church historian Eusebius prepared a list of writings accepted by Christians as scripture, he indicated that Revelation was a “book that some reject but others judge to belong.”

Second, Revelation appears to have been endorsed by more-or-less official spokespersons but challenged at other levels.

- In 367, Athanasius, the prominent bishop of Alexandria, included Revelation without any hesitation in his list of twenty-seven books to be regarded as Christian scripture. And in 393, a regional council known as the Third Synod of Carthage ratified that list, declaring those books to be the canon of Christian scripture.
- Nevertheless, a Christian poet from this same period, Amphilocus of Iconium, refers to Revelation as a book “that some approve, but most say is spurious.”

What was the problem? There seem to have been a few difficulties with the book:

1. Revelation often was popular with Christians given to expressions of the faith that others would regard as religious fanaticism. In the second century, it was a popular book with the Montanists, a charismatic group that stressed prophecy and the imminence of the end times, but that was ultimately judged to be a heretical sect. We know of at least one second-century leader in the Roman church, Gaius, who thought that the book of Revelation should be rejected on this account.
2. The authorship of the book was uncertain. Dionysius, a third-century Egyptian bishop, maintained that Revelation could not have been written by the same person who wrote the Gospel of John. He based his argument on linguistic and literary analysis, but he did not care for the theology of Revelation either and thought that the book should be rejected.
3. Many leaders in the early church (including Dionysius, but also Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and Irenaeus) believed that the book of Revelation taught a doctrine called “chiliasm.” In a nutshell, chiliasm envisions the rewards of Christians in materialistic or political terms; Revelation was believed to support this doctrine by promising the faithful that they would participate in a thousand-year reign on earth with Christ. Supporters of chiliasm

- made much of this, and as a consequence, opponents of the controversial doctrine were less inclined to view Revelation as authoritative scripture.
4. The book of Revelation takes a very harsh and negative view toward the Roman Empire and toward governing authorities in general. Eventually, this became an uncomfortable problem for churches that were maintained and supported financially by Christian emperors.

## Prophetic Literature and Apocalyptic Literature

The Bible contains both prophetic literature and apocalyptic literature. This chart shows some of the key differences between those two genres.

	<b>Prophetic Literature</b>	<b>Apocalyptic Literature</b>
examples in the Bible	Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos	Daniel 7–12, Revelation
period of biblical history when most prominent	monarchy, exile, return	intertestamental period, Christian era
situation addressed	God's people are coming under judgment for failure to keep the covenant	God's people are being persecuted for faithfulness, but some are turning apostate
basic message	Repent! Obey God! Keep the covenant!	Keep the faith! Persevere until the end comes!
audience addressed	Israel	the elect
mode of communication	oracles that reveal the will of God in clear, deliberate terms	visions that convey God's plan with symbolic imagery
view of history	reformable	irredeemable
the "day of the Lord"	propitious moment in history; coming soon	cataclysmic end of history; coming soon
understanding of the world	basically positive; just needs to be reformed	completely negative; needs to be destroyed or replaced
cause of suffering	unfaithfulness	faithfulness
cure for suffering	human repentance; seek what is good; shun what is evil	divine resolution; ultimate victory of good over evil
the plan of God	to establish God's reign within history	to establish God's reign beyond history
content of "hope"	restoration of God's people, to continue living in God's world in the way that God desires	removal of God's people to a new sphere of existence, in which God's will is done
process of salvation	deliverance wrought by God acting within history, through historical persons	deliverance wrought by God acting at end of time, through spiritual intermediaries
ethics	fundamentally communal; nation is to enact justice, live as God's covenant people	basically individualistic; the one who endures to the end will be saved

## Revelation in the Revised Common Lectionary

Text	Series	Liturgical Occasion	Calendar Date
1:4–8	C	Easter 2	1 Sunday after Easter
1:4b–8	B	Christ the King	Nov. 20–26
5:11–14	C	Easter 3	2 Sundays after Easter
7:9–17	C	Easter 4	3 Sundays after Easter
7:9–11	A	All Saints' Day	Nov. 1
21:1–6	C	Easter 5	4 Sundays after Easter
21:1–6a	B	All Saints' Day	Nov. 1
21:10, 22–22:5	C	Easter 6	5 Sundays after Easter
22:12–14, 16–17, 20–21	C	Easter 7	6 Sundays after Easter

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