

New Testament Survey I

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The Old Testament Hope

The Hebrew Bible, which Christians came to call the Old Testament, contains a vibrant messianic hope for the future. The exile of the northern and southern nations of Israel and Judah was a death sentence to the older notion that the kingdom of Israel was the kingdom of God (2 Kg. 17, 25; 2 Chr. 36; Je. 52; Lamentations). The prophets had clearly preached that exile was not God's final word, however. The future held forth the assurance of national restoration (Is. 10:20-22; 11:11-12, 16; Je. 30:1-3; 31:16-17, 21-25; 33:7, 10-26; 50:18-19; Ho. 1:10-11; 2:21-23; 11:10-11; Am. 9:13-15; Mic. 2:12-13; 4:6-8; 7:8-11; Zep. 3:20), and beyond that, the prediction of a coming messianic redeemer to whom all the nations would look for salvation (Is. 42:1-4; 49:1-7; 52:13--53:12; 55:3-5; Je. 23:5-6; 30:8-9; 33:17-26; Eze. 34:23-24; 37:24-25; Zec. 8:14-23; 9:9-10). The last of the writing prophets predicted that before this messianic event, a forerunner would be sent by God to prepare the way (Mal. 3:1; 4:5-6). So, while the Hebrew Bible documents the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the second temple (Ezr. 6:14-15; Ne. 6:15-16; Hg. 1:12-15), it concludes with an unfulfilled expectation. The Lord whom the returned exiles were seeking had not yet come (Mal. 3:1).

To make matters worse, the Jews repeatedly were oppressed politically, even after they had reestablished themselves in the land of Palestine. Following the Persian Period, when many Jews returned to Jerusalem to rebuild it, the Greeks conquered and controlled Palestine (333-167 BC). Although there was a century of independence for the Jews following the Maccabean Revolt, the Romans conquered Palestine in 63 BC, incorporating it into their empire. Such oppression fired the hopes of the faithful who eagerly awaited the fulfillment of God's messianic promises (cf. Lk. 2:25-38).

Between the Testaments

The period between the Testaments, often called the “silent years” because of the general belief that the prophetic Spirit had been quenched, was more than four centuries long. The development of ideas and the progress of history during this period contributed significantly to the cultural world surrounding the time of Jesus’ birth.

The history of the Jews following the return from Babylonian captivity, for the most part, was a series of bitter disappointments. While under the authority of Persia, the Jews escaped the first pogrom due to the intervention of Esther. However, Palestine passed over to the Greeks under Alexander the Great in 333 BC. After

Alexander's death, the Jews found themselves in a political tug-of-war between two factions vying for power within the larger Greek empire, Egypt and Syria. Palestine was ruled by each, first by the Ptolemaic family in Egypt and later by the Seleucid family in Syria.

Jews throughout the empire, but especially the ones in Palestine under the Seleucid rule, began to feel the impact of Greek culture. The Seleucids attempted to force Greek culture upon the Jews with regard to politics, sports, art and religion. Orthodox Jews, in particular, were incensed by these efforts, and Antiochus Epiphanes, the most oppressive of the Syrian Greek rulers, attempted to wipe out the Jewish religion altogether. He executed the high priest, forbade circumcision, burned the Torah scrolls, brought an image of Zeus into the holy place of the 2nd temple, sacrificed a pig on the great altar, compelled Jews to eat pork, and executed the dissidents (1 and 2 Maccabees). Finally, a priestly family revolted, Mattathias and his sons. Led by one of the sons, Judas Maccabeus (= the Hammerer), the freedom fighters were able to drive out the Greeks and win their independence in 164 BC. They cleansed the desecrated temple (celebrated in the Jewish feast of Hanukkah) and reestablished the priesthood.

The Institutions and Sects of Judaism

Three primary institutions were developed and sustained during the intertestamental period. The first of them, the temple, had the longest history, going back to the time of Solomon and the 1st temple. The 2nd temple period extended from the late 6th century BC until AD 70. It was the only place where the ancient sacrificial worship of the Torah could be conducted. Of course, many Diaspora Jews were a long way from Jerusalem, but they still attempted to make pilgrimages to the holy city to celebrate the three great pilgrim festivals, Passover, Pentecost and Booths. Practically speaking, the temple had the greatest availability to those Jews who lived in Palestine, and when Herod the Great came to power in 40 BC under the Romans, he refurbished the temple and greatly expanded the temple mount, thus giving rise to the appellation "Herod's temple."

The second primary institution was the Sanhedrin. The origins of the Sanhedrin are ambiguous, but it probably had its seeds in the priestly nobility that formed an aristocratic council in the post-exilic period (cf. Ne. 2:16; 5:7). Under Hellenism, the influence of this priestly body grew, and after the Maccabean revolt, the status of the high priest as the leader of the group grew even more. Under the Roman procurators, the council's power increased yet again. This Jewish ruling body in Palestine was composed of seventy elders plus the high priest. The body had both legislative and judicial power in religious and civil affairs as allowed by Rome.

The third institution was the synagogue, by far the most familiar to Jews

everywhere. Formed by Jews during the exile, synagogues became Jewish centers for study and worship. Rabbis and scribes taught here, though it should be noted that synagogues had no official capacity in connection with the temple priesthood. Still, the synagogues enabled Jews, especially Diaspora Jews, to keep Judaism alive with only limited temple contact. Synagogues existed in Palestine, also, and the Talmud claims that even prior to AD 70, when the temple was destroyed, there were some eighty synagogues in Jerusalem. A group of local elders directed the affairs of the synagogue, while the synagogue leader (*archisynagogos*) was the central leader responsible for keeping the congregation faithful to the Torah.¹

Judaism was hardly monolithic! Several different streams of political and religious thought existed, of whom the most important were the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Zealots and People of the Land. The Pharisees, descendants of the Hasidim (the orthodox Jews who revolted against Hellenization), were lay people, not clergy. They uphold both the written and oral Torah. They believed in resurrection and an afterlife as well as in angels. Their primary sphere of influence was in the synagogue. Ultimately, they were the only Jewish sect to survive the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

Sadducees were priestly stock from wealthy families, and their influence was largely in the temple and the Sanhedrin. They upheld the written Torah, but they rejected the notion that the oral Torah was binding. In general, they were more open to Hellenistic ideals, and unlike the Pharisees, they rejected the ideas of resurrection, an after-life and angels.

The Essenes were a reactionary group that withdrew from Jewish society to live in the desert. Probably (though this is still debated) they established the commune at Qumran, considering themselves to be the only pure form of Judaism. If so, they held the Jerusalem high priesthood in contempt, believing that soon God would intervene to purify his house. They copied ancient Hebrew texts, wrote their own commentaries, and developed a rule book for behavior. Many of these documents were preserved in caves near the Dead Sea and discovered in 1947. In AD 68, the Qumran community was destroyed by the Romans in the 1st Jewish Revolt.

The Zealots were Jewish freedom fighters whose ideals were adopted from the original Maccabean revolt and transferred over into a bitter hatred of Rome. From the 40s BC until the 1st Jewish Revolt in the 60s AD, various patriotic incidents sponsored by zealots invited the use of Roman military force. Especially popular in Galilee, these patriots made their last stand against the Romans at Masada, where they committed mass suicide in AD 74, just as the Romans were on the verge of breaching the walls of their mountain fortress.

¹ E. Yamauchi, "Synagogue," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1992), pp. 781-784.

Finally, the People of the Land were the many Jews living in Palestine who did not belong to any of the above groups. They were merely small farmers, fishermen and trades people, attending their local synagogues and observing the various religious differences among the other sects from a more or less neutral position.

The Documents and Oral Traditions of Judaism

The Jews of Jesus' day not only were steeped in the traditional values of the Hebrew culture, they were obliged to make those values relevant in a world much different than that of their ancestors. This ability for adaptation can be seen especially in the way they treated their Scriptures and in the development of new ideas and approaches to their traditions.

Jews in Alexandria, Egypt (seventy of them, according to rabbinic tradition) helped facilitate the adjustment of the Jewish community to the new Greek culture by translating the Hebrew Bible into Greek in about the mid-200s BC. This Greek translation, called the Septuagint (LXX), became the version most often used by the writers of the New Testament.

A number of documents, in a collection called the Apocrypha, described the history, traditions and wisdom of the Jews before and during the Maccabean period. They were written in Greek also, and included as part of the Septuagint. Later, Jewish theologians declined to accept these writings as part of the authoritative listing of the Sacred Scriptures, which was confined to the collections called the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings. Still, because of their Greek form, Christians used these writings in many of the early churches.

Also appearing during the dark days of Seleucid oppression was a new genre of Jewish literature called "apocalyptic." Usually written under the pseudonym of an ancient Old Testament character (i.e., Moses, Enoch, Solomon, Ezra, Baruch, etc.), these writings predicted in vivid and creative symbolism the imminent collapse of the present world system by divine intervention. The New Testament Book of Revelation was strongly influenced by this style and also uses the title "apocalypse" (Re. 1:1).

During the intertestamental period, the Torah became for the Jews the supreme religious authority. Around the Torah, however, there grew a mass of rabbinical interpretation called "the tradition of the elders" (cf. Mk. 7:3) as well as a mass of extra-Scriptural laws called "the oral law." This oral law was intended as a legal fence around the Torah, a way of halting a person before he found himself even close to breaching a written commandment. Eventually, the Torah itself came to be considered by many as have two parts, written and oral, and for some the oral law had equal authority with the written Torah.

The New Testament

The combined documents which Christians call the New Testament were all written within about half a century (late 40s to late 90s). Their collection and recognition was completed by about the middle of the 2nd century so that Christians could legitimately speak of a "New Testament." The term "testament" is derived from the word "covenant" (via Latin and Greek). The Hebrew Bible, which records the history of the old covenant between God and Israel, came to be called the Old Testament by Christians. Since Jeremiah promised that in the future there would be a new covenant between God and his people (Je. 31:31-34), and since the Christian writings specifically say that this new covenant was fulfilled in the death of Jesus Christ (1 Co. 11:25), it is not too surprising that Christians came to call their body of authoritative writings the New Testament. The designations Old Testament and New Testament were in place by the late 2nd century and have remained so since.

The Christian New Testament contains twenty-seven books in all: four gospels (*Matthew, Mark, Luke and John*), one narrative history (*Acts*), thirteen letters by Paul (*Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus and Philemon*), one letter by an unknown author (*Hebrews*), one letter by James the Just (*James*),² two letters by Peter (*1 & 2 Peter*), three letters by John (*1, 2 & 3 John*), one letter by Jude (*Jude*), and one apocalypse by John (*Revelation*).³

Jesus Christ is the central figure of the Christian faith. This faith was developed from a sequence of historical events occurring in Palestine in the years immediately prior to and including AD 30.⁴ Many of the early Christians were people who had personally seen and heard Jesus (cf. 1 Co. 15:1-8). The knowledge of Jesus was kept alive by the oral tradition of the church, the preaching and teaching of the apostles and the testimony of others who had known Jesus. When these original eyewitnesses began to die, the need for a permanent record of the central Christian event—the life, death and resurrection of Jesus—became paramount. Furthermore, it was assumed, at least popularly, that the return of Christ might occur within a relatively short period of time (cf. Jn. 21:22-23). When this expectation did not materialize, naturally the early Christians had to face the possibility that it could be a long time before Christ returned. Finally, there was the question of orthodoxy. Apparently, many believers began to write accounts of Jesus' history (Lk. 1:1-2).

²James the Just, who was not one of the original Twelve Apostles, is to be distinguished from James the brother of John and James bar Alphaeus, both of whom were original members of the Twelve.

³Opinions about the precise identity of "John," who wrote Revelation, have never reached a consensus.

⁴There is scholarly debate as to when Jesus was crucified, but AD 30 remains the popular choice, cf. G. Ogg, "Chronology of the NT," *NBD* (1982) 201-202.

Most of these have long since disappeared in antiquity, though some samples survive.⁵ Which stories about Jesus were authentic and trustworthy? From the various early accounts that were written, four portraits of Jesus became accepted as authoritative for the church. We know them as the four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

The fact that the post-apostolic church accepted four gospels is noteworthy for several reasons. First, it meant that the early Christians considered these four documents to be faithful accounts of what really happened. Though various stories about Jesus' actions and sayings circulated throughout the churches,⁶ only four accounts received the unqualified support of all the Christians and all the churches. These four were composed during the mid to late 1st century while there were still living witnesses of people who had personally seen Jesus. To be sure, there was a late 2nd century attempt to combine the four gospels into a single document in Tatian's *Diatessaron* (= through four). However, though this harmonized account circulated in both Syriac and Greek, in the end the church preserved the four gospels as we know them.

Each of the four gospels offers a portrait of Jesus. They are not identical, nor should we expect they to be (portraits are not like multiple prints of the same photograph). Nevertheless, together they offer a full picture of "the things that have been fulfilled...as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses" (Lk. 1:1-2).

Four Gospels, One Story

The four gospels form a unique genre of literature that is somewhat different than either biography (at least in the modern sense), diary, or the epic work about ancient heroes. Instead, a gospel is a literary form that seeks to answer a fundamental question: "Who is/was Jesus?"

Even the casual observer is bound to notice that the four gospels are distinct.⁷ Each gospel was composed by selecting narratives, parables, miracles and so forth from the traditions about Jesus. None of them attempt to tell everything, for as John frankly states, "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were

⁵ The most well-known, of course, is the Gnostic Coptic Gospel of Thomas discovered in Nag Hammadi, Egypt. Dating from about AD 140, this gospel gained considerable recognition when it was included along with the canonical gospels in the publication *The Five Gospels* by the so-called "Jesus Seminar." Other apocryphal gospels are known, however. Some concern Jesus' infancy, some his passion and resurrection, and others various aspects of his life, cf. E. Yamauchi, "Apocryphal Gospels," *ISBE* (1979) I.181-188.

⁶ Indeed, even in the New Testament we occasionally find reference to something Jesus said that is not recorded in the four gospels. A case in point is Paul's quotation of Jesus in Acts 20:35.

⁷ In time, the distinct portrayals of Jesus in the four gospels were symbolized in Christian art by the man (Matthew), the lion (Mark), the ox (Luke) and the eagle (John).

written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written” (Jn. 21:25). Hence, each gospel is selective. We may assume that inasmuch as each gospel was written within and for specific communities, the selection of material in each gospel reflects to some degree the situation of the church for which it was written.⁸ Elements were chosen because they addressed a need in the community of faith. Hence, the materials in the gospels are intentional, not haphazard. Each evangelist had at his disposal various resources, including the Hebrew Bible (or the Septuagint), the oral traditions that had been preserved about Jesus, the written traditions that had preceded his own composition, and the eyewitness accounts of those who had personally witnessed events in the life of Jesus. Matthew and John, of course, were themselves disciples of the Lord. About Mark we know only the testimony of Papias in the early 2nd century that he based his gospel on the witness of Simon Peter, his mentor.⁹ Luke, though not a disciple of Jesus, built his gospel upon careful investigation of eyewitnesses (Lk. 1:1-4).

Matthew

It is generally conceded that Matthew was composed for a Christian community with a significant Jewish constituency, possibly Antioch, Syria.¹⁰ The gospel does not explain, for instance, Jewish customs and words as does Mark, thus suggesting that the author knew his readers would be familiar with them. Also, Matthew consistently uses the circumlocution “kingdom of heaven” rather than “kingdom of God”, a rabbinical device familiar to the Jews.¹¹

⁸ Some scholars see multiple levels in the gospel narratives. The first level is the *sitz im leben Christi* (life situation of the historical Christ), and it describes what actually happened in the earthly period of Jesus’ ministry. This the level that is most obvious and the one that most Christians throughout the centuries have recognized. The second level, the *sitz im leben kirche* (life situation of the church), can be inferred from the choice of stories and narratives that the evangelist selected. If, for instance, the evangelist selected many accounts of conflict between Jesus and the Jewish community, this in turn may suggest that there were later conflicts between the church and the synagogue, thus creating a need to hear anew the stories about Jesus’ conflicts. The third level is the *sitz im leben euangelium* (life situation of the evangelist). Here, the assumption is that the gospel may reflect the editorial comments of the evangelist as he assessed and interpreted the meaning of the stories about Jesus, cf. P. Ellis, *Matthew, His Mind and His Message* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1974), pp. 156-159. Obviously, interpretations at levels two and three assume a sympathetic “reading between the lines” and must carry considerably less weight than the first level. The interpreter must be extremely cautious in such a literary approach. The opportunity to overread the evidence is considerable, and many modern scholars have placed far too great a dependence on their perceived literary skills and much too little dependence on the inspiration of the Word of God.

⁹ According to the 4th century church historian Eusebius, Papias claimed that Mark was the interpreter of Peter and wrote down accurately the things Jesus said and did as they were recounted by Peter. “For he was careful of one thing, not to omit any of the things which he had heard, and not to state any of them falsely,” cf. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, III.39.15.

¹⁰ Though other Christians communities have been suggested, such as, Jerusalem, Alexandria, Caesarea Maritima, Edessa and Phoenicia, Antioch has the most plausible claim for the gospel being composed there *ca.* AD 80-90, cf. R. Brown and J. Meier, *Antioch & Rome* (New York: Paulist, 1983), pp. 15-27.

¹¹ Out of reverence, the Jews avoided directly using the name of God by substituting something with which God was

Matthew paints his literary portrait of Jesus in five alternating patterns of narrative and discourse, each beginning with the phrase, “When Jesus had finished these sayings...” (7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). In keeping with his Jewish community, Matthew emphasizes that in Jesus the Old Testament is fulfilled (1:22-23; 2:15, 17, 23; 3:3, 15; 4:14-16; 5:17; 8:17; 12:17-21; 13:35; 21:4-5; 26:56).¹² However, Matthew is careful to point out the universal implications of the gospel that extend beyond the Jewish-Christian community. In his genealogy of Jesus, for instance, he lists four gentile women (1:3, 5, 6). He describes eastern magi (2:1), a Roman soldier (8:5-13), and a Canaanite woman (15:22-28), all of whom came to faith in Jesus. Other references, also, point toward this universalism (8:11-12; 12:18-21), not the least of which is the Great Commission (28:19).

Mark

This is the gospel that gives to us the familiar title “gospel” (1:1).¹³ If it was based on the testimony of Simon Peter, as Papias says, then it may well have been written in Rome, since Peter probably was martyred there under Nero in *ca.* AD 65.

In Mark Jesus is portrayed as an active Christ, and there is less material about Jesus’ teaching ministry than in the other three gospels. The word *euthus* (= immediately) is a favorite of Mark’s, as though to emphasize that Jesus not only was busy but also in control (cf. 1:29-31).¹⁴

Mark devotes fully a third of his gospel to the passion of Jesus (chapters 11-16). While he emphasizes Jesus as being fully human, he continually points beyond Jesus’ humanity to his divine sonship (e.g., 1:1, 11, 24; 3:11; 5:7; 9:7; 12:7, 37; 13:32; 14:61-62; 15:39). A special feature of Mark’s gospel is Jesus’ insistence that his messianic identity be kept a secret until after the resurrection (cf. 1:25, 34, 44; 3:12; 5:43; 7:36; 8:26; 9:9).

Also peculiar to Mark’s gospel is the ending, which suspends the narrative abruptly in 16:8 with the phrase, “They said nothing to anyone, because they were

associated, cf. O. Evans, *IDB* (1962) III.18.

¹² Matthew’s use of the term *πληρωω* (= fulfill, fill, make full, bring to completion) is much broader than merely prediction and verification. It can include such a sense, of course (e.g., 2:5-6; cf. Mic. 5:2), but it also includes the clarification of enigmatic Old Testament passages (e.g., 22:41-46; cf. Ps. 110:1), the exchange between the nation and its representative (e.g., 2:15; cf. Ho. 11:1), and the recapitulation of Old Testament events in a New Testament form (e.g., 2:17-18; cf. Je. 31:15), cf. R. Longenecker, “Who is the Prophet Talking About?” *Themelios* (Oct/Nov 1987), pp. 4-8.

¹³ The term *εὐαγγέλιον* (= gospel, good news) was used in the Greco-Roman world for such things as the message from a runner that victory in battle had been won or that the emperor was having a birthday, cf. R. Martin, *ISBE* (1982) II.529. Mark and those who followed him “baptized” this word with a special Christian nuance.

¹⁴ The extent to which Mark uses this word is especially apparent in the opening passages (1:10, 18, 20, 21, 23, 29, 30, 31, 42, 43).

afraid.” Though other endings are to be found, the text in the earliest manuscripts ends here.¹⁵

Luke

Luke is unique in that it is the first volume of a two-volume work (Lk. 1:1-4; Ac. 1:1). Most interpreters agree that Luke was written to a Gentile community as reflected in the address to Theophilus (= God-lover). It is likely that Luke had a special desire for the church to be on good terms with the Roman Empire, since he describes the birth of Jesus in relation to Roman events (cf. 2:1-3; 3:1-2). Three times he notes that Pilate, the Roman procurator, found Jesus innocent (23:4, 13-16, 22). The Book of Acts also contains considerable apologetic material showing that the Christians were not a threat to Rome.

Luke contains a special geographical scheme for Jesus’ ministry—a progress from Galilee to Jerusalem. A whole section, sometimes called “the travelogue”, stresses Jesus’ resolve to make it to the Holy City (9:51-53, 57; 10:1, 38; 13:22, 31-32; 14:25; 17:11; 18:31, 35; 19:1, 28, 41). Just as Luke’s gospel progresses from Galilee to Jerusalem, his second work progresses from Jerusalem to Rome (Ac. 1:8; 28:16).

Of some importance is the way Luke divides history into three epochs: 1) from ancient Israel to John the Baptist (16:16a), 2) the earthly ministry of Jesus (16:16b; Ac. 10:37-38), and 3) the ascension until the return of Christ (Ac. 1:1, 11). Also important is the whole range of words expressing the idea of amazement as if to compelled the reader to address the question, “Who is/was this man?” (1:12, 21, 63, 65; 2:9, 18, 33, 47-48; 4:22, 32, 36; 5:9, 26; 7:16; 8:25, 35, 37, 56; 9:34, 43, 45; 11:14, 38; 20:26; 24:4, 12, 22, 41).

John

The fourth gospel, composed by “the beloved disciple” who traditionally is assumed to be John (cf. 21:20-24), was expressly written to arouse or confirm faith in Jesus (20:30-31). It carefully structures the life of Jesus around seven great miracles and the teaching discourses associated with them:

- Turning water to wine (2:11)
- Healing the nobleman’s son (4:54)

¹⁵ There are four distinct endings in the Greek manuscripts of Mark: the abrupt ending in the oldest texts, an intermediate ending that begins to appear in 7th century texts, the so-called long ending that appears in the KJV, and yet another long ending with a significant expansion in 16:14. Some suggest that the original ending of Mark was lost and other endings composed as appendices based on independent ancient traditions. Others argue that the abrupt ending in verse 8 urges the reader to address seriously the question of faith.

- Healing the invalid at Bethesda (5:8-9)
- Walking on the water (6:14)
- Feeding the 5000 (6:16-20)
- Healing the man born blind (9:13-16)
- Raising Lazarus (11:43-47)

Surrounding these miracles are teachings on the new birth (3), the water of life (4), the divine sonship (5), the bread from heaven (6), the Holy Spirit (7), the Light of the World (8), and the Good Shepherd (10). Together, these miracles and discourses explain the meaning of Jesus' person and work. The signs are not ends in themselves, but they are events that point beyond themselves to great truths about Jesus. The discourse and dialogues explain the deeper meaning of the signs.

John also devotes a large portion of his gospel to a farewell discourse with the Twelve before his death (13-17). As is true for all the gospels, the story of Jesus climaxes with the crucifixion and resurrection (18-21).

Characteristic of John's gospel are the strong antitheses between light and darkness, truth and falsehood, life and death, love and hatred, and the world and the community of faith. It is John's gospel that shows Jesus' ministry to be somewhat over three years, since he mentions three Passovers (2:13; 6:4; 12:1). This gospel presents a strong christology especially evident in the prologue, where Jesus is described as the incarnate *Logos* (1:1-18).

Synoptic Relationships

The observant reader will notice that Matthew, Mark and Luke (called the synoptic gospels) are very similar in structure, chronology and content. John, by contrast, is quite dissimilar on all counts. Only a few stories are found in all four gospels (baptism of Jesus, feeding the 5000, the trial and crucifixion), and some stories are found in only a single gospel. What is especially striking about the synoptics are their considerable parallels. Of the 661 verses in Mark, Matthew has parallels for some 600 of them while Luke some 300. Furthermore, Matthew and Luke have material common to the two of them, mostly sayings, but that are not found in Mark. Various theories have been offered to account for what seems to be a literary relationship, a feature that scholars call "the synoptic problem."

In brief, the most commonly accepted theory, the "four source theory", is that Mark was written first. Matthew and Luke used Mark as well as another source designated "Q" (for the German *quelle* = source). The Q hypothesis is an attempt to explain the material common to Matthew and Luke but not found in Mark. Matthew and Luke, it is supposed, then included original material of their own to round out their narratives (sometimes called proto-Matthew and proto-Luke). Other literary

theories usually suggest some sort of abridgment. They include either Matthew or Luke as the earliest gospel with Mark being an abridgment of one or the other of them. In the end, while some of the literary theories are plausible, they are often laden with considerable speculation as well. The so-called “Q” document, for instance, has no hard reality. It may or may not have existed.

The Life of Jesus: Initiation (Mt. 1-4; Mk. 1:1-13; Lk. 1:1--4:13; Jn. 1)

The Birth and Infancy Narratives

Two of the gospels, Matthew and Luke, provide accounts of the birth of Jesus. Luke also tells the story of the birth of John the Baptist. The births of Jesus and John are related theologically, since John served as the forerunner who preached before the public introduction of Jesus. Both births were miraculous, John being born to an aged couple who were childless (Lk. 1:1-25), and Jesus being born to Mary, who was a virgin, engaged but not married to Joseph (Lk. 1:26-38; 2:1-20; Mt. 1:18-23). Both Matthew and Luke are clear that Mary was a virgin at the time of her conception and that her pregnancy was the result of a divine act (Mt. 1:18, 25; Lk. 1:34-35).

Critical themes emerge in the birth stories that are important for the continuing account of the life of Jesus. First, his birth was attended by the gift of the Spirit (Lk. 1:15, 35, 41, 67; 2:26-27; Mt. 1:18, 20). This theme is important because in Jewish thought it was believed that the Holy Spirit had withdrawn from Israel with Malachi, the last of the writing prophets. It was not expected to return until the advent of the Messiah, who was to be the bearer and giver of the Spirit. Thus, the gift of the Spirit meant that the days of Messiah were now dawning.

A second theme is the lineal descent of Jesus from the family of David, the ancient king of Israel. The prophets had specified that the coming messianic figure would be from the family of David, and both Mary (Lk. 3:23-38) and Joseph (Mt. 1:1-17) were from David's line. The parallel between the promises about David and the promises about Jesus in the annunciation are hardly accidental.

Promises to David (2 Sa. 7:9-16)

His name would be great...

God would establish his kingdom...

He would be God's son...

His house would endure forever...

His throne would be established forever...

Promises to Jesus (Lk. 1:32-33)

He would be great...

God would give him the throne of David...

He would be the Son of the Most High...

He would reign over Jacob's house forever...

His kingdom would never end...

To be sure, there has been considerable discussion as to why the two

genealogies are different. One popular explanation is that Matthew offers Jesus' legal and/or royal genealogy through Joseph (even though Joseph was not his actual father), while Luke offers the natural descent of Jesus through Mary, his mother.¹⁶

A third theme is an international motif that stretched beyond the boundaries of Jewishness. Luke traces Jesus' family descent all the way back to Adam (Lk. 3:38), implying a universal significance to Jesus' birth. Matthew, for his part, includes four women in Jesus' genealogy, all of whom were probably non-Jews (Mt. 1:3//Ge. 38:2-6; Mt. 1:5a//Jos. 2:1; Mt. 1:5b//Ru. 1:4; Mt. 1:6//2 Sa. 11:3). Matthew also records that gentiles came to worship Jesus at his birth (Mt. 2:1-12) and that Jesus lived for a time during his childhood in Egypt, a gentile country (Mt. 2:13-15).

Only one story survives about Jesus' childhood.¹⁷ This story, which describes a trip from Nazareth to Jerusalem when Jesus was twelve, demonstrates Jesus' intelligence, familiarity with the law of Moses, and his rightful place in Jerusalem among those interpreting the Scriptures (Lk. 2:41-52).

The Prologue to the Fourth Gospel

The opening of the Gospel of John is unique. Rather than birth stories, such as one finds in Matthew and Luke, John begins with a theological treatise about the meaning of the incarnation. With the word *Logos* (= Word), John describes Jesus' preexistence with the Father before he came into the world. Jesus acted and spoke as the incarnate expression of God's speech. As word gives body to thought, so Jesus gave visible expression in the world to the invisible power and presence of God. It is clear that John did not intend the word *Logos* to signify merely language, however. He speaks of the Word as a personal entity, one who was with God in the very beginning. The opening words of the first book of Torah, "In the beginning...", and the opening words of John, "In the beginning...", are hardly accidental! When the universe began, the preexistent Word was already there, personally subsisting in relationship with God, the Father!

John's language is simple, but his ideas are profound. He uses simple words like light, life and truth, but he declares that their fullest meaning is in Jesus, God's one and only Son. This *Logos*, who was with God and who was God, became human (Jn. 1:14). The prologue ends with the declaration that Jesus is the full revelation of God! No one has ever seen God, at least not in his purest essence. The one and only Son, who is himself God and who is at the Father's side, has made him known (Jn.

¹⁶ This explanation goes back to at least Luther and stresses the phrase "so it was thought" in Luke 3:23. There is some support for this interpretation from the Jewish Talmud, which says that Mary was the daughter of one Heli, cf. L. Sweet, *ISBE* (1943) II.1198.

¹⁷ There are other stories of Jesus' childhood, such as, the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* and the *Proevangelium of James* (both from the 2nd century), but their reliability is seriously to be questioned.

1:18)!

John the Baptist

With the preaching of John the Baptist, all four gospels come together to narrate the account of Jesus' forerunner. John's ministry began in about AD 26.¹⁸ The burden of his message is summarized in the proclamation, "The kingdom of heaven is near" (Mt. 3:1).¹⁹ Such an announcement could hardly be taken in any way other than that the messianic age was upon them. John called for repentance and water baptism for the forgiveness of sins, announcing that soon one would appear who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (Mt. 3:6, 11-12//Mk. 1:4, 7-8//Lk. 3:3, 16-18//Jn. 1:26). These two elements, the Spirit and fire, pointed toward the fulfillment of the Old Testament promise of the Holy Spirit to be given to God's people as well as the certainty of God's coming judgment upon the world. The people who listened to John were generally familiar with the act of baptism due to its prior usage in the Jewish community. Jewish baptismal rites were performed in *mikva'ot*, stepped pools in which the candidate immersed himself as a symbol of purification. Archaeologists have unearthed more than 300 such installations, and they are mentioned frequently in rabbinic literature.

John called for social justice to accompany the act of repentance (Lk. 3:7-14). Also, he announced a blunt disclaimer to the notion that God extended salvation to Jews simply because of their genealogical connection to Abraham. Rather, John boldly declared that God could bypass Jewishness altogether, if necessary (Mt. 3:9-10//Lk. 3:8-9). Only those willing to repent—to change their ways—would be spared the coming judgment. Salvation was for the remnant of faith!

While the people wondered if John were the Messiah (Lk. 3:15), and while a delegation from Jerusalem asked him pointblank, he disclaimed any identification other than that he was a prophetic voice in the desert (Jn. 1:19-23; cf. Is. 40:3). Consistently, John described himself as one who must "become less," while the Messiah was one who would "become more" (Jn. 3:30; cf. Mt. 3:11; Mk. 1:7; Lk. 3:16).

The Baptism and Temptation

All four gospels mention Jesus' baptism. During John's ministry at the Jordan River, Jesus came from Galilee to be baptized with all the others. John's reluctance to baptize him was apparent (Mt. 3:13-15), but he consented at Jesus' urging. John

¹⁸ The dating given by Luke already shows Pontius Pilate in Jerusalem (cf. Lk. 3:1), and from other sources we know that Pilate became governor of Judea in AD 26, cf. *ISBE* (1982) II.1109.

¹⁹ Matthew uses the phrase "kingdom of heaven" probably because of Jewish sensitivity to the use of God's name. Luke, who wrote to non-Jews, uses the phrase "kingdom of God."

had been promised by God that he would be shown an unmistakable sign as to the true identity of the Messiah. This sign was to be the descent of the Holy Spirit (Jn. 1:32-34). The sign was fulfilled when Jesus was baptized, for the Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove, and a heavenly voice proclaimed that Jesus was the Son of God (Mt. 3:16-17//Mk. 1:10-11//Lk. 3:21-22//Jn. 1:34). Mark's vivid language that the heavens were "torn open" (Mk. 1:10) recalled the apocalyptic language of revelation, the imagery that God was about to reveal himself on earth.

Theologically, the question arises, "Why was Jesus baptized?" As the sinless Son of God, he would not have been baptized for the forgiveness of his sins. Only Matthew addresses the question directly, when he states that Jesus was baptized "to fulfill all righteousness" (Mt. 3:15). Yet, what does his explanation mean? Some suggest that Jesus was baptized vicariously for the sins of the world, others that he was simply offering a pattern that his followers should later repeat, and still others, that his baptism was an expression of self-commitment to his messianic mission.

The heavenly voice and the descent of the Spirit bring together two independent strands of biblical prophecy. On the one hand, the declaration, "This is my Son," recalls the promises to David that his son would be God's Son (cf. 2 Sa. 7:14; Ps. 2:7, 12). On the other hand, the descent of the Spirit recalls the promise about the coming Servant of the Lord upon whom God would put his Spirit (Is. 42:1; 61:1). Jesus was both! He was David's son who was God's Son, and he was the suffering Servant of the Lord who would be a light to the nations (Is. 49:6) and who would vicariously suffer for their sins (Is. 53:4-6).

From the site of his baptism, Jesus went into the Judean desert where he fasted forty days among the wild animals and in the company of angels (Mk. 1:12-13). All three synoptic gospels concur that it was the Spirit who led Jesus into the desert of temptation. It is likely that this period of time intentionally recalled the forty years that Moses and the Israelites spent in the desert after crossing the Red Sea, a period when, as Moses said, "God led you...to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands" (Dt. 8:2). In a symbolic way, Jesus became the true Israel who succeeded where ancient Israel failed. His temptation, like theirs, was over survival, faithfulness and dependence upon God. Satan urged doubt about Jesus' divine Sonship. He tried to get Jesus to depend upon himself rather than upon God. He urged the illicit use of power, even buttressing his temptation with the quotation of Scripture. Jesus responded to Satan's ploys by quoting from the ancient record of Israel's temptation in the desert in Deuteronomy (cf. Dt. 8:3; 6:3, 16).

At the end of the temptations, when Jesus emerged from the desert, he did so in the power of the Holy Spirit (Lk. 4:14). He was now ready to inaugurate his public ministry.

The First Disciples

John's Gospel informs us that Jesus' first disciples were originally followers of John the Baptist (Jn. 1:35-42), including Andrew and Simon Peter. They, along with Philip and Nathanael, who were also natives of the Galilean village of Bethsaida, met Jesus for the first time in Judea before Jesus went back to Galilee (cf. Jn. 1:43).

Though Jesus' ministry was initiated in the south with his baptism, temptation and first disciples, the geographical center quickly moved northward to Galilee. John's Gospel offers some important early stories about Jesus before this geographical shift, however. First, Jesus made a brief trip to Galilee to attend a wedding at Cana, a small village near Nazareth. Here, Jesus turned a large quantity of water into wine when the host ran short (Jn. 2:1-10). John specifically notes that this was the first of Jesus' miraculous signs (and the first of the seven signs in his gospel, 2:11a). Such signs were expressions of God's power that called people to faith in Jesus, beginning with the disciples (Jn. 2:11b). However, John also offers a particular theology of signs, showing over the course of his gospel that faith can be superficial if it does not move beyond the personal benefits of a miracle (cf. Jn. 2:23-24; 4:48; 6:26-27; 12:37).

Back in Jerusalem for the first of the Passovers during his ministry, Jesus was incensed by the commercialism in the temple courts. The temple authorities would not allow pagan coinage to be used for payment of sacrificial fees, since it was considered a defilement, so they had set up money exchanging booths to change common currency into special temple currency. Also, there were marketing stalls for animals fit for sacrifice. Jesus braided a whip and drove them all out, an act that offended the temple officials but brought considerable attention to himself (Jn. 2:13-16).²⁰ In the verbal confrontation that followed, Jesus gave the first intimation of his coming death in Jerusalem (2:18-22). While in Jerusalem, Jesus apparently performed other signs, too, though John does not give details (2:23).

The miraculous signs caught the attention of Nicodemus, a member of the Sanhedrin who frankly admitted that Jesus must be a prophet (Jn. 3:1-2). Jesus, however, challenged Nicodemus' entry level faith with the assertion that true faith must involve a fundamental change—a change so complete it was like rebirth. John's Gospel, especially, describes the many metaphors Jesus used for spiritual categories, and “new birth”, a metaphor for the Spirit's work of conversion, stands alongside other images, like water, bread and light.

²⁰ The careful observer will note that while John's Gospel has the story of Jesus driving out the money-changers at the beginning of his ministry, the synoptics place the story near the end (cf. Mk. 11:15-18 and parallels). Since the time of the early church, the solution has been offered that Jesus actually cleansed the temple twice, once at the beginning of his ministry and once at the end, cf. C. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1987), p. 172.

On the way back to Galilee, Jesus did not take the more customary route to the east of the Jordan but instead took the more direct route through Samaria.²¹ Here at Jacob's well, he encountered a Samaritan woman whom, using another spiritual metaphor, he challenged to drink "living" water (Jn. 4:4-26). Jesus' expression "living water" was a play on words, since "living water" doubles for "running water." When the woman tried to involve Jesus in the long-running theological dispute between the Jews and Samaritans,²² Jesus sidestepped her question and challenged her to accept him as the fulfillment of the messianic promise.

Finally, all four gospels comment on Jesus leaving Judea in the south to begin his public ministry in Galilee (Mt. 4:12//Mk. 1:14//Lk. 4:14; Jn. 4:1-4, 43-45). Galilee was in some ways more rural than Jerusalem and in other ways more cosmopolitan. The farming and fishing villages of the Jews were rural enough to leave the Galileans as a sort of "country cousin" to the more sophisticated Jews in the south. At the same time, there were some prominent Greco-Roman cities in Galilee, like Sepphoris, a metropolis of some 30,000 residents only an hour's walk from Nazareth, or like Caesarea Maritima, the artificial seaport on the Mediterranean built by Herod the Great.²³

The Great Galilean Ministry

About two-thirds of the material in the four gospels record the teachings and deeds of Jesus during his public ministry. He began preaching at the age of thirty (Lk. 3:23). The larger portion of his time he spent in the northern region of Galilee, though periodically he made trips southward to Jerusalem. Using for a center the villages on the north side of the lake, Capernaum, Bethsaida and Korazin (Mt. 4:13; 11:20-21; Lk. 9:10), Jesus traveled in and about the various cities and villages, preaching about the advent of the kingdom of God (Mt. 4:23//Mk. 1:14-15, 35-39//Lk. 4:14-15).

The four gospels assume that the phrase "kingdom of God" is a known category, and thus they do not define it. For the Jewish community, the kingdom of

²¹ Normally, Jews traveling between Galilee and Judea avoided Samaria because of the strained racial relations between the two peoples. In 128 BC, John Hyrcanus, the Jewish Hasmonean priest-king, had destroyed the Samaritan temple on Mt. Gerizim. About AD 6 or 7, some Samaritans vented their anger against the Jews by scattered bones in the Jerusalem temple during Passover. Later than the time of Jesus, the Samaritans massacred a group of Galilean pilgrims in AD 52, cf. H. Williamson, "Samaritans," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1992), p. 727.

²² After Ex. 20:17 in the Samaritan Pentateuch, the text specifies that the one place of worship was to be on Mt. Gerizim (as opposed to Mt. Zion), and there is a direct command to build the temple there, cf. E. Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament*, trans. E. Rhodes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 43.

²³ For the influence that such Greco-Roman cities might have had on Jesus—including the possibility that he could speak Greek as well as Aramaic—see R. Batey, "Sepphoris: An Urban Portrait of Jesus," *BAR* (May/June 1992), pp. 50-62.

God referred to the reign of God expressed through his personal representative, the Messiah. It was the fulfillment of the prophetic hope held forth in the Old Testament (Lk. 1:68-79).

The observant reader will notice that the synoptic gospels derive most of their narratives from Jesus' time in Galilee, while the Fourth Gospel narrates Jesus' trips south to Jerusalem. Galilee was well-known as a hotbed of Jewish patriotism. In about AD 6, for instance, a major Jewish uprising, in which a freedom-fighter raided the armory at Sepphoris, brought the wrath of Rome to the area. Sepphoris was burned to the ground, its citizens sold into slavery, and the perpetrators and sympathizers—about 2000 of them—were crucified along the public roads.²⁴

Jesus' preaching about the advent of God's kingdom stirred the people deeply (Mt. 4:24-25//Mk. 1:28//Lk. 4:37; 8:42b). From among those who listened Jesus chose twelve disciples as his special representatives. The number twelve probably had symbolic significance and pointed toward the formation of a new Israel in the same way the twelve sons of Jacob were the fathers of ancient Israel. The calling of several of the apostles are described in detail, while the others are simply named (Mt. 10:1-4//Mk. 3:13-19//Lk. 6:12-16).²⁵

Simon and Andrew bar John (the Aramaic *Kephas* and Greek *Petros*, Jn. 1:42, are nicknames and mean “rock”)

James and John bar Zebedee (the Aramaic *Boanerges*, Mk. 3:17, is a humorous nickname and means “sons of thunder,” though it is unclear whether this is reference to the temperament of the brothers or their father)

Philip (a Greek name)

Nathanael (probably the same as Bartholomew, which means “son of Talmai)

Matthew (probably the same as Levi)

Thomas (“Didymas”, Jn. 11:16, means “twin”)

Thaddaeus (also called Judas, cf. Jn. 14:22; Ac. 1:13)

Simon (the term “Cananaean” or “zealot” refers to a freedom-fighter)

James bar Alphaeus (sometimes referred to as James the Less, Mk. 15:40, which may refer to either stature or age)

²⁴ W. Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), p. 121.

²⁵ Though the twelve are called both “disciples” and “apostles,” the former term, which means “learner” or “student,” more generally applies to all those who followed Jesus. The term “apostle,” which means “messenger” or “delegate,” is used only of the twelve. Hence, all apostles were disciples, but not all disciples were apostles.

Judas Iscariot (the surname might be a nickname or a given name and there are several possible meanings, e.g., Judas of Kerioth, Judas the Liar, Judas the Assassin, etc.)

Upon his arrival back in Galilee, Jesus attended the synagogue service in his home village of Nazareth. Upon being selected as a Sabbath reader, he read the selections in Isaiah 61:1-2a and 58:6b—passages concerning the Servant of the Lord. After he explained that these very passages were predictions about himself, the villagers were at first amazed and then angry (Lk. 4:14-30), and Jesus narrowly escaped death. All the Synoptics offer a short summary of Jesus' early miracles, which included healings and exorcisms. His reputation spread quickly, and people came from everywhere to hear him.

Conflict Stories

Rather early, Jesus experienced a series of conflicts with various of the Jewish sects. He offended the lawyers when he forgave sins and fraternized with “sinners” and tax-gatherers (Mt. 9:1-13//Mk. 2:6-17//Lk. 5:20-32). He offended the Pharisees by violating the oral Torah's sabbath restrictions (Mt. 12:1-9; Mk. 2:23-28//Lk. 6:1-11). The resistance of these groups would continue throughout Jesus' ministry and contribute to the forces marshaled against him that would culminate in his death. Much of the criticism leveled against Jesus derived from the Pharisees, whose attempts at Torah intensification did not fit with Jesus' overt sympathies toward the people of the land, whom the Pharisees called “sinners.” By asking why he ate with sinners and why his disciples did not fast, they implied that Jesus was not properly pious. Jesus, for his part, responded that his mission was to those who needed help. In any case, the new life of the kingdom could not simply be stitched into the old wineskins of traditional religious form (Lk. 5:36-39). So, tension continued to develop along the lines of authority and religion. For the scribes and Pharisees, authority was especially derived from the oral Torah; for Jesus, authority was in the written Scriptures and in himself as well! To the Pharisees, Jesus appeared irreligious and worldly, though he grew more popular with the crowds every day (cf. Mk. 3:7-12).

In addition to conflicts with religious sects, Jesus also experienced conflict within his own family. His mother and brothers at one point wondered if he were insane and tried to remove him from public view (Mk. 3:20-21, 31-34), especially after he was condemned by the scribes as having an evil spirit (Mk. 3:22-30).

The Great Sermon

Some of Jesus' most distinctive teachings are collected in what is popularly

called the "Sermon on the Mount" (Mt. 5-7), though in Luke it is on a plain (Lk. 6:17-49). Here, Jesus detailed for the crowds what it would mean to be part of God's kingdom. The sermon began with Jesus' blessing, his "beatitudes" to the poor and humble. All Jews looked forward to the messianic age, and there were various opinions about how to prepare for it. The Pharisees favored Torah intensification. The zealots urged political and military resistance. Jesus, by contrast, described the spiritual qualities that belong to the people of the messianic age. Rather than following the Maccabean ideals of patriotism, with its glorification of war, or Torah intensification, which lapsed easily into legalism and ostentatious piety, Jesus urged the ethics of the ancient prophets of Israel, such as, contrition and meekness (Is. 57:15; Mt. 5:3), comfort for the mourners (Is. 57:18b-19a; Mt. 5:4), humility (Is. 66:2b; Mt. 5:5), spiritual hunger (Is. 55:1-2; Mt. 5:6), and showing mercy (Is. 58:6-7; Mt. 5:7).

Jesus was careful to point out that he did not intend to revoke the Torah. Rather, he intended to raise the commandments of Torah to their fullest meaning (Mt. 5:17-20). The higher intent of the Torah's prohibitions and commandments, for instance, were not simply overt actions like physical murder, forbidden sex, or punishment commensurate with the crime. Rather, they pointed to the deeper sins of hatred (Mt. 5:21-26), lust (Mt. 5:27-30) and revenge (Mt. 5:38-42). Jesus reinterpreted the Torah in terms of inner motivations as well as external actions. Similarly, he objected to ostentatious piety which looked good in the public eye. Instead, he called for the unseen piety done for God alone (Mt. 6:1-18). In the context of this piety, he gave his disciples a prayer that they should pray—a prayer simple enough for a child to learn yet profound enough to shape the devotional life of Christians for two millennia (Mt. 6:9-13//Lk. 11:2-4). Finally, Jesus warned against the dangers of materialism in a series of metaphors about the two treasures (heavenly and earthly), the two masters (God and money) and the two preoccupations (God's kingdom and current physical needs). He concluded the sermon with parables about the two ways, each marking out the choices before his listeners. They could choose the narrow gate or the broad road. They could produce healthy fruit or rotten fruit. They could build their lives on sand or rock. Whatever way they chose would determine their destiny. One Christian writer described this sermon as a manifesto for a counter-culture, for it radically departed from the several popular Jewish notions about how to prepare for the kingdom of God.

Christians through the centuries have sought how best to apply the message of this teaching. Some understand the sermon as a statement of perfectionism: you must do all this in order to be saved. Others have seen it as a worthy but impossible ideal: you ought to have done all this—see what poor creatures you really are! Still others have interpreted the teaching to be an interim ethic applicable to the time of Jesus but

not applicable to all people of all times. Most Christians, however, have understood the sermon as a call to living faith: you are forgiven, so live a new life out of thankfulness!

Parables

One of Jesus' most distinctive methods of teaching was through parables, that is, short, pithy stories that drew comparisons between daily life or nature and some spiritual truth. This method of teaching was derived from the ancient prophets and consisted of comparing the known with the unknown. A parable is a figurative saying, often using either metaphor or simile, that is expanded into a picture or story. The parables are fictional, of course, but their lessons offer pointed truths about discipleship, God's kingdom and the meaning of Jesus' ministry. Implicitly, parables call for a verdict: "What do you think?" Often, parables have a single main point, and hence, they are not strictly allegories.²⁶ However, the parables also were subversive, that is, they were carefully constructed both to reveal truth to those who were open to it but to hide truth from those who were cynical (Mt. 13:10-17). They sought to break through the prevailing Jewish world view and replace it with one that was different. The parables of Jesus comprise more than a third of his recorded teachings in the gospels, though primarily, they are found only in the Synoptics.²⁷

Matthew offers several of Jesus' parables in a single collection, all of which describe the nature of the kingdom of God (Mt. 13). They are:

The Sower (13:3-9, 18-23)

The Weeds (13:24-30, 36-43)

The Mustard Seed (13:31-32)

The Yeast (13:33)

The Treasure (13:44)

The Pearl (13:45-46)

The Dragnet (13:47-50)

In these parables, Jesus taught that the coming of God's kingdom would look very different than what was popularly supposed. Rather than in the burst of a fiery national revolution, the coming of God's kingdom would come gradually (*The Mustard Seed* and *The Yeast*). It would involve personal choice (*The Sower*) and

²⁶ To be sure, in some parables, such as the Sower and the Dragnet, there are several elements in the story that have meaning.

²⁷ There is some debate about whether John's Gospel contains even a single parable. John 12:35 and 16:21 might count as parables, but on the whole, it is safe to say that parables are primarily a feature of the Synoptics. cf. A. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), pp. 10-11.

deep commitment (*The Treasure and The Pearl*). In the end, God would intervene in judgment to separate out of his kingdom those who did not belong (*The Weeds and The Dragnet*).

Other parables, also, aimed at subverting popular assumptions. In the story of the Strong Man, which appears in all three Synoptics, Jesus taught that the real enemy of the Jews was not merely Rome, but Satan (Mk. 3:23-30//Mt. 12:25-32//Lk. 11:17-23). The hero in one story who followed the true spirit of the Torah was a Samaritan, a member of a despised race (Lk. 10:25-37). (If Jesus had been in Samaria, he may have told the same parable but about “The Good Jew.”) In a trilogy of parables against the background of a highly stratified social hierarchy, Jesus highlighted God’s radical love for the outcast and despised in the stories of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son (Lk. 15). In the parable of the tenant farmers, Jesus recalled Israel’s rejection of the prophets and anticipated his own rejection and death (Mk. 12:1-9).

Some parables are stories of contrast rather than similarity. Luke’s Gospel contains two such parables that teach about God’s willingness to answer prayer. One contrasts the willingness of God to hear prayers over against the sluggishness of a reluctant neighbor (Lk. 11:5-13). Another contrasts God’s concern about justice with the cavalier attitudes of a stubborn magistrate (Lk. 18:1-8). God is no more like an unjust judge than he is like a sleepy neighbor!

Miracles

Jesus was not only a teacher, however. His popularity owed as much to what he did as to what he said. In both public and private settings, Jesus performed miracles as signs of his glory as the Son of God (Jn. 2:11; 4:54).²⁸ He exorcised demons (Mk. 1:23-28; 5:1-20; 9:14-29; Mt. 9:32-34; 15:21-28) and healed many diseases, including fevers (Lk. 4:38-39), skin diseases (Mt. 8:1-4; Lk. 17:11-19), paralysis (Mk. 2:1-12), dysfunctional limbs (Lk. 6:6-11), hemorrhages (Mk. 5:24-34), blindness (Mk. 8:22-26; Mt. 9:27-31; 20:29-34; Jn. 9:1-7), deafness (Mk. 7:31-37), and dropsy (Lk. 14:1-6). On three occasions, he raised people from the dead (Mk. 5:21-24, 35-43; Lk. 7:11-17; Jn. 11:17-44). His miracles included authority over the natural world, when he multiplied bread and fish (Jn. 6:1-14; Mt. 15:32-39), calmed a violent storm (Mt. 8:23-27), walked on the surface of the Sea of Galilee (Jn. 6:16-21), precipitated a huge catch of fish (Lk. 5:1-11), and provided money for Peter’s taxes from a fish’s mouth (Mt. 17:24-27).

Signs were no guarantee of genuine faith, however. It was popular to demand

²⁸The first three gospels most often describe Jesus’ miracles by the word *dynamis* (= an act of power). John’s Gospel most often uses the word *semeion* (= sign).

signs as proofs of authenticity (Mt. 12:38; 16:1), but Jesus knew that sign-seeking was a dangerous course, for it often demonstrated skepticism and unbelief (Mt. 12:39; Lk. 17:20; Jn. 2:23-25; 7:3-6). Some who "believed" on the basis of signs (Jn. 8:31) later rejected Jesus because of his teachings (Jn. 8:33-59). To have true faith, one needed to accept Jesus' self-claims, not merely his miracles (Jn. 6:66-71; 16:29-30; 17:6-10, 20).

The Teaching Tours and the Turning of Public Opinion

Several passages in the gospels describe Jesus traveling from village to village to teach about the kingdom of God (Mk. 1:35-39//Lk. 4:42-44; 8:1; Mt. 9:35). Not only was he accompanied by the Twelve, he also included in his entourage several women (Lk. 8:2-3), a practice that could only have been shocking in a strictly patriarchal culture. Jesus also sent out the Twelve in pairs to be his special emissaries. He authorized them to preach the good news of the kingdom of God and to perform miracles, just as he did (Mt. 10). Later, he sent out seventy of his disciples on a similar tour (Lk. 10:1-20). Just as the number twelve held symbolic significance, pointing toward a new Israel, so also the number seventy held symbolic significance, since the common Jewish understanding was that the world was composed of seventy nations.

When it became clear that Jesus was not going to fulfil the conventional role of the messiah,²⁹ his popularity dimmed. Jesus, in fact, would not even allow his followers to proclaim him as the Messiah until after his death (Mk. 1:24-25, 34, 44; 3:11-12; 5:43; 7:36; 8:26; 9:9; Mt. 16:13-20). Eventually, because he did not match expectations, some followers abandoned him (Jn. 6:66). His own family thought he was deranged (Mk. 3:20-21; Jn. 7:3-5). Jesus repeatedly encountered criticism and controversy over his teachings and actions. Experts in the law of Moses accused him of blasphemy because he forgave sins (Mk. 2:6-7). The Pharisees criticized him because he socialized with "sinners" (Mk. 2:16; Mt. 9:10-13; Lk. 7:33-34, 39). John the Baptist's followers were uncomfortable with the fact that he did not require fasting (Mk. 2:18). Repeatedly, Jesus broke sabbatical or other Jewish customs in the interest of good works (Mk. 2:23-24; 3:1-6; 7:1-5; Jn. 5:8-13, 16-18). The people from his own town of Nazareth tried to kill him because he claimed to be a prophet (Lk. 4:28-30). He was ridiculed (Lk. 8:53), turned away (Lk. 9:52-53), challenged (Mt. 16:1), and criticized (Mt. 13:54-57). On one occasion, even one of his own disciples rebuked him (Mt. 16:22).

²⁹The messianic concept in first century Judaism was not uniform, but there was a common expectation that the messiah would fulfill the hopes of Israel. A popular view, especially in Galilee, was that the messiah would deliver the Jews from Roman oppression, and claimants for this role were not lacking (cf. Ac. 5:36-37; 21:38). At Qumran, two messiahs were expected, one priestly and the other kingly, cf. D. Russell, *Between the Testaments* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965) 119-142. Jesus warned his followers about false messiahs (Mt. 24:5, 23-24).

Such rejection was serious indeed. Jesus especially held up for censure the Galilean cities of Korazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum, where he had spent much of his time and performed most of his miracles (Mt. 11:20-24//Lk. 10:13-15). Though these villages had seen his mighty works, they did not turn toward God. When Jesus turned inland from the lake to his own home village of Nazareth, the Nazarenes rejected him also (Mk. 6:1-6).

Periods of Withdrawal

There is little doubt that the ministry of Jesus was intense. Mark, for instance, describes a litany of activities that occupied hardly more than a day: Jesus taught in the Capernaum synagogue (Mk. 1:21), exorcised a demon (1:25), spent the afternoon at Simon's house, where he healed Simon's mother-in-law (1:31), and in the evening hosted a large group of sick people whom he healed (1:32-34). Before daylight, he was up praying in a lonely place (1:35-37), and left that same morning with his disciples for other nearby villages (1:38). Such concentrated activity over the weeks and months in Galilee was bound to take its toll. Sometimes, the group was unable even to take the time to eat (Mk. 6:31a). Hence, it is not surprising that Jesus finally withdrew from the crowds for rest (Mk. 6:31b-32). Furthermore, the conflict with various special interest groups was also intensifying. Some, due to their patriotic fervor, were on the verge of hailing Jesus as the new revolutionary (Jn. 6:14-15), and their misinterpretation of his messiahship forced him to withdraw. Later, when he did not match their expectations, many followers became disillusioned altogether (Jn. 6:66).

In the midst of such controversy, Jesus withdrew from the crowds, though his efforts toward privacy were not always successful (Mk. 6:33). In these withdrawals, he traveled as far north as lower Phoenicia (Mt. 15:21), taking care to avoid the territory ruled by Herod Antipas (Mk. 7:31), who already had executed John the Baptist (Mk. 6:14-29) and was now threatening Jesus (Lk. 13:32). He also spent time in Caesarea Philippi, where Herod Philip ruled (Mk. 8:27).

During and after these withdrawals, Jesus began to explain openly to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and die (Mt. 16:21; 17:22-23; 20:17-19). His teaching now included metaphors about the cross (Lk. 9:23; 14:27). One of the most remarkable events during this time was his transfiguration on a high mountain (Mt. 17:1-3). Jesus' disciples briefly saw him revealed in his true power and glory, and they heard him speaking to Moses and Elijah about his coming death in Jerusalem (Lk. 9:29-32). A voice from within a mysterious cloud reminiscent of God's descent on Mt. Sinai and similar to the heavenly voice at Jesus' baptism declared that Jesus was God's Son (Lk. 9:34-36).

Several of Jesus' most notable miracles occurred during these withdrawals.

His feeding of the 5000, one of the few events recorded in all four gospels, was the result of the crowds following on land while Jesus was trying to withdraw by boat (Mt. 14:13-14). Here, with a lad's lunch of five loaves and a couple fish, Jesus fed the entire multitude (Mk. 6:38-44). The miracle was more than just a physical benefit, however, for Jesus used the occasion to teach about himself as the true bread from heaven (6:30-59).³⁰ Also during this period, Jesus walked on the water and calmed the storm (Mt. 14:24-33), miracles so stupendous that his disciples were now convinced he was God's Son.

Also during this period, Jesus made one of his brief trips southward to attend the Feast of Booths, though in general Jesus was careful to avoid Judea because of the inherent danger there (Jn. 7:1-10). While there, he healed a man who had been blind from birth (Jn. 9:1-7). This miracle and the intense debate surrounding it became the setting for two of Jesus' most audacious claims. He claimed to be the Light of the World (Jn. 9:5; 8:12), and he claimed to be the Good Shepherd (Jn. 10:11). Both claims were shocking and implied that Jesus was divine (cf. Ps. 104:1-2; Eze. 34:11-16). C. S. Lewis was surely correct when he wrote:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: "I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God." That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit on Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.³¹

The Last Trip to Jerusalem

Especially in Luke's Gospel (Lk. 9:51--19:44), the narratives describe Jesus' final trip to Jerusalem. While Jesus traveled in several directions, no matter which way he went Luke always depicts him as "on his way to Jerusalem" (Lk. 9:51-53, 57; 10:1, 38; 13:22, 31-32; 14:25; 17:11; 18:31, 35; 19:1, 28, 41). During this extended "trip," Jesus continued to teach about the kingdom of God. Some of his most famous parables come from this period, including the parables of the good Samaritan (Lk.

³⁰ The Fourth Gospel contains no mention of the eucharistic words of Jesus, even though John mentions the last supper. Nevertheless, the early Christian church understood the feeding of the 5000 and Jesus' teaching on that occasion to have a relationship to the eucharist. One of the most notable reflections about this connection comes from early in the 2nd century: "As this broken bread was scattered upon the mountains and being gathered together became one, so may Thy Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into Thy kingdom," *Didache* 9.

³¹ From *Mere Christianity*.

10:25-37), the friend at midnight (Lk. 11:5-10), the rich fool (Lk. 12:13-21), the great banquet (Lk. 14:15-24), the lost sheep (Lk. 15:3-7), the lost coin (Lk. 15:8-10), the lost son (Lk. 15:11-32), and Lazarus and the rich man (Lk. 16:19-31).

One climactic event that occurred during this period was the raising of Lazarus from the dead. Lazarus and his sisters were close friends of Jesus who lived in Bethany near Jerusalem (Lk. 10:38-42; Jn. 11:1-3). When Lazarus became deathly ill, his sisters naturally sent word to Jesus. Arriving after Lazarus had been dead for four days, Jesus went to his tomb and raised him back to life (Jn. 11:17-44). This miracle caused so much attention that the Jewish Sanhedrin met to plot the death of Jesus (Jn. 11:45-53). They were afraid that if he were allowed to continue without restraint, the Romans might suspect an insurrection, and a bloodbath could follow (Jn. 11:48). Their animosity meant that until the time of his death, Jesus could no longer move freely in public (Jn. 11:54).

From the Triumphant Entry to the Arrest

By now it should be obvious that the story of Jesus in the gospels was not constructed like a modern biography. The huge gaps (between his birth and when he was twelve, and then between the age of twelve and the age of thirty) distinguish the gospel accounts from traditional biographies. Rather, the four gospels aim to answer for the reader a single, fundamental question: "Who was Jesus?" Their answer is that he was the Messiah, God's one and only Son, who appeared in fulfillment to the predictions of the Old Testament prophets (Mt. 1:1; 28:18-20; Mk. 1:1, 10-11; 15:39; Lk. 1:1-4; 9:29-31; Jn. 1:1-2, 14-18). Beyond that, they call the reader to faith in him as the Savior (Mt. 1:21; 28:19-20; Lk. 2:11; 24:45-48; Jn. 20:30-31).

Given this aim, it should not be surprising to us that the most detailed accounts of Jesus' life are those which describe his final visit to Jerusalem. Roughly a third of the gospel content is taken up with this subject. Jesus himself said that no prophet could die outside Jerusalem (Lk. 13:33). So, it was to Jerusalem that he went. John's Gospel, especially, treats the passion of Jesus as his glorification by the Father (cf. Jn. 12:23; 13:31; 17:1, 5, 24).

The Triumphant Entry

Jesus approached Jerusalem for the last time a few days before the annual Passover festival (Jn. 11:55--12:1). On Sunday³² he rode into the city on the back of a colt amidst the messianic shouts of the crowds who accompanied him, one of the few

³²If the passover was on Friday, as is traditionally assumed, then Jesus' arrival at Bethany six days earlier meant that he arrived on Friday afternoon. The chronological challenge of harmonizing the gospel records with the Jewish calendar and with each other is notoriously difficult, cf. H. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977) 65-114.

incidents in Jesus' life which was recorded in all four gospels (Mt. 21:1-9//Mk. 11:1-10//Lk. 19:28-40//Jn. 12:12-19). Jesus, while he acknowledged the appropriateness of their celebration (Lk. 19:39-40), nevertheless knew what lay ahead. As the city came into view, he wept over it because he knew that only a generation later it would be destroyed (Lk. 19:41-44). Going to the temple, Jesus drove from the court of the nations those exchanging currency and selling sacrificial animals (Mt. 21:10-17). They had used the only place open for non-Jews to pray as a merchandising arena, and Jesus resented it deeply. Furthermore, his quotation from Jeremiah's temple sermon—a sermon that delivered a scathing denunciation of the temple (cf. Jer. 7, 26)—suggested that God's wrath against the 1st temple was now leveled against the 2nd temple. Jesus' actions further crystallized the intentions of the Jewish ruling body to destroy him (Mt. 11:18-19).

A Week of Controversy

The days that followed were filled with confrontations between Jesus and various sects. Jesus' authority was challenged by Sanhedrin members (Mk. 11:27-33). The Pharisees (lay-theologians associated with the synagogues) and Herodians (a pro-Herod group) tried to snare him on the issue of taxes (Mk. 12:13-17). Taxes were especially an issue, since Palestine was a Roman occupied country, and the payment of taxes to a foreign government compromised patriotism. The Sadducees (aristocrats and priests associated with the temple) raised a complex question about life after the resurrection (Mk. 12:18-27). In all these confrontations, Jesus proved to be sufficient. In fact, he even posed for his detractors a loaded question about the origin of the Messiah that they were loathe to answer (Mt. 22:41-46). In the end, Jesus issued a searing denunciation against the Pharisees and scribes for their hypocrisy, legalism and lack of compassion (Mt. 23:1-36). By now, there was no doubt that he considered his rejection by his own people to be imminent (Mt. 21:33-46). Jerusalem, for a millennium the religious center of the Jews, had rejected him (Mt. 23:37-39).

One of the most profound teachings Jesus gave during this final week was delivered privately to his disciples. It was a prophetic statement about the future of Jerusalem (Mt. 24-25; Mk. 13; Lk. 24). Jesus' words seemed to have both a near and far reference. This sort of double entendre, where the near and the far are collapsed into a single discourse, was typical of the Old Testament prophets, who often combined visions of the invasions of the Assyrians and Babylonians with images of the end of the age. In retrospect, we can easily see the fulfillment of Jesus' near prediction that Jerusalem would be destroyed. We know that the Roman general Titus ravaged Jerusalem in AD 70, just as Jesus said (Lk. 21:20-24). The distant references reach all the way to the end of the age and the last judgment (Mt. 25:31-

46), and about them there has been much speculation among Christians throughout church history. Jesus described a coming terrible sacrilege and persecution (Mt. 24:15-22), the rise of false messiahs and false prophets (Mt. 24:23-28), and finally, the coming of the Son of Man predicted by Daniel (Mt. 24:29-31//Mk. 13:24-27//Lk. 21:25-28; cf. Da. 7:13-14; 9:27; 11:31; 12:11). He closed the discourse by calling for vigilance and faithfulness (Mt. 25).

The Last Supper, Betrayal and Arrest

The plot against Jesus was gaining momentum (Mt. 26:1-5; Jn. 11:47-53), for now one of his own apostles agreed to double-cross him (Lk. 22:3-6). In the evening, Jesus determined to share a farewell meal with his disciples in the traditional seder fashion, and he sent Peter and John to prepare an upper room for them (Lk. 22:7-14).³³ That evening, as he reclined with the others at this formal meal, he interrupted it by washing his disciples' feet (Jn. 13:1-20). All four gospel agree that he told them frankly he knew one of them would betray him (Mt. 26:21-25//Mk. 14:18-21//Lk. 22:21-23//Jn. 13:21-30). He even predicted that Peter would deny him before morning (Mk. 14:26-31). During the meal, Jesus broke bread and shared it with them, along with wine, a custom that Christians ever since have continued to reenact, just as Jesus indicated they should (1 Co. 11:23-26). This event was a covenant meal, and when Christians reenact it, they are reaffirming their commitment to this new covenant based upon the death of Jesus. Finally, both in the upper room and in the street on the way to Gethsemene, Jesus engaged in a lengthy discourse about his departure from the world to return to the Father, his unity with the Father, the coming of the Holy Spirit, and the hostility of the world that the disciples should expect (Jn. 14-16). At the end of this discourse, Jesus offered what has come to be called a high priestly prayer—a prayer of consecration to his great task and of intercession for his apostles and the church. Later in Gethsemene, while his disciples slept, Jesus prayed in great distress about the coming crisis (Lk. 22:39-46).

At the end of his prayer, a band of soldiers and officers, led by Judas Iscariot, located the group. Judas planted his traitor's kiss upon Jesus' cheek, and the officers arrested Jesus, while his disciples took to their heels in terror (Mk. 14:43-52//Mt. 26:47-56).

³³ The calendars of the Synoptics and the Fourth Gospel seem to differ with respect to Jesus' death and the Passover. In the Synoptics, Jesus' last supper is a Passover meal (Mk. 14:12-16//Mt. 26:17-19//Lk. 22:7-8), while John seems to put the crucifixion prior to the traditional Passover meal (Jn. 18:28; 19:14). It may be that the Pharisees and Sadducees followed different calendars, though the question cannot be considered closed, cf. J. Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, trans. N. Perrin (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), pp. 15-88; I. Marshall, *Last Supper and Lord's Supper* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 57-75.

The Passion and Resurrection

For all four gospels, the passion and resurrection of Jesus is the climax, not only of Jesus' earthly ministry, but of God's sovereign plan for his Son. As a matter of historical fact, the trial and death of Jesus is better attested than any other comparable event known to us from the ancient world.³⁴ The sequence of events can be pieced together from the four gospels with reasonable certainty. The one unequivocal point is that Jesus' disciples discovered the empty tomb on Sunday, the first day of the week (Mt. 28:1; Mk. 16:1; Lk. 24:1; Jn. 20:1). The fact that repeatedly the resurrection of Jesus is described as being "on the third day" puts the crucifixion on Friday.³⁵ It follows that the arrest was early Friday morning sometime after midnight (the Jewish "day" began at sundown the previous evening).

The Trial of Jesus

The trial of Jesus proceeded in two stages, one Jewish and the other Roman. In each stage, the charges against him were distinct. In the Jewish trial, where Jesus was examined by the Sanhedrin, the charge was blasphemy (Mk. 14:53, 55-65). He first appeared before Annas, the high priest emeritus whom the Romans had deposed in AD 15 but who still probably retained the dignity of the title and wielded considerable influence (Jn. 18:12-14, 19-23). From Annas, Jesus was taken to Caiaphas, the current high priest (Jn. 18:24), where he was further examined during the pre-dawn hours (Mt. 26:59-66).³⁶ Peter, who had cautiously followed the arresting party, fulfilled Jesus' prediction by denying on three separate occasions that he knew him. His denial is recorded in all four gospel narratives (Mt. 26:69-75//Mk. 14:66-72//Lk. 22:56-62//Jn. 18:15-18, 25-27). Finally, after dawn the Sanhedrin reached a guilty verdict and transferred Jesus to the Roman procurator (Mt. 27:1-2//Jn. 18:28).³⁷ Meanwhile, Judas, the betrayer, committed suicide (Mt. 27:3-10).

The formal charge before the Romans could hardly be blasphemy, since the Romans would care little about Jewish religious sensitivities. Thus, the charge

³⁴ C. Evans, "Jesus in Non-Christian Sources," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. J. Green and S. McKnight (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1992), pp. 364-368, 841.

³⁵ To be sure, other scenarios have been suggested, such as a Wednesday crucifixion based on the expression "three days and three nights" (cf. Mt. 12:40). However, such a sequence makes the expression "on the third day impossible," and most scholars, on the basis of rabbinical reckoning, agree that this expression is idiomatic rather than literal and includes any part of a three day sequence, cf. D. Carson, *EBC* (1984) 8.296.

³⁶ Archaeologists have uncovered a 1st century Jewish ossuary with the inscription "house of Caiaphas", and it may well have belonged to the family of the high priest in Jesus' trial.

³⁷ For the whole sequence of the trial and the task of harmonizing the four gospel accounts, see B. Corley, "Trial of Jesus," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, pp. 841-854. Also, if the jurisprudence described in the Mishnah was in effect during the time of Jesus' trial, the Jewish legal code was breached in several ways for the sake of expediency, including the hearing in the high priest's house, the examination during the night, the examination on a sabbath, a guilty verdict on the same day as the hearing, and inadequate grounds for blasphemy, cf. p. 851.

before Pontius Pilate, the Roman procurator, was insurrection (Lk. 23:2-5//Jn. 18:29-38). John's Gospel, especially, depicts the awkwardness of the hearing before Pilate. The delegation from the Sanhedrin was restricted from entering a Gentile residence, since it was considered a defilement (Jn. 18:28).³⁸ Hence, the examination was very much a "back and forth" process with Pilate talking to the prisoner inside and periodically walking back outside to speak with the delegation (Jn. 18:29, 33, 38; 19:4-5, 9, 13). After a failed attempt to sidestep the case by referring it to Herod Antipas, the provincial king of Galilee (Lk. 23:6-12), Pilate finally consented to sentence Jesus to death (Jn. 18:39--19:16). His last ploy to release Jesus by a Passover amnesty was vigorously protested.

The Cross

After he was scourged and mocked by the Roman soldiers (Mt.27:26-31), final sentence for execution was passed at a place called the *Lithostroton* (Jn. 19:13). Jesus, carrying the *patibulum* (= crosspiece), was led away to the site of execution just outside the north wall of the city (Lk. 23:26-32; He. 13:12). Here they nailed him up along with two other convicted criminals (Jn. 19:17b-27).³⁹ As a form of execution, crucifixion was particularly brutal. Since the process itself damaged no vital organs, death came slowly through shock or asphyxiation as the muscles weakened and the lungs collapsed.⁴⁰ Victims were executed publicly and left to die slowly.⁴¹ Jesus hung on the cross for about six hours before he died (Mk. 15:25, 33-37).⁴² He was buried by two friends (Jn. 19:38-42), and a guard was placed over his tomb (Mt. 27:62-66).

While Jesus was on the cross, he uttered seven different sayings. Their order is debated, but their significance has never diminished. He prayed for his executioners' forgiveness (Lk. 23:34). He promised one of the criminals that he would meet him in the afterlife (Lk. 23:39-43). He committed the care of his mother to a close friend, probably John (Jn. 19:25b-27). He suffered an agonizing thirst (Jn. 19:28). He quoted from the Psalms a prayer of abandonment (Mt. 27:46//Mk. 15:34;

³⁸ J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, trans. F. and C. Cave (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), p. 321, note 18.

³⁹ The medical details of the crucifixion have been thoroughly explored in W. Edwards, W. Gabel and F. Hosmer, "On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ," *JAMA* (March 21, 1986—Vol. 255, No. 11), pp. 1455-1463.

⁴⁰ J. Green, "Death of Jesus," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, p. 147.

⁴¹ In 1968, remains of a 1st century victim of crucifixion were uncovered in a Jerusalem burial chamber. A nail about seven inches long had been driven through the man's heel bones and was so deeply imbedded in a knot that it could not be removed. Hence, when the corpse was taken down the feet were simply amputated and buried with the nail, feet and wood section all still attached, cf. V. Tzaferis, "Crucifixion—the Archaeological Evidence," *BAR* (Jan./Feb. 1985), pp. 44-53.

⁴² The Jewish reckoning of daylight hours began about 6:00 A.M. As such, the "third hour" was about 9:00 A.M., the "sixth hour" was about noon, and the "ninth hour" was about 3:00 P.M.

Ps. 22:1). He committed his life into the hands of the Father (Lk. 23:46). Finally, with a loud and final cry of triumph, he died (Jn. 19:30//Mt. 27:50//Mk. 15:37).

Easter

The Christian faith that Jesus is alive rests on two kinds of testimony, the witnesses to the empty tomb and the witnesses to Jesus' post-resurrection appearances. The first line of evidence is important, because if the corpse of Jesus could have been produced by his enemies, the idea of resurrection would fall of its own accord. The second line of evidence is important, because those who saw Jesus alive after his death were not gullible people wanting to believe in the preposterous, but rather, disillusioned and devastated followers who were reluctant to believe. They were not people who wanted a resurrection but who were compelled to accept it because the evidence was overwhelming. The sheer numbers of those who claimed to have seen Jesus alive militates against any sort of subjective interpretation or even collusion. In any case, as Origen pointed out in the post-apostolic church, people do not risk their lives and suffer martyrdom for something they know very well is not true!

If the death of Jesus occurred on Friday evening, as is generally assumed, no one would have visited the site on Saturday due to Sabbath restrictions (Lk. 23:56). On Sunday morning, however, the women who had watched him die came to the tomb and discovered that the large stone had been rolled away (Mk. 16:1-4). An angel instructed them to return to the disciples and tell them that Jesus had risen from the dead (Mt. 28:5-8). In fear, the women fled, at first even afraid to tell what they had seen (Mk. 16:8). They did tell, however, and Peter and another disciple ran to investigate (Lk. 24:10-12//Jn. 20:1-10). It was just as the women had said. The tomb was empty.

Beginning on that morning, Jesus appeared to his followers several times over the next few weeks (1 Co. 15:4-8). He appeared to the women (Mt. 28:9-10), to Mary Magdalene (Jn. 20:14-18), to Peter (1 Co. 15:5), to Cleopas and a companion (Lk. 24:13-35), to ten of the apostles in a group (Jn. 20:19-23), to eleven of the apostles in a group (Jn. 20:24-29), to the eleven in Galilee (Mt. 28:16-17), to seven disciples while they were fishing (Jn. 21:1-4), to a group of more than five hundred disciples (1 Co. 15:6), to James (1 Cor. 15:7), and finally, to his disciples near Jerusalem (Lk. 24:44-50). On this final occasion, he ascended up into the heavens, and they did not see him again (Lk. 24:51; Ac. 1:3-9). Before he left, however, he gave them a mandate, which Christians traditionally call "the great commission." They were to go into the whole world and announce the good news, baptizing and teaching their converts all about the life and message of Jesus (Mt. 28:19-20; Lk. 24:44-49; Ac. 1:7-8).

It is important to examine the history of the early Christian communities in the larger context of Luke's extended two-volume work. Luke is unique among the four evangelists in that he composed two works, both addressed to the same individual (Lk. 1:3; Ac. 1:1). Together, these two works comprise slightly more than a quarter of the New Testament. Thus, the reader who reaches the climax of the gospel is only half way through the whole, which extends beyond the death and resurrection of Jesus in about AD 30 to Paul's arrival in Rome in about AD 60.

When looking at the whole of Luke's work, several important themes become apparent of which two are most significant. One is that Luke takes pains to demonstrate that the Christian movement was politically harmless to the Romans. True, Jesus had been executed as an insurrectionist under Pilate, but even the procurator declared him to be innocent (Lk. 23:4, 13-16, 22, 47). His followers, though they also were brought up on charges, were consistently shown to be the victims of false information (Ac. 19:35-41; 23:25-30; 25:8-21, 24-27; 26:30-32).

Even more important is Luke's concern to show how the Christian message moved beyond the tight circle of Jewishness to the non-Jewish world. This universal mission is hinted at in the third gospel when Jesus sent out the seventy (Lk. 10:1). It is explicit in Jesus last commission to the apostles (Lk. 24:46-47; Ac. 1:8). Hence, the Book of Acts falls into two major parts. The first half (chapters 1-12) describes how the Jewish ethnic and regional boundaries were gradually crossed so that Jesus' mandate could be accomplished. At first, the Christians were reluctant to reach beyond even the community in Jerusalem, but after the lynching of Stephen (Ac. 6:8-14; 7:54-60), they were scattered due to persecution (Ac. 8:1-3). They carried the message of Jesus everywhere they went, but they only told it to other Jews (Acts 8:4; 11:19). Several critical events, however, pushed the new Christians beyond their comfortable ethnic circles. Philip shared the message with some Samaritans (Ac. 8), Peter with a Roman officer (Ac. 10) and others with some Greeks in Antioch, Syria (Ac. 11:20-21). In the end, the multi-national Christian church in Antioch sent out the first formal missionary team to the Gentile nations (Ac. 13:1-3).

The second half of the Book of Acts, then, details the missionary journeys of Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles (chapters 13-28). He conducted three major tours, the first taking him to Cyprus and the interior of Asia Minor (chapters 13-14) and the second and third into Greece (chapters 17-20). In the end, Paul was arrested in Jerusalem and taken to Rome for an imperial hearing, so the gospel reached even into Italy (chapters 21-28).

The Early Jerusalem Church (Acts 1-7)

C. H. Dodd, the famous British biblical scholar of the last century, called Jesus the "Founder of Christianity." This title is at once true and misleading. It is true in

the sense that the center of faith for all Christians is Jesus of Nazareth, crucified in Jerusalem and resurrected on Easter. It can be misleading, however, if one assumes that Jesus gave a charter for the structure of the Christian church. He did not do so. He prayed that his followers would be unified, just as he and the Father were one (Jn. 17:20-23). His parables indicated that his disciples should maintain their faith until the end, when he would come again (Mt. 24:26--25:46). His final words to the apostles were that they should preach the good news about him to the whole world (Mt. 28:18-20; Lk. 24:45-49; Jn. 20:21-23; Ac. 1:6-8). However, the word *ekklesia* (= church) appears in only two passages in the gospels (Mt. 16:18; 18:17), and while these passages assume the existence of a Messianic community, they hardly anticipate all the connotations of the word "church" which would come later.

What Jesus did to prepare his followers for the time between his ascension to the Father and his return at the end of the age was promise them the gift of the Spirit to "lead them into all truth" (Jn. 14:1-3, 15-18, 25-29; 15:26-27; 16:1-16). Just before his ascension, he instructed them to wait in Jerusalem for the gift of the Spirit, which had been promised by the Old Testament prophets and reaffirmed by John the Baptist (Lk. 24:49; Ac. 1:4-5).

Waiting in Jerusalem

The disciples, including the apostles and Mary, Jesus' mother, went back to Jerusalem as Jesus had instructed. They spent the nights in an upper room (Ac. 1:12-14), while in the daytime they remained in the temple precincts (Lk. 24:53). During this time, they took their first significant action in the absence of their Lord who had returned to the Father. This action was to fill the vacancy left by Judas Iscariot so that the apostolic group could maintain the number twelve as the leaders of a new Israel (Mt. 27:3-5; Ac. 1:15-26).

On the basis of Ps. 41:9; 109:8 and 69:25, Peter led the group in their conclusion that Jesus, the epitome of righteous suffering, had been betrayed by a friend who must now be replaced (Ac. 1:15-17, 20-22). The apostles took seriously their role as eyewitnesses to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus (Mk. 3:14; Jn. 15:16-17; cf. Ac. 10:39-42). They also took seriously their roles as leaders of a new community, headed by twelve leaders, just as the ancient community of faith was headed by the twelve sons of Jacob. They chose two candidates, allowing the final choice to be decided by drawing lots, a means God used in ancient times for the selection of tribal territories (cf. Nu. 34:13; Jos. 14:2). The lot fell upon Matthias, and he became the twelfth apostle in place of Judas.⁴³

⁴³ Some interpreters have assumed that Paul was the twelfth apostle, but while his credentials as a special apostle can never be denied, he was never numbered with the twelve, since he had not been with Jesus during his public ministry (cf. Ac. 1:22; 10:41). Paul distinguishes himself from "the Twelve" (1 Co. 15:5), and Luke counts the

The Day of Pentecost

The Jewish feast of Pentecost, one of the annual pilgrim festivals (cf. Dt. 16:16), came fifty days after the Passover sabbath (Lv. 23:15-16). It was a day of celebration and thanksgiving for God's abundant gifts of food, especially the harvest. On this day, the waiting disciples in Jerusalem were baptized with the Holy Spirit (Ac. 2:1-4). Their miraculous speech in a variety of foreign languages drew a great deal of attention, and Peter, the apostle who had been described by Jesus as the "rock" of the church (Mt. 16:18), addressed the curious crowd. His sermon proclaimed that what the prophets had promised about the gift of the Spirit and the resurrection of Jesus from the dead had now been fulfilled (Ac. 2:14-36). He called for repentance and baptism, the very things that John the Baptist had preached, and he assured them that they would receive the gift of the Spirit, just as John had predicted (Ac. 2:37-39). Some 3000 responded with eagerness to Peter's message and accepted baptism in the name of Jesus Christ.

All these believers were Jews, even though many of them were from the Jewish Diaspora and had traveled to Jerusalem for the festival. Their baptism into the name of Jesus Christ signified that they accepted what Peter had proclaimed—Jesus was both Messiah and Lord (Ac. 2:36). Later, especially when the Christian message began to make inroads into Gentile territories, the baptismal wording began to follow along the lines of Jesus' commission in Matthew, that is, "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" (Mt. 28:19). This longer formula was more appropriate for non-Jews who had not grown up in the tradition of the Old Testament.

The Common Life

These earliest Christians in Jerusalem voluntarily decided to live a communal lifestyle (Ac. 2:44-47; 4:32-37). This generosity eventually produced two problems. One was the peer pressure to contribute to the common fund. Though such contributions were completely voluntary, the desire to "look good" in the eyes of everyone else caused one couple to lie about their contributions, a lie that ended in a death sentence from God (Ac. 5:1-11). Another problem was cultural favoritism. Hebrew Jews (those speaking Aramaic and maintaining the Hebrew culture) were given preferential treatment over Hellenistic Jews (those speaking Greek and adopting Greek culture). The twelve apostles learned the importance of delegating authority in such matters to ensure fairness (Ac. 6:1-7).

This practice of common life seems to have been confined to the earliest Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. No mention of it is made later in either the rest of the Book of Acts or the letters of the New Testament.

Twelve apart from Paul (Ac. 6:2).

Miracles and Opposition

Earlier, the apostles had been given authority by Jesus to perform miracles during his public ministry in Galilee (Mt. 10:1). Of course, this power was not available to them at whim, but on certain occasions they were able to demonstrate it effectively as God enabled them. The first recorded healing miracle in the early period of the church occurred at one of the temple gates, where Peter and John healed a man crippled from birth (Ac. 3:1-10). Peter used the occasion as an opportunity to address the crowd about Jesus. Most of them would have known of the recent crucifixion of Jesus, but Peter now declared that he was alive and actively working through his apostles (Ac. 3:11-26).

The apostles' boldness was not missed by the Jewish Sanhedrin. This tribunal, which had condemned Jesus to death and handed him over to the Romans, was alarmed that the excitement over the Galilean from Nazareth had not subsided. They jailed Peter and John, interrogating them sternly (Ac. 4:1-7). Peter, still acting as the spokesman for the group, fearlessly testified that Jesus was alive. Furthermore, he bluntly indicted the Sanhedrin for their part in his death (Ac. 4:8-12). So, the Sanhedrin threatened and released them (Ac. 4:13-22). Peter and John returned to their friends triumphantly (Ac. 4:23-31).

Later, the Sanhedrin jailed all the apostles (Ac. 5:17-18). To their chagrin, they found the jail empty in the morning, for an angel came and released Jesus' followers (Ac. 5:19-20). The Jewish rulers did not have far to search for them, however, for the apostles were boldly standing in the temple courts preaching about Jesus (Ac. 5:21-26). Once again, they interrogated them, and once again, Peter fearlessly declared that Jesus, who had been hung on the cross, was alive (Ac. 5:27-28). God had exalted Jesus as the Savior, and the message to all the Israelites was to repent (Ac. 5:29-32). In anger yet frustration due to the apostles' popularity, the Sanhedrin threatened them and had them flogged for their impudence (Ac. 5:33-40). Jesus' prediction that his disciples would suffer for his name was already being fulfilled (Jn. 15:20-25)! The apostles, for their part, were not discouraged. They continued to preach that Jesus was the Messiah (Ac. 5:41-42).

The First Martyr

Opposition against the followers of Jesus did not die out. One of the Christians, a young Hellenistic Jew⁴⁴ named Stephen, who attended a Greek speaking synagogue (Ac. 6:9), was powerfully used by God, both in performing miracles (Ac. 6:8) and in speaking about Jesus (Ac. 6:10). He had been selected by the apostles for

⁴⁴For further information about Hellenistic Jews, see F. Bruce, *Peter, Stephen, James & John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 50-52.

administrative leadership as well (Ac. 6:5). Other members of this Hellenistic synagogue were deeply jealous, however, and they indicted Stephen for blasphemy before the Sanhedrin (Ac. 6:11-15).

In front of the Sanhedrin, Stephen rehearsed his faith in the ancient history of the Israelites from Abraham to Moses to David (Ac. 7:1-47). At the climax of his testimony, however, he bluntly indicted the council members for resisting God, persecuting the prophets, and murdering Jesus (Ac. 7:51-53). His words were so inflammatory, the Sanhedrin and the crowd lynched Stephen by stoning him to death. At his death, Stephen had a vision of the Lord Jesus welcoming him at death, and this first Christian martyr prayed for the mob as they threw the stones that killed him (Ac. 7:54-60).

The Great Transition (Acts 8-12)

All the earliest Christians were Jewish, as was Jesus himself.⁴⁵ This ethnic exclusiveness natural arose from the fact that Christianity began within the context of Judaism and the Jewish communities in Palestine. The first group of Christians in Jerusalem met in Solomon's Colonnade in the temple precincts, a circumstance which reinforced their Jewish loyalties (3:11; 5:12). In spite of Jesus' mandate to the nations (Mt. 28:18-20), the earliest Christians made no attempt to reach beyond the boundaries of Jewishness. They had tensions with Jews who merely adopted non-Jewish behaviors (6:1-7), let alone non-Jews themselves. Their delay in this matter was due, no doubt, to the fact that Jesus had given a paradigm for evangelism that began with Jerusalem and Judea (1:8). Formerly, Jesus himself had forbidden them to cross Jewish racial boundaries during his public ministry (Mt. 10:5-6). Perhaps most important of all, the heritage of their own history made such racial barriers extremely difficult to break. The careful racial restrictions in the Torah, the aftermath of the exile to foreign lands, the Greek and Roman oppression of the post-exilic community, and the oral tradition of the elders all combined to produce acute discomfort for any close contact with outsiders. Yet, Jesus' command had been to go to the nations of the world. The transition from a Jewish church to an international one was necessary, and God broke down their natural reluctance by circumstances beyond their control.

The First Martyr

Within this larger body of Jerusalem Christians were two sub-groups described by Luke as *Hebraioi* (= Hebrews) and *Hellenistai* (= Hellenists). Though both

⁴⁵The term "Jewish," when used in this way, is an ethnic term. In more modern times, many Jews use the term in only a cultural or religious way, but in the first century, racial purity was a major concern of Jews, cf. J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, trans. F. & C. Cave (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) 271ff.

groups were Jewish, the differences between them lay in language, worship and culture. The Hebrews spoke Aramaic, while the Hellenists spoke Greek. The Hebrews worshiped in their own synagogues, while the Hellenists attended synagogues apart. The Hebrews made a special point to preserve Palestinian ways, while the Hellenists, with long-standing roots in the Greco-Roman world, had absorbed much of Greek culture. It is in this context that we meet Stephen, a young Christian Hellenist in the Jerusalem church whose martyrdom was the first incident in an escalating persecution against the earliest Christians (8:2).

Stephen was as a Christian with extraordinary spiritual gifts (Ac. 6:8). However, his boldness for the Christian message brought him into sharp conflict with members of a certain Hellenist synagogue, a synagogue he probably attended before and certainly after his conversion to Christ (6:9-10).⁴⁶ Stephen was a “theologian” in his own right, and he introduced to the synagogue an interpretation that the coming of Jesus, the Messiah, abrogated the Mosaic customs and meant the cessation of sacrificial worship (Ac. 6:11-14; 7:48-50). Furthermore, if the accusations of his opponents have any merit, he may have repeated to them Jesus’ teaching in the Olivet Discourse that the temple would be destroyed (Ac. 6:14b; cf. Mt. 24:2; Lk. 21:6). This interpretation was taken to be blasphemy, and Stephen was brought to a heresy trial before the Sanhedrin.

At his trial, Stephen was given the opportunity to defend himself. His defense was a recollection of Israelite history, somewhat after the form of the historical Psalms (i.e., 78, 105, 106). In his speech, Stephen developed two themes. The first concerned the rejection of God's spokesmen. From ancient times, God had revealed himself to various ancestors and spiritual leaders of the Israelite people—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph (Ac. 7:2-16), Moses and Aaron (Ac. 7:17-43), Joshua (Ac. 7:44-45a), David (Ac. 7:45b-46), Solomon (Ac. 7:47) and the prophets (Ac. 7:52). All of these leaders the people consistently rejected. The sons of Jacob rejected Joseph, selling him into slavery (Ac. 7:9). They began their rejection of Moses while he was still young (Ac. 7:24-28, 35a). Later, when he was older and had led them to Mt. Sinai, they rejected him again, turning their hearts back toward Egypt (Ac. 7:39-40). In fact, the whole history of Israel was one long story of rejecting God's spokespersons (Ac. 7:51-52a, 53). Their ultimate rebellion was against Christ, the Righteous One, whom they betrayed and murdered (Ac. 7:52b).

The second theme of Stephen's defense concerned the temple. The temple as a permanent shrine for God, Stephen argued, was highly over-valued by the Jewish

⁴⁶It is not entirely clear in the Greek text whether Luke intends one or more than one synagogue, but in any case, it is clear that the main congregation was composed of Hellenist Jews of Diaspora Judaism, both from Africa and Asia Minor. Later in the story it will become significant that some of these Jews were from Cilicia, for one of them turns out to be Saul of Tarsus, Cilicia.

community. In fact, from the very first God's purpose for his people was that they live as pilgrims without a permanent shrine for God. Abraham was called to a pilgrim life (Ac. 7:2-3), and he traveled from the land of the Chaldeans to Haran and then to Canaan (Ac. 7:4). Abraham was given no land inheritance, though an inheritance was promised to his descendants (Ac. 7:5). Jacob and his sons migrated to Egypt in the time of Joseph (Ac. 7:14-15), and even after they died, their remains were moved yet again (Ac. 7:16). Moses lived as a foreigner in a strange land (Ac. 7:29). Later, he led the Israelites into the desert, where again they were pilgrims (Ac. 7:36). The ancient Tent of Meeting was a symbol of this pilgrim life (Ac. 7:44-45). Though Solomon, upon the wishes of his father David, built a permanent temple for God (Ac. 7:46-47), even he conceded that God could not be confined to any temple (Ac. 7:48-50; cf. Is. 66:1-2; 2 Chr. 6:18). Thus, to speak about the abrogation of temple worship could hardly be blasphemy or sacrilege against God. God was independent of any human structure!

Stephen's defense, especially his biting indictment at the close (Ac. 7:51-53), only served to infuriate his opponents. They lynched him by stoning him to death (Ac. 7:54, 57-58a). Only at the end does Luke tell us that one of Stephen's primary opponents was a zealous young Pharisee named Saul of Cilicia (Ac. 7:58b; 8:1a; 22:20). Stephen's lynching was the beginning of a terrible wave of persecutions and executions leveled by Saul against the Christians (Ac. 8:1b-3; 22:2-5; 26:9-11).

Just before he died, Stephen had a vision of the risen Christ beckoning him home to the heavens (Ac. 7:55-56). He died praying for the forgiveness of his antagonists (Ac. 7:59-60). He was buried by his friends, while the apostles were compelled to flee Jerusalem in order to save their lives. The Sanhedrin had discovered a particularly thorough and dedicated inquisitor in Saul (8:3). He had consented to the lynching of Stephen (7:58b; cf. 22:20), and now he was determined to destroy this new movement called "The Way" (9:1-2; cf. 22:4-5; 26:9-11; Ga. 1:13-14; Phil. 3:6; 1 Ti. 1:13a).

The Samaritan Mission

The tight-knit Jerusalem church began to break up. To be sure, many Christians stayed in Jerusalem, but many also left. Wherever they went, they shared the good news about Jesus (8:4), though they restricted their preaching to Jews only (11:19). In his final words, Jesus had said that his disciples should be his witnesses, not only in Jerusalem and Judea, but also in Samaria. Stephen's friend, the Jewish-Hellenist Philip, made the first calculated break from the strictly Jewish circle by going to a Samaritan town to preach (8:4-5). Many believed his message (8:6-8, 12), and it is not unlikely that some of them may have known of Jesus from the testimony of the Samaritan woman at Sychar who had met Jesus (Jn. 4:39-42). On another

occasion, it may be remembered that Jesus had healed a Samaritan leper (Lk. 17:15-16).

The news that Samaritans were becoming Christians and had received Christian baptism must have startled the apostles. Could this be? Jewish and Samaritan relations had been bitter for a long time. Centuries earlier when the Samaritans had attempted to assist in the rebuilding the temple, they had been rebuffed abruptly by Zerubbabel (cf. Ezra 4:1-5). Over the succeeding years, the rift continued to widen.⁴⁷ So, the Jerusalem church sent Peter and John as an investigative team (8:14). After the two apostles arrived, the Samaritans received the gift of the Spirit as a confirmation that this mission had God's approval (8:15-17).⁴⁸ Peter and John then joined Philip in the Samaritan mission, and many other Samaritan towns, also, became preaching points. With full openness to this new direction God had confirmed, Philip had no hesitation in sharing the story of Jesus with an Ethiopian proselyte (8:26ff.). The avenue beyond the Jewish circle for the message of Jesus now lay wide open!

The Conversion and Call of Saul

Meanwhile, the Sanhedrin's grand inquisitor, Saul, directed his attention to Jewish communities beyond Jerusalem and Judea. If the Christians were spreading their message elsewhere, Saul intended to follow them with vigor. On one of his trips to extradite Jewish Christians for trial, Saul had a vision of the resurrected Jesus near Damascus (9:3-7; 22:6-11; 1 Co. 9:1). To the voice from the heavens that could only have been God, Saul asked, "Who are you, Lord?" His shock could not have been greater when he heard the voice say, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting" (9:4-5).

In this vision, not only was Saul convinced that Jesus was the Messiah, he also was called to be a missionary to the non-Jews (26:12-18; cf. 9:15-16; Ga. 1:15-17). Later, he would describe this experience as the moment when he was "apprehended by Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:12). In Damascus, Saul was baptized as a Christian (9:10-19), and he immediately changed from grand inquisitor to defender of the faith (9:20-30).

⁴⁷ In 128 BC, John Hyrcanus of Jerusalem had destroyed the Samaritan sanctuary on Mt. Gerizim, and more recently, some Samaritans in AD 6 or 7 had scattered bones in the Jerusalem temple during Passover, a deliberate desecration, cf. H. Williamson, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1992), pp. 726-727.

⁴⁸ The unique circumstance in which the Holy Spirit was withheld from the Samaritans until the arrival of the Jerusalem delegation is probably significant. Had it been otherwise, the Jerusalem church would have had no certain assurance that the Samaritan mission was of God. Both here and in the later incident at the gentile Cornelius' home, the gift of the Spirit, accompanied by some obvious external sign (such as tongues or prophecy), was important to convince the Jerusalem delegation that God had accepted non-Jews (cf. 10:45-46).

Peter's Leadership in the Gentile Mission

With Saul now on the side of the Christians, the intensity of persecution eased (9:31). Peter openly traveled throughout the Jewish communities up the Palestinian seacoast, and during his travels, two notable miracles attested to God's continuing presence, the healing of Aenas and the raising of Dorcas from the dead (9:32-43).

Luke, the historian who wrote Acts, gives a most complete account of an incident in Peter's ministry that was to have astounding repercussions for all of history. If Peter had been given the "keys" to the kingdom of heaven (Mt. 16:19), he must surely have used them on this occasion! While in coastal Joppa, Peter had a vision in which he was commanded by God to kill and eat food forbidden by the law of Moses (10:9-23; cf. Lv. 11). This vision, in which he was sternly warned not to call unclean what God had cleansed, enabled him to overcome his natural reluctance to enter a non-Jewish home for food and fellowship (10:23b-33). While there, Peter shared with a Roman military officer the story of Jesus, and just as at Samaria, God gave them the gift of the Spirit with an external sign of authenticity (10:34-46). Overwhelmed by this event, Peter ordered that these new believers be given Christian baptism (10:47-48).

When he arrived back at Jerusalem, however, Peter's boldness was criticized (11:1-3). It took a careful explanation before the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were ready to accept gentile believers (11:4-18). Once they did, however, the door now was open to a wider gentile mission. The Samaritan mission, the conversion and call of Saul, and the incident at the house of Cornelius combined to move the Christians from Jewish exclusiveness to an international vision.

In no place was this international cause more apparent than in Syrian Antioch, the third largest city of the Roman Empire. Here, Christians who had scattered during the persecution began to share the story of Jesus with Greeks (11:19-21). The church in Antioch developed into a multi-cultural, multi-racial church (13:1). Once again, the Jerusalem church felt compelled to send an investigative delegation. This time, they chose Barnabas, a Cypriot Jew who was distinguished by his generosity and diplomacy (11:22; 4:36-37; 9:26-28). Barnabas confirmed that the mission to Greeks in Antioch was undoubtedly a work of God (11:22-24). He brought Saul to Antioch, probably due to his knowledge that Saul felt God's call to preach to gentiles (11:25-26a). Here at the Antioch church, a nickname for the followers of Jesus was first popularized, and it has become the most famous name of all, the name "Christians" (11:26b).

More Persecution

While the defection of Paul from Judaism to Christianity temporarily stymied the opposition, it was not long before persecution again rose with renewed vigor.

This time, Herod Agrippa I attacked the church, probably in his efforts to win and retain the favor of his Jewish constituency. Now there was a second martyrdom, this time one of the twelve apostles, James (12:1-2). Peter then was seized and imprisoned during Passover week (12:3-5). On the night before Peter's trial, an angel miraculously released him from the jail, and Peter escaped (12:6-19).

During this same period, Barnabas and Saul served as leaders of a relief mission between the Antioch Church and the Jerusalem Church, since the Roman world was under famine (11:27-30; 12:25; cf. Ga. 2:1). They visited Jerusalem and returned to Antioch. Meanwhile, Herod Agrippa I died under God's judgment, and the Christian message continued to spread (12:21-24).

The Gentile Mission (Acts 13:1--21:17)

The great transition from an exclusively Jewish church to an interracial church paved the way for an international mission to the Roman world. If Jesus had said that the gospel should be preached to "all the nations," it was now time to take active steps toward fulfilling this commission. The greatest missionary of the early church unquestionably was Saul of Tarsus, also called Paul.⁴⁹ Commissioned years earlier (26:17-18; cf. 9:15), Paul was sent out by the Antioch church with its multi-racial leadership and congregational mix of Jewish and non-Jewish Christians (13:1-3).

The First Great Missions Tour

On the first missions tour, Paul accompanied Barnabas, who at the first was the apparent leader, though this was to change early on.⁵⁰ They also took John Mark, Barnabas' cousin (Col. 4:10). The group traveled to Cyprus, Barnabas' home (cf. 4:36), where they preached in the Jewish synagogues (13:4-5). At Paphos, on the western side of the island, they encountered a sorcerer, who attempted to hinder their work. Paul, however, was directed by the Holy Spirit to pronounce a curse upon him, and Elymas was blinded as a judgment because of his opposition (13:6-12). From Cyprus, the group sailed to the mainland of Asia Minor, the southern part of modern Turkey. Here, John Mark left them and returned to Jerusalem, where his mother owned a home (13:13; cf. 12:12).

⁴⁹ It was quite common for Jews who lived outside of Palestine to have two names, one Jewish and the other Greek. As a Roman citizen (Ac. 16:37-38), Paul would have had three names, a forename (*praenomen*), a family name (*nomen gentile*) and an additional name (*cognomen*), in addition to his Jewish name. Only his *cognomen*, Paulos, is known. Paul's Jewish name was Saul, probably in honor of his great ancestor, Israel's first king (1 Sa. 9-10). Both were Benjamites (cf. Phil. 3:5), cf. F. Bruce, *Paul Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), p. 38.

⁵⁰ It is common in New Testament Greek to list the prominent member of a party first, and Barnabas is so mentioned twice (13:2, 7). However, after the incident with Elymas the sorcerer, Luke begins listing Paul first, thus suggesting a shift in leadership (13:13, 42-43, 46, etc.).

In Asia Minor Paul and his group established four important churches in major cities. The first was in Pisidian Antioch.⁵¹ Luke gives his readers an account of Paul's sermon in the synagogue, where he rehearsed the history of the exodus, the invasion of Canaan, the tribal league, and the rise of David (13:16-25). God's promises to David resulted in the birth of Jesus, Paul preached. The death of Jesus in Jerusalem and his resurrection on Easter was the "good news." What God had promised he had now fulfilled (13:26-41)! In Jesus, David's descendant, was the forgiveness of sins!

Paul's sermon sparked intense interest, though the popularity of the apostles created jealousy in the synagogue leaders, who began to oppose them. So, Paul turned to the non-Jews and preached the same good news. Many of them became Christians (13:42-49). Eventually, however, their opposers succeeded in driving Paul and his companions from the region (13:50-52).

Traveling inland, Paul and the group arrived at Iconium in Lycaonia. Once more, Paul and Barnabas began preaching in the synagogue, and as before, they also preached to non-Jews. Many became Christians here, too (14:1). However, opposition arose, and the group was nearly stoned (14:2-5). They were forced to flee to the cities of Lystra and Derbe (14:6-7). At Lystra, Paul was used by God to heal a cripple, and the citizens decided Paul and Barnabas must be the gods Zeus (Jupiter) and Hermes (Mercury). The apostles vehemently disclaimed this honor, and when some travelers from Pisidian Antioch and Iconium arrived to speak out against Paul and his group, the crowd turned against them (14:8-19). Paul was stoned and left outside the city for dead (cf. 2 Co. 11:25). He revived, and the next day he left with Barnabas for Derbe, where another nucleus of believers was established (14:21a).

Finally, the apostles went back through the cities to ordain leaders to carry on the work (14:21b-23). From Attalia, they sailed back to Syrian Antioch, their sending church (14:24-28).

The First Ecumenical Council

While the first missionary efforts to the non-Jews had been successful, and while progress toward an international church had made important strides, the Christians now faced their first significant theological challenge. This challenge came from the Jewish sector of the Judean church where some teachers held the position that one must become a Jew in order to become a Christian (15:1, 5).⁵² The fact that Gentile converts to the Christian message had not come through the door of Judaism made many Jewish Christians uncomfortable. Paul and Barnabas, for their part, were quite prepared to defend the legitimacy of their new converts in Asia

⁵¹ Not to be confused with Syrian Antioch, where the group began their trip.

⁵² Circumcision was the religious symbol of accepting the faith of Judaism.

Minor (15:2a).

Eventually, a council was convened in Jerusalem to address this issue, a council which ever since has been loosely called “the first ecumenical council” (15:3-4).⁵³ After considerable discussion, during which Paul and Barnabas recounted their experiences in Asia Minor, and Peter rehearsed his experience at Cornelius' home, the council reached a decision (15:6-12). The non-Jews were not required to submit to circumcision, though they were counseled concerning certain issues which were especially sensitive to their Jewish Christian brothers and sisters (15:13-21). An encyclical was duly composed to this effect, and a delegation, which included Paul and Barnabas along with others, was chosen to carry it to the northern churches (15:22-34).

The Second Great Missions Tour

After spending some time in Antioch, Paul felt that he and Barnabas should return to their newly established churches in Asia Minor (15:35-36). Barnabas wanted John Mark to go along as well, but Paul was firm—he would not have John Mark. In the end, Barnabas took John Mark and went to Cyprus, while Paul took Silas and went to Asia Minor (15:37-41). On the surface, it might appear that Paul was overly stubborn in this matter. However, as would become apparent shortly, he sought a younger companion who could be trained as his personal representative. Such a person needed to show unswerving loyalty, and Paul found just such a person at Lystra, a young Christian named Timothy (16:1-5; cf. Phil. 2:20-22). So, Paul and Silas visited Derbe, Lystra and Iconium, reading to them the encyclical composed by the apostles in Jerusalem. At Lystra, Timothy joined the team.

After visiting the congregations in Asia Minor, Paul then had to decide where to go next. He traveled westward as far as the Aegean coastline, but his inclination was to turn back to the northeast (Bithynia). Here, God intervened in a vision to show Paul that he should cross the Aegean to the Grecian mainland (16:6-10), a redirection that forever changed the course of world history.

In Greece, Paul and his company would establish five churches, three in the province of Macedonia and two in the province of Achaia. The first of these churches began in Macedonian Philippi at a women's prayer group, where Paul exorcised a demon from a slave fortune-teller (16:11-18). This deliverance was not appreciated by her owners, who used her to make money, so they incited a riot against Paul and Silas (16:19-24). The missionaries were peremptorily flogged and jailed. In the night, however, a tremendous earthquake opened the jail doors and loosed the prisoners. In the aftermath, the jailer was converted along with his entire

⁵³ Not to be confused with the Council of Nicea in AD 325.

family (16:25-34). When the magistrates came to release the prisoners, Paul demanded a public apology. After all, he was a Roman citizen, and it was illegal to flog a Roman citizen without due process of law (16:35-40).

From Philippi, the missionaries went down the coast to Thessalonica. Once more beginning in the synagogue, Paul explained from the Hebrew Bible the convergence of prophecies pointing to the death and resurrection of Jesus. Converts came from both the Jewish and non-Jewish communities, but stiff opposition forced Paul and his company to move on for safety's sake (17:1-10). A third Christian congregation was planted in Berea, a Macedonian city near Thessalonica, and as before, severe opposition arose (17:10-15).

Moving from Macedonia to Achaia, on the Peloponnesus, Paul stopped at Athens, where he discoursed with the intellectuals about the nature of God. In his discussion, Paul not only preached from the Hebrew Bible but also demonstrated his knowledge of literature by quoting from classical poetry (17:28).⁵⁴ His reception was not violent, as it had been in Asia Minor and Macedonia, yet his converts were few (17:16-34). Still, a nucleus of believers were won with which to begin a Christian church.

Also in the province of Achaia was the city of Corinth, where Paul made a lengthy stay of a year and a half. While there, he resorted to his trade as a tent weaver in order to support himself (18:2-3). Here, he preached in the local synagogue, and later, he taught out of a home (18:4-11). As before, there were efforts to silence the message about Jesus. The synagogue ruler, who had become a Christian, was publicly mobbed (18:12-17). Finally, Paul left Greece and sailed back toward the east (18:18). Landing on the coast of Asia Minor, he stopped briefly in Ephesus before returning to Syrian Antioch (18:19-22).

The Third Great Missions Tour

Paul did not stay long at Antioch before setting out once more to visit the congregations he had previously established (18:23). Just as he had promised (18:20-21), he returned to Ephesus, where he encountered a Baptist group who knew of John's baptism but were imperfectly informed about Jesus.⁵⁵ After Paul explained to them more about Jesus, they accepted Christian baptism and were confirmed by the gift of the Spirit (19:1-7). At Ephesus, Paul spent three months preaching in the local synagogue, and later, he spent two years teaching in the lecture hall of Tyrannus (19:8-10). Miracles attended his ministry, and many more became Christians (19:11-

⁵⁴ His quotations were from Epimenides, a Cretan poet, and Aratus, a Cilician poet, cf. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts [NICNT]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 359-360.

⁵⁵ There is some uncertainty about whether these twelve men were Christians. Luke calls them "disciples" (19:1), but obviously they had not yet received Christian baptism or the Spirit.

20).

While at Ephesus, Paul made a firm decision to revisit Jerusalem, after which he wanted to reach further west by going to Rome (19:21). This intention, in fact, would be fulfilled, but hardly in the way Paul first envisioned it!

Shortly, a tremendous resistance to Paul arose in Ephesus, and he was nearly lynched in the amphitheater (19:23-41). It was felt that he should leave immediately, so the Christians sent him off to Macedonia (20:1). Eventually, he arrived in southern Greece, where he stayed for three months (20:2-3a). After traveling back through Macedonia, he sailed to Troas, the principal seaport of Asia Minor. Paul preached there at length one evening, and he performed a notable miracle in which a young man was raised from the dead (20:4-12). Sailing further south down the coast, Paul was able to meet briefly with the leaders of the Ephesian church, though he was intent on reaching Jerusalem as quickly as possible (20:13-38). In every church he visited, the warning was given by the Spirit that his trip to Jerusalem would end in imprisonment (20:22-24). Somehow, Paul seemed to sense that his future would prevent him from ever seeing his friends again, and he said as much (20:25, 38). Nevertheless, his decision to go to Jerusalem was firm, even though Christians along the way urged him to change his mind (21:1-6, 10-14). At last, Paul and his friends arrived in Jerusalem (21:17).

Paul's Arrest and Appeal to Caesar (Acts 21:18--28:31)

As noted earlier, Paul was determined to go to Jerusalem in spite of the several warnings he received against it. His decision apparently was made while on his third missions tour, during which he composed the Roman letter. His task in Jerusalem was to deliver the relief fund which he had organized and collected from the Gentile churches in Asia, Macedonia and Achaia (1 Co. 16:1-4; 2 Co. 8-9; Ro. 15:25-28). As he himself said, he felt the Gentile churches owed their material blessings to the Jewish church, since the Jewish spiritual blessings had been shared with the Gentiles through the gospel.

Paul's Arrest in Jerusalem

Upon arriving in Palestine, Paul immediately was confronted by a delegation from the Jerusalem church, including James (21:17-19). By this time, the Jewish church had grown quite large. However, if the Gentiles had been exempted from following Jewish culture when they became Christians, the Jews themselves were content to remain within their Jewish culture after they became Christians (21:20). The earlier Jerusalem council on circumcision and its conclusion notwithstanding, many Jewish Christians were still troubled by the Gentile mission. In particular, they had heard rumors that Paul was against the Torah, even discouraging Jews from

obeying it (21:21). Of course, this rumor was not true (16:3; 18:18), and to correct it, James and the Jerusalem delegation requested Paul to participate in a Jewish temple ritual (21:22-26).⁵⁶

It was during the performance of this ritual that Paul was observed by some non-Christian Jews who were visiting from Asia. Thinking he had brought a Greek into the Jewish area of the temple, which in Jewish law would have been desecration,⁵⁷ they raised an outcry against him, and started a riot. Paul was saved from lynching by Roman soldiers from the Antonia Fortress, which was adjacent to the temple grounds (21:27-36).

Paul's Five Defenses

From the time of his arrest until his hearing in Rome, Paul made five defenses of his integrity and innocence concerning the charges leveled against him. He had some advantages in that he was a Roman citizen; he could not be punished without a proper trial. Taking advantage of the great crowd in the temple courtyard, he requested permission from the tribune to address them. In their native vernacular of Aramaic, Paul stood on the steps leading into the Antonia Fortress and explained his Jewish background, his conversion, and his divine call to the Gentile mission (21:37-22:21). Although the crowd listened at first, when they found that Paul was a Christian, they began to demonstrate. He was spared flogging only when the tribune discovered he was a Roman citizen (22:22-29).

Paul's second defense was before the Sanhedrin, where the tribune brought him in order to find out what charges might be forthcoming. Here, Paul claimed allegiance to the Pharisaic party, and his claim divided the Sanhedrin, which was composed of both Pharisees and Sadducees, the former defending Paul and the latter accusing him. Once more, to avoid a lynching, the tribune took Paul into custody (22:30--23:10). Deciding that the circumstance was too volatile to keep him in Jerusalem, the tribune made arrangements to take Paul to the Roman fortress at Caesarea on the north coast, where the Judean procurator resided (23:12-35).

Here, Paul gave his third defense, this time before Felix, the Roman procurator. The high priest and a delegation from Jerusalem served as the prosecution in the hearing, accusing Paul of insurrection and desecration (24:1-9). Paul, when it was his turn, disclaimed their general accusations, admitting only to the charge that he was a Christian who had come to Jerusalem to bring a relief offering for the poor (24:10-21). The hearing ended without resolution, and Paul was

⁵⁶ The ritual was a purification rite associated with a temporary Nazarite vow (cf. Nu. 6).

⁵⁷ In 1871, archaeologists uncovered an actual inscription of the second temple which forbade non-Jews from entering the Jewish court at the penalty of death, cf. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*, 5th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960) 93.

incarcerated in the barracks but given limited freedom (24:22-23). He remained under arrest for two years (24:24-27).

Festus succeeded Felix as procurator during Paul's incarceration, a shift in administration that provided Paul with the opportunity for yet a fourth defense. Once more, a hearing was called with temple priests and leaders from Jerusalem serving as the prosecution, and as before, the hearing reached no resolution (25:1-8). However, when Festus suggested that the actual trial be moved back to Jerusalem, Paul exercised his right as a Roman citizen to appear directly to Caesar in Rome (25:9-12). While arrangements were being made to send him to Rome, Paul had opportunity to give his fifth defense, this time to Herod Agrippa II, king of a small province to the north of Galilee who had arrived in Caesarea to pay his respects to the new procurator (25:13-22). As before, Paul reviewed his life in Judaism, his former persecution of Christians, his conversion, and his call to the Gentile mission (25:23--26:32).

When Paul's trip to Rome had been arranged, he sailed under armed guard toward the west (27:1-8). The voyage ended in a disaster, however, and Paul and the others, 276 in all, were shipwrecked on the island of Malta (27:9--28:10). At last, they arrived in Rome where Paul was allowed to live under house arrest until his imperial hearing (28:11-16). While under house arrest, Paul was able to offer his message to the Jewish community in Rome (28:17-29). For two years, Paul remained under house arrest (28:30-31), using every opportunity to preach about Jesus Christ. Luke's narrative breaks off with Paul still awaiting his hearing before Caesar, and there is considerable scholarly debate about the outcome of the imperial trial.⁵⁸ On the other hand, the paradigmatic statement of Jesus before his ascension was surely fulfilled: the gospel had spread from Jerusalem to Samaria, Judea, and now, the very capital of the civilized world, Rome (1:8).

Christians and the Roman Government

The Roman Empire provided significant advantages for the spread of the Christian message. First, the *pax Romana* (Roman peace) meant that travel throughout the empire would not be hindered by wars or border patrols. The Roman system of roads created a network connecting the major cities, and they were maintained in good repair. The Greek language was universally used, most countries being at least bilingual, speaking Greek and their native dialect. The Hebrew Bible already had been translated into Greek before the Christian era,⁵⁹ and of course,

⁵⁸ Some scholars feel that he was probably released and perhaps continued missionary work to the west in Spain. Others conclude that he was condemned and executed. Only fragmented information is available from the early church, and the chronology of Paul's life, about which there is continuing debate, bears directly upon the question.

⁵⁹The Greek version of the Hebrew Bible is called the Septuagint.

Christian writings were also in Greek. Thus, it comes as no surprise to hear Paul urging Christians to be in submission to the Roman government, paying taxes and obeying the laws (Ro. 13:1-7). Paul himself testified that he was willing to submit to Roman authority, even to the point of execution (Ac. 25:10-11).

Just as important as the advantages of Roman culture was the fact that Christianity was perceived by the Romans to be a sect of Judaism. Judaism was a legal religion in the Roman Empire, and so long as Christianity existed under its wing, there would be no imperial resistance.⁶⁰ Peter, like Paul, advocated submission to Roman authority (1 Pe. 2:13-17). Only after Christianity was distinguished from Judaism and only after the imperial cult of emperor worship was compulsory would Christians be compelled to view Rome in an entirely negative way (i.e., the Book of Revelation).

The Church After Paul's Martyrdom

After Paul's arrest and his trip to Rome near the end of the Book of Acts, there are no further narratives of early church events in the Bible. Thus, our knowledge of the apostolic church to the end of the first century depends upon what can be gleaned from the New Testament letters, what can be found in non-canonical documents of Christianity, and what exists in historical sources external to Christianity.

The deaths of the apostles began with James bar Zebedee (Ac. 12:2). It is generally agreed, based upon early Christian tradition, that both Peter and Paul were martyred in Rome in the 60s under Caesar Nero. According to Eusebius (a Christian historian of the 4th century), the other apostles and disciples scattered "over the whole world, [and] preached the gospel everywhere."⁶¹ Also according to Christian tradition, all the apostles save John were martyred.

Paul's Thirteen Letters

Thirteen documents in the New Testament bear the name of Paul. They range from the short personal note to Philemon, which would have fit on a single papyrus sheet, to the lengthy theological treatise to the Romans. The English Bible has the disadvantage of arranging these letters according to length, a feature which in turn scrambles them as far as chronology is concerned. With respect to chronology,

⁶⁰ This situation would drastically change, of course, after the great fire in Rome in AD 64 (which was blamed on the Christians), and later, the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. When a clear demarcation between the Jews and the Christians became evident, avenues were opened up for the possibility of imperial persecution. For the time being, however, Christianity and Judaism were linked in the popular mind, and this was to the advantage of the Christians.

⁶¹ This missionary activity is implied much earlier in the title of the Christian document *The Didache* (c. AD 110), which in its fuller form reads, "The Lord's teaching to the Heathen by the Twelve Apostles."

Paul's correspondence can be divided into four major categories: second tour letters, third tour letters, prison letters and pastoral letters. While there is ongoing discussion among biblical scholars about the dating and precise order of his letters, a common chronology is as follows:

Second Tour Letters	Prison Letters
Galatians	Colossians and Philemon
1 & 2 Thessalonians	Ephesians
	Philippians
Third Tour Letters	Pastoral Letters
1 & 2 Corinthians	1 & 2 Timothy
Romans	Titus

Paul's letters were hardly conventional. Most of them were correctives to one or more misconceptions which threatened the purity of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Together, they provide us with the earliest data concerning Christianity's first generation. If the Book of Acts by Luke provides us with a history of the actions of the earliest Christians, Paul's letters provide us with a look at the thought processes of the earliest Christians. When Christianity moved beyond the Jewish community to the gentiles, it confronted the pluralism of a religious world with many competing traditions. Paul's letters reflect this diversity.

Paul's Second Tour Letters (Galatians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians)

The Galatian Letter

Galatians may well have been the first letter Paul wrote.⁶² The Galatian churches, if we are to identify them with the congregations in south Galatia, were Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe, the churches Paul planted on his first missions tour. The problem in Galatia was quite similar to the problem addressed at the first ecumenical council in Jerusalem (Ac. 15), that is, the Christian's relationship to the law of Moses. Some time after Paul was in Galatia, an aggressive teaching arose which demanded that the Galatian Christians submit to circumcision, the sign of taking up the yoke of Torah (5:1-4; 6:12-13). Of course, circumcision was only

⁶²There is considerable debate about the dating of the Galatian letter. I have followed the chronology which puts it first, though the reader should be aware that many scholars put it among the third tour letters, cf. D. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1970) 450-465.

the beginning. To accept the yoke of Torah through circumcision meant to accept the full range of the law's demands (3:10; 5:3). Even more serious, it meant lapsing into a form of salvation based upon works rather than upon grace and faith (2:15-16; 3:11-14). Paul wrote that the ones who promoted this theology were demanding that gentile Christians "Judaize," that is, to live like Jews (2:14).

In confronting this problem, Paul was scathingly blunt. He said the Galatians were stupid to listen to such a message (3:1). To turn back to the law of Moses in order to be saved was to advocate "another gospel" (1:6-7), and Paul called down curses upon anyone who taught such a thing (1:8-9). At one point, he even said that if they wanted to continue this agitation about circumcision, he hoped the circumcising knife would slip (5:12)! The Judaizers were "false brothers" who "infiltrated" the Christian ranks (2:4; 4:17; 6:12-13).

Of course, Paul was not trying to say that the law had no value. The law of Moses certainly had a divine purpose. It performed a moral function in that it identified sin (3:19a, 22). However, the law was a temporary expedient until the coming of the Messiah (3:19b, 23-25; 4:1-7). The Old Testament paradigm for salvation by faith was Abraham, who was justified by faith before the law was even given (3:6-9; 4:15-18). In itself, the law could not provide salvation (2:16; 3:11; 4:9-11). If it could have done so, the coming of the Messiah would have been altogether unnecessary (2:21). Thus, to submit to circumcision in order to be saved was tantamount to rejecting Christ (5:2). In an extended metaphor of slavery and freedom, Paul contrasted law and grace. The law, standing alone, was slavery, while salvation by grace through Christ was freedom (4:22-31). So, Paul called for the Galatians to stand firm in their freedom (5:1, 13). Circumcision had no continuing religious value (5:6; 6:15).

The First Thessalonian Letter

The theological problem at Thessalonica, Macedonia was altogether different than the one in Galatia. Paul's time in Thessalonica had been short, so his opportunity for Christian instruction had been limited (Ac. 17:1-10a). Timothy and Silas stayed behind in Berea (Ac. 17:14-15), and when they rejoined Paul at Corinth, they brought disturbing news (Ac. 18:1-5). The new Christians at Thessalonica had been left to face a barrage of criticism about Paul. Some of the believers had experienced severe persecution from outsiders. To make matters worse, apparently some of the believers had died, a fate that the Christians did not expect in view of the expected soon return of Christ.

Paul addressed these concerns in his first letter. He defended his evangelistic motives (2:3-6, 10), calling attention to his gentleness and pastoral care (2:7-8, 10). His readers could testify with certainty that he had not come to them in order to trick

them out of their money, for he received nothing from them, preferring instead to work to support himself (2:9). As to persecution from those who opposed the Christian message, Paul said that this sort of thing was to be expected. Even the Christians in Judea had suffered as had Christ himself (2:14-16), so no one was exempt (3:3-4).

Concerning the believers who had died, Paul wrote that they would not miss out on the return of Christ at the end. In fact, when Christ returned, those who died as Christians would be resurrected first and joined to the entire body of living Christians. Then, the whole church would rise to meet the descending Lord, welcoming him to the earth, and they would never have to leave his presence (4:13-18).⁶³ As to when this event would be, sooner or later, no one knew. The return of the Lord would be at an unknown time, and it would come like a thief upon those who were not ready for it (5:1-3). However, for Christians who were watching, the day of Christ's return would be welcomed as the time of final triumph (5:4-9). So, whether one was alive or deceased made no difference so long as that person was a believer (5:10-11).

The Second Thessalonian Letter

The second letter to the Thessalonians seems to have been written not long after the first one, possibly within a few months. Some of Paul's teaching in the first letter had raised questions, and Paul felt that he needed to clarify himself.⁶⁴ The Thessalonians were making three inappropriate responses to their continued distress. First, judging from Paul's comments, some believers questioned God's justice in view of the ongoing persecution (1:5-10). Second, probably due to the severity of the persecution (1:4), others had concluded that the time of Christ's return for his church was to be expected immediately (2:1-2).⁶⁵ Third, some believers had stopped working, possibly because they felt that Jesus might return at any moment (3:6-15). Such behavior put a considerable strain on the rest of the Christian community, who felt obliged to support them.

In addressing these misconceptions, Paul wrote that God's justice would be demonstrated fully at the end, though not necessarily in the intermediate period before the end (1:5-10). As to the notion that the day of Christ's return for his church

⁶³Paul uses a technical term when he speaks of the church rising to "meet" Christ. The word *apantesis* (= a meeting) refers to the ancient civic custom of publicly welcoming important visitors to one's city. In this case, of course, the body of Christians will welcome Christ to the earth at his return.

⁶⁴How Paul knew of this and other problems is unknown. He only says, "We hear...." (3:11).

⁶⁵The expression "day of the Lord" is an Old Testament phrase pointing to the judgments of God upon the world at the close of history and the triumph of God's people.

was already upon them, Paul wrote that two things must occur before this event. First, there would be a great rebellion in the world (2:3a). Second, the rebellion would be accompanied by the rise of an antagonist whom Paul called the "man of lawlessness," an evil leader who would defy God and display the power of Satan (2:3b-10). At the present time, this wave of lawlessness was held back by a restraining force (2:7).⁶⁶ Even though the Thessalonians felt pressured because of the opposition in their city, it was relatively minor compared to the universal distress that would come at the end. As to those who had quit working, Paul bluntly commanded them to go back to work and support themselves (3:6-15).

The Third Tour Letters (1 & 2 Corinthians, Romans)

There is considerable agreement that 1 and 2 Corinthians as well as Romans were written during Paul's third missions tour. Internal indications suggest that 1 Corinthians was composed during his lengthy residence at Ephesus (16:8, 19; cf. Ac. 19:8-10). Though Paul apparently had written to the Corinthians previously (cf. 5:9-11),⁶⁷ his earliest letter to them has not survived.

Much occurred between the writing of 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians, most of which can be pieced together from internal references. Paul had hoped to spend the winter at Corinth after his lengthy stay at Ephesus (1 Co. 16:5-9; cf. 4:18). In the meantime, he decided to send Timothy as his personal representative (1 Co. 4:17; 1:10-11). Shortly, however, he modified his plan, replacing his intended longer visit by two shorter ones (2 Co. 1:15-16). Unable to follow through with either plan, Paul finally made an emergency visit to Corinth, a visit that ended in disaster (2 Co. 12:14; 13:1). During this "painful visit", the apostle was publicly humiliated by an opponent (2 Cor. 2:1, 5; 7:12; 12:21). The painful visit ended with such lack of resolution that after he left Paul composed a stinging letter, sending it to the Corinthians by Titus (2 Co. 2:3-4; 12:18).⁶⁸ Under great pressure, Paul waited for their response (2 Co. 2:12-13; 7:5). When it came, it was eagerly welcomed. Titus had been warmly received, and the Corinthians had experienced a change of heart (2 Co. 7:6-7, 13-16). The wrongs had been redressed, and the opposer had been silenced (2 Co. 2:6; 7:8-11).

In response to this encouraging report, Paul immediately composed another

⁶⁶There has been much discussion as to what this restraining force could be, since Paul does not specify. No Christian consensus has been reached.

⁶⁷ For the theory that the unknown letter to the Corinthians might be identified with 2 Co. 6:14--7:1, see the introductions.

⁶⁸ It has long been argued that the stinging letter is 1 Corinthians. Very few contemporary scholars agree, however, since 1 Corinthians does not seem to bear the character which is ascribed to the stinging letter. Most scholars believe that the stinging letter is an intermediate correspondence now lost to us, similar to his initial letter to the Corinthians. If so, then there are at least two letters by Paul to the Corinthians that have not survived.

letter to the Corinthians, probably 2 Corinthians 1-9.⁶⁹ The tone was conciliatory, and Paul determined to send Titus back to Corinth along with two other Christians (2 Co. 8:6, 16-19, 22-24). This second visit by Titus is not described, but if 2 Corinthians 10-13 is any indication, it was not a happy one. A resilient strain of negativism toward Paul was still evident in the church, and the optimism in 2 Corinthians 1-9 is missing in 2 Corinthians 10-13. Paul voiced his intentions to make yet a third visit to Corinth (2 Co. 10:11; 12:14, 20-21; 13:1-2), a promise that he kept, staying there three months (Ac. 20:1-3a).

While in Corinth this third time, Paul composed the letter to the Romans, mentioning in it the Achaian and Macedonian churches (Ro. 15:25-27). He probably dispatched the letter from Cenchrea, the port of Corinth (16:1). Paul had not been to Rome as yet, so he certainly did not start the church there (1:11). However, he hoped to visit Rome as he made his way further east toward Spain, the next area in his plans for evangelism (15:24, 28).

1 Corinthians

The letter of 1 Corinthians was a direct response to the letter the Corinthians had written to Paul, sending it to him by special courier (7:1; 16:17). Paul's answers to their questions begin in chapter 7. However, before taking up these questions, Paul first felt compelled to address reports about several Corinthian problems that had come to him from members of the house church that met in the home of Cloe (1:11).

First among their problems was a divisive, competitive spirit. Different Corinthian groups were rallying around personalities (1:10-17; 3:1-9), and their disunity showed that they were relying on the wisdom of the world, not the wisdom of God (1:18--2:16). They had lapsed into judgmentalism (4:1-7). Though they apparently experienced many manifestations of spiritual gifts (1:5-7), their rivalry demonstrated marked spiritual immaturity (3:1).

The second problem was moral. They actually tolerated a Christian brother who was living in incest (5:1-2). Christians were filing lawsuits against other Christians (6:1-6). Christian freedom was being turned into license to do anything, particularly license to engage in sexual promiscuity (6:12-17). These moral problems were signs that the Corinthians already were defeated in living the Christian life (6:7). Paul urged them to set themselves in order. The man living in incest must be put out of the fellowship (5:3-5, 13). Sexual promiscuity must not be tolerated in the

⁶⁹ There is much discussion as to whether our 2 Corinthians is one or two letters. The tone between 2 Corinthians 1-9 and 2 Corinthians 10-13 is strikingly different. Here, we take the position that they were indeed two letters that were collapsed into one as the church preserved them. If 2 Corinthians was composed as a single letter, on the other hand, then some event must have occurred that radically changed Paul's mood after he completed chapters 1-9 but before he began to composed chapters 10-13.

Christian assembly (5:9-11; 6:9-11, 18-20). Litigation between Christians must be stopped (6:7-8). Christian freedom must be coupled with Christian responsibility (6:12-13).

Finally, Paul addressed the questions the Corinthians themselves had posed. These questions concerned marriage and celibacy (7), food dedicated to pagan deities (8-9), the celebration of the Eucharist (10-11), the use of spiritual gifts (12-14), the nature of resurrection (15), and the collection of relief funds (16).

2 Corinthians

As discussed earlier, 2 Corinthians was written out of the ongoing awkward relationship between Paul and the Corinthians. His first remarks are an explanation as to why he changed his travel plans (1-2). In the context of helping them understand his mission, Paul launched into a lengthy discourse about the nature of the new covenant. In this discussion, he described the superior glory of the new covenant (3), the transitory character of the present life (4), and the reconciling hope of the life to come (5). He described the work of Christian ministry as a paradoxical mixture of hardship and triumph (6). Finally, turning once more to the tension between himself and the Corinthians, Paul pleaded with them to continue the positive change in attitude that Titus had reported (7).

Chapters 8-9 contain the most sustained discussion of Christian giving in the New Testament. Paul had asked the congregations in Macedonia and Achaia to participate in the collection of relief funds for the impoverished Christians in Palestine (cf. 1 Co. 16:1-4; Ro. 15:25-27). The Macedonian churches were exemplary models in this regard (8:1-5), and Paul urged the Corinthians to follow their good example (8:6--9:15). This they did (cf. Ro. 15:26-27).

Beginning in 2 Corinthians 10, Paul deals with the negative opinions that the Corinthians fostered about him. They had accused him of exhibiting a weak personality (10:1, 10), and they had become enamored with other leaders who bragged of great powers (10:12-18). In a parody against the boastings of others (11:1, 7-12), Paul described his hardships and weaknesses (11:16--12:13). He promised to visit the Corinthians a third time, and he warned them that human weakness, not human strength, was the arena in which Christ showed himself to be powerful (12:14--13:10).

Romans

The letter to the Romans is universally acknowledged as having the most developed theology of all Paul's letters. It is even conjectured that he wrote multiple

editions of the letter, sending it not only to Rome, but also to other congregations.⁷⁰ Be that as it may, the letter systematically develops Paul's understanding of the gospel (1:14-17). It was important for Paul, as an outsider to the Romans, to explain to them the message he preached, since he intended to ask for their financial help in his mission to the far west of the empire (15:24). His work in Asia Minor and Greece had reached the extent of his vision there (15:23), and since he did not intend to evangelize where other Christians had already gone (15:20), he would only pass through Rome on his way further west (15:28-33).

The Roman letter begins with the argument that the problem with the human race is not ignorance about God but rebellion against him (1:18-32). This rebellion is evident in both the Jewish and the non-Jewish communities. The Jews have not kept the law that God revealed, and the Gentiles, while not having the law, have failed to live up to what little they knew naturally (2). In the end, then, the whole world stands guilty before God (3:9-20). How then can any person be in right standing with God? Paul cites the great example of Abraham, a man whose standing with God was established by faith (4). Abraham, who lived before the law was given, is the prototype believer who was accredited righteousness because of his trust in God's promises. Similarly, peace with God is established by accepting, through faith, the death of the Messiah for sin (5:1-11). Just as sin entered human history through Adam, so salvation was made possible through Jesus Christ (5:12-21). Such salvation produces a moral imperative, for the only legitimate response to divine grace and forgiveness is thankful obedience (6). This is not to say that a righteous life is automatic, of course. Paul is realistic about the Christian's struggle against sin (7). Nevertheless, in the end those who believe in Jesus Christ will not stand condemned, for their salvation is established, not in themselves, but by God's redemptive work in Christ (8).

In chapters 9-11, Paul takes up the Jewish question. Why did God choose Israel in the first place, and what is Israel's role now that salvation by grace through faith has been revealed in Jesus Christ? Beginning in chapter 12, Paul offers important moral instruction concerning living the Christian life (12), relating to secular authority (13), and living in harmony within a Christian community where there are diverse ideas about scruples (14:1--15:13). He closes with a discussion of his travel plans (15:14-33) and sends greetings to the Christians he knows in Rome (16).

⁷⁰ This theory is based on the fact that in the early Greek manuscripts there are three versions of the epistle, one containing chapters 1-14, one with chapters 1-15 and another (the canonical edition) with chapters 1-16, cf. R. Fuller, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament* (London: Duckworth, 1971), pp. 51-53. Even in the canonical version, one can see two different endings in the book (15:33 and 16:27).

Paul's Prison Letters (Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians, Philippians)

Paul wrote several letters while suffering imprisonment for his Christian work. They are Colossians (4:3, 18), Philemon (10, 13, 22-23), Ephesians (3:1; 4:1; 6:20), and Philippians (1:7, 13). In none of them does he comment upon the exact circumstances of his incarceration. In fact, scholars today have not reached a consensus about even the place where the letters were composed, though the more traditional view is that they were written in Rome during the two years he awaited his imperial hearing.⁷¹

The order in which Paul wrote them is also an unsettled matter. It would seem that the Philippian letter was written at some time other than the Colossian letter, since the friends surrounding Paul at the respective times of composition are quite different in the two letters (Col. 4:7, 10-14; Phil. 2:19-21, 25-30). At the same time, it is generally concluded that Philemon was written at the same time as Colossians because of the common courier (Col. 4:9; Phlm. 10-12). Ephesians is often regarded as a circular letter composed for several congregations of which Ephesus was only one. This viewpoint depends in large part upon the fact that our earliest copies of Ephesians do not have the phrase "in Ephesus" in the heading, as we are accustomed to seeing in our English Bibles (1:1).

The traditional view is that Colossians and Philemon belong to the earlier part of Paul's detention in Rome, while Ephesians and Philippians come latter, Philippians being last because of its language of uncertainty about the upcoming verdict. Such a scenario, in fact, may be correct, but the question cannot be settled unless more information is discovered.

Colossians

Paul did not found the church at Colossae and, in fact, had never been there when he wrote to them (1:6-7; 2:1). Nonetheless, he had heard of them through others (1:4). Presumably from this same source he knew that they had encountered a serious distortion of the Christian faith. The general shape of this distortion can be inferred from Paul's arguments against it. At the heart, it consisted of mixing the Christian faith with other religious thought (2:8). The heretics, for we may confidently call them such, contended that the only way to achieve fullness of religious experience was by drawing from a pluralism of religious ideas (1:19). They urged the worship of angels (2:18) and called for strict asceticism (2:21, 23). They demanded circumcision, food regulations, and sabbatical observances taken from Judaism (2:11, 14, 16, 20-22). They paid homage to mystical knowledge and the

⁷¹The other strong option is the two year imprisonment at Caesarea before he went to Rome (Ac. 24:27). There is also speculation about an imprisonment at Ephesus.

elemental spirits of the universe drawn from Hellenistic religious thought (2:8, 20). The Colossian heresy was eclectic and syncretistic.

Paul's correction of this heresy was based upon the supremacy of Christ. He explained to his readers that there were only two kingdoms, the kingdom of the Son and the kingdom of darkness (1:12-13). One could not belong to both at once! Full religious experience might be an admirable goal, but it could be achieved in Christ only, since Christ alone was the fullness of God (1:15, 19; 2:9). Christ was the one by whom the Father created the entire universe (1:16-17), and in everything Christ had supremacy (1:18). Perfection was in Christ alone (1:28), for in him were the entire range of all treasures of wisdom and knowledge (2:2-3, 10). The Colossians must not be deceived by the arguments of the heretics (2:4, 8). They must not depend upon Jewish rituals (2:16-17), mystical experiences (2:18-19) or practices of asceticism (2:20-23). Rather, they must find the fullness of religious experience in Christ, who had been exalted at God's right hand (3:1-4). To these basic warnings Paul added important moral instruction for living the full Christian life, both what to avoid (3:5-11) and what to practice (3:12--4:1).

Philemon

Paul's short personal letter to Philemon concerned the slave, Onesimus (15-16). We can assume that Philemon was a member of the Colossian church, since his slave, Onesimus, was from Colossae (Col. 4:9). It is usually assumed that Onesimus was a runaway, though he just as easily may have been on a legitimate mission.⁷² In any case, he was converted to Christianity during the apostle's incarceration, and due to circumstances which are only hinted at, he was liable to punishment by his master. Paul wrote to intervene. He encouraged Philemon to receive Onesimus, not as a slave, but as a brother in Christ (16). Paul asked that any wrongs Philemon might have held against the slave should be redirected toward himself (18-19). His suggestive, "...you will do even more than I ask," may even hint at manumission.

Ephesians

The letter entitled Ephesians is perhaps the most impersonal of all Paul's correspondence, a fact that is unusual given that Paul spent two years there. Tychicus, the courier (6:21), is the only name in the epistle other than Paul's. This fact, along with the lack of an address in the earliest manuscripts, have prompted the suggestion that it was a circular letter written to several congregations.

⁷²Some argue that the evidence for Onesimus being a runaway is overstated. It was by no means unusual for a master to send a trusted slave on business, or Onesimus could even have been sent by Philemon to Paul, and Paul detained him beyond the time allotted, cf. R. Jones, "Paul, the Perpetrator," presented at the 1994 Central States Regional SBL-ASOR Meeting, St. Louis, MO.

The central theme of the letter is the universal church, the body of Christ in the world. The church was established upon Jesus Christ and his chosen apostles (2:20-21). It is God's masterpiece of reconciliation within history, bringing together both Jew and Gentile (2:11-19; 3:6). This present work of reconciliation points toward God's greater reconciling purpose, the bringing together of all things in the entire universe under the lordship of Jesus Christ (1:9-10; 2:7). Competing against God's divine purpose are the powers of evil (6:10-12), and before them, God displays the wonders of his eternal purpose through his church (3:10-11). The church has become God's showpiece to the universe (3:20-21). God's reconciling purpose in the church, once hidden, now has been disclosed in all its glory by the preaching of the gospel (1:4; 3:4-9).

Because the church is God's showpiece of reconciliation, it is imperative that the members of the church demonstrate the spirit of unity among themselves (4:1-6, 15-16). Christians have a moral imperative to live as imitators of God (5:1-2; 4:17-32; 5:3-20). God's reconciling love must be demonstrated in domestic relationships between spouses (5:21-33), parents and children (6:1-4), and slaves and masters (6:5-9).

Philippians

The Philippian letter, in contrast to the Ephesian letter, is very personal.⁷³ No less than sixteen times in the Greek text Paul uses some form of the word "joy" (1:4, 18, 25; 2:2, 17-18, 28-29; 3:1; 4:1, 4, 10). The apostle's upbeat tone is all the more remarkable since Paul frankly discussed with his readers that the outcome of his imprisonment was unclear. It was a matter of life and death, yet he was unsure how the verdict would go (1:20-25; 2:17, 23-24). The Philippians, for their part, had been especially supportive of Paul, sending him assistance to further his ministry and providing him encouragement by sending him one of their own (2:25-30; 4:15-16).

Unlike the letters to the Galatians, Thessalonians and Colossians, the Philippian letter does not seem preoccupied with any major distortion of the Christian faith. Paul does, of course, warn them about the influence of Judaizers (3:2), and he also gives a mild reproof to two female leaders in the Philippian church (4:2; cf. 2:14-15). He addresses the short-sightedness of perfectionism (3:12-16), and he warns the church against materialism (3:18-19). He even comments briefly about some within the Christian fellowship who saw themselves as competitors with Paul (1:15-17). Yet, for the most part, the Philippian does not contain the concentrated arguments aimed at correcting heresies found in some of his other letters.

Two of the most important passages in the book are the hymn of incarnation

⁷³In the Greek text of this letter, Paul uses the first person "I" some fifty-two times.

(2:5-11) and Paul's description of how he relinquished the religion of his ancestry in order to embrace the faith of Jesus Christ (3:4-11). The hymn of incarnation⁷⁴ serves to support Paul's call for humility and deference among the believers (2:1-4). The description of his transition from Judaism to Christianity serves to emphasize that salvation through faith in Christ is the supreme issue of life itself.

The Pastoral Letters (1 Timothy, Titus and 2 Timothy)

Since the 18th century the final three letters ascribed to St. Paul have been dubbed “the pastoral letters”, largely because there is considerable material in them concerning pastoral duties and church life. The letters are to two persons, Timothy and Titus, both junior colleagues of Paul. They are similar in style, content and structure, and they seem to presuppose the same theological concepts, the same false teachers, and the same peculiarities of language and style. Especially, they were written to churches under siege from false teachings that threatened to distort the Christian faith (1 Ti. 1:3-11, 19-20; 4:1-7; 6:3-5, 20-21; Tit. 1:10-11, 15-16; 3:9-11; 2 Ti. 2:16-18, 23-26; 3:1-9, 13; 4:3-4). It has been popular among historical-critical scholars for the past couple of centuries to deny to Paul these letters on the basis of linguistic differences from his other letters, ambiguity about the closing years of Paul's life, and what has been perceived to be too advanced a development of church structure for the mid-1st century AD. Conservative scholars, on the other hand, defend Pauline authorship. A moderating position has been that Paul may have composed these letters through an amanuensis, which would account for some of the differences between them and other of Paul's letters.

If Paul wrote these letters (and here we assume that he did), he wrote them during the final years of his life, presumably while awaiting the outcome of his requested hearing under Caesar Nero. This means that they either were composed in Caesarea or Rome, two cities where Paul remained incarcerated for about two years in each place. The most traditional position is that they were composed while Paul was in Rome.

The central theme of 1 Timothy, which was directed to him while he was in Ephesus, was to refute teachers who gave priority to myths and genealogies, apparently some form of Judaizing Christianity (1:4-7). They demanded abstinence from marriage and dietary restrictions (4:3). They claimed to possess special knowledge (6:20-21), a claim that might suggest some form of incipient Gnosticism or Jewish mysticism. Ringleaders in the opposition included Hymenaeus and Alexander (1:20). Hence, Paul sets forth at the beginning the

⁷⁴Biblical scholars agree that the poem in 2:5b-11 is hymnic, and some suggest that it may have been a pre-existing hymn already in use by the Christians by the time Paul wrote.

differences between the false and true gospel (1:3-20). He gives an order for genuine Christian life and worship (2:1-15), instructions for the moral character of church leaders (3:1-16), and warnings against the coming apostasy (4:1-16). He closes with an order for Christian relationships (5:1—6:2), a warning against the false teachers (6:3-10) and a final pastoral charge to Timothy (6:11-21).

Titus' letter was directed to him while he was overseeing the congregations in Crete. Paul apparently had visited Crete some time in the relatively recent past (1:5). He intended his younger colleague to set in better order these churches (1:7), preserving the apostolic faith without distortion (1:9) and avoiding deception by misguided teachers (1:10-11, 15-16). Part of the problem was the cultural patterns of the Cretans themselves (1:12), and part was due to purveyors of Jewish myths (1:14) and disputes about legal observances from the Torah (3:9).

2 Timothy shows that by the time of writing Paul's situation was very precarious. Not only was he in jail (1:16; 2:9; 4:16), he had been denied the privilege of house arrest afforded him earlier (cf. Ac. 28:16, 30-31). Now, he was "chained like a criminal". He seemed to sense the finality of his circumstances (4:6). Still, grim as the future might be, his deepest concern was for the perpetuity of his churches. He was grieved by the unfaithfulness of some (1:15; 4:10, 16), and distressed that others no longer helped him (4:20). In this letter he aimed at furthering his gospel work through Timothy (1:6-8; 4:1-2). Above all, he was concerned for the purity of the Christian message, urging Timothy to "guard the truth" (1:13-14; 2:2, 8-9, 15; 3:14-17; 4:1-2, 5).

Other Apostolic Letters (James, 1 & 2 Peter, Jude, Hebrews, 1 & 2 & 3 John)

The English designation for the non-Pauline letters of the New Testament has been "The General Epistles" or "The Catholic Letters." This designation leaves a good deal to be desired, since it implies that the letters were written to Christendom in general, or possibly that they were not written to anyone in particular. Such is hardly the case. There is considerable internal evidence that most of these letters had particular audiences in mind, in spite of the fact that the precise addresses of all but 1 Peter have been lost in antiquity.

The authorship of these letters is traditionally ascribed to the names of the apostles in the titles (with the exception of Hebrews, of course). Liberal scholarship generally doubts the authenticity of these titles, as it does the authorship of about half the letters bearing Paul's name. Nevertheless, the early church accepted these letters as apostolic, either written by an apostle or certainly under the influence the apostles.

James

In addition to James bar Zebedee, who was the first of the twelve apostles to be martyred, there was another James associated with the Jerusalem church. He is mentioned by Peter just after his miraculous release from jail (12:17), and later, he is referred to by St. Paul as a pillar in the Jerusalem church (Ga. 2:9, 12). This James is usually called "the brother of the Lord" or "James the Just" (Mt. 13:35; 1 Co. 9:5; 15:7; Ga. 1:19).⁷⁵ He is traditionally credited with the letter under his name in the New Testament epistles (Ja. 1:1).⁷⁶

The letter is addressed to the Jewish *diaspora* (1:1), a term which could refer either to the scattered Jewish community throughout the world, or more likely, the scattered Christian-Jewish community throughout the world. It may date as early as the 40s A.D., and if so, then it is earlier than even Paul's letters and may be the earliest written document in the New Testament.⁷⁷ Several things lend support to the Jerusalem church being the locus for this epistle, such as, there is no mention of the gentile mission, Jewish Christians were still meeting in synagogues (Ja. 2:2),⁷⁸ and the contents of the letter seem to fit best in the milieu of Jewish Palestine.

The letter contains many short sayings, similar in some ways to the Old Testament Book of Proverbs, along with longer treatments of such subjects as favoritism (2:1-7), faith and works (2:14-26), the tongue (3:1-12), envy (3:13--4:10), wealth (5:1-6), patience in suffering (5:7-11), and prayer for the sick (5:13-18).

1 Peter

Early Christian tradition puts the death of Peter in Rome during the emperorship of Caesar Nero. Peter, who first was a disciple of John the Baptist, then of Jesus, and finally the spokesman for the Twelve after Jesus had ascended into heaven, was the dominant leader in the first half of the Book of Acts. He was the primary figure during the period of transition from an exclusively Jewish church to a multi-national church. His later ministry is not well attested, though we know he traveled with his wife (1 Co. 9:5), presumably through Corinth (1 Co. 1:12; 3:22). He wrote from Rome (cryptically called "Babylon," cf. 5:13), and his readers were Christians who lived in the northeastern extremities of the Roman Empire near the coast of the Black Sea (1:1).

Unlike many of Paul's letters, 1 Peter is not a defense against outside

⁷⁵The first of these titles comes from the New Testament itself, the second from very early Christian tradition.

⁷⁶Of course, as with many biblical documents, there are academic debates about authorship and the early traditions, but they are beyond the scope of this study. See the "Introductions."

⁷⁷It should be borne in mind, however, that the precise dating of New Testament documents is made difficult by conflicting data and many ambiguities, so certainty is impossible.

⁷⁸While not all English translations make this clear, the word "synagogue" is used here to describe Christian meetings.

distortions of the faith. Rather, the letter calls its readers to realize their own unique identity as the new people of God, the climax of God's redemptive work predicted by the prophets (1:10-12, 20). The same solemn charges that once were issued to the ancient people of Israel are now directed to his church (1:15; 2:4-12; cf. Lv. 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7; Ex. 19:5-6). This unique calling means that Christians must live in righteous relationships, submitting themselves to governing authorities (2:13-17), enduring unjust suffering as did Christ (1:6-7; 2:18-25; 3:13-17; 4:1, 12-19; 5:10), and living in harmony with their spouses (3:1-7) and everyone else (4:7-11). In light of this high calling, humility must characterize God's people, whether elders (5:1-4) or youth (5:5-6).

2 Peter

This letter more naturally falls into the category of a "general letter," since no addressee is mentioned. After the opening paragraphs, which urge Christian values and virtues along with the certainties of the apostolic tradition (1:5-9, 16-21), the letter immediately embarks on a polemic against false teachers (2:1). Peter recites a series of examples where God summarily judged rebels while sparing the righteous (2:4-9). His point, of course, is that God holds humans accountable. The false teachers, for their part, were offering "freedom" (2:19a), but in reality, their "freedom" smacked more of ethical anarchy (2:13b-15). They believed that they were beyond good and evil (2:18a). In the end, they produced followers who were worse off than before they heard the Christian message (2:20-22).

Against this antinomianism, the letter warns that the "day of the Lord" is coming (3:10, 12). Skeptics might scoff (3:3-4), but the God who once judged the world by water (3:5-7) would, in the end, judge it with fire. At the same time, God delays final judgment in order to provide opportunity for people to repent (3:9, 15).

Jude

It has long been recognized that Jude and 2 Peter have a great deal in common, so much so that most scholars suggest that one is dependent on the other, though which was composed first is debated. The traditional author, Jude, is thought to have been the half-brother of the Lord (cf. Mt. 13:55; Mk. 6:3).

Like 2 Peter, the letter is a stern warning to preserve the apostolic faith without distortion (3, 20-25). Heretics were changing the gospel of God's grace into lies (4, 8, 10-13, 16, 19). The letter is a reminder, then, that God's past judgments (5-7) anticipate a final judgment (14-15).

Hebrews

Hebrews, the longest New Testament letter outside the Pauline collection, is

anonymous.⁷⁹ Like 2 Peter, it has no formal address, but it clearly was meant for some particular group, possibly Jewish Christians who were in danger of apostatizing or perhaps a group of Gentiles who were in danger of drifting into the various cults of the Greco-Roman world. Whoever the first readers, the letter presents a strong Christology of Jesus as superior to the religion of Torah. As the divine Son, Jesus is God's final revelation (1:1-3), infinitely superior to angels (1:4--2:18) and Moses and Aaron (3:1--4:13). Christ is the heavenly high priest, ordained not after the prescriptions of the levitical priesthood, but by God's direct appointment (4:14--7:28). He is the mediator of a new covenant which was vastly superior to the Sinai covenant. Unlike the sacrifices of the old covenant, which were repeated again and again, Christ's sacrifice of himself was once and for all (8:1--10:18). In light of this truth, the author urges his readers to press on in faithfulness (11:1--13:21).

One of the most remarkable features of the book are the frequent warnings against turning away from the Christian faith (2:1-4; 3:1-6, 12-13; 4:1, 11-13; 6:4-8, 11-12; 10:19-31, 35-39; 12:1-3, 25-29; 13:9). It is clear that the letter is aimed at preventing defection, and it strongly implies that whatever group was the target audience, the danger of defection was real.

1, 2, 3 John

The letters themselves give no direct clue as to their origin or destination. Ephesus is often suggested as the general locale, since early church tradition puts the apostle John there in the closing years of his life. It is generally agreed, however, that the three letters are closely related in origin and destination, possibly even being sent as a "three-letter packet" to the same city.⁸⁰ The occasion was a rupture in the Christian community (1 Jn. 2:19, 26; 4:1, 5-6; 2 Jn. 7, 10-11; 3 Jn. 9-10). Those who left claimed to know God, but their hatred of their former Christian friends and their rejection of the Christian lifestyle belied their claim (1 Jn. 1:6, 8; 2:4, 9, 11). If the polemics within the letters are any indication, a major cause of this rupture was a difference over Christology.

John offered several criteria as tests of genuine Christianity, such as, obedience to God, a righteous lifestyle and love for the Christian community (1 Jn. 1:5-10; 2:3-11, 29; 3:4-10, 14-24; 4:7-12, 16b-17, 19-21; 5:2-3, 18; 2 Jn. 6; 3 Jn. 11). In addition, he issued a theological imperative to acknowledge that Jesus the Christ was both truly human and truly divine (1 Jn. 1:1-3; 2:22-23; 3:23a; 4:2-3, 9, 14; 5:1, 5, 9-13, 20; 2 Jn. 9).

⁷⁹Many opinions have been offered concerning authorship, including Paul, Apollos, Luke, Priscilla and Aquila, Barnabas and Silas. All the theories have difficulties, and the clearest consensus is that most likely it was not written by Paul.

⁸⁰L. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 503.

The Finale

The Jewish Question and the *Birkat Ha-Minim*

In the earliest period of the church after Pentecost, the Christians were perceived by most outsiders as a sectarian branch of Judaism. The Jerusalem church and the other congregations in Palestine seemed to have maintained a conformity to the life of the Jewish community. They continued to worship in the temple (Ac. 2:46; 3:1; 5:20-21, 25, 42; 22:17). They still took Jewish vows (Ac. 21:22-26). They continued to use the synagogues (Ac. 13:14; 14:1; 17:1-3, 10, 17; 18:4, 19, 26; 19:8).⁸¹ They scrupulously followed the regulations of Torah (Ac. 21:20). They continued to practice circumcision (Ac. 16:3).⁸² Some early Christians, including Paul, still belonged to other Jewish theological traditions, such as the Pharisees (Ac. 15:5; 23:6). They originally preached only to other Jews (Ac. 11:19).⁸³ Even some elders on the Sanhedrin, while they opposed the apostles' preaching about Jesus, were at least open to the idea that the Christian message might eventually prove to be from God. For them, the Christian message was only one among several other messianic sectarian movements within Judaism (Ac. 5:33-40). The Romans, for their part, viewed the Christians as just another Jewish sect (Ac. 24:5, 14; 28:22).

This temporary and relatively peaceful coexistence between Christianity and Judaism lasted only for a few decades, however. While the Sanhedrin was disturbed by the messianic Jesus movement and sought to quell it as a fanatical sect (Ac. 4:1-2, 16-18; 5:17-18, 40), the beginnings of an even greater rift occurred with Stephen's sermon about the transitory role of the temple (Ac. 7:47-50). Stephen was lynched (7:54-60), and a massive persecution broke out against all who agreed with him (Ac. 8:1-3). Christians were extradited for trial from other cities (Ac. 9:1-2), James bar-Zebedee was beheaded (Ac. 12:1-2), and eventually James, the brother of the Lord, was executed.⁸⁴ Paul was arrested for allegedly bringing a Gentile beyond the barrier in the temple as well as for teaching against Jewishness, the Torah and the Temple (Ac. 21:27-36). In 66 A.D., when the Jewish insurrection broke out against Rome, virtually all of the Jewish sects were drawn into the conflict, including the Essenes.

⁸¹ The reference to a synagogue in Ja. 2:2 is also to be mentioned, and while it is not as clear as the references in Acts, it may well indicate that Christians were at that time still using the synagogue for worship, cf. J. Adamson, *The Epistle of James [NICNT]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 105.

⁸² Circumcision became a primary issue when Gentiles began to experience conversion, and the issue became sharp enough to generate an ecumenical council of the apostles and elders (Ac. 15:1ff.).

⁸³ Of course, the great commission of Christ envisioned the preaching of the gospel to the whole world, but possibly the disciples at this time were still operating under the earlier instructions of Jesus that they should only preach to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, cf. Mt. 10:5; 15:24).

⁸⁴ Josephus, *Antiquities*, XX.ix.1.

Of all the Jewish groups, the Christians alone did not participate, and consequently, they were viewed by their Jewish fellows as traitors to the Jewish cause. Many Jewish Christians were killed by the Jewish insurrectionists.⁸⁵

Following the Jewish wars, probably in about the mid-80s, an addition was made to the Eighteen Benedictions which constituted the daily prayers of all pious Jews and were repeated in every synagogue service. This addition is called the *birkat ha-minim* (= curse upon the heretics), and the *minim* were almost certainly Christians. The addition read, "For the apostates let there be no hope, and let the arrogant government be speedily uprooted in our days. Let the Nazarenes⁸⁶ and the heretics be destroyed in a moment, and let them be blotted out of the book of life and not be inscribed together with the righteous. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who humblest the arrogant."⁸⁷ This curse indicates that "an unbridgeable gulf had opened up between the Church and the Synagogue, so that exclusion on the part of the latter is total."⁸⁸ The words of Jesus had come to pass that his followers would be expelled (cf. Jn. 16:2). By the 2nd century, Jews were involved in the deaths of Christians by way of denunciation to the Romans. Christians accused Jews of betraying them to Roman inquisitors.⁸⁹ Given this widening rift between Christianity and Judaism, the early Christians, even before the end of the first century, were obliged to develop their religion independently of Jewish culture.

Christianity as an Illegal Religion

With the recognition that Christianity was not merely a sect of Judaism, another serious problem arose. This problem concerned the Roman government itself. Rome recognized Judaism as a legitimate religion, permitted by law. In fact, Judaism was the only religion which was exempt from the worship of the emperor. Normally, any religion which did not permit emperor-worship was unlawful, but since the Jews were so numerous and influential in the empire, the Romans could not easily afford to be intolerant. For about the first thirty years of its existence, Christianity benefited from the perception that it was a Jewish sect. As Christianity spread, however, and particularly as it came to include non-Jewish peoples, the Roman authorities began to distinguish between Christians and Jews. Since Christians also refused to sacrifice to the emperor, Christianity became regarded as *religio illicita* (= illegal religion), and from about the early 60s, Christians risked

⁸⁵ L. Goppelt, *Apostolic and Post-Apostolic Times*, trans. R. Guelich (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970) 60.

⁸⁶ The term Nazarenes is probably a direct reference to Christians, cf. Ac. 24:5.

⁸⁷ From the Twelfth Benediction, cf. G. Beasley-Murray, *John [WBC]* (Waco, TX: Word, 1987) lxxvi-lxxvii.

⁸⁸ Schrage, *TDNT* (1971) VII.852.

⁸⁹ R. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist, 1979) 42-43.

their lives, their goods, and their freedom.⁹⁰

The Book of Revelation

The final book in the New Testament is the Apocalypse of John, probably written in the mid-90s A.D. By this time, the relationship between the Roman imperial government and the Christian church had become severe. Earlier, while Christians still enjoyed protection by the Roman government because Christianity was thought to be a sect of Judaism, the apostles urged compliance and respect (Ro. 13:1-7; 1 Pe. 2:13-17). After the first Jewish revolt, however, Christians could no longer count on being exempt from the cult of emperor worship as were the Jews. Emperor worship was required, and a certificate of proof that the pinch of incense had been offered was to be produced on demand at the threat of death. It is within this milieu that the Apocalypse of John was written, warning Christians to be faithful unto death (2:10; 13:10; 14:12). While Paul had spoken of the Roman government as "God's servant to do you good" (Ro. 13:4), John now depicted Rome as a ravenous beast in league with the devil (13:1-2; 17:9, 18), the purveyor of a prostitute culture which drank the blood of the saints (17:3-6; 18:24). Rome stood under the sentence of divine judgment (Re. 18:4-8, 20).

The interpretations of the Book of Revelation are more varied than any other book in the New Testament. The various interpreters throughout Christian history have tended to view their own era and circumstances as the primary focus of the book. This tendency stemmed from the fact that the book is a prophecy. If the book in some sense describes the future, then readers throughout Christian history have readily seen in John's visions elements that seemed to describe their own times.

Thus, in the early centuries of Christianity, readers saw the book as describing the struggle between Christians and pagan Rome. In later times, it was the struggle between Christians and Muslims. The Reformers thought that the book described the struggle between Protestants and Roman Catholics in Europe. Still later readers saw in the book the rise of Napoleon, the German Kaiser, the Bolsheviks, the Third Reich, the Cold War, and the European Economic Community. Each felt that his own era could be the final chapter in human history. If Christ was coming soon, and if current events seemed to parallel the visions of John, then the book could be read directly in the context of one's own times.

In general, there have been five major interpretive schemes for the book. They are **idealism**, **historicism**, **preterism**, **dispensationalism** and **historic premillennialism**. Idealism, the allegorical approach, takes the book as symbolic but tries to separate it from any particular time period. Historicism, the popular choice in

⁹⁰H. Boer, *A Short History of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 43-44.

the Reformation and post-Reformation, takes the book as a prophecy of the struggles of Christian Europe, often along the lines of the Protestant-Roman Catholic schism. Preterism, embraced by most critical scholars, reads the book almost entirely against the background of the late 1st century. Dispensationalism, taken up by many American conservatives, regards the book as describing the struggle between the Jews and the Anti-christ after the Christians have been taken to heaven in the rapture. Historic premillennialism, common to both the earliest centuries of Christianity and many conservatives in the present era, opts for a middle ground between the past and the future. In this view, the book refers at once to the first century struggle between Christians and pagan Rome, but it does so in a way that foreshadows the struggle between Christians and the powers of evil at the end of the age. In the opinion of this author, the latter viewpoint seems to be the most balanced.