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# The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke and the Acts of the Apostles [Course Lecture Notes]

Scott Gambrill Sinclair

*Department of Religion and Philosophy, Dominican University of California,*  
[scottgsinclair@hotmail.com](mailto:scottgsinclair@hotmail.com)

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Course Syllabus for the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke and the Acts of the Apostles (3 units)

No course prerequisites

Instructor: Dr. Scott G. Sinclair [scottgsinclair@hotmail.com](mailto:scottgsinclair@hotmail.com)

Course description: A detailed study of the New Testament gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke and of the historical Jesus. We will reconstruct the social setting of each gospel and examine the gospels' major theological themes. Then we will examine the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Some attention will also be paid to the contents and message of the Acts of the Apostles.

Student learning outcomes: Students will demonstrate

- 1) A knowledge of the social settings of the New Testament gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke and the Acts of the Apostles,
- 2) a knowledge of the basic theological ideas of Matthew, Mark, and Luke-Acts,
- 3) an awareness of the historical problem of how to reconstruct the life and teachings of Jesus,
- 4) a knowledge of the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth and how they were a response to the beliefs and social structures of first century Jewish Palestine,
- 5) an awareness of the relevance of the teaching of the evangelists and Jesus to such contemporary problems as the proper Christian attitude toward the poor and women.

Texts: A Bible (ideally, a modern translation) and these lecture notes. Students should bring a Bible to class.

Assessment: There will be quizzes, a midterm, and a final. The quizzes will consist of ten multiple-choice questions based on the notes for the previous two lectures. The midterm and final will each have three sections. The first is multiple choice. The second is essay. The third is extra credit and invites the student to disagree with the instructor on a topic of the student's choosing. This section is intended to stimulate independent and critical thinking. The essays (including any extra credit one) are to be written at home and handed in on the day of the examination when the students answer the multiple choice questions in class. Of course, the essays are to be in correct, concise English! The midterm will take place after we have finished the section on Matthew's Gospel. The final will not be cumulative but cover the material taught after the midterm. Each quiz will be worth 10 points, and the midterm and the final will each be worth 200 points. In addition, students will receive 2 points for every class attended or every excused absence.

**Upper division students must write a 6 to 10 page paper relevant to the course.** The students are free to select their own topics. The topic could be a theme in one of the gospels and/or the Acts of the Apostles, such as women in Mark's Gospel or miracles in Luke-Acts. Or the topic could be some aspect of the life or teaching of Jesus (e.g., whether he thought that he was the Messiah) or some institution that influenced Jesus or the gospels (e.g., the first century synagogue). The paper is worth 100 points.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke-Acts  
Lecture Notes

by  
Scott Gambrill Sinclair

The Gospels, the Gospel, and the Synoptics; the Origin of the Synoptics; an Outline of the Course; the Cultural and Historical Background of the Synoptics

- I. How certain books came to be designated "gospels."
  - A. The Greek word "euangelion" which we translate as "gospel" means "good news."
  - B. In early Christian usage it became shorthand for the Church's proclamation of salvation through Jesus Christ (e.g., Rom. 1:1).
  - C. Later the term came to be applied to written documents which contained this good news, and, especially, to documents which recounted the words and deeds of Jesus.
  - D. Nevertheless, the older usage in which "gospel" was a synonym for the Christian proclamation continued.
  - E. Consequently, individual documents were identified as different versions of the one gospel (The Gospel According to . . .).
  - F. These titles are not from the original authors but were added in the second century.
- II. As "good news" suggests, such documents are both history and proclamation.
  - A. They tell us about the past words and deeds of Jesus and to that extent are biographies.
  - B. They recount the origin of Christianity in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.
  - C. They attempt to increase the reader's commitment to Jesus as Lord and to the Christian movement.
- III. In the course of time, theology and legend drove out history in the gospels.
  - A. Christians wrote gospels for centuries, and, in a way, still write them today.
  - B. Nevertheless, as time went on, new gospels contained less and less history and more reflection, apologetics, and fantasy.
- IV. The gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are the earliest and most historical and are our best sources for reliable information about Jesus.
- V. Besides them, only two gospels are important sources for the life and teaching of Jesus:
  - A. The Gospel of John
    1. This gospel was written, at least in its final form, around 90-100 C.E.
    2. Although it preserves genuine historical facts about Jesus, it concentrates on proclaiming the ultimate meaning of what God did in Jesus.

3. This meaning is that the eternal Word of God became a human being in Jesus, and through Jesus we can come to know who God is and share in God's glory.

B. The Gospel of Thomas

1. This gospel was rediscovered in modern times.
2. It contains only sayings attributed to Jesus.
3. A form of this gospel existed in the second century.
4. Thomas appears to be based on oral tradition that has already been influenced by the New Testament gospels.
5. Therefore, Thomas is less important for reconstructing what Jesus taught.
6. Nevertheless, some of the sayings in Thomas that are not recorded in the New Testament may go back to Jesus.
7. And Thomas can be used to study how oral tradition evolves.

VI. By comparing Matthew, Mark, and Luke with John and Thomas, we can see why the former came to be called "synoptics."

A. The meaning of "synoptic" is to "look at together," hence, to compare.

B. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are much closer to one another than they are to such gospels as John and Thomas, and, much closer than, for example, John and Thomas are to each other. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke basically the same material occurs in the same order, and there are many similarities in the actual wording in the original Greek.

C. Consequently, we can make detailed comparisons between these gospels, and they have come to be called "the synoptics."

VII. The synoptics have important similarities in theology which are not shared by such gospels as John and Thomas (for example, the synoptic emphasis on the second coming of Jesus).

VIII. Like the other gospels the synoptics are the end result of a long history.

A. Jesus said and did certain things. Most of what he said must have been in his native language, Palestinian Aramaic.

B. After his departure, people remembered and repeated these things including in early Christian teaching and preaching.

C. Then someone, probably Mark, working in Greek produced the first written account of the life and teaching of Jesus based on oral tradition.

D. Later Matthew and Luke used Mark plus other surviving tradition to produce their own gospels in Greek.

IX. At each point of this long history, people added their own perspectives to the material as they responded to their own situations.

X. To study this long history we must work backwards one layer at a time, and that is what we will do in this class.

A. What survives is the gospels, and we must begin with them.

B. In studying the gospels individually we have to start by looking at their messages to their own situations. Therefore, we will look at the individual theologies of Matthew, Mark, and Luke and the social situations which they addressed.

C. Once we have dealt with the peculiarities of these gospels, then we can

- try to uncover the older traditions that underlie these documents and, finally, get back to the actual life and teaching of Jesus.
- XI. In this course I will not attempt to survey all viewpoints about the synoptics but instead will merely present my own (which in most respects are in the scholarly mainstream) and give you the tools to formulate your own viewpoints.
- A. Perhaps no set of books has been studied and debated as much as the synoptics.
  - B. Consequently, there are countless opinions, and we cannot survey them here.
  - C. However, there is a mainstream in critical scholarship, and, for the most part, I am in it.
  - D. In this course, I will mostly present my own views.
  - E. However, I will discuss how to analyze the synoptics and how I arrive at my own opinions.
  - F. Consequently, you will have the tools to disagree and come to different conclusions.
- XII. What are your present religious beliefs, including your beliefs about the gospels, and why did you take this course?
- XIII. The basic historical and cultural background of the synoptic gospels
- A. The synoptics come out of two different cultures.
    - 1. The synoptics interpret ancient Jewish religion. Jesus was a Jew and saw himself as fulfilling his religious heritage.
    - 2. The synoptics primarily address Greco-Roman readers. Note that these documents are in Greek. Some of the intended readers were certainly Jewish, but first century Jews had absorbed major aspects of Greco-Roman culture.
  - B. Ancient Jewish religion.
    - 1. Basic teachings. In contrast to most other ancient religions, ancient Judaism taught
      - a. Ethical monotheism. There is only one God, and he demands justice, especially for the poor and defenseless.
      - b. Special election. This one God has entered into a special relationship with the Jews.
      - c. The Law of Moses. This special relationship requires the Jews to keep a code of regulations which enshrined the ethical precepts and the ethnic customs of the Jewish people. According to tradition, God gave this body of law to Moses (c. 1250 B.C.E.). The Mosaic Law is contained in the first five books of Jewish scripture (the Christian Old Testament).
      - d. Prophecy and apocalypticism. During much of Jewish history a series of "prophets" taught. They both proclaimed God's will and announced future events. Some late prophets proclaimed that the world as we know it was about to end. These figures we call apocalypticists.
    - 2. Early history. Some of the major periods, persons, and events of ancient Judaism according to the biblical account. Here I am not

concerned with how accurate the biblical account is, since Jesus and the early Christians did not raise this question.

- a. The first period of Jewish history is the Patriarchal (c. 2000-1300 B.C.E.). According to biblical record, in this era individuals who would become the ancestors of the Jews (Israelites) first encountered God and received prophetic promises concerning their descendants. The most memorable of the Patriarchs were Abraham and Jacob (whose name was changed to "Israel"). At the end of the period, the Jews migrated to Egypt where they fell into slavery.
- b. The time of Moses and Joshua (13th. cent.). In the name of God, a man named Moses inspired the Jews to escape from Egypt into the desert. There God gave them the "Mosaic Law" (see above). Subsequently, under Moses's successor, Joshua, the Jews conquered Canaan which then became "Israel."
- c. The judges (12th cent.). Local charismatic figures ruled a decentralized Israelite state.
- d. The monarchy (11th cent.-6th cent.). For half a millennium a series of kings ruled Jewish Palestine. The most important of these were David, who founded a continuing dynasty, and his son Solomon who in the biblical account was supremely wealthy and wise.
- e. The exile and the post-exilic period (6th cent.-4th cent.). When the Babylonians conquered Israel, they took the Jewish leaders into exile. Subsequently, when the Persians conquered Babylon, they allowed Jews to return to Israel.
- f. The Greco-Roman period. Around 330 B.C.E. Alexander the Great conquered the entire Middle East. Thereafter, Israel remained under Greek rule until about 167 B.C.E. At that point the Jews revolted and remained independent until 63 B.C.E. when Roman domination began. In the centuries immediately before the Common Era, the Romans conquered the entire Mediterranean. Sometimes the Romans ruled Israel indirectly (through the Herods) and sometimes directly through military governors (e.g., Pontius Pilate). For the purposes of this course the following events during the first century of the Common Era are especially important.
  - 1). The ministry of Jesus (c. 27-c. 30 C.E.) and the beginning of (Jewish) "Christianity."
  - 2). The beginning of Gentile Christianity (a year or two later).
  - 3). Nero's persecution of Christians living at Rome (c. 65 C.E.).

- 4). The revolt of the Jews living in Israel and their subsequent defeat (66 C.E.-70 C.E.) which culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple.
- 5). The expulsion of (many?) Jewish Christians from the official Jewish community, now under the leadership of the Pharisees (c. 90 C.E.).

Further comments on this course.

Assignment: Read the Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of Thomas (available on the Web, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/thomas.html>).

## Literary Criticism and the Basic Message of Mark

- I. In literature the whole to a surprising degree determines the meaning of the parts. For example, often the meaning of a word or sentence depends on its context.
- II. Structural features shape the meaning of the whole. Note the influence of key passages, such as introductions, conclusions, transitional summaries. We normally assume that the most important points appear in such passages.
- III. Hence, we can make use of structural analyses to arrive at a hypothesis concerning the overall meaning of Mark's Gospel.
- IV. A good test of whether such a hypothesis is accurate is if it can shed light on difficult passages.
- V. Two such passages in Mark are
  - A. 4:10-12. Why does Mark tell us that Jesus does *not* want the crowds to understand what he is saying and be converted?
  - B. 8:22-26. Why does Mark include a story in which Jesus has to take two tries to heal someone? Matthew and Luke omit it.
- VI. The structurally important opening verse of Mark is interesting ("The Beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, God's Son").
  - A. It contains no verb.
  - B. It may be a title. The present title of the gospel "According to Mark" presupposes the existence of other gospels and is not original. As we shall see, Mark is probably the earliest of these books.
- VII. Mark's opening suggests that the book is only the "beginning" of the good news and that we might look for the book's midpoint when the first person declares that Jesus is the Christ and look for the climax when the first person declares that Jesus is God's Son.
- VIII. Both of these passages are odd.
  - A. In 8:27-9:1 Peter first confesses that Jesus is the Christ (Messiah) but, strangely, Jesus tells him not to speak to anyone about him and insists that he and his true followers must "take up their cross" (8:34).
  - B. In 15:37-39 the centurion confesses that Jesus is God's Son just after Jesus has died as a criminal.
- IX. A hypothesis on the basic structure and message of Mark.
  - A. Structure



1. The confession of Peter (8:27-9:1) divides the gospel into two halves.
  2. The centurion's confession is the climax (15:39).
  3. In the first half of Mark we have a lot of material about Jesus's earthly glory which leads to Peter's inadequate confession.
  4. In the second half we have a lot of material about the need for the cross.
- B. Message: The beginning of the gospel is the awareness that before we can rightly confess that Jesus is the Christ (Messiah), the Son of God, we must first confess in word and deed that he is the one who suffered.
- X. A closer look at the gospel confirms this basic hypothesis about its structure.
- A. Chapters 1-8 contain almost all of Jesus's miracles. Notice the summary in 8:19-20 and the following miracle.
  - B. The cross dominates chapters 9-16.
    1. We first have the passion predictions (esp., 8:31, 9:31, 10:32-34).
    2. Then the arrival in Jerusalem (11:1ff) and the passion itself.
    3. Note that the centurion's confession comes immediately after Jesus's death and the rending of the temple veil.
    4. The original ending of Mark's Gospel does not detract from the centrality of the centurion's confession because the woman *fail* to proclaim the resurrection (16:8). The longer endings do not appear in the earliest and best manuscripts and seem to be due to later scribes who wanted a more triumphant conclusion.
- XI. A closer look at the gospel also confirms that its basic message is that we cannot confess Jesus is the Messiah and God's Son unless we first confess in word and deed that he is the one who suffered.
- A. The story of the transfiguration which follows Peter's confession also makes this point (9:9-13).
  - B. Prior to Peter's confession, only the demons publicly confess that Jesus is God's chosen, and Jesus silences them (1:23-26, 1:34, 3:11-12).
  - C. From Jesus's entry into Jerusalem on, Jesus more and more confesses himself, and now these confessions lead directly to his death. Note, especially, 11:18, 14:61-63.
  - D. Between the confession of Peter and the entry into Jerusalem, Jesus teaches the disciples that he will suffer and that they must follow the road of humble discipleship. In the three major passion predictions (8:31-38, 9:30-35, 10:32-45) we have the following pattern:
    1. A prediction that Jesus will suffer
    2. A misunderstanding or negative response
    3. A teaching from Jesus that humble discipleship is necessary.
  - E. The inversion of the confession of Peter and the denial of Peter (14:53-72; notice the intercalation) confirms the basic message. In the first scene Peter confesses Jesus and objects when Jesus proclaims that he and his followers must suffer; in the second scene Jesus confesses himself and as a result suffers while Peter denies Jesus.
  - F. The healing of Bartimaeus (10:46-52)

1. In this story we have another inversion: Instead of Jesus silencing someone who tries to confess him, he insists that the person be heard.
2. Structurally, this story occupies a key position, since it occurs between the last passion prediction and Jesus's triumphant entry into Jerusalem as the crowds proclaim his messianic mission (11:1-11).
3. In the story Jesus heals Bartimaeus's blindness, and Bartimaeus follows him "on the way" (the way to the cross! the phrase "on the way" occurs in each of the major sections predicting the passion).

XII. Our hypothesis about the basic message of Mark makes sense of the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida (8:22-26).

- A. Just before this section, Jesus rebukes his disciples for spiritual blindness (8:18).
- B. Then in the story Jesus heals blindness in two stages.
- C. Immediately after the story, Peter sees that Jesus is the Christ but fails to see that Jesus and his followers must suffer.
- D. This scene is closely connected with the following scene of the transfiguration. The first scene predicts the coming of the kingdom in power, and the transfiguration occurs "after six days" (9:2; on the same day of the week?) and gives a preview of that triumph.
- E. In the transfiguration God himself declares to Peter and the others that Jesus is his Son. Jesus orders them to say nothing about what they have seen until the resurrection. Then he declares that he like his predecessor (John the Baptist) must suffer.
- F. Hence, the story of the healing of the blind man suggests that if you confess Jesus is the Christ but fail to realize the need to suffer, you are beginning to see, but you still see only very imperfectly and need more healing. Real seeing is knowing that Jesus is God's Son and that we must share in his sufferings in this age in order to partake of his heavenly glory.
- G. Later we will discover that the story also fits into Mark's theology that we must not seek miracles in order to evade the way of the cross.

XIII. Our hypothesis concerning Mark's basic message also explains 4:10-12. Jesus does not want the crowds to understand and be converted before the crucifixion. Conversion prior to the cross would lead only to disaster. Cf. 9:9 where Mark gives us an explicit example of something that is not to be shared until after the resurrection.

Note, especially,

- A. The Parable of the Sower and its explanation which surround 4:10-12 are a warning about the dangers of being converted without realizing the need to suffer. The various types of soil stand for various kinds of Christians, many of whom convert quickly and eagerly but soon fall away due to temptation.
- B. 4:21-23 makes it clear that in due course the message which Jesus has temporarily hidden will be proclaimed.
- C. I think 4:24-25 is a warning to the disciples to take the need for patient

suffering seriously, a warning that, as we shall see, the disciples do not heed.

XIV. An important way that Mark's Gospel manipulates its readers is by giving us more information about Jesus than the characters have and inviting us to see in the words and actions of the characters an irony which the characters themselves do not know.

A. Mark makes it clear to the reader who Jesus is and that Jesus's words are always reliable.

1. Mark reveals Jesus's identity to us already in 1:1.
2. Mark repeatedly makes it clear to us that Jesus's words come true. Note, e.g., the passion predictions.

B. However, the other characters in the story often do not have this knowledge. They wonder who Jesus is and whether what he says is dependable.

C. Consequently, the reader often passes judgment on the characters. For example, we know in advance that Peter is foolish to disregard Jesus's warnings at the Last Supper (14:27-31).

D. This distance between the reader and the characters often allows us to detect an irony in what the characters say. An extreme illustration is the mocking of Jesus.

1. The tormentors of Jesus ironically acclaim him "king," but from the reader's perspective, the joke is on them. Jesus actually is king of the Jews (and the universe), and by torturing and killing him, his enemies are making his reign begin (Francis Moloney).
2. A particularly ironic passage is, "He saved others; himself he cannot save" (15:31), since it actually expresses the core of Mark's theology (Francis Moloney), namely, that Jesus must die in order to save others.

Assignment: Reread Mark, and study chapter 13.

### Mark's Historical Context and Its Significance For His Presentation of Discipleship

I. (review) The primary message of Mark is we cannot confess that Jesus is the Christ, God's Son, unless we first confess in word and deed that he is the one who suffered. An easy way to remember the basic flow of Mark's Gospel is to note the three great confessions that Jesus is God's Son.

A. The first confession (1:11) is addressed to Jesus alone, and subsequently Jesus tries to stop the demons from telling others who he is (e.g., 3:11-12).

B. The second confession (9:7) is addressed to disciples in secret, and Jesus immediately orders them not to talk about what they have heard until the resurrection (9:9).

C. The third confession (15:39) comes from a Pagan Roman soldier and occurs just after Jesus has died.

II. Now we need to see what was the situation that this message originally addressed.

III. Ancient traditions about the authorship and location of the Gospel According to Mark.

A. The attribution of the gospel to "Mark" goes back at least to the second century when the gospels received titles.

B. Papias (early second century) records that he had been told Mark was Peter's interpreter and got his information from him (Eus. E.H. III.29.14-15). Presumably, Papias is referring to the John Mark we know from Acts.

C. Beginning with Clement of Alexandria (second century) we get the tradition that Mark's Gospel came from Rome (E.H. VI.14.6).

IV. Evaluation of these traditions.

A. In my opinion, there is no reason to doubt that the author's name was "Mark." If people had been guessing, they would have picked someone who

1. Was more prominent in the early Church

2. Had been one of the original followers of Jesus. It would have been natural and reassuring to assume that the first gospel was written by an eyewitness.

B. The other traditions mentioned above all deserve to be taken seriously.

C. Nevertheless, we cannot uncritically assume that they are correct.

1. The earliest we can trace these traditions back is at least decades after the composition of Mark's Gospel.

2. The claim that "Mark" was Peter's interpreter helps guarantee the accuracy of the gospel and, therefore, is suspect.

3. That claim and locating the gospel in Rome could have been deduced from 1 Peter 5:13, and 1 Peter 5:13 does not justify these conclusions.

4. "Mark" was a common name at the time, and years after the composition of the gospel, it would have been easy to confuse two individuals having the same name.

V. Accordingly, we must primarily rely on the information we can glean from the gospel itself to determine the situation.

VI. Fortunately, from chapter 13 we can deduce a great deal about Mark's community and what was going on when the gospel was written.

A. In this chapter Jesus talks about the events between his earthly ministry and the second coming.

B. Naturally, much of the material goes back to Jesus and to Old Testament prophecy which Jesus and his first disciples believed that he was fulfilling.

C. However, Mark also must have shaped the discourse. For example, Jesus could not have said, "Let the reader understand" (13:14)!

D. The discourse suggests that Mark and his intended readers were living during the time of the devastating sacrilege and the false Christs.

1. Mark adds "let the reader understand" when mentioning the "devastating sacrilege" (13:14).

2. The opening of the discourse warns about the "false Christs" (13:5-6) even though we do not actually get to their period until verses 21-22.
3. In connection with the sacrilege and the false Christs we get emphatic warnings (e.g., 13:23).
4. Immediately after the mention of the false prophets we have the destruction of this age and the second coming.

E. Hence, the events chronologically prior to the devastating sacrilege in chapter 13 were past from Mark's perspective.

VII. On the basis of Mark 13 and some other material in the gospel, the history of Mark's community was something like this:

A. After Jesus's death and resurrection Mark's community engaged in a long period of evangelism and experienced some persecution.

1. The community preached in the power of the Spirit and healed (13:11; 6:7, 13).
2. It had missions both to Jews and Gentiles and apparently made some converts from each group (13:9-10, 14:9).
3. Hostility and persecution came from both sides.
4. Some Christian converts suffered rejection from their natural families (13:12-13) and looked on the Church as their true family (10:29-30).

B. After this period of difficult progress there was disaster due both to external threat and internal division.

1. Externally, there was unparalleled affliction (13:19) which threatened to destroy the entire community (13:20).
2. Internally, a series of "false Christs" arose who apparently claimed they were bringing in the consummation and would work miracles to protect their followers. Since Mark explicitly tells us that these "prophets" came in Jesus's own name (13:6), and since Mark's intended readers were tempted to follow them, these "false christs" were Christians. The Jewish historian Josephus (who was a contemporary of Mark) tells us of similar non-Christian messianic figures.

C. Mark wrote during the disaster.

VIII. From external sources, as well as Mark, we can conclude that the disaster was the Neronian persecution and the Jewish War. These were the only major disasters in church history before the second century.

A. The Emperor Nero blamed Christians for the great fire in Rome (64 C.E.) and began executing Christians who lived in the capital. Nero reigned until 68.

B. From 66-70 Jews and Romans fought a long war which culminated in the Roman re-conquest of Palestine and the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. Probably both sides persecuted Christians. Notice that Jesus's speech in Mark 13 responds to the question of when the temple will be destroyed and that the phrase the "abomination of desolation" (Mk. 13:14) refers to the defilement of the temple in the Old Testament (Dan. 9:27, 1

- Mac. 1:54).
- IX. Scholars disagree over precisely when and where Mark wrote during this disastrous period, but, in my opinion, such precision is not necessary to understand the gospel.
- X. We can now see that the gospel was a direct response to the crisis.
- A. (review) Mark's message is that we cannot confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, until we confess in word and deed that he is the one who suffered.
  - B. We may assume that the "false Christs"
    - 1. Were promising that through their miraculous powers Christians could escape the sufferings of the Roman persecution and the Jewish War.
    - 2. Were claiming to be faithful to Jesus, especially since he and they were miracle workers.
  - C. By stressing that Jesus called us to suffer, Mark's gospel implicitly warns Christians not to pay attention to the false Christs.
- XI. We can verify that Mark's Gospel is a direct response to the crisis by looking at the theme of discipleship.
- A. Mark suggests that the primary role of disciples is to be with Jesus (3:14) and imitate his example.
    - 1. The disciples replace Jesus's family (especially, 3:31-35) and will meet him at his second coming (13:26-27).
    - 2. The disciples are to share in Jesus's saving authority (e.g., 3:14-15), including his secret knowledge (4:11, 33-34) and power to work miracles (3:15, 6:7).
    - 3. They are also to share the humble, trusting, self-sacrificing life of Jesus (6:7ff; 8:34; 9:35; 10:43-44).
  - B. As Mark's narrative goes on, the disciples increasingly fail in all their roles.
    - 1. They understand less and less. At one point Mark deliberately parallels the ignorance of the disciples who have heard Jesus's private instruction with the ignorance of outsiders who have not (4:12 versus 8:17-18).
    - 2. The disciples seem to lose at least some of their power to work miracles (9:18, 28; note the contrast with 9:38).
    - 3. They increasingly resist the humble, trusting, self-sacrificing life of Jesus. Notice the negative reactions to the passion predictions.
    - 4. In the end the disciples desert Jesus. Note, especially, the deliberate literary contrasts between the watchful Jesus in Gethsemane and the sleeping disciples (14:32-42), between Jesus and Peter at the trial (14:53-72), between the anonymous woman who anoints Jesus and Judas who betrays him (14:3-11), between the command of the young man at the tomb and the silence of the women (16:5-8). Note too the young man who flees naked (14:51-52).
  - C. The disciples fail because they are not prepared to suffer and do not

rely on God to give them strength.

1. Initially they do not understand that Jesus and they must suffer (8:32).
2. Then when they do understand that they must suffer, they are overconfident in their own ability to endure (10:38-39, 14:29-31).
3. They have too little confidence in Jesus's power to save them in times of crisis (4:36-41, 8:14ff.).
4. They do not “watch and pray” (14:38).

D. Mark looks forward to a later time of tribulation when some will remain faithful and endure to the end, whereas others will fall away (4:14-20, 13:5-13). Of course, this later time is the period in which Mark is living.

E. The failure of the disciples in the narrative is a warning to Mark's readers. Notice the three commands to watch in chapter 13 and the three failures of the disciples to watch in chapter 14.

F. I feel that Mark's treatment of discipleship is of continuing value today. Perhaps the most interesting part of this treatment is that Mark insists that even when we intellectually know that we will suffer, we cannot truly know what it will be like and be ready. Instead, the only way to prepare is to rely on God.

1. There are at least two scenes in which the disciples clearly understand intellectually that they will have to suffer (10:38-39, 14:27-31).
2. And in both cases the disciples are completely confident in their own ability to withstand the coming suffering and remain faithful to Jesus.
3. Yet, James and John and Peter all fail when the actual test comes.
4. And the contrast in Gethsemane between Jesus and the disciples is striking (14:32-41).
  - a. Jesus is praying to God.
  - b. The disciples are sleeping.
5. The conclusion follows that in the hour of testing we must rely on God.
6. And Jesus insists that in that hour God will give us what we need to say (13:11).

Discussion: How do you think the original readers would have “completed” the story of the disciples? How would you complete it? What was Mark trying to achieve by leaving the end of the story open?

XII. Some comments on the minor characters in Mark.

- A. I will define a “minor character” as someone in Mark who appears in only one story.
- B. There are many such characters, some named, some not.
- C. Often these characters model ideal Christian behavior (e.g., the woman with the hemorrhage [5:24-34], and Bartimaeus [10:46-52]).
- D. Of course, by using minor characters to model ideal behavior, Mark

underlines the failure of the “disciples.”

E. An interesting feature of the idealized minor characters is that many of them are women, including the woman with the hemorrhage (5:24-34), the Syrophenician woman (7:24-30), the widow who contributes all her “living” (12:41-44), and the woman who anoints Jesus (14:3-9).

F. Some feminist scholars have argued that Mark has a feminist agenda.

Discussion: Do you agree?

G. My view: Mark is not a “feminist,” but it is significant that he uses women as positive role models.

1. In his description of the death of John the Baptist, Mark unfairly portrays women negatively. It is unlikely that two women manipulated Herod into executing John. The historian Josephus recorded that Herod executed John because of John’s growing popularity which might lead to an uprising.

2. The original ending of the gospel leaves the reader with a negative impression about at least some women disciples.

3. It is noteworthy that Luke, who has a “feminist” perspective (see below), omits Mark’s description of John the Baptist’s death and alters Mark’s presentation of the empty tomb to shift blame from the silent women to the unbelieving men.

4. Still, the many times in Mark that women behave ideally suggest that Mark believed that women could be good role models for all Christians.

H. We may also note in passing that many of the idealized minor characters in Mark suffer from physical (e.g., Bartimaeus [10:46-52]), mental (the possessed man in 5:1-20; note vss. 18-20), or social disabilities (Levi; 2:14), and, hence, Mark also believed that the disabled often show us what a Christian should be.

Mark's Theology of Miracles: The Faith that produces miracles is the same faith that demands that we persevere in the way of the cross.

I. Like other early Christian tradition, Mark emphasizes that Jesus worked miracles and gave to his disciples the same power (Mk. 6:7-12).

II. In Mark the miracles of Jesus and his disciples are primarily acts of compassion to people in desperate need (the sick, the hungry, those in danger).

III. Therefore, the miracle stories also challenge readers to give concrete help in non-miraculous ways.

IV. Mark's presentation of Jesus's miracles is unsettling in two respects:

A. Jesus sometimes has trouble working miracles (e.g., 6:5, 9:14-29).

Historically, Jesus undoubtedly did have difficulty working certain miracles, since Mark could scarcely have invented something so embarrassing. What is significant for understanding Mark’s Gospel is that Mark *chose* to include this material and the other evangelists did not.

Compare, for example, Mark 9:14-29 with Matthew 17:14-21 and Luke



9:37-43).

B. Sometimes in Mark Jesus insists that a miracle be kept quiet (e.g., 7:31-37) and sometimes that it come to public attention (e.g., 5:1-20). It is particularly strange that often Jesus's attempts to silence or publicize a miracle seem to have the wrong result.

1. When Jesus tries to silence a miracle, word of the miracle sometimes spreads dramatically (1:40-45, 7:31-37).

2. When Jesus brings a miracle to public attention, sometimes there is no public reaction (5:34) or even a negative one (5:17).

V. As William Countryman has shown, in Mark 7-9 Jesus's power to work miracles decreases.

A. The literarily significant summary in 8:14-21 challenges the disciples (and the reader) to pay attention to what is happening, and then points out that the second miraculous feeding was in every respect inferior to the first. In the second miracle Jesus starts with more bread, feeds fewer people, and there are less leftovers.

B. Note also the surrounding miracles. In 7:31-37, Jesus groans before working the miracle and uses elaborate physical contact. In 8:22-26 Jesus again uses elaborate physical contact and must now take two tries before healing the man completely. In 9:14-29 when Jesus first attempts to work a miracle, the child collapses and appears to have died.

VI. This decrease in Jesus's power to work miracles is due to the decreasing faith of the disciples and others. Notice, especially,

A. Mark repeatedly stresses that faith makes miracles possible (e.g., 5:34), whereas lack of faith does the opposite (e.g., 6:5-6).

B. Despite the first miraculous feeding of the multitude, the disciples have no confidence in Jesus's ability to feed people on other occasions (8:4, 16).

C. In the healing of the boy with an unclean spirit (9:14-29), the father has the least possible faith, while having any at all (especially, vs. 24).

VII. As Countryman suggests, in Mark faith produces miracles, but miracles do not produce real faith. Note 8:11-13.

VIII. When he does miracles, Jesus tries to hush them up if people have no faith, but he sometimes insists on publicizing them if faith is present (e.g., 5:21-54; note that by intercalating two miracles Mark invites us to compare them). I do not believe that 1:40-44 is an exception because

A. The man's claim that Jesus could make him clean leaves open the possibility that Jesus may lack the compassion to wish to do so. In 4:35-41 Mark makes it clear that questioning Jesus's concern for those in danger shows lack of faith. I believe that Mark himself added the words "if you want to" to the story in 1:40-44.

B. By disobeying Jesus's command not to reveal the miracle, the man breaks faith with Jesus and complicates Jesus's mission.

IX. For Mark faith is especially that confidence in Jesus's power and concern that allows people to persist in coming to him or in following him despite obstacles (e.g., 2:3-5, 5:25-34).

X. Literarily, I believe that the most important miracle in Mark is the healing of

Bartimaeus (10:46-52).

- A. It is the last positive miracle in the gospel (the cursing of the fig tree is the only subsequent miracle).
- B. It reverses the pattern of declining miracles.
- C. It provides a transition to the entrance into Jerusalem.

XI. The miracle confirms what we have seen above.

- A. Faith makes the miracle possible.
- B. It leads Jesus to insist on working the miracle publicly with no demand for secrecy.
- C. The faith consists of persistent coming to Jesus with confidence despite obstacles.
- D. We may also note that the public miracle produces no reaction from the crowd.

XII. The story strongly suggests that the faith that works miracles also leads people to follow Jesus to the cross. After Jesus heals him of his blindness and compliments him on his faith, Bartimaeus follows Jesus "on the way." The phrase "on the way" (8:27, 9:33-34, 10:32) repeatedly occurs in connection with the passion predictions. Note that just before his arrest Jesus requests a miracle to save himself from suffering but in faith accepts God's call to suffer (14:35-36).

XIII. In line with the connection of miracles and the cross, Jesus never uses miracles to evade the cross, but precisely the reverse. We can see this from the major sections in Mark dealing with Jesus's miracles.

- A. In 1:21-1:44 we have a series of miracle stories in which Jesus gains approval by his miracles. In this section he tries to work miracles in private and withdraws after working public miracles and hushes up the confession that he is God's Son.
- B. By contrast, in 2:1-3:6 we have a series of (controversy) stories in which Jesus provokes opposition. In this section Jesus proclaims he is the son of humanity. Note that this section begins and ends with aggressively public miracles which provoke Jesus's enemies. Note too that in the opening miracle Mark has intercalated the debate about Jesus's authority to forgive sins so the miracle sparks opposition. The concluding miracle looks forward to the passion.
- C. From 3:7 on
  - 1. Jesus works many of his miracles for the disciples in private, and these wonders teach them they must patiently follow him because he exercises the power of God (especially, 4:35-41, 6:45-52).
  - 2. Jesus continues to try to hush up miracles that lead to popular acclaim. Note, particularly, 7:31-37.
- D. In the passion itself Jesus's detractors challenge him to save himself and inspire faith by working a miracle, to come down from the cross so that people may believe (15:32). Jesus does not comply because
  - 1. To comply would make the cross unnecessary.
  - 2. The faith such a miracle would inspire would not be the persistent trust which Mark advocates.
  - 3. Christ's suffering and death can themselves produce faith, as the

centurion's confession immediately demonstrates (15:39).

4. As we shall see, Jesus is not the earthly Messiah that his enemies challenge him to become.

XIV. A summary of Mark's theology of miracles:

A. Miracles are part of Christian life and practice. Jesus worked them and gave his followers the power to do the same.

B. Normally faith is necessary to work miracles, and miracles do not produce genuine faith.

C. Jesus refused to work miracles to verify messianic claims or gain public approval.

D. The faith that works miracles is the same faith that persists in following on the way of the cross.

XV. Clearly, Mark's theology of miracles is a response to the Christian messianic miracle workers of his own day.

A. (review) Mark warns against "false Messiahs" who work miracles to verify claims and to protect their followers (13:21-23).

B. Presumably, since such figures came in Jesus's name (13:6), they claimed to be following his example.

C. In reply, Mark insists

1. Jesus refused to use miracles to verify claims or to save himself, and he called his followers to suffer.

2. The faith that is necessary to work miracles produces steadfastness in the way of the cross.

3. And genuine faith depends on the love that Jesus's showed by his voluntary suffering (and, by implication, the love that Jesus's disciples show when they voluntarily suffer).

XVI. Since today we continue to have false prophets who claim to work miracles, Mark's theology remains relevant.

Discussion: How would you define a "miracle"? Do you believe in miracles? Do you think that faith produces miracles? Do you think that miracles produce faith? How do you feel about using miracles as the primary way of doing evangelism?

Assignment: Study Mark.

## Mark's Christology

I. A literary analysis suggests that the key to Mark's Christology (doctrine of the significance of Jesus) is three titles: "Messiah/Christ," "Son of Humanity," "Son of God."

A. These titles are prominent in the gospel, including in key literary passages (e.g., 1:1).

B. Mark tends to balance the titles. Two or even three titles appear in close proximity, and one title qualifies another (1:1 [according to most manuscripts]; 8:29-31, 38, 9:7; 14:61-62).

II. Some general observations about Mark's use of Christological titles and

attitudes toward them.

A. It appears that Mark regarded the title "Son of God" as definitive, since it appears at the beginning of the gospel (1:1 [according to most manuscripts]) and the climax (15:39) and is the title that God himself uses (1:11, 9:7).

B. It also appears that Mark considered the title "Messiah" ("Christ") to be insufficient, since he does not allow it to stand alone (1:1, 8:29-31, 12:35-37 [the Messiah is not merely David's son], 14:61-62) unless it is spoken in irony (15:32). Note that the mocking in the passion distances the title "Messiah" from its usual feel.

C. From a historical point of view, Mark's position that "Son of God" is the proper title and "Messiah" ("Christ") is not sufficient is interesting because these titles were often synonymous.

1. Earlier in Jewish history these titles sometimes referred to the same individual (e.g., Psalm 2:6-7).

2. In the first century they continued to do so (e.g., John 1:49), and Mark seems to know this (14:61).

III. The basic concept of the "Messiah" is a davidic king, and Mark realizes this (12:35-37, 15:32).

A. In Hebrew "Messiah" literally means "anointed." "Christ" literally means "anointed" in Greek.

B. Anointing refers to the ancient Jewish practice of applying sacred oil.

C. In the Bible anointing conferred authority, and people could be anointed to various offices (e.g., the high priesthood).

D. Nevertheless, *the* anointed was the king.

E. The archetypal king was David.

F. In New Testament times the Jews looked forward to the coming of a royal successor to David who would liberate Israel and conquer the nations.

G. In Mark's Gospel the crowds apparently want to foist this role on Jesus (especially, 11:9).

IV. Accordingly, the title of "Anointed," as it was normally understood, implied that the "Messiah" was

A. Only a human being, not a divine figure

B. Someone who achieved great worldly success

C. Someone who saved Israel and thereby fulfilled ancient prophecies.

V. Mark wants to affirm and correct this royal Christology.

A. On the one hand, Mark clearly believes that Jesus is the savior who fulfilled God's ancient prophecies.

B. Nevertheless, Jesus is not just a human being, and he suffers rejection in this world.

VI. In correcting the traditional understanding of the "Messiah," Mark wishes to combat the claims of the "false messiahs" (13:21-22). These figures probably sought power and approval by promising their followers protection in this world.

VII. Mark corrects the title "Messiah" in two ways.

A. Jesus is condemned and suffers for the charge of being "King of the

- Jews," and during the passion this title is used with hesitation or irony.
- B. By contrasting "Messiah" with "Son of Humanity" (8:29-32, 13:21-27, 14:61-62). The Jesus who is the Royal Messiah is also the "Son of Humanity."
- VIII. The basic meaning of "son of humanity" was "a human being," but thanks to Daniel 7:13-14, the early church also connected the term with the final judge of the world and the ruler of the age to come (e.g., Mat. 25:31ff.).
- IX. "Son of Humanity" appears in three different types of passages in Mark which indicate three different roles for this figure.
- A. Passion predictions (8:31, 9:12, 9:31, 10:33) and related material (e.g., 14:21). The son of humanity must suffer.
- B. References to the coming final judgment (8:38, 13:26, 14:62). The son of humanity will usher in the end of this age and be an agent of God's final judgment and reign over the new age.
- C. Present sayings (2:10, 2:28). The son of humanity already exercises on earth the authority to interpret God's will. He forgives sins and is Lord of the Sabbath.
- X. These three roles cohere.
- A. Jesus's own human example of suffering while serving God is the basis on which he will judge us at the end of this age (8:38).
- B. Because he will be the agent of God's future judgment and reign over the new world, he can also interpret God's will now. Those who disregard Jesus's words now will suffer condemnation later.
- XI. In Jewish tradition "Son of God" was a vague term which might or might not refer to the messiah.
- A. In the ancient world a son shared in his father's social status and was expected to be totally obedient to him.
- B. Basically, Son of God had the same two dimensions (Oscar Cullmann):
1. It implied being intimate with God and sharing his power.
  2. It also implied total obedience to God.
- C. It was used as a title for various figures who somehow fit one of these two dimensions.
1. Divine figures, especially angels (e.g., Job 2:1). Of course, in Paganism male gods could also be sons of other gods.
  2. Israel (e.g., Hosea 11:1).
  3. The king, including a davidic figure (e.g., Psalm 2:7). Note this usage appears in Mark. Note too that the Pagan Roman emperors also claimed to be "Son" of a god.
  4. Any human being, especially one who showed exemplary obedience to God (e.g., Wisdom of Solomon 2:13, 18).
- XII. As a result of the correction supplied by the title "son of humanity," Mark at the climax of the gospel can let the title "Son of God" stand alone (15:39).
- XIII. Accordingly, Mark's basic Christology includes the following:
- A. Jesus is the predicted Jewish Messiah, though not exactly the sort people expected. He is the son of David, indeed David's Lord, and the King of Israel. As such he fulfills the prophecies. But his rule is primarily

over the coming age rather than this one. Hence, he is infinitely less and infinitely more than an earthly king.

B. He is also the "son of humanity."

1. The one who suffered in obedience to God and thereby gave us an example of costly human obedience.
2. The one who will judge us at the end of this age and reign over the new one.
3. The one who has already exercised on earth the authority to interpret God's will.

C. The above is summarized in the title "Son of God."

XIV. The title "Son of God," as Mark uses it, has two important additional dimensions

A. Jesus exercises the power that belongs to God alone. We see this divine authority in three teaching miracles which precede God's declaration to the disciples that Jesus is his Son. In each of the miracles Jesus shows that he exercises God's mastery over nature. Jesus, like God, stills the storm, provides the miraculous bread, and walks on the water.

B. Jesus makes the God of Israel available to all by abolishing the barriers between us and God.

1. At Jesus's baptism, the heavens (which separate God from the world) are "torn apart," and the Spirit descends on him, and the heavenly voice declares that Jesus is God's Son (1:9-11). Notice that this scene occurs immediately after John the Baptist predicts that Jesus will baptize people with the Holy Spirit.
2. At the transfiguration (9:2-13) the heavenly voice tells Peter to pay attention to Jesus, God's Son, rather than to the ancient Jewish prophets of Moses and Elijah. Then Jesus states that the vision can be shared after his resurrection. "Moses" and "Elijah" probably also symbolize the Jewish scriptures (the "Law and the Prophets"). The story of the transfiguration suggests that Jesus even takes precedence over the scriptures as the way of knowing God.
3. At Christ's death the veil of the sanctuary (which separates God's dwelling from human beings) is torn apart, and a Gentile confesses that Jesus is God's Son (15:37-39).

XV. Jesus makes God available to all by doing at least two things:

A. Through the cross overcoming the barriers that sin has erected between us and one another and God (10:45).

B. Giving his followers the authority in God's name to heal and preach.

XVI. Consequently, Mark's Gospel supports the later theological claim that Christ is both human and divine.

XVII. Mark's Christological reply to the "false prophets," who, as Christians, must have claimed to be faithful to Jesus.

A. Historically, Jesus was not a success but instead deliberately chose suffering and death.

B. Theologically, Jesus was much greater than an earthly savior.

1. As the suffering son of humanity, he died for us.

2. As the Son of God he offers a greater salvation. This salvation
  - a. Is available to all people, not just the Jews
  - b. Includes the forgiveness of sin and deeper communion with God
  - c. Leads to final resurrection and eternal blessedness in Jesus's everlasting kingdom.
- C. Consequently, he can ask us to trust him more deeply and take up our crosses and suffer disgrace and death in this world. When Peter confesses Jesus as the Messiah and then (at the transfiguration) places Jesus on the same level as Moses and Elijah, God tells him to listen to Jesus.
- D. Finally, the only way we can come to know who Jesus really is is by sharing in his humble suffering.
  1. The gospel suggests that people who are not Jesus's disciples can have little real knowledge of who he is. Note the double question Jesus asks in 8:27-29.
  2. However, as the narrative makes clear, even the disciples only half understand who Jesus is, since they refuse to share in his humility and suffering.
  3. Presumably, the "false prophets" thought they knew who Jesus was and had no trouble with the claim that he was "God's Son."
  4. To them Mark replies that even the demons know this in theory (3:11), but we only really learn who Jesus is by being conformed to his suffering servanthood.

## The Problem of Mark's Gospel Originally and Today

- I. In both the ancient and modern world Mark has been a foundation for theology.
  - A. In the first century Mark was probably the earliest gospel and was the basis of Matthew and Luke and provided a literary model for other gospels.
  - B. In the nineteenth century when it was discovered that Mark was the earliest gospel, Mark became the basis for attempts to reconstruct the life and teaching of Jesus.
- II. One reason Mark became a foundation for theology is because both the ancient and modern church found certain aspects of this gospel attractive.
  - A. The first century church apparently appreciated Mark's production of a continuous narrative about Jesus and the use of that narrative to address contemporary problems.
  - B. The nineteenth century appreciated Mark's relatively "non-mythological" feel. Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark does not have miraculous birth narratives or resurrection appearances.
- III. Yet, it is also clear that to some extent both the ancient and modern world abandoned Mark.
  - A. After the appearance and acceptance of Matthew and Luke, the ancient

- world neglected Mark. There apparently were no commentaries on Mark until the late fifth century.
- B. After modern scholars discovered that Mark shaped his gospel to respond to theological and social needs, it became obvious that Mark was only of limited value for reconstructing the life and teaching of Jesus. Hence, scholars who specialize in Jesus turned to other sources.
- IV. The ancient world had problems with Mark.
- A. Matthew and Luke, who probably used Mark as a source, toned down or eliminated Mark's most striking features (e.g., Jesus's difficulties in working certain miracles).
- B. Ancient scribes supplied new conclusions to the gospel which increasingly dominated the manuscript tradition.
- V. The modern world has had problems too.
- A. Conservative scholars have argued that Mark never intended for the gospel to end at 16:8; instead, he was unable to complete the book or the original ending was lost. However, this contention seems most unlikely. The last passion prediction (which previews the rest of the book) also describes the suffering of Jesus in detail but only announces the resurrection (10:33-34).
- B. Radical scholars have tried to "demythologize" the text. Note Mark's many exorcisms.
- C. After almost a century of study, the "messianic secret" (the fact that Jesus tries to keep his identity as the Christ secret) remains a problem; so does the ending at 16:8. (I have given you my solutions to these problems above.)
- VI. We may summarize the problems under two headings:
- A. Mark presents a portrait of Jesus and the disciples that is often unflattering and disturbing.
- B. The universe Mark presupposes (e.g., with demons and miracles) is alien to most modern educated people.  
 {It is perhaps worth noting that the problems mentioned under "A" and "B" can be in tension. For the typical ancient reader the problem with Mark's miracles was that often they were not impressive enough; for many modern readers the problem is that Mark has miracles at all.}
- VII. Mark apparently intends for his gospel to be disturbing.
- A. He likes to challenge the reader by calling attention to a problem and then refusing to give a clear solution to it (e.g., 8:15-21, 9:13).
- B. The ending--which must be a creation of Mark himself--leaves the whole story hanging in midair.
- VIII. In my opinion, the disturbing features accomplish at least two goals:
- A. They force us to focus on the cross. Note, for example, that if Mark had ended his gospel with a triumphant resurrection appearance, that would have inevitably been the literary climax rather than the centurion's confession when Jesus died.
- B. The disturbing features in Mark make us ponder and struggle with the text.



IX. Like all presentations of the life and teaching of Jesus, we may judge Mark on at least two criteria:

A. Does the gospel faithfully transmit the essence of Jesus's original message?

B. Did the gospel successfully address the needs of its own day?

X. I believe the answer to both questions is "yes."

A. The historical Jesus used paradox and riddle to force people to ponder.

B. Jesus was concerned with love and humble service in the face of God's future.

C. Mark applied this style of communication and this ethical perspective to address the crisis of messianic miracle workers in his own day.

XI. Perhaps the gravest problem of all in Mark is the subsequent failure of his prediction that Christ would soon return (9:1, 13:20). I believe that Mark in line with earlier tradition specified a more general hope of Jesus; of course, this more specific prediction did not materialize.

XII. Yet, it is interesting that even Mark's treatment of the imminent second coming is strange in its own terms.

A. Mark insists that no one (not even the Son!) can know when Christ will return (13:32).

B. Hence, all must watch (13:37).

C. We are left without a future (the end could come at any time) and have only the present and eternity.

1. The present is the time when we do God's will at great cost.

2. Eternity is the continuing guarantee of a final reward.

D. We must not seek some greater security than this. Here too, Mark is in agreement with the teaching of Jesus (cf. e.g., Mat. 6:19-21, 25-34).

XIII. Mark is disturbing because it is so faithful to Jesus's message.

Discussion: What do you think of Mark's Gospel?

(time permitting) Appendix: The Problem of Mark 16:9-20

I. Up to this point we have concentrated on the original Gospel of Mark (i.e., 1:1-16:8).

II. Most people in the past and many people still today, however, read the "long ending" (16:9-20), perhaps combined with other additions, as part of Mark.

III. With the long ending, the gospel climaxes not with the centurion's confession at the death of Jesus but with Jesus's final resurrection appearance, ascension, and the disciples proclaiming the Christian message.

IV. Because the climax has changed, the feel of the entire book shifts.

Discussion: Do you think that the long ending is appropriate?

V. My own answer is that the long ending may have been an appropriate way to make Mark relevant to a new period of church history.

A. Mark was written as a pamphlet to address the crisis of the persecution of the Church and the rise of the "false Christs."

B. Under these circumstances Mark's emphasis on the cross and the

ambiguous ending of the book at 16:8 were appropriate.

C. However, Mark's Gospel outlived its original setting and became a foundation for the continuing institutional Church, including its efforts to convert people.

D. A more positive presentation, especially of the resurrection, was now necessary.

E. A scribe produced a more triumphal conclusion, mostly by borrowing material from the other gospels in the New Testament. As a consequence, Mark became more like Matthew, Luke, and John.

F. It is worth noting that 16:9-20 does continue Mark's theme of the failure of the disciples to follow Jesus on their own strength and Mark's theme that the risen Christ nevertheless empowers his followers to do God's work.

G. However, I am not comfortable with the overly positive attitude toward miracles in 16:17-18 which seems at odds with the more cautious treatment of miracles in the original gospel. In 16:9-20 miracles seem to produce faith.

H. Now that we are able to reconstruct the original setting of Mark, it is probably best to concentrate on the original gospel in its actual context and then ourselves struggle with the issue of how to apply that gospel to different situations today.

Assignment: Read Matthew

## The Basic Message of Matthew

Discussion: Does the Church need to have an official leadership? Do church leaders sometimes abuse their power and, if so, why do they forget their responsibilities?

I. There are literary indications that 28:16-20 is the climax of Matthew and contains its essential message.

A. These are the final verses.

B. As the concluding resurrection appearance which also contains a definitive command and promise from the risen Lord, 28:16-20 is extraordinarily impressive.

C. Matthew repeatedly points forward to this scene (26:32, 28:7, 28:10).

D. The scene has numinous touches (the mountain, the worship, the declaration of universal authority).

II. Three emphases appear in 28:16-20:

A. Through Jesus God is calling a new holy people into being. This people is under Christ's patronage and is open to all.

B. To call this holy people into being, Christ creates a new leadership and gives it authority.

C. This new holy community and, especially, this new leadership have serious failings and need Christ's continual support and guidance.

Matthew explicitly says that "some [or, "they"] doubted." Of course, Christ

- promises to be faithful.
- III. These same themes appear in other key passages (as well as elsewhere).
- A. In the opening genealogy
1. God's people are now entering a new era, since with Jesus we begin the seventh set of seven generations. There is a hint that in this era the Gentiles will come in, since there are Gentile women in the genealogy.
  2. In the past God has worked through an official, chosen leadership. Matthew in contrast to Luke traces Christ's ancestry through Solomon and the kings of Judah and Zerubbabel.
  3. Nevertheless, this leadership has had serious failings and performed its appointed role only by God's grace. Note, especially, the inclusion of Tamar and Bathsheba who were the occasions by which Judah and David sinned (see Gen. 38 and 2 Sam. 11).
- B. In 16:13-28 which is perhaps the most important transition in Matthew. Notice that Matthew's version of this story differs drastically from the one in Mark, since Matthew has added a commendation of Peter.
1. Jesus will found a "church"--a new holy people which will endure.
  2. Jesus sets up an authoritative leader, Peter, giving him the power to impose community discipline.
  3. Nevertheless, perhaps even more than Mark, the text underlines the weakness and sinfulness of Peter whom Jesus calls "Satan." Contrary to his usual practice, Matthew expands this section taken over from Mark by actually attributing words to Peter and adding words to Jesus's harsh response.
- IV. Accordingly, the central message of Matthew's Gospel appears to be as follows: God through Christ has called into being a universal, holy community and set up a new leadership over it. However, this community, and, particularly, its leadership is sinful and will need Jesus's continual guidance to endure.
- V. The theme that through Jesus God is calling a new holy people into being implies that the Church is now replacing Israel as God's chosen people, and Matthew more or less states this (e.g., 8:11-12), particularly in the Parable of the Vineyard and the Tenants (21:41, 43).
- VI. This new holy people comes out of Israel and inherits its promises and obligations.
- A. Matthew stresses the Jewish heritage of Jesus and the Church (e.g., the davidic descent).
  - B. He insists that during his lifetime Jesus restricted his mission to Israel (especially, 10:5-6).
  - C. He stresses that Jesus fulfills and upholds the Jewish scriptures.
  - D. Probably Matthew himself and the majority of his church were ethnically Jewish.
- VII. In line with the Church replacing ethnic Israel and inheriting its promises and obligations, the new leadership now exercises the old authority of the scribes. Matthew explicitly acknowledges the former authority of the scribes to interpret

scripture (23:1-2) and calls a Christian leader "a scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven" (13:52).

VIII. Matthew warns that the new leaders will be tempted to follow the bad example of the old and use their power for self-aggrandizement and crush the poor, particularly the morally poor.

A. Matthew complains that the scribes

1. Preach but do not practice (23:3)
2. Seek their own glory (23:5)
3. Crush others with legal demands (e.g., 23:4)
4. Manipulate the law by over subtle reasoning (23:16-22)
5. Concentrate on minutiae and neglect love and justice (23:23)
6. Exclude people from the holy community and access to God (e.g., 23:13).

B. Matthew knows that the members of the Church and, especially, her leaders could fall into these same patterns, and he warns

1. We must do God's will and not be like false prophets who bear no fruit (e.g., 7:15-23).
2. We must not use titles like "father" and "rabbi" (23:8-10).
3. We must be patient with the little ones and the lost (ch. 18).

IX. The old holy people and their leaders lost their privileges and experienced historical disaster (including the destruction of Jerusalem) because of their misconduct (e.g., 23:29-36).

X. The new holy people and their leaders face the even more frightening prospect of final judgment on the basis of works. It is noteworthy that we will be judged on how we have treated the *least* (ch. 18, 25:31-46).

XI. Historically, the Church has tended to pay more attention to the authority that Matthew accords to it and its leaders than to Matthew's warnings. I think it is particularly important to remember that law (e.g., on divorce or homosexuality) must not become an instrument for crushing the weak.

XII. Matthew's treatment of Peter's denial suggests that the leaders of the Church must repent and live (26:69-75). Peter recognizes what he has done and weeps, and Matthew believes that Peter is the foundation of the future Church.

XIII. Perhaps today too the leadership of the Church needs to repent of its past abuses of power and live. There are signs that this is beginning to happen. Note, for example, the pope's apologies for the historical sins of the Catholic Church and for sexual misconduct by the clergy.

Assignment: Study Matthew.

## Matthew's Historical Context and Response to It

I. Matthew's Gospel was probably written between 80 and 100 C.E.

A. Matthew looks back on the fall of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. as a past event (especially, 22:7), and so a date before 80 is unlikely. Note that 22:1-14 is an allegory.

B. Matthew's bitter polemic against the Pharisees (especially, ch. 23)

- presupposes that they are in control of Judaism, and they assumed this position no earlier than around 80 C.E. Prior to the destruction of the temple the high priests dominated Jewish religious and political life, and the high priests were at least predominately Sadducees (Acts 5:17).
- C. As we will see later, Matthew probably used Mark as a source and, since Mark wrote around 70 C.E., Matthew must have written subsequently.
- D. Ignatius, who was martyred around 110, makes use of Matthew, and a date after 100 is unlikely.
- II. Because of Matthew's polemic against the Pharisees and his strong Jewish interests, the gospel was probably written in or near Palestine, possibly at the early Christian center of Antioch (today near the border of Turkey and Syria). Ignatius was bishop of Antioch.
- III. The author was probably a second generation Christian who may not have had the name "Matthew." Scholars today use the label as a convenience.
- A. To be sure, church tradition beginning with Papias (c. 130) attributes the gospel to Matthew, one of the twelve apostles, and the book's present title reflects this attribution. The twelve were an inner core of Jesus's followers.
- B. However, the church tradition is questionable.
1. Papias's testimony is late and problematic: "Matthew compiled the reports in the Hebrew language, and each one interpreted them as best they could." The gospel is in Greek!
  2. Church tradition tended to attribute gospels to apostles to guarantee their accuracy.
  3. Only Matthew's Gospel tells us that the tax collector named Levi in Mark and Luke (Mk. 2:14, Lk. 5:27) was called Matthew (Mt. 9:9, 10:3), and this fact could have led early Christians to conclude that the author was Matthew the apostle. This conclusion then could have led to the title which can scarcely be original, since it presupposes a collection of gospels.
  4. There are weighty reasons for assuming the apostle did not write the gospel.
    - a. The gospel is in good Greek.
    - b. It apparently depends on Mark.
    - c. The gospel focuses on Peter, not Matthew.
    - d. It is not likely that the apostle would still have been alive in 80 C.E. (the *earliest* the present gospel could have originated). In the ancient world most people died before turning fifty.
    - e. The gospel does not feel like an eyewitness account. The gospel takes the "call" of Matthew from Mark (John Meier)!
    - f. The gospel sometimes focuses on later issues (e.g., the authority of church leaders).
- IV. In the period 80-100 C.E. three major things occurred in church history:
- A. Jewish Christians were expelled from the synagogues, and the Church became increasingly Gentile. The expulsion was part of the consolidation

- of Judaism under scribal (Pharisaic) leadership after the Romans crushed the Jewish Revolt (66-70 C.E.). Once Christians were no longer able to attend the synagogues, missionary efforts to convert Jews were doomed, and the Church became more and more Gentile.
- B. Institutional structures developed. In the early second century Ignatius campaigned for a threefold ministry of bishops, priests, and deacons throughout the Church.
- C. Except for periods of crisis, expectation of Christ's imminent return lessened.
- V. It is harder to determine the gospel's specific social context, but probably Matthew was writing for a Christian community which was still predominantly Jewish and was bitter over the (impending?) expulsion. Certainly, the tone of the gospel suggests some such situation.
- VI. In his social situation Matthew had to deal with three basic questions which are related and remain important.
- A. How do Christians know that they (and not the Synagogue) are the chosen of God?
- B. How do Christians know that their leaders have authority and, particularly, authority to interpret the law?
- C. What contact do we have with Christ if he lived some time ago and his return is delayed?
- VII. Matthew's answer to how Christians know they are God's community
- A. The scriptures (i.e., the Jewish scriptures) point to Jesus as the fulfillment of God's plan. Note the pervasiveness of the formula quotations ("This took place in order to fulfill . . ."). We must also note,
1. Today it seems unlikely that Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament in the detailed way that Matthew claims.
  2. Nevertheless, the basic prediction of the Old Testament/Hebrew Scriptures is that God will become present to his people in a dramatic new way, and I believe Matthew was right to affirm that this happened through Jesus. The Old Testament also predicts that through Israel, the Gentile world will come to know God. And it is undeniable that the Hebrew Scriptures became available to the world primarily through the Church.
- B. Jesus rose from the dead and has assumed authority over all things and called the Christian Church into being.
- VIII. Matthew's answer to how Christians know their leaders have authority
- A. Historically, Jesus chose a group of people and gave them authority. (Whether Matthew has a doctrine of apostolic succession is less clear.)
- B. The risen Lord supports and guides them.
- C. Jesus has also warned them to avoid the hypocrisy and oppressiveness of the old Pharisaic leadership, and church leaders will have to give an account of their stewardship.
- IX. Matthew's answer to what contact we have with Jesus now
- A. We have Jesus's teachings in the gospel. Note that when we read Matthew, the stories about Jesus feel like the past, but the speeches of

- Jesus feel like he is addressing us (Willi Marxsen).
- B. We have the leadership whose authority goes back to Jesus himself.
- C. We have the glorified Christ in our midst to guide us (18:20, 28:20).
- X. In contrast to Mark, Matthew needed to respond to the challenge of defining the identity of the Church as a continuing institution separate from institutional Judaism.
  - A. (review) The Gospel of Mark was a response to a temporary crisis and did not envision that the present world would last must longer.
  - B. Matthew, by contrast, seems to assume that the world will last.
  - C. And, as we have seen, Christianity and Judaism were becoming separate (and antagonistic) religions.
- XI. Matthew's achievement in his historical situation was that he managed to affirm both the Church's Jewish heritage and also the Church's right to go beyond that heritage.
  - A. (review) Matthew everywhere affirms the Jewish scriptures.
  - B. Matthew preserves much more of the teaching of Jesus than Mark does and even organizes it into long discourses with sections on various topics.
  - C. (review) Matthew affirms the historical fact that Jesus's earthly mission was only to Jews (10:5, 15:24).
  - D. Yet, the gospel stresses that the Church has a mission to all the world and suggests that baptism has replaced male circumcision as the means by which one joins God's holy people (especially, 28:19). Note that unlike male circumcision, baptism is equally available to women.
- XII. I think Matthew was able to achieve this because he believed
  - A. Jesus was the goal and fulfillment of the Old Testament.
  - B. Jesus's death and resurrection shatter the old universe and allow for radical new possibilities (note 27:51-54 and 28:2-4).
  - C. God has guided and will guide the community to fulfill an unchanging plan to save the world.
  - D. Accordingly, we are both anchored in the past and open to new things. The ideal Christians "brings out from their treasure new things and old" (13:52).

Discussion: How can we be anchored in the past and open to the future?

Assignment: Read Leviticus 19 and study Matthew.

### Antisemitism and Matthew's Gospel

- I. One of the most monstrous things in Christian history is the Church's persecution of the Jews.
- II. Matthew's Gospel has helped feed this evil. Here we may particularly emphasize the dangers implicit in the scene where the Jewish crowd says, "His [Jesus's] blood be upon us and upon our children" (27:25).
- III. In a post-holocaust era we may note
  - A. When Matthew wrote, the Church was suffering persecution from the "orthodox" (rabbinic) Jewish community.

- B. Matthew is an attempt to explain to Christians why they should not abandon their faith.
- C. Hence, Matthew has to emphasize the negative features of rabbinic religion.
- D. Moreover, in first century religion and philosophy generally, it was common to attack other viewpoints with extreme rhetoric. Matthew's antisemitic material is less virulent than New Testament attacks on "idolatrous" Pagan religion (e.g., Romans 1:19-31).
- E. Consequently, Matthew does not give a balanced, let alone charitable, view of orthodox Judaism. For a balanced understanding of Judaism we must turn elsewhere.
- F. Matthew's church was a persecuted minority which was powerless, whereas later the Church was a persecuting majority preying on the powerless Jewish community.
- G. Matthew's antisemitism is not ethnic, only religious.
1. Matthew's church had many Christian Jews in it.
  2. Matthew sees the Church as continuing the historical mission of Israel.
  3. Matthew has no quarrel with the Jewish people, only with Pharisaic religion, particularly its leadership. At various points in Matthew's Gospel the Jewish people respond positively to Jesus (e.g., 21:8-11).
- H. Matthew does not claim that any Jews bear some permanent stain because of the death of Jesus.
1. Matthew believed that the "guilt" of the Jewish crowd and its leadership for calling down the blood of Jesus on their own heads was fully punished in the destruction of Jerusalem (e.g., 23:36).
  2. In the gospel, the blood which the Jewish crowd calls down on their heads is, ironically, the *atoning* blood of Jesus (26:28; John Boyle).
  3. Historically, as Matthew realizes, the destruction of Jerusalem was caused by some Jews rejecting Jesus's message that we must overcome our enemies through love and instead resorting to violent revolt.
- I. It is perhaps also worth mentioning that beginning in the second century, Judaism rejected such violent nationalism and adopted the teaching of Hillel which emphasized being charitable toward Gentiles and living in peace.

### Matthew's Theology of Law

Discussion: Does goodness consist primarily of keeping a set of rules? If so, what are the rules we should keep, and why? If not, what does goodness consist of?

I. Much of Matthew deals with "law."

II. In Matthew, as in first century Judaism generally, "law" designates two



related things

- A. The ancient regulations of Moses (and, to some extent, the traditional oral interpretation of them developed by the Pharisees). These regulations included both ethical and taboo prescriptions and helped keep the Jews separate from the Gentiles.
  - B. The scriptures, particularly the books of Moses (i.e., the first five books of the Bible).
- III. Matthew's teaching on "law" is rich and confusing.
- A. Sometimes Matthew writes as if the Mosaic Law (and even its oral interpretation) is unconditionally valid (5:17-18; 23:2-3).
  - B. More often, though, Jesus in the gospel critiques the law.
    - 1. He attacks the oral tradition as a betrayal of the Mosaic regulations (15:1-6).
    - 2. Yet he can also set aside Mosaic regulations (see below).
  - C. Jesus's criticism of the law is paradoxical.
    - 1. Sometimes he attacks the law as being too lenient and drastically extends its demands (5:21-48).
    - 2. Yet sometimes he drastically reduces its demands (12:12, 17:24-27; perhaps 15:11) and insists that his own "yoke" is light (11:29-30).
  - D. It is unclear how Jesus's discussion of the law applies to Gentiles, since they were never subject to the Mosaic Law. Jesus's followers are supposed to teach the Pagans to do what he commanded (28:20), but we do not know how much, if any, of the "law" is part of this.
  - E. In light of the above, it is not surprising that scholars disagree over what Matthew's position on the law was. A vexing issue throughout church history has been how to deal with the extraordinarily demanding sayings in the Sermon on the Mount (e.g., 5:27-30).
- IV. The problems in Matthew's presentation are partly due to contingent historical and social factors.
- A. Jesus's own teaching concerning the law was paradoxical (see lectures on Jesus below).
  - B. Matthew's Gospel contains traditions from different periods of his church's history, including probably a conservative Jewish one and a later, more liberal and Gentile one.
  - C. Matthew's legal pronouncements serve two different purposes
    - 1. To criticize the Pharisees with whom the Church was in competition.
    - 2. To give guidelines for Christian behavior, perhaps especially to Pagan converts.
- V. The problems are also due to the fact that Matthew commands us to imitate the goodness of God and yet acknowledges that we are very imperfect and must not be subjected to unreasonable demands.
- A. The standard for human conduct is the selfless moral perfection of God himself (5:45-48).
  - B. Moreover, Matthew insists that real goodness comes from deep within and mere outward perfection is not at all sufficient.

- C. Yet, Matthew also insists that Jesus came to save sinners (9:13) and acknowledges that members of the Church and even its leadership will sin.
  - D. Moreover, he stresses that moral demands must not become crushing (11:30 versus 23:4).
- VI. Still, since Matthew put all the diverse perspectives on law into the same book, we must assume he thought they were compatible, and we must struggle to see how.
- VII. For Matthew (as for other Jews) the "law" is the revealed will of God and so is valid and good.
- VIII. The law includes two things:
- A. Prophecy
  - B. Regulation
- IX. As the normative revelation of God, Jesus fulfills the law perfectly (5:17-18).
- A. He fulfills the prophecies by making their predictions come true.
  - B. He fulfills the regulations by
    1. Obeying them himself. Note, for example, that in his passion, Jesus lives up to the radical commandment not to engage in violent resistance even against abuse (5:39; Dale Allison).
    2. Properly interpreting what they demand
    3. Giving people the power to do what is demanded
    4. Giving others the authority and wisdom to interpret the law after he is gone.
- X. Jesus's interpretation of the regulative law in Matthew
- A. Love is the summary of the law and the principal demand (e.g., 22:40, 7:12, 19:19). Hence, it allows us to distinguish what is central from what is peripheral and to disregard the peripheral when occasion requires (e.g., 12:12).
  - B. The essence of love is mercy (9:13, 12:7), especially to the least and the enemy.
  - C. If the command to love is being kept, then Jewish Christians should keep the other less important commandments too, including the oral law when it is sincere and accurate (5:18-19; 23:2-3, 23).
  - D. The extremely radical demands that Jesus makes (e.g., loving enemies) both
    1. Give us a moral vision that constantly urges us to grow
    2. Make us humble and dependent on Jesus who is especially loving to the lowly.
  - E. Once one has accepted the vision of perfection and received Jesus's forgiving love, one can begin to love from the heart and discern what must be done in specific situations.
  - F. Consequently, one can begin moving toward keeping the radical commandments which point in a certain direction, but are not to be taken literally.
  - G. By his training of the disciples, his teaching legacy, and his continuing presence in the community, Jesus gives the leaders of the Church the power to interpret the demands of the law in new situations.

H. This power is especially necessary now, since the Church must provide guidance for the Gentiles who are not subject to the Mosaic rules.

I. Both the radical commandments and the interpretation of the law by the Church point us to the perfection that ultimately we will have in the age to come.

Assignment: Study Matthew

## Matthew's Christology

I. Matthew's Christology is rich and complex.

II. The gospel gives us a bewildering variety of titles for Jesus, each of which has complexities of its own.

A. "Son of God"

1. In many cases Matthew like the Old Testament uses this as a title for the Messiah (e.g., Mt. 16:16; cf., e.g., Ps. 2:6-7). Note that Matthew emphasizes that Jesus is King of the Jews (see below).
2. Nevertheless, for Matthew the title also points to Jesus's mysterious origin in God (1:20) and his risen lordship over all things (28:19).

B. Son of humanity.

1. Matthew's usage of the title reflects Mark's.
  - a. Originally, the title simply meant "human being," and I think Matthew remembers this because Jesus often uses the title in the gospel without causing a stir (e.g., 11:19).
  - b. Sometimes in Matthew the title is identified as the one who has authority on earth (e.g., 9:6).
  - c. Often the one who will suffer (e.g., 17:12).
  - d. Sometimes the apocalyptic judge (e.g., 25:31). This usage ultimately goes back to Daniel 7 (especially, vs. 13).
2. Matthew makes it clear that we, Jesus's human followers, are to imitate Jesus in each of his roles as a "son of humanity."
  - a. Of course, we must imitate Jesus in his obedient suffering by taking up our cross (e.g., 20:27-8).
  - b. Because we do take up our cross, we will somehow also participate in judging the world (19:28).
  - c. Because we have suffered and will judge, we too have the power to interpret the law and pronounce forgiveness of sins. Notice Matthew's special conclusion to the story of the healing of the paralytic on the cot (9:8). Of course, this conclusion coheres with other passages in the gospel in which Jesus gives the power to bind and loose (16:19, 18:18).

C. Lord. The title is very elastic and can mean anything from "sir" (perhaps 8:2) to "God" (perhaps 25:37).

III. The gospel also compares Jesus to figures in the Old Testament. Here the two most important are Moses and David.

- A. Jesus is the new and greater king from David's line (e.g., 1:1, 2:2ff.) who will save Israel.
  - B. Jesus is the new and greater Moses who gives the new and better law (see above). Matthew patterns much of the material about Jesus's birth on Moses's (e.g., 2:20; cf. Ex. 4:19).
- IV. Matthew also has narrative Christologies--characteristics of Jesus that are not encapsulated in title or type but which emerge in Jesus's actions. Here we may especially note that Jesus is a healer from God and a teacher who embodies God's own Wisdom.
- V. The richness and complexity of Matthew's Christology result from his attempt to combine and honor three things:
- A. The Christologies of his sources, especially, Mark.
  - B. Various perspectives from the Jewish scriptures (the Old Testament).
  - C. His own original perspectives.
- VI. The complexity of Matthew's Christology should warn us not to oversimplify. Jesus is many things to Matthew.
- VII. Nevertheless, to me (and I am not alone) literary criticism suggests that Matthew's overarching Christological idea is that Jesus is "God with us."
- A. This idea appears near the beginning of the gospel (1:23) and in the climactic conclusion (28:18-20) and elsewhere (18:20) and is literarily very significant.
  - B. "God with us" seems to summarize the leading Christological ideas in Matthew. As "God with us" Jesus
    1. Fulfills the promises of the Old Testament. Perhaps the most basic promise of the Old Testament is that one day God will be fully with his people.
    2. Reveals and interprets God's will and is the one through whom we see the Father (11:25-30).
    3. Exercises the miraculous saving power of God as healer and helper (14:22-36).
    4. After his resurrection rules over the universe.
    5. Gives us the authority to go out and save the world and abides with us as we do so.
    6. All of this makes it clear that for Matthew Jesus is divine.
- VIII. I think that what Matthew did in response to the religious crisis of his day was to insist that we must come to God through a person rather than a code.
- A. Judaism, especially after 70 C.E., held that studying and obeying the Mosaic Law was the way to discover God's will and serve him. This approach
    1. Reinforced a distinctive ethnic identity that allowed Judaism to survive after it lost its homeland and many of its central institutions (e.g., the temple).
    2. Produced an alternative reality, the Jewish home and neighborhood, in which God was visible in all things.
    3. Used that alternative reality to point to the life to come.
  - B. Matthew, by contrast, suggested that God could only be fully known

and served through a person, a person whom God specially called into being, a person whose deeds and words Matthew presents. This approach

1. Allowed Christianity to become an international religion that did not require some ethnic core.
2. Made God visible primarily in people whose own lives reflected that of Jesus (i.e., the “saints”).
3. Was the “mystical” basis for the most distinctive doctrine of Christianity, namely the divinity of Christ, a doctrine that Matthew stresses. What do you think of Matthew's Gospel?

Assignment: Study for midterm; after midterm, read Luke-Acts.

An Additional Reflection: The New Testament's--and, particularly, Matthew's--Portrait of Peter and Its Significance

I. With the exception of Peter, we know almost nothing about the biographies of the first followers of Jesus.

II. By contrast, we can at least sketch Peter's life.

- A. His real name was Simon, and his father's name was Jonah (e.g., Mt. 16:17).
- B. He apparently came from Bethsaida, a town near the Lake of Galilee (Jn. 1:44).
- C. He got married and worked as a fisherman.
- D. In response to Jesus's call, he left work and followed Jesus from place to place.
- E. Jesus gave him the nickname of “Cephas” (Greek: Petros), “Rocky.”
- F. Jesus made him a member of the Twelve who apparently symbolized the new Israel that Jesus was calling into being.
- G. At one point Peter made a dramatic confession supporting Jesus.
- H. Either at this time or at another Jesus rebuked Peter sternly, calling him Satan. Apparently Peter was urging Jesus to start acting like a king and let Peter share in his earthly glory.
- I. Peter was present at the Last Supper and followed Jesus to the high priest's palace after Jesus was arrested.
- J. There under questioning he panicked and denied being associated with Jesus. He then deeply regretted his actions.
- K. Subsequently, Peter was the first (male) who had a resurrection appearance, and his faith helped reassure others.
- L. He along with John and Jesus's relative, James, became the leaders of the church in Jerusalem.
- M. In the early debates about whether Gentiles had to become Jews in order to join the Church, Peter seems to have taken a moderate position.
  1. He agreed that Gentiles did not have to get circumcised or adopt most of the Jewish Law, and he himself began to baptize Gentiles.
  2. Nevertheless, he seems to have waffled over whether Jewish and Gentile Christians could eat together without the Gentiles following



VIII. In part the dominance of Peter in the synoptics in general and Matthew in particular is due to Peter's historical importance in the communities from which these gospels came. By way of review we may note

A. Peter may have been the source of much of the synoptic tradition (cf. Papias's claim that Mark was Peter's interpreter).

B. He was apparently the first (male) witness to the resurrection, and his testimony became a foundation for faith (1 Cor. 15:3-5).

C. He was a leader in the early Jerusalem church.

D. He traveled to Antioch (Gal. 2:11), the city where Matthew's Gospel may have originated, and he was apparently martyred in Rome, the city where Mark's Gospel may have originated.

IX. Matthew may also emphasize Peter as a way of supporting a Christianity that was moderately Jewish.

A. Matthew clearly recognizes the legitimacy of Gentile Christianity.

B. Yet, his is the most Jewish of the gospels.

C. Perhaps then Matthew exalts Peter because the latter was a moderate in the debates over how Jewish the Church should remain.

X. It is significant that in non-synoptic traditions Peter does not always enjoy the same prominence. For example, in John's Gospel Andrew is called prior to Peter, and the "Beloved Disciple" is always one step ahead of Peter.

XI. Still, in the synoptics Peter also plays a literary and theological role, particularly in Matthew's Gospel.

XII. As the first disciple whom Jesus calls, Peter symbolizes every disciple, every Christian. Down through the ages preachers have always instinctively known this! As every Christian, Peter symbolizes our natural strengths and weaknesses, and the transforming power of God's grace.

A. Occasionally, Peter's conduct is an ideal to be imitated, as when he leaves everything and follows Jesus (Mt. 4:18-20).

B. Sometimes he asks the questions which we all want to ask (e.g., Mt. 18:21).

C. More often, he is a symbol of our weakness and sinfulness, our lack of perception (e.g., Mt. 15:15-20), our lack of faith (e.g., Mt. 14:30-31), and our lack of steadfastness (especially, Peter's role in the passion).

D. Peter is also a sign that God's grace can use us and restore us despite our failings. The synoptics look forward to the restoration of Peter at the resurrection, and Acts emphasizes his subsequent greatness.

XIII. Perhaps in line with the theme that Peter is every Christian, Matthew stresses both Peter's positive and negative features, sometimes simultaneously. Note, Peter's confession, walking on water, boldness in following Jesus to the high priest's courtyard and cowardice in denying knowing Jesus.

XIV. In addition Peter is also the first *leader* of the Church. He is one of the Twelve, and in the lists his name always comes first, and Matthew even adds the word "first" (Mt. 10:2).

XV. As such he becomes every leader. We can see this from a comparison of 16:19 and 18:18 in Matthew. The same theology appears in other passages in the New Testament (e.g., Lk. 12:35-48).

XVI. A more difficult issue is whether Matthew sees Peter as the *primary* leader of the Church, an impression one gets from 16:17-19. Note that much of the material here appears in other contexts in John's Gospel (Jn. 1:42, 20:23), and, therefore, it seems that in this passage Matthew is expressing his own theology.

XVII. My own guess is that Matthew holds that Peter is the first among equals and, therefore, a spokesman for the leadership of the Church, but not someone who holds authority over other leaders. In Matthew Peter sometimes speaks for the other disciples (e.g., 19:27) but never gives them orders. Of course, when Matthew wrote, Peter was already dead, and Matthew does not deal with the issue of whether subsequent Church leaders derived authority from Peter.

XVIII. For what it is worth, I, as a non-Roman Catholic, would be willing to accept the popes as first among equals in church leadership.

XIX. In the rest of the New Testament several things are also worth pondering.

A. "Peter" uses his authority to support and exhort other Church leaders (e.g., 1 Pet. 5:1ff.).

B. At least in his confrontation with Paul at Antioch Peter was in the wrong (Gal. 2:11-14).

C. At one point in the gospels Jesus warns Church leaders that we should pay more attention to whether people are able to work miracles in his name than whether they are following us (Mk. 9:38-39, para. Lk. 9:49-50).

Discussion: What do you think of Matthew's Gospel?

Assignment: Study for the midterm.

## The Basic Message of Luke-Acts

Discussion: Do you think that a historian can ever be fully "objective"? Should a historian try to be?

I. The Gospel According to Luke and the Acts of the Apostles are two volumes in a single work which traces the story of Christianity from the announcement of the coming birth of John the Baptist until the preaching of Paul in Rome.

A. The gospel narrates the story of Jesus until he ascends into heaven.

B. The Acts then describes the early expansion of Christianity. Note that the preface to Acts explicitly refers back to the gospel.

II. As the gospel preface (Lk. 1:1-4) suggests, Luke-Acts is basically apologetic history.

A. Luke intends to write a disciplined, accurate narrative of actual events.

1. Luke explicitly appeals to eyewitness testimony.

2. In his account Luke deals with things that interest historians, such as rulers and dates (e.g., Lk. 3:1).

3. Luke also strives to include a great deal of information. Luke-Acts is eclectic, and these are the two longest books in the New Testament.

B. The purpose of this narrative is to convince the reader that the Christian message is reliable.

C. I stress that apologetic history is not necessarily dishonest. All



- historians write to achieve some goal and select information accordingly. Similarly, readers turn to different sorts of history to meet different needs.
- III. From an apologetic standpoint Luke had to deal with two embarrassing facts:
- A. The Christian movement had aroused widespread, continuing hostility and appeared to be a threat.
    1. Duly constituted Jewish and Roman authorities had imprisoned or even executed its leaders.
    2. Public opinion had often been negative, and there had even been instances of mob violence.
  - B. The movement had made so many fundamental transitions that it seemed to have no continuing identity.
    1. The movement had begun in the countryside and ended up concentrated in urban centers.
    2. It was originally counter cultural but then tried to become socially respectable.
    3. Initially, it emphasized that the end of the present world would be soon but later had to settle down for the long haul.
    4. Perhaps most important, at first it had been exclusively Jewish but in only a few decades became predominantly Gentile.
- IV. In response to the widespread hostility toward the Church, Luke emphasizes
- A. This hostility resulted from misinformation or sin, and the charges against Christians were groundless. Informed people always recognized that Christians were harmless. Jesus and Paul are both repeatedly declared innocent (e.g., Luke 23:13-15, Acts 26:30-32).
  - B. Christians and, especially, their leaders behaved in an exemplary manner. Luke leaves out the passages in Mark where Jesus calls Peter “Satan” and James and John ask for the best seats in the Kingdom. Of course, by idealizing early Christians Luke holds them up to the reader as models to imitate.
  - C. Popular opinion had often been favorable (e.g., Luke 23:27).
  - D. The Jewish scriptures had foreseen the crucifixion of Jesus, and Jesus himself had predicted the persecution of his followers. Hence, such violence resulted from God's mysterious decree, not from the shortcomings of Christians.
- V. To make the historical transitions seem reasonable Luke does several things:
- A. He structures the narrative so they are gradual and seem inevitable.
    1. Much of the gospel concerns Jesus's journey to Jerusalem (Lk. 9:51-19:27); and much of Acts concerns Paul's journey to Rome (19:21-28:14).
    2. Luke tailors the geography so the narrative moves ever forward (e.g., he places all the resurrection appearances in Jerusalem so the disciples do not have to return to Galilee).
    3. Key transitional events are repeated (e.g., we read three times about Paul's conversion [Acts 9, 22, 26]). Notice how often Paul first preaches in a synagogue and then moves on to preach to Gentiles.

- B. Luke records many signs that show that the transitions were God's will.
    1. The transitions occur after prayer and visions.
    2. The testimony of scripture confirms the transitions.
    3. So does the Spirit.
  - C. Luke shows that the ultimate basis of the Christian movement is always the same: The Holy Spirit who guided everything.
- VI. (A personal reflection): The primary significance of Luke-Acts today.
- A. Luke-Acts remains the best apologetic explanation of the radical changes in early Church history.
  - B. It tells us how to recognize when God is calling the Church to make a fundamental transition (e.g., ordaining women). We must look for the signs of the Spirit (e.g., seeing new things in scripture, noticing what happens during prayer).
  - C. It tells us what the Church's enduring identity is, namely, the people who follow the Spirit, and this is the Spirit who inspired the scriptures and points to Jesus.
- Assignment: Read Luke-Acts.

### The Setting and Historical Accuracy of Luke-Acts

- I. Luke-Acts probably originated between 80 and 100 C.E.
  - A. It cannot be earlier than around 80 because other written gospels apparently already existed (Lk. 1:1), and Jerusalem had already been destroyed (Lk. 19:41-44, 21:20-24).
  - B. It probably is not later than 100, because it shows no knowledge of Paul's letters which had become widely known by that date (note, e.g., the letters of Ignatius).
- II. We can deduce only a little about the author himself.
  - A. There is no good reason to doubt that his name was "Luke." If the Church had been guessing who the author was, it would have picked a more prominent figure.
  - B. However, we have no way of knowing whether he was the "Luke" mentioned in the Pauline letters (e.g., Philemon 24), as later Church tradition claimed.
    1. On the one hand, the Church could have preserved an accurate memory concerning the author.
    2. On the other, since "Luke" was a common name (cf. Acts 13:1, Rom. 16:21), the Church may simply have assumed that two people with similar names were the same individual.
  - C. The author apparently was a second generation Christian (Lk. 1:2-3).
  - D. His elevated style and ability to imitate different ways of speaking suggest he was well educated.
  - E. He probably wrote primarily for Gentiles (especially, "Theophilus;" Lk. 1:3, Acts 1:1) living outside of Palestine. Luke drops Aramaic terms (e.g., "abba") and adjusts material to fit extra-Palestinian circumstances (Mk.

- 2:4 versus Lk 5:19; Mt. 7:27 versus Lk. 6:48-49). Of course, the narrative of how Christianity got to Rome would be interesting to this group of people.
- III. Scholars disagree over how historically reliable Luke-Acts is.
- A. Conservatives argue that Luke is very reliable.
  - B. Radicals hold that the gospel and, even more so, the Acts are often untrustworthy. Several things invite skepticism about Acts:
    1. We have no knowledge of what sources of information Luke had for the early history of the Church.
    2. The early Church would have been more concerned to preserve accurate information about Jesus, its Lord, than about subsequent history.
    3. Some of the stories in Acts seem
      - a. Fantastic (e.g., the story of the conversion of the Ethiopian Eunuch; Acts 8:26-40).
      - b. Unsavory (e.g., the destruction of Ananias and Sapphira; Acts 5:1-11).
    4. The above suggests that often Acts draws on popular legends about the early Church.
- IV. Ancient historians generally wrote with several different goals in mind including
- A. To produce accurate accounts of past events
  - B. To inspire and edify their readers
  - C. To entertain
- V. Clearly Luke shares all of these goals.
- A. He expressly states that he wishes to produce a reliable narrative (Lk. 1:1-4)
  - B. This narrative does inspire the reader.
  - C. At many points it is deliberately dramatic (e.g., Acts 27).
- VI. One crucial question concerning Luke's accuracy is how far would he go in using his imagination to "reconstruct" some event or speech when he had little hard data. My guess is that Luke sometimes went pretty far and that Acts 27, for example, is mostly creative writing.
- VII. Of course, when Luke did not have hard data, neither do we, and so this question must be left largely unanswered.
- VIII. Another crucial question is whether the "we" passages in Acts (16:10-17, 20:5-15, 21:1-18, 27:1-29, 28:1-6) are eyewitness testimony (either Luke's or someone else's). Conservative scholars hold that they are. Radical scholars have suggested that the use of "we" could be a literary device.
- A. This device appears in contemporary popular literature.
  - B. The discrepancies between what Luke us tells about Paul and what we learn from Paul's letters suggest that Luke may not have known him personally. For example, in Acts Paul is an impressive preacher, whereas in 1 and 2 Corinthians Paul admits that his preaching is poor (e.g., 1 Cor. 23-4, 2 Cor. 10:10).
- IX. Fortunately, occasionally we do have independent accounts of events which

Luke describes. For example, in Galatians 2:1-14 Paul gives us an independent account of what seem to be the same events that Luke describes in Acts 15:1-35.

X. When we look at such parallel accounts we discover that

A. Luke idealizes. Acts 15 stresses that the proceedings were basically harmonious, contrary to what Paul reports.

B. Luke makes things simpler and more logical. In Acts the church sends Paul and Barnabas, whereas Paul insists that he went "in response to a revelation" (Gal. 2:2).

C. Apparently, Luke makes some factual errors. From what Paul tells us (Gal. 2:6), it seems unlikely that the decree in Acts 15:23-29 came out of the meeting in question.

D. Nevertheless, the basic "drift" of what Luke records seems to be accurate.

XI. When we look at Luke's use of written sources (especially, Mark), we see basically the same: Luke sometimes idealizes and simplifies, but on the whole he is careful to retain the essential information.

Assignment: Read Luke-Acts

## Luke's Theology of the Oppressed

Discussion: Who are the oppressed, and why should we help them?

I. Literarily, one of the most important scenes in Luke-Acts is Jesus's visit to Nazareth in 4:16-30. The passage contains Jesus's inaugural sermon, is very dramatic, and foreshadows key themes (e.g., the death of Jesus and the coming of the gospel to the Gentiles).

II. The section makes it clear that Jesus and the Spirit liberate the oppressed (4:18-21).

III. In line with this theme, Luke-Acts shows a special concern for marginalized groups.

### A. Women

1. Luke has a special interest in material about women. He likes to alternate stories about men and about women (e.g., Luke 13:6-21) and stress that women were present along with men (e.g., Acts 17).

2. In Luke-Acts God vindicates women, particularly when they suffer criticism from human beings (Lk. 1:25, 1:48, 1:60-63, 7:36-50, 10:40-42, 24:1-32, Acts 12:13-16 ).

3. He sometimes portrays women playing leadership roles (e.g., Acts 18:26), though on the whole he emphasizes male leadership.

### B. The poor

1. In line with traditional Jewish teaching, Luke emphasizes that the poor are sometimes especially holy (Lk. 21:1-4, Acts 3:6).

2. He stresses that we must share what we have with the poor and not oppress them (Lk. 3:10-14, 14:12-14, Acts 4:34-35, 20:35).

3. He insists that in the next world, economic roles will be reversed, and the poor will be blessed, whereas the rich will suffer (Lk. 6:20-

26, 16:19-31).

C. Social outcasts ("sinners"), including tax collectors (e.g., Lk. 18:9-14), immoral women (e.g., Lk. 7:36-50), even a bandit (Lk. 23:40-43). Jesus gives to outcasts inclusion, forgiveness, and the promise of salvation.

D. Other powerless groups: the sick, children (e.g., Lk. 1:17), Samaritans (e.g., Lk. 10:25-37).

E. A particularly noteworthy "oppressed" individual is the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:26-39).

1. In addition to having a physical "disability," eunuchs could not become Jewish proselytes (Deut. 23:1).

2. Yet, Luke exalts this Ethiopian.

a. He is a model of piety, since he comes to worship at Jerusalem and is studying scripture on his return home.

b. He is apparently the first Gentile convert in Acts and more than any other character fulfills Luke's vision of the gospel traveling to the "end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Ancient "Ethiopia" was the area south of Egypt (especially, the kingdom of Meroe, today in the Sudan) and the Greeks considered it to be the limit of the world.

3. For a modern American reader, it is noteworthy that an ancient "Ethiopian" was black.

IV. Luke's concern for the oppressed is based on both justice and mercy.

A. There must be justice for those who through no fault of their own are disadvantaged.

B. There is mercy for everyone else (Lk. 15).

V. Some aspects of Luke's social theology that seem particularly profound to me.

A. The oppressed are all who suffer deprivation and can even include the rich and powerful if they happen to be despised or sick.

B. Luke never suggests that the oppressed are necessarily virtuous or that despised sinners cannot be held morally responsible for their conduct (Lk. 23:40-41!).

C. Instead, the reason the oppressed are to be helped is simply that they are in need and God loves them.

D. However, precisely because they are in need, they may be more open to receive the good news and more able to respond with gratitude and love (Lk. 7:36-50).

E. Luke has no blanket condemnation for the rich but does make it clear that they are at a spiritual disadvantage and must be generous and just (Lk. 12:48).

F. Luke's concern for social justice does not lead him to advocate violence (Lk. 22:51).

VI. As a historian Luke holds up the early history of the Church as a social challenge.

A. Historically, Christianity moved from being marginal to being mainline. By the time Luke was writing, the transition was well under way.

B. Luke reminds us where the Church came from (women, sinners, the poor) and invites us to remember them.

VII. Some implications of Luke's theology of the oppressed for personal psychology.

A. One problem with which biblical scholars need to struggle is how to make the social categories of biblical thought relevant to the psychological categories of so much modern thought.

B. In my opinion, the way to do this is to remember that the inner voices of the disordered psyche are the internalization of the outer voices of the disordered society (the dysfunctional family, the racially oppressive "system," the sexually confused culture). Note that as we overcome the outer divisions which produced the inner ones, the inner ones tend to get better. E.g., if we reconcile with our parents, the destructive inner parental voices start to go away.

C. As we deal with the psychological "monsters," Luke's theology would suggest

1. We should seek to discover whether or not these parts of us are sinful.
  - a. On the one hand, we may be unfairly evaluating certain aspects of ourselves.
  - b. On the other, we really may have disordered desires that are sinful.
2. We should recognize that God is most concerned about and loving toward those places in us which are hurting, precisely because they are hurting.
3. We should give justice to those aspects of our personality we have unfairly condemned.
4. We should grant forgiveness and love to the others.
5. We should recognize that the parts of us that we most reject will be the ones which will allow us to love God the most once we have let God's love touch them.

Assignment: Study Luke-Acts

## Luke's Spirituality

Discussion: Does prayer get answered? How?

I. Luke has a special interest in prayer and worship.

A. He often has references to prayer in scenes where Matthew and Mark omit them (including, Jesus's baptism [Lk. 3:21], the choosing of the 12 [Lk. 6:12], the confession of Peter [Lk. 9:18], the transfiguration [Lk. 9:28-29])

B. Prayer and worship occur at key transitional scenes in church history (e.g., the baptism of the first Gentiles [Acts 10]).

C. He has many references to the temple and the synagogue. Notice that the gospel story begins and ends in the temple and that Jesus's inaugural

- sermon takes place in a synagogue.
- D. And there are many references to sacraments (baptism, Eucharist, laying on of hands) and spiritual gifts and states (tongues, prophecy, visions).
- II. Hence, Luke felt that prayer and worship were an essential part of Christian life, and through them God guided the Church to make the transitions we discussed earlier.
- III. He felt that Christians should
- A. Engage in prayer and worship regularly (e.g., Lk. 24:53, Acts 1:14).
  - B. Particularly engage in prayer in times of crisis or decision making.
- IV. Luke believed that prayer and worship are only effective when they are done sincerely and are genuinely directed toward God (Lk. 18:9-14, 20:46-47).
- A. Luke rejects all magic, even when it is done in the name of Jesus (Acts 19:13-19; cf. Acts 8:18-24).
  - B. In Luke-Acts characters do not ask God for selfish things and do not seek self-gratification from spiritual experience.
- V. Luke's theology of how prayer is answered.
- A. Luke insists that God always answers sincere prayer positively (Lk. 11:5-13), and this principle is borne out in the narrative, even under the most seemingly hopeless circumstances (Lk. 1:13-20, Acts 12:3-17).
  - B. However, sometimes in order to receive a positive answer, we must persevere in prayer (Lk. 18:1-8).
  - C. The primary answer to prayer and worship is the coming of the Holy Spirit or the renewing and deepening of her presence (Lk. 11:9-13, Acts 4:23-31). I think this is profound. The primary answer to prayer is the deepening of God's presence in our lives. With the Spirit come several things
    1. Forgiveness of our own sins and the ability to ask God to forgive people who have wronged us. Note that sin is primarily what separates us from God and the life he gives; prayer and the Spirit overcome this separation.
    2. A mission to advance God's work in the world.
      - a. The discernment of what our mission is (e.g., Acts 13:2-3).
      - b. The strength to persevere in it (Acts 4:23-31).
    3. Charismatic gifts, including tongues, healing, and prophecy. "Tongues" like weeping and laughter are sounds that have no dictionary meaning but express emotion directly. Hence, tongues can produce great communion and healing.
    4. Joy and praise, especially as we participate in God's mission (Lk. 1:39-55).
- VI. Some comments on the Lord's Prayer, particularly as found in Luke (11:2-4). I am using the NRSV translation.
- A. There are basically two forms of the Lord's Prayer which have come down to us.
    1. A longer form in Matthew 6:9-13 and Didache 8:2-3.
    2. A shorter form in the better manuscripts of Luke.

Matthew 6: 9-13

Our Father in heaven,  
May your name be kept holy;  
May your kingdom come;  
May your will happen on earth  
as in heaven.  
Give us today our "daily" bread,  
And forgive us our debts,  
As we also have forgiven our debtors.  
  
And do not bring us into temptation,  
But deliver us from evil.  
[For yours is the kingdom and the power  
and the glory forever. Amen.]

Luke 11:1-4

Father,  
May your name be kept holy;  
May your kingdom come.  
  
Give us each day our "daily" bread,  
And forgive us our sins,  
For we ourselves forgive everyone  
indebted to us.  
  
And do not bring us into temptation.

B. Basically the version in Luke is the original. The longer version apparently arose when the various sections of the prayer were expanded to explain the meaning and perhaps to make the prayer more suitable for liturgy.

C. Note that the Lukan context insists that if we persist in praying, God will answer us positively (11:5-13).

D. Some comments on the various sections. For these comments I am especially indebted to Jeremias, Perrin, and Duling.

1. "Father"

- a. This probably reflects Jesus calling God "abba." Apparently, Jesus was innovating when he used the vernacular (Aramaic) word for father to address God.
- b. In the first century world, fathers played a somewhat different role than they often do in the United States today.
  - 1). The father was the undisputed authority within the family and its primary economic support.
  - 2). The father normally worked at home.
  - 3). Therefore, the father had a much more prominent role in raising the children than he has in most American homes today.
- c. Addressing God as "Father" suggests
  - 1). Our trust in him
  - 2). God's great love for us
  - 3). That God provides for our material and spiritual needs



- 4). Our willingness to obey him as someone who exercises final authority.
- d. The different roles which parents fulfill today at least raise the issue of whether we may want to supplement the use of "father" with "mother" in addressing God. Personally, though, I do not think we should do this with the text of the Lord's Prayer.
2. "Hallowed be your Name. Your kingdom come."
  - a. This probably is a condensed form of a more elaborate synagogue prayer which was being used during Jesus's lifetime.
  - b. As Matthew's context for the prayer suggests, the condensation is in line with Jesus's belief that prayer should be humble and, therefore, brief (Mt. 6:7-8).
  - c. The center of Jesus's message was the coming of God's rule when God would be honored and his loving will would be done. Notice the expansion in Matthew.
  - d. Jesus taught that God's rule was already becoming present in his own words and deeds, but that the kingdom would also later come in power.
  - e. The greatest wish of his followers was to be that this kingdom would come both through their own actions in the present and through God's mighty act in the future.
3. "Give us each day our daily bread."
  - a. The Greek word translated here as "daily" is rare, and its meaning is not certain. Another possibility is "necessary for existence."
  - b. Jesus taught that we should ask God for what we need and that God is concerned about our material well-being.
  - c. Nevertheless, we are to live one day at a time, trusting that God will provide for tomorrow.
  - d. Luke probably has substituted "each day" for "today" to make the prayer apply more generally.
  - e. The prayer for daily bread is an implicit criticism of seeking riches. We only ask God for what we truly need.
4. "And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us."
  - a. Here too Luke seems to be generalizing.
  - b. He has correctly rendered the original intent of the prayer by using the present tense in the words "for we ourselves *forgive*." The prayer does not claim that we have forgiven. Instead, as we ask for God's forgiveness, we declare that we now do forgive. Jesus taught that we cannot receive God's forgiveness if we ourselves hold grudges.
  - c. It appears that the Aramaic original used the words "debts" which, as Luke's change indicates, clearly includes

"sins."

- d. Nevertheless, as various scholars (e.g., Douglas Oakman) have pointed out, debt was a major problem for the rural poor of Galilee, and Jesus's prayer certainly included a pledge to extend financial mercy to those in great need.
5. "And do not bring us to the time of trial."
  - a. The intent here is that God would spare us from trials. Note Matthew's expansion.
  - b. A striking feature of Jesus's teaching is that he never advocates volunteering to act heroically. As human beings we are to pray that we be spared the worst.
  - c. However, we must do whatever God requires of us ("your kingdom come"). Jesus and the early Church taught that when God asks us to face some severe trial, he will in that moment give us new resources. Notice that in his larger context for the prayer Luke talks about God's gift of the Holy Spirit.
  - d. Since, I personally am not inclined to be heroic, this is my favorite petition in the prayer.

Assignment: Study Luke-Acts

(time permitting) The Eucharist in Luke-Acts

- I. Food in general, and meals in particular, are a major theme in Luke-Acts. These come up often in material that only Luke has (e.g., John the Baptist's exhortation to share food with the hungry; Luke 3:11) or in places where we would scarcely expect (Paul getting everyone to eat just before the ship wreck [Acts 27:33-38]).
- II. Two themes especially surface in this material about meals and food, and these encapsulate the Christian message as Luke presents it.
  - A. Christianity teaches that no one should go hungry. Notice, for example, the contrast between the behavior of the rich man in respect to Lazarus (Lk. 16:19-31) versus the early Church in Acts where Christians repeatedly took action so that every person would have enough to eat (Acts 4:32-34, 11:27-29, 20:34-35).
  - B. Christianity teaches that no one should be socially excluded. More specifically:
    1. A theme in the gospel is that Jesus eats with sinners (e.g., the story of Zachaeus; 19:1-10).
    2. A theme in the Acts is that in the early Church Jews and Gentiles learned to eat together (11:3-18).
- III. Luke suggests that in the sinful conventional world the structures of economic power and religious exclusiveness are largely responsible for the poor lacking bread and the despised lacking inclusion. Note the parables of Lazarus and the Rich Man (Luke 16:19-31) or the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke

18:9-14).

IV. Luke looks forward to a final judgment in which there will be a reversal and the rich and the prestigious will suffer, whereas the poor and rejected will be blessed (e.g., Luke 6:20-26).

V. As we wait for that judgment, Jesus and the Church model ideal conduct by giving to all food and inclusion and by having the leaders act as servants.

VI. In both the Gospel and the Acts, Luke blurs the distinction between the Eucharist properly speaking and any meal eaten by Christians. In some sense, every meal that believers consume is a Eucharist (Acts 2:42-47). In part this blurring reflects the historical fact that in earliest Christianity (which is all that Luke describes) the Eucharist was still a full meal. Nevertheless, I also believe that Luke deliberately gives a Eucharistic dimension to other meals. Notice, e.g., the breaking of bread in the Emmaus story (Luke 24:3-35).

VII. Perhaps then it is not going too far to say that for Luke the Eucharist properly speaking is the formal sacramental sign that all Christian meals are sacred.

VIII. In his narrative of the institution of the Eucharist Luke has two major insertions into the Mark's narrative.

A. The dispute among the disciples concerning who is the greatest and Jesus's teaching that in the church (as opposed to the fallen world) the greatest must be as the least (22:24-27).

B. The promise that the twelve will eat at Christ's heavenly banquet and judge Israel (22:28-30).

IX. Luke seems to be insisting that the Eucharist is the primary symbol of

A. The responsibility of the Church and, especially, its leaders not to use power to oppress others but to be servants of everyone, particularly those who are most vulnerable. Nevertheless, Luke assumes that the Church must have leaders and even believes that this leadership will somehow continue into the next world.

B. The hope of a new order of existence in which the structures of exclusiveness and oppression will be no more.

X. In his narration of the institution of the Eucharist Luke also strengthens two themes that already appear in Mark.

A. Luke stresses more than any other evangelist that the Eucharist was a Passover meal. Notice Jesus's emphatic words found only in Luke, "I have greatly desired to eat this Passover with you . . ." (22:15). Note also that Luke has two cups of wine which probably accords with a Passover practice that he knew.

B. Luke also places a greater stress on the theme that the next time Jesus dines with the disciples will be in the kingdom, since Jesus says this twice, once with the bread and once with the wine (22:15-18).

XI. Yet, despite the emphasis that Jesus will not dine with the disciples again, Luke more than any other evangelist emphasizes that the risen Jesus did eat with the disciples (e.g., Acts 10:40-41), and in the famous scene when Jesus breaks bread at Emmaus, we have Eucharistic language (24:30, 35).

XII. In his eschatology Luke stresses both

- A. A preliminary fulfillment for the individual Christian at death (e.g., Luke 23:43, Acts 7:59).
  - B. A final fulfillment for the entire faithful when Christ returns in glory.
- XIII. Perhaps then Luke is emphasizing that in each Eucharist we celebrate both the partial liberation that we presently enjoy in the Christian community and look forward to full liberation.
- A. We celebrate partial liberation. Just as the Jews at Passover celebrate their liberation from slavery, Christians in the Eucharistic “Passover” celebrate that
    - 1. Jesus has risen from the dead and already reigns as Lord.
    - 2. We belong to a community in which bread and dignity are available for all.
  - B. We look forward to the greater liberation to come.
    - 1. At death the individual Christian will join Jesus in heavenly glory.
    - 2. In the fullness of time Jesus will definitively bring his kingdom on earth.
- XIV. And because we celebrate these themes at every Eucharist, every (other) Christian meal is a sign of fellowship in food and forgiveness and of an ultimate hope of dining together in the kingdom.
- XV. Unfortunately, in subsequent church history the Eucharist became a means of reinforcing hierarchies of exclusion and power.
- XVI. I suspect this happened in part because we forgot Luke’s emphases that
- A. The preliminary fulfillment in the Eucharist primarily consists of inclusion and equality.
  - B. The final fulfillment is still to come.

#### Ascension, Pentecost, and the Achievement of Luke

- I. A notorious problem for students of the New Testament is the great discrepancies between the various accounts of the resurrection.
- II. These discrepancies seem to be due to at least three factors.
  - A. Faulty memory and reconstruction (including apologetic reconstruction). Note that much of what we claim to “remember” is actually reconstruction.
  - B. Theological editing to make diverse points.
  - C. Different “translations” into earthly terms of experiences which were essentially unlike normal experience.
- III. To the extent that we can reconstruct the original experience, it seems to have included the following (in part I am drawing on Charles Perry):
  - A. The appearance of a mysterious and compelling presence which initially could be misunderstood or doubted.
  - B. The growing certainty that somehow this presence was Jesus who had been crucified.
  - C. And the recognition that nevertheless this same Jesus now had divine

- authority.
- D. A command to share the good news.
  - E. A promise that when the command was obeyed Jesus would somehow confirm the testimony. The narratives assume or assert that Jesus kept this promise.
- IV. After a brief period the resurrection appearances ceased.
- V. However, Jesus continued to be present in a different way and still brought peace and joy.
- VI. New converts could know this presence.
- VII. From this experience the early Christians concluded
- A. Jesus reigned as Lord of the universe.
  - B. He had poured out his Spirit on the Church.
  - C. He would soon return, raise the dead, and judge the world.
- VIII. Writing toward the end of the first century Luke had to do two things:
- A. Set forth the complex resurrection experience in a clear and simple way so people like "Theophilus" could make sense of it.
  - B. Answer two crucial questions:
    1. Had the prophecies of Jesus's imminent return simply failed?
    2. What do Christians have now if Jesus may not return for a long period?
- IX. Luke breaks up the resurrection (broadly speaking) into resurrection, ascension, and the coming of the Holy Spirit and places extraordinary literary emphasis on the second two.
- A. In other gospels there is no clear differentiation between the resurrection, ascension, and the coming of the Spirit (note, e.g., John 20).
  - B. By contrast, Luke-Acts carefully separates these and even assigns a different date to each.
    1. The resurrection now is only Jesus's rising from the dead. It occurs on the first day of the week. Subsequently, Jesus appears to his disciples for forty days to prove that he is alive (Acts 1:3).
    2. At the end of this period we have his ascension into heaven where he will reign until he comes again (Acts 1:9-11).
    3. Then on the Jewish feast of Pentecost there is the outpouring of the Spirit (Acts 2:1ff.).
  - C. Luke puts great literary emphasis on the Ascension and the coming of the Spirit.
    1. He refers to both events at the conclusion of the gospel and at the beginning of Acts (Lk. 24:49, 51 [according to most manuscripts]; Acts 1:4-5, 9). To achieve this emphasis Luke had to narrate the ascension twice, and this repetition was so awkward that a few scribes omitted Luke 24:51.
    2. Various other passages in Luke-Acts look forward or backward to the Ascension and coming of the Spirit.
      - a. Passages looking to the ascension (Lk. 9:31, 9:51, 19:11-27; Acts, 2:32ff., 3:21, 5:31).
      - b. Passages looking to the coming of the Spirit (e.g., Lk. 3:16;

cf. Acts 1:5). Of course, after her coming the Spirit guides what happens in the remainder of Acts.

X. By breaking up the complex resurrection experience this way, Luke makes its various dimensions easy to grasp.

A. The "resurrection" (narrowly speaking) emphasizes that Jesus himself is the one who has risen from the dead.

B. The ascension emphasizes that nevertheless this Jesus has now left this world and gone to God and reigns in glory as Lord of the universe.

C. The coming of the Spirit stresses that Jesus is with us in a new way and is inspiring us to go out and preach the good news.

XI. Because Luke's presentation was so easy to follow, it became the standard way of understanding the resurrection and the basis of the liturgical calendar.

XII. However, Luke's presentation also allows more advanced readers to realize that the actual resurrection experience was in fact more complicated.

A. Luke clearly refers to the older tradition that did not separate the resurrection, ascension, and the giving of the Spirit (e.g., Luke 24:26).

B. There are serious contradictions between Luke 24 and Acts 1. For example, in Luke 24 the resurrection appearances all occur in a single day, whereas Acts tells us they occurred over forty days.

C. These contradictions invite more advanced readers to realize that Luke's basic storyline of the resurrection, followed by the ascension, followed by the gift of the Holy Spirit is a simplified account.

XIII. The achievement of Luke

A. As we noted above Luke had to explain the transition in church history from imminent apocalyptic expectation to settling down for the long haul.

B. Luke's achievement was that he gave convincing answers to the questions of whether the prophecies of Jesus's imminent return had failed and what we have as we continue to wait.

1. The promises have not failed, though perhaps there was some misunderstanding (Lk. 21:8, Acts 1:6). The first installment of the promises has taken place, and the final fulfillment, though delayed, will surely come.

2. In the meantime Christians have

a. The remembrance of the compassionate and mighty words and deeds of Jesus.

b. The knowledge that God has made Jesus Lord. Note that since Jesus is our leader, Jesus's exaltation honors us.

c. The knowledge that our sins are forgiven.

d. The presence of the Holy Spirit which gives us joy and power to face hardship.

e. An international community of mutual love and support, bound together by the presence of the Spirit and devotion to Jesus.

f. A world-wide mission to promote spiritual and social change.

g. The hope of immediate life with Christ if we die before the

present world ends. Note that Luke seems to suggest that we go to heaven or hell when we die (Lk. 16:19-31, 23:43; Acts 7:59) and that we can die unexpectedly at any moment (Lk. 12:16-20, Acts 12:20-23). N.T. Wright has shown that in general early Christians believed in immediate life with Christ at death, but it remains true that Luke places a greater emphasis on it.

h. A final hope for all the world.

XIV. There may not have been much that was original in these answers-- basically they appear in Paul, for example--but as an ancient historian, Luke's goal was not to be original but to present clearly to a new generation the insights of the past. I think he achieved this goal admirably.

XV. Discussion: What do you think of Luke-Acts?

(time permitting) The Problem of the Atonement and Luke-Acts

I. A central Christian doctrine is that the death of Jesus somehow overcame sin.

II. The doctrine apparently arose when the first Christians struggled with the question of why Jesus had to suffer torture and die. If God permitted the horrifying death of Jesus, then that death must have been an important part of some plan to save the world.

III. Throughout church history Christian thinkers have proposed various models as to how the death of Jesus brought salvation.

IV. In my opinion, the most successful of these models is that the death of Jesus challenges us by definitively revealing three things:

A. The unconditional love and forgiveness of God.

B. The wickedness of human beings and the fact that in this world the innocent often suffer.

C. What a human being can become through God's grace.

(Of course, the actions of holy people constantly reveal these things partially.)

V. We find all these themes in John's Gospel (e.g., 3:16-17, 15:18-25, 19:26-27).

In the Middle Ages, Peter Abelard (1079-1142) would synthesize such insights in his "moral exemplary theory" of the atonement.

VI. New Testament scholars (e.g., Bart Ehrman) often criticize Luke for not dealing with the atonement. They claim that Luke merely holds that

A. The death of Jesus was necessary to fulfill scriptural prophecy.

B. Salvation comes through repentance, not through the cross.

VII. While it is certainly true that Luke (like the other evangelists) believes that the death of Jesus fulfills scripture and that repentance is necessary for salvation, I think that in Luke the cross reveals the love of God, the wickedness of human beings, and what we can become through Jesus. Note, especially,

A. Luke's emphasis on the mercy of God (e.g., Luke 6:36).

B. His emphasis that the crucifixion is the culmination of the heinous sins of God's people (Luke 20:9-19, Acts 7:51-53).

C. His further emphasis that God's people do not realize that they have

sinned until the apostolic proclamation that they killed God's savior and that they must now repent (Acts 2:14-42, 3:11-26).

D. That the Roman soldier who supervised the crucifixion realizes after the death of Jesus that Jesus was "innocent" (Luke 23:47).

E. Jesus asking God to forgive those who are killing him and Stephen's similar request (Luke 23:24, Acts 7:60). Jesus's prayer demonstrates God's mercy (since God will surely grant his Son's request), and Jesus provides an example of the mercy that his followers can and should reveal. Note incidentally that the parallelism between Jesus's and Stephen's prayers demonstrates that Luke 23:24, which is missing in some ancient manuscripts, does go back to Luke.

### Luke-Acts and the Problem of Unity in Diversity Then and Now

I. As we have seen, Luke-Acts describes the transition of Christianity from a Jewish sect to an international religion.

II. In describing this transition, Luke has to deal at least implicitly with a series of issues involving diversity. Among those issues:

A. Do human beings have a "natural" basis (i.e., a basis not founded in a common historical or cultural experience) for unity?

B. If so, what is the reason that human beings have been at odds with each other throughout history?

C. How can we overcome the historical divisions between different ethnic, social, and linguistic groups?

III. Luke seems to hold that human beings have a natural unity as children of God and descendants of Adam. Like other Christians of his era, Luke apparently takes Genesis 2 literally and assumes that we are all descended from a single person, Adam, who in turn was directly created by God. Because we are created by God we have a natural orientation toward him.

A. Luke traces Jesus's own genealogy all the way back to Adam and reminds us that Adam in turn was from God (Lk. 3:38). By contrast, Matthew only deals with Jesus's Jewish ancestry, since Matthew stops at Abraham (the first person in the biblical narrative to receive circumcision; Mt. 1:1-2).

B. Paul in his speech to the philosophers at Athens declares that

1. Human beings have a common ancestor (Acts 17:26) whom God created.

2. Everything that we have and are participates in God and is sustained by him. "In him we live and move and have our being" [17:28; Paul is quoting a Pagan philosopher].

3. Because we all have a common ancestor who was made by God and we all participate in God, Paul in Acts suggests that we share a common goal of coming to know God (17:27).

IV. Nevertheless, according to Luke, outside of Judaism human beings lost knowledge of God. In his speech to the philosophers at Athens Paul dismisses the



Pagan past as one of “ignorance” (Acts 17:30), and throughout Acts Luke regards Pagan religion as foolishness (e.g., 14:15).

V. Following Genesis, Luke probably regards the divisions between different linguistic and national groups as the result of past sin. Notice, for example, that in Genesis the development of different languages (which make it difficult for human beings to communicate) was the ultimate result of human defiance of God (see Gen. 11:1-9).

VI. Luke feels that fundamental unity among human beings must come through the gift of the Holy Spirit (which people receive when they believe in Jesus).

Note, especially,

A. That the coming of the Holy Spirit on the church at Pentecost symbolically overcomes linguistic division (Acts 2). Every linguistic group hears the disciples speak in its own language.

B. At the Apostolic Council the definitive argument that Gentiles can be fellow Christians is that they too have received the Spirit (Acts 15:8-9).

VII. Thanks to the unity among diverse Christians which results from the Spirit, Christians can be one without having to adopt some ethnic code. The Apostolic Council does not require Gentiles to adopt the Mosaic Law. The only “ethnic” requirement that the Council makes is for Gentiles not to eat blood, apparently so that early Christians can dine together (Acts 15:29).

VIII. There are three basic models for how to achieve unity between human beings, and each of these models has problems:

A. Assimilation. Unity is achieved by a dominant ethnic group imposing its culture. The problem with this model is that it is oppressive.

B. Pluralism based on a common humanity. Unity is achieved by claiming that the features that all human beings share are sufficiently strong that we do not need to agree on ethnic customs. The problem with this model is that in practice our common humanity seems insufficient to prevent discord (e.g., wars).

C. Pluralism based on sharing a common social framework which enables diversity. Unity is achieved by some common political (e.g., constitutional democracy), religious (e.g., loyalty to the Pope), or experiential (e.g., the struggle for human rights) commitment which is so fundamental that we can be one without having other things in common (e.g., a language). The problem with this model is that we have to agree on what the common social framework should be.

IX. We may note that in some respects Luke is “politically correct.” Like “liberals” today he

A. Rejects assimilation.

B. Believes that we have a common humanity which includes fundamental “spiritual” orientations.

C. Believes that there is a system that can allow people to live together in unity despite differences in ethnic backgrounds and loyalties.

X. Nevertheless, the “system” that Luke advocates is not politically correct.

A. He does not claim that a mere commitment to diversity will achieve the necessary harmony.

B. Instead, he holds that a common religious experience and faith are necessary for true unity, and he insists that only Christianity can provide them.

Discussion: How do you feel about Luke's solution to the problem of unity within diversity? What is your solution?

## Source Criticism and the Synoptic Problem

I. "Source criticism" is the art of discovering the unacknowledged written sources which an author used. Note that source criticism is *not* concerned with oral sources.

II. Basically, there are two different situations in which one does source criticism and two different sets of questions one asks depending on the situation.

- A. We actually possess all of the documents in question, and we ask
1. Is there literary dependence (i.e., did the author of one of the documents make use of one or more of the others)?
  2. If so, what is the direction of the dependence (i.e., which document was the source)?

B. We possess only the final document but suspect that its author drew on unknown written sources, and so we ask

1. Did the author actually use such sources?
2. If so, can we deduce something about them?

III. Some rules for determining whether there is literary dependence when we possess all of the documents

A. The occurrence of the same ideas in the same sequence suggests literary dependence. (It does not *guarantee* it, because such similarities might be due to a common oral source or similar recollections of some event.)

B. Substantial similarities in wording normally guarantee literary dependence.

IV. The basic rule for determining the direction of dependence is, not surprisingly, the document from which it is easiest to explain how the other document(s) originated is the original.

V. Some guidelines for determining the direction of dependence with rationales and cautions.

A. The derivative document is probably the one that reflects the latest historical situation.

1. Rationale: Since the derivative document is necessarily later, it can reflect a situation after the other document was written.
2. Caution: An author may not allude to a recent situation, especially when writing about the past.

B. The derivative document is probably the one that includes more material that is significant and less that is superfluous.

1. Rationale: A copier and editor will tend to omit superfluous material and add significant material obtained elsewhere.

2. Caution: What the author thought was "significant" or "superfluous" may be very different from what we think.
  - C. The derivative document is probably the one that has the better style and more reliable facts.
    1. Rationale: It is easier to recognize and retain good style and accurate information than to produce them. Hence, a copier is likely to retain the virtues of a source and improve defects.
    2. Caution: A later writer may put things in their own (inferior) style and not be able to recognize accurate information, particularly if the information is about events in the distant past.
  - D. The derivative document is probably the one that is less homogeneous.
    1. Rationale: The style and ideas of a source will differ from those of a later author, and, therefore, the use of sources tends to produce documents that are not stylistically or theologically uniform.
    2. Caution: A good writer strives for coherence and may produce a unified document even when using sources.
- VI. Some reflections on the problem of determining if a document depends on a now lost source and, if so, what that source was.
- A. It is difficult to determine if an author used lost sources and, if so, what they were.
  - B. In my opinion, the burden of proof always falls on people who want to hypothesize such sources.
  - C. Some guidelines for determining lost sources
    1. A lack of uniformity in style or content suggests the hypothesis that the document in question may depend in part on a lost written source.
    2. The hypothesis becomes more likely if we can isolate the intrusive sections and show that they are consistent with one another.
    3. The hypothesis becomes even stronger if the style and content of this material fit into some known historical context that is relevant.
    4. The hypothesis becomes stronger still if the reconstructed document resembles descriptions of some document now lost.
    5. However, the hypothesis becomes weaker if there are no surviving testimonies that such a document ever existed and we cannot plausibly explain this silence.
- VII. The synoptic problem: Are the similarities between the synoptics due to literary dependence, and if so, which evangelist copied what?
- VIII. An exercise: What can we deduce about literary dependence from the following passages?
- A. Matthew 3:7-10, Luke 3:7-9.
  - B. Matthew 3:11-12, Mark 1:7-8, Luke 3:16-18
  - C. Matthew 3:13-17, Mark 1:9-11, Luke 3:21-22
- Assignment: Do the portion of the exercise not completed in class.

## The Present State of the Synoptic Debate

I. The data for some sort of literary dependence among the synoptic gospels or common dependence on a lost source (Streeter, Kummel, *et al.*).

A. The synoptics cover much of the same material

1. About 90% of the substance of Mark is in Matthew, and somewhat more than half of the substance of Mark is in Luke.
2. Matthew and Luke also have around 200 verses in common that do not occur in Mark. Most of this material is discourse.

B. In the common material there are extensive verbal similarities in Greek.

1. According to De Solages, of Mark's 10,650 words, 7,768 are in Matthew and 7,040 are in Luke. These figures are a little soft because of textual variations between manuscripts and because of the difficulty of determining whether closely related terms are the *same* word (e.g., "rose" and "arose" in English).
2. More than half of the wording for the common material between Matthew and Luke that is not in Mark is the same.

C. The order of the material is often similar, and "from Mark 6:7 on, Matthew and Luke seldom ever diverge from the Markan sequence" (Werner Kummel).

D. It is most unlikely that these similarities could be due solely to a common memory of historical events because

1. Our other primary sources for the tradition--the gospels of John and Thomas--lack most of these similarities.
2. Although it is possible to remember the words of what someone said, the deeds of someone have no wording. Witnesses must come up with their own descriptive words, and different people will choose different words.
3. The verbal similarities between the synoptics occur in Greek, whereas the sayings of Jesus and the earliest tradition about him must have been primarily in Aramaic. Different translators too choose different words to render the same original text.

II. Because the data for literary dependence is so strong, scholars generally agree that the synoptics must somehow depend on each other or some common lost source in Greek.

III. The data for the direction of dependence or the reconstruction of a lost source.

A. General characteristics of the gospels

1. Length: Luke is longer than Matthew which is longer than Mark.
2. Style: Luke's Greek is better than Matthew's which is better than Mark's. Mark also preserves some Aramaic words (e.g., "abba"; Mark 14:36) when quoting Jesus and in general comes closest to preserving the linguistic patterns of oral tradition.

B. Order

1. When the three gospels diverge and two follow a common order

involving common material, Mark is with the majority.

2. When Matthew and Luke have common material absent from Mark, it seldom occurs in the same place within the outline Matthew and Luke share with Mark.

#### C. Wording

1. In material common to all three gospels, if two agree in wording against a third, Mark is mostly in the majority.

2. Nevertheless, there are cases where Matthew and Luke agree against Mark. Hans-Herbert Stodt with some exaggeration lists 72.

#### D. Material

1. Mark is mostly narrative, and his narratives are often longer and have more incidental details than Luke and, especially, Matthew (e.g., Mk. 5:21-43 vs. Mt. 9:18-26 and Lk. 8:40-56).

2. Most of the material that Matthew and Luke share which is not in Mark consists of sayings from Jesus.

3. This sayings material appears primarily in long sermons in Matthew but is more scattered in Luke.

4. Matthew and Luke also have a lot of unique material. 230 or more verses in Matthew and 400 or more verses in Luke have no synoptic parallel (though sometimes we find parallels elsewhere).

#### E. References to external matters (review)

1. Matthew and Luke seem to look back on the destruction of Jerusalem, whereas Mark does not.

2. Luke in his prologue tells us that "many" have produced accounts of Jesus already.

### IV. The three most popular and likely theories of the source relations between the synoptics and the strengths and weaknesses of each.

#### A. The two document hypothesis

1. The theory holds that Matthew and Luke are independent of each other but both depend on Mark and a lost collection of sayings usually called "Q" (from "Quelle," "source" in German). Matthew and Luke had additional sources from which they obtained their unique passages. This theory triumphed in the nineteenth century and remains the standard one.

2. This theory explains most of the data well. Matthew and Luke improved Mark's style, removed unimportant material and added important material, added references to the fall of Jerusalem, and inserted sayings from "Q," with Matthew and Luke inserting the same passage in different places. The two document hypothesis especially explains why Mark is in the majority when two of the synoptics agree against the third.

3. Nevertheless, there are two major problems

a. The theory does not easily account for the occasional agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark, and so its proponents must resort to a various supplementary explanations (e.g., that "Q" and Mark had some overlaps).

- b. There is good reason to question whether there was a "Q."
      - 1). Since by hypothesis Matthew and Luke used "Q" independently, it is surprising that we have no other evidence for its existence.
      - 2). "Q" does not really resemble any other early Christian document known to us, not even the Gospel of Thomas. "Q" must have contained more than just the sayings of Jesus.
      - 3). Supporters of "Q" have had to postulate different editions of the work to explain all the evidence in Matthew and Luke.
- B. The Griesbach-Farmer hypothesis
  - 1. The theory holds that Luke used Matthew, and Mark used both. Mark produced his gospel by selecting only a portion of the stories and sayings in Matthew and Luke, with a preference for the material common to both, and in this material he conflated the details. This theory was invented in the eighteenth century and was revived in the second half of the twentieth.
  - 2. The theory has the following strengths
    - a. We do not have to postulate a lost document ("Q") which may never have existed (see above).
    - b. We have a convincing explanation of all the agreements between Matthew and Luke, since Luke used Matthew.
    - c. The theory accords with early church tradition that Matthew was the first gospel.
  - 3. Nevertheless, there are serious problems, including
    - a. All the normal rules of source criticism (see previous lecture) support Markan priority, since Mark has the most superfluous material, the worst Greek style, etc.
    - b. The theory makes Mark's "conflation" of Matthew and Luke mechanical, whereas, as we have seen, Mark often writes very thoughtfully (see lectures on Mark).
    - c. Luke's reference to "many" predecessors becomes problematic.
    - d. We can only wonder why the Church accepted Mark if Matthew and Luke were first, since Mark has almost no unique material.
- C. Austin Farrer's hypothesis
  - 1. According to this theory, Matthew used Mark, and Luke used both. To shorten Matthew's sermons, Luke inserted much of their contents into new places in Mark's framework and, of course, Luke included material that he obtained from elsewhere.
  - 2. The theory combines the strengths of the other theories
    - a. It respects the many arguments for the priority of Mark.
    - b. It does not postulate the existence of a problematic lost document.

- c. It explains the agreements between Matthew and Luke and accords well with Luke's claim of many predecessors.
- 3. Still there are problems
  - a. Luke seems much less well organized than Matthew and leaves out much valuable Matthean material that accords well with his own theology. Hence, we have to wonder why Luke did not make better use of Matthew.
  - b. Luke rarely inserts the sayings of Matthew into the same place in the Mark's framework.
  - c. Matthew and Luke do not agree in the material before the beginning or after the end of parallels with Mark. Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark has no narratives of Jesus's infancy or of resurrection appearances, and Matthew and Luke never overlap in this material.

Discussion: Which theory do you prefer and why?

V. My own non-expert opinion is that Mark was surely the first gospel and that Luke made use of Matthew and several other written and oral sources, including ones which Matthew himself used. As a historian, Luke relied most on the oldest sources he could obtain. Hence, there is truth in both the two document hypothesis and Farrer's. However, the actual situation was very complicated because of Luke's eclecticism.

## Redaction Criticism

- I. How an author uses sources says a lot about him or her. How an author alters material taken from elsewhere is especially instructive because it reveals the author's distinctive viewpoint.
- II. Redaction criticism is the systematic study of how an author uses--and, especially, alters--source materials. Redaction criticism tries to determine an author's special social situation and theology.
- III. Redaction criticism presupposes that we have already determined the sources (whether written or oral) which an author used.
- IV. There are three common source situations in which redaction criticism is done.
  - A. The source is written and available (e.g., we know that Luke used Mark, and we have Mark).
  - B. The source was written, and to some degree we can reconstruct it (e.g., we think that Luke used "Q", and by comparing Matthew and Luke we can basically determine what was in it).
  - C. The source was oral.
- V. Redaction criticism is easiest and most reliable in the first situation and becomes more problematic as we go on to the other two.
  - A. When we have an author's written source, we can make a systematic study of how she or he used it, and we can draw secure conclusions.
  - B. If we have to reconstruct a source, our work becomes more

hypothetical.

1. We can only reconstruct a source approximately.
2. The danger of circular reasoning is very great. We run the risk of using theological and stylistic criteria to isolate a source and then using that source to study how the author made theological and stylistic alterations!

C. If we have to reconstruct an oral source, our work becomes even more hypothetical but may still produce significant results.

1. Normally, we cannot assume that an oral source had a fixed wording, except perhaps for punch lines. Hence, a systematic study of redactional changes is impossible.
2. Nevertheless, in synoptic studies we can usually assume that an oral tradition consisted of short units with relatively fixed outlines and that the order of these units was variable.
3. Consequently, we can get reliable redactional insights by looking at the order in which an author arranged units and how he or she linked them.

VI. Since the most reliable redactional studies involve working with an extant source, I will concentrate on this kind of investigation for the rest of this lecture. I will also assume (see previous lecture) that Matthew and Luke used Mark.

VII. Some steps for doing a redactional study of how an evangelist used an extant written source in a particular passage.

- A. Step 1: Compare the passage in the derivative document with the parallel in the source to make sure there is indeed literary dependence. (review) Verbal similarities normally guarantee such dependence.
- B. Step 2: Compare the passages and note all redactional changes, including changes in the larger literary context (especially, in what immediately precedes and follows the section).
- C. Step 3: Look for an explanation of the changes, particularly a theological or social one.
- D. Step 4: Check to see if this explanation makes sense within the larger redactional and literary patterns of the book as a whole.

VIII. An exercise

- A. Study how Luke 3:21-22 redacts Mark 1:9-11.
- B. " " Matthew 8:23-27 " Mark 4:35-41.
- C. " " Luke 24:1-11 " Mark 16:1-8.
- D. " " Luke 9:28-36 " Mark. 9:2-10.

IX. Despite its obvious usefulness, redaction criticism does not always work well and must be employed with caution.

- A. A redactor may change material taken from a source for reasons other than theology or social situation or style (e.g., the redactor may have another source which she or he prefers because it is older or more widely known).
- B. A redactor may sometimes edit arbitrarily or, at least, inconsistently.
- C. A redactor may be even more concerned about the material she or he keeps than the material that is changed. Hence, focusing on the changes



may give a distorted picture.

D. The success of redaction criticism depends on correctly identifying the sources, and sometimes this cannot be done with certainty.

E. Because of these problems redaction criticism is not as popular today as it was in the decades after World War II.

F. Personally, I feel redaction criticism is most helpful when it is primarily used as an aid to an overall literary analysis of a document.

Assignment: Do the portion of the exercise not completed in class.

## Form Criticism

I. The earliest traditions about Jesus were oral, since we have no evidence that anyone was recording Jesus's words and deeds when he was alive.

II. To attempt to reconstruct this oral tradition we must rely on

- A. The synoptics and Thomas which were largely based on this tradition. Please remember that Matthew and Luke are dependent on Mark, and Thomas is dependent on all three.
- B. How oral tradition functions in other contexts
- C. Our imagination

III. Clearly our conclusions must be tentative.

IV. It is likely that the oral tradition about Jesus consisted of

- A. A general story about his life, death, and resurrection.
- B. Small units about specific incidents.

V. There is no scholarly consensus about the general story, how long and detailed it was, how much it may have varied, and how much it was influenced by events after Jesus's death.

VI. It is probable that the small units had no particular order or fixed wording and that the evangelists drew heavily on these building blocks.

A. The synoptic gospels and Thomas mostly consist of short units loosely joined together.

1. We have brief, coherent sections (such as individual stories or sayings of Jesus).

2. These are connected by short, uninformative, and sometimes stereotypic verbal bridges (e.g., "at once," "and he said," "on the next day").

B. As we have seen, the arrangement and wording of these units frequently reflect the special perspective of the different evangelists, and Matthew and Luke sometimes felt free to change the order and wording which they found in Mark. In addition, the gospels often arrange material by topic (miracle stories, debates between Jesus and his critics, parables about the kingdom of God).

C. The Gospel of Thomas has many of the same basic units, but the wording and arrangement are very different.

D. Papias (c. 130 C.E.) states that Mark's order is artificial because Mark got his information from Peter, and Peter adjusted his presentation of

Jesus to fit the needs of the moment (Eusebius, Ecc. His. III.39.15). Whether or not Papias was correct about Mark getting information from Peter's preaching, Papias certainly knew about oral tradition which he himself collected and wrote down.

VII. "Form criticism" is the study of these individual oral units. Specifically, form criticism does the following:

A. It attempts to classify the units on the basis of their structural "form." Here are two such classifications:

1. The pronouncement story: A brief story whose primary purpose is to prepare for a memorable pronouncement of Jesus. The story about paying taxes to Caesar is a good illustration (Mk. 12:13-17, Mt. 22:15-22, Lk. 20:20-26, Thomas 100). Another illustration is the story about Jesus's true family (Mk. 3:31-35, Mt. 12:46-50, Lk. 8:19-21, Th. 99).

2. The miracle story: A story (often long) which has the following basic narrative pattern. (The feeding of the multitude [e.g., Mk. 6:35-44] and the stilling of the storm [e.g., Mk. 4:35-41] are illustrations.)

a. The presentation of a problem (often stressing its seriousness)

b. A record of Jesus saying or doing certain things to produce a miracle.

c. An attestation that the miracle has taken place. This attestation often stresses the certainty or suddenness of the miracle or the amazement of the witnesses.

B. On the basis of this classification, form criticism attempts to specify which elements will change and how and which will remain fixed as the unit is repeated orally.

1. In a pronouncement story the actual pronouncement (the punch line) will tend to remain the same, but the other elements will vary, unless they are essential to get to the punch line. Thomas's version of the unit about paying taxes to Caesar illustrates the rule (Th. 100).

2. In a miracle story elements "a" and "c" will tend to vary (often being heightened), whereas element "b" will tend to remain the same. The various versions of the feeding of the multitude follow the rule.

3. In any one oral telling, the shape of the variable units will largely reflect the specific situation and goal of the narrator.

VIII. Some steps for doing a form critical analysis of a passage.

A. Separate each coherent unit from its literary context in a gospel and examine all parallel passages.

B. Study the structure and try to determine what elements might change and what might remain fixed as the unit was transmitted orally.

C. Ask what the basic unit (i.e., its "stable" elements) means and how it might have been used in the early Church and what it might have meant in

the teaching of Jesus. Be open to the possibility that the primary meaning of the unit may be different from the evangelist's interpretation.

IX. An exercise. Do a form critical study of the following

A. Mark 4:1-8; Thomas 9

B. Luke 18:1-14

C. Mark 9:48-50; cf. Mat. 5:13 and Luke 14:34-35

Assignment: Do the portion of the exercise not completed in class.

## The Problem of Getting Back to Jesus; One Solution

I. Any attempt to reconstruct the life and teaching of Jesus must rely heavily on the synoptics for they are our best sources of information.

A. John is later (c. 100 C.E.) and more affected by subsequent theology.

B. Thomas is problematic.

1. Its date is uncertain and probably late (mid second century).

2. We cannot reconstruct its earliest form.

3. It does not deal with the life of Jesus.

4. It is dependent on the synoptics.

5. Often it seems more affected by subsequent (Gnostic) theology than the synoptics are.

C. Other sources (Paul's letters, later gospels) contain little that is helpful.

II. (review) The synoptics are the end result of a long and complex transmission process.

A. After Jesus's death and resurrection, people who had been with him remembered his words and deeds and talked about them.

B. This initial tradition was repeated and spread for decades, and much of it was brief oral units with variable wording and order.

C. Around 70 C.E. Mark arranged some of this tradition and fixed its wording and wrote it down.

D. Matthew and Luke then edited this written tradition and added material from the continuing oral tradition and probably additional written sources.

III. This long, complex transmission invites the question of how historically reliable the synoptics are and how we can get secure information about Jesus from them.

IV. Two views about the historical reliability of the synoptics and how to get secure information about Jesus from them.

A. A conservative view: The synoptics are reliable because the transmission was faithful.

1. The early Christians would have wanted accurate transmission because Jesus's words and deeds were authoritative.

2. It was easy to achieve accurate transmission.

a. The words and deeds of Jesus were memorable, especially to his followers.

b. The original witnesses were important in their

communities, and some of these individuals must have been alive when the synoptics were written.

c. In first century Judaism oral transmission was much more accurate than today because

1). The culture stressed memorization of sacred material. Of course, Jesus's followers regarded his words and deeds as sacred.

2). In cultures where most people are illiterate and must rely on oral information, people are more careful not to distort what they hear and repeat.

d. Pre-synoptic written traditions may have been extensive.

e. As Luke explicitly states about himself (Lk. 1:1-4), the synoptic evangelists would have wanted to produce an accurate account and would naturally have consulted the reliable sources and rendered their information faithfully.

f. When synoptic texts diverge, they generally provide different authentic versions (e.g., of a parable which Jesus told in several ways) or selective reporting of the same event.

3. Consequently, we can normally assume that something recorded in the synoptics is historically accurate. The burden of proof is always on those who would question the reliability of a particular passage.

B. A critique of this conservative view.

1. The besetting difficulty of the conservative view is that it often cannot explain the great divergences between texts which must be descriptions of a single event (e.g., the baptism of Jesus, the women finding the empty tomb).

2. In addition, in a number of texts (e.g., the allegorical interpretation of the Parable of the Sower) the influence of later Church perspectives is hard to deny.

3. Nevertheless, the conservative viewpoint has some justification and must be taken seriously.

C. A liberal position: The synoptic gospels are almost totally unreliable, because the early Christians did not remember accurately, and at each stage the transmission process seriously distorted the information about Jesus.

1. It is typical of human memory that after long periods of time people forget or wrongly recall most things, especially details.

2. Mark wrote around forty years after the death of Jesus, and we must assume that after such a long period there was little accurate memory. Matthew and Luke wrote even later!

3. The oral tradition gravely distorted.

a. The oral transmission was uncontrolled and did not preserve the historical order of various traditions about Jesus or their original contexts or the details of the individual units. Instead, Christians molded the genuine

material to address subsequent Church problems.

b. Worse still, the oral transmission added a great deal of spurious material to the genuine.

1. Christians attributed to the historical Jesus statements made by early Christian prophets in the Name of the risen Lord.
2. They attributed to Jesus statements made by Jewish and Pagan figures.
3. They imagined that Jesus must have fulfilled biblical prophecies, and they invented material on the assumption that he did.

4. The synoptic evangelists further distorted because they tailored the oral material to express their viewpoints and address new situations, and they too invented material to fulfill biblical prophecies.

5. Consequently, we should normally assume that something in the synoptic gospels tells us about the early Church rather than about Jesus.

6. To conclude that something in the synoptics actually goes back to Jesus, it must survive at least some rigorous tests. Specifically, it has to

- a. Fit the environment of first century Jewish Palestine, especially the linguistic conventions of Aramaic, the language of Jesus.
- b. Be widely attested in independent traditions.
- c. Be dissimilar to the teaching of Judaism and the early Church.
- d. Be embarrassing to the early Church.
- e. Or, at least, cohere with material that meets "a"- "d."

7. Of these tests dissimilarity and embarrassment are the most important.

8. Little material survives these tests.

D. A critique of the liberal position.

1. The besetting difficulty of the liberal view is that it does not account for the synoptics as they actually are. If the liberal assumptions were correct, the synoptics would be full of obvious references to subsequent history. Yet, on the whole, such is not the case. For example, that the synoptics never discuss circumcision despite the fact that the most important debate in the early Church was over whether Gentiles had to be circumcised.

2. Use of the criterion of dissimilarity drives a wedge between Jesus and both his environment and the early Church and could easily cause us to lose the core of his teaching. Accordingly, recently some scholars have emphasized that any reconstruction of the life of Jesus must plausibly explain

- a. How he could have originated from his Jewish culture and

- his message been relevant to it,
- b. And how Jesus's life and teaching could have led to the early Church.
3. Use of the criterion of embarrassment will unfairly emphasize things about Jesus that are disturbing to believers.
  4. Even environmental and linguistic tests only show that the precise form of a story or saying does not go back to Jesus. The substance still could.
  5. If Jesus believed that he had a special role in God's plan (as seems very likely), he probably also believed that this role had been prophesied in the Bible, and he may have deliberately acted to fulfill certain passages (E.P. Sanders).
  6. Liberal reconstructions of Jesus have produced very different results. It is especially troubling that in liberal reconstructions Jesus usually fits the religious ideals of the liberal in question.
  7. In all probability the Church was concerned about history and did distinguish between the words of the risen Lord spoken through the prophets and the words of the historical Jesus. Luke-Acts is a history and does distinguish between the sayings of the historical Jesus and the testimony of Christian prophets.
  8. Nevertheless, the arguments of the liberals do have some force and cannot be dismissed. Certainly, the transmission produced distortions, and, certainly, dissimilarity and embarrassment do establish that some things must go back to Jesus.

Discussion: Do you agree more with the liberal or the conservative view about the reliability of what the synoptic gospels record?

V. My own approach, which many others might share

- A. The early Church--like the Church subsequently--was concerned with applying the historical teaching of Jesus to address new situations.
  1. The words of Jesus were authoritative and, therefore, worth remembering
  2. But the Church was concerned primarily about its present problems.
- B. What the oral tradition remembered and the synoptic evangelists retained were
  1. The basic cores of individual incidents and sayings (e.g., the outline of the Parable of the Sower)
  2. Continuing or habitual facts (e.g., Jesus had disputes with religious leaders over keeping the Sabbath). Often these were used to manufacture settings for the individual incidents and sayings after the original settings had been forgotten.
- C. The oral tradition and the evangelists did not usually retain the details or the historical order or the original contexts of the sayings and events.
- D. Hence, the oral tradition and the evangelists altered the details, the order, and the settings to suit the needs of the moment.
- E. Because the words of Jesus were authoritative and early Christians

were concerned about contemporary problems, the oral tradition and the evangelists sometimes added commentaries (e.g., the allegorical interpretation of the Parable of the Sower [Mark 4:14-20]).

F. Accordingly, we should assume that the cores of synoptic units and the habitual facts which the synoptics report are historical and that, strictly speaking, details and commentaries usually are not.

G. Nevertheless, even such additions and embellishments may well have some historical value. They are at least interpretations of what Jesus would have said in response to something or what he meant, and these interpretations come from people who probably knew more about him than we can.

H. Since both conservative and liberal approaches have value, we need to keep using both and bringing the results into dialog.

I. We should also search for a picture of Jesus which can explain how the various pictures of Jesus in the early Church could have arisen and been plausibly seen as faithful interpretations of him.

J. We should concentrate on what can be known and leave other questions open.

#### (time permitting) Tracing the History of a Piece of Synoptic Tradition; An Illustration

I. (review) The tradition about Jesus in the synoptics had a long and complex history.

II. Accordingly, so did the individual units of that tradition.

III. To trace the history of a unit of synoptic tradition we must begin with the surviving versions of a particular story or saying and work backward until we get to Jesus.

IV. Step 1 is to select a piece of synoptic tradition and identify all the surviving written versions. If we select the Parable of the Lost Sheep, we find it in Matthew 18:12-14, Luke 15:4-7, and Thomas 107.

V. Step 2 is to determine if within the unit there is any literary dependence between the gospels. In the case of the lost sheep there does not appear to be. Of course, if there is literary dependence, we need to do redaction criticism.

VI. Step 3 is to determine the meaning of the piece of tradition within each gospel by looking at the different versions of the selection and at the contexts in which the evangelists placed it.

A. In Thomas the parable is probably making the point that God especially seeks the true Gnostic.

B. In Matthew the parable is primarily about how the Church and its leaders should deal with a lowly member of the congregation who perhaps is very sinful.

C. In Luke the parable is primarily a defense of Jesus's ministry to sinners and is addressed to the Pharisees. However, the parable also fits into Luke's larger theme that God asks us to help the outcasts and the

defenseless.

VII. Step 4 is to try to reconstruct the fixed oral form of the tradition and ask what the unit may have meant in the early Church.

A. We must identify the elements that would have remained the same as the story was told and retold. In the case of the Parable of the Lost Sheep, the fixed elements would seem to have been

1. A man had 100 sheep.
2. He lost one.
3. He abandoned the 99.
4. He found the one.
5. He rejoiced over it more than over the others.

B. We must ask what the early Church might have used the basic story to illustrate. In the case of the lost sheep the early Church could have used it to illustrate God's love for every member of the congregation.

VIII. Step 5 is to place the basic tradition back in the context of Jesus's ministry and ask what the unit originally meant. If we do that, the Parable of the Lost Sheep becomes unrealistic. A shepherd would never abandon 99 sheep to look for one, and, since he was a resident of rural Palestine, Jesus would have known this. The parable, therefore, is disturbing and invites us to rethink our basic assumptions about the world and God. Perhaps the original message of the parable is that we cannot limit God's love and call to what we as human beings assume to be realistic. Of course, Luke is probably right in suggesting that this parable was in part a defense of Jesus's ministry to "sinners."

IX. An exercise: Trace the history of the following

- A. The Parable of the Great Supper (Mt. 22:1-14, Lk. 14:16-24, Th. 64)
- B. The sin against the Holy Spirit (Mt. 12:31-32, Mk. 3:28-30, Lk. 12:10, Th. 44).

Assignment: Reread Matthew.

The Context of Jesus: The Old Testament Legacy; Palestine in the First Century; A Sketch of Jesus's Life

I. Jesus and the early Church arose out of first century Palestinian Judaism.

II. Consequently, they regarded the Jewish scriptures (the Christian Old Testament) as authoritative and saw themselves as the true continuation of Israel.

III. Hence, to understand Jesus and the early Church we need to have some understanding of the Old Testament heritage and first century Palestine.

IV. (mostly review) The theology of the Old Testament can be summarized in two fundamental convictions

A. Ethical monotheism

1. There is only one God who is creator of heaven and earth and is Lord of All.
2. This one God is just and is especially concerned about the poor and oppressed.



- B. Special election: This one God has chosen to make a special covenant with a particular people, the Jews. As part of this relationship, God requires Jews to keep a special Law which has both ethical and ritual requirements, including male circumcision. (Note: The term "Law" is ambiguous in first century Judaism and stands both for the regulations in scripture and for the scriptures themselves, especially the first five books of the Bible.)
- V. Theologically, these ideas had powerful advantages.
  - A. In contrast to polytheism, they produced a more exalted concept of God. God is now omnipotent, perfect, and transcendent.
  - B. They also promoted greater loyalty to him.
    - 1. Election produced a special bond.
    - 2. Monotheism ruled out all other spiritual attachments.
    - 3. To some extent, the justice of God could be used to explain disaster.
- VI. Nevertheless, these ideas clashed with the continuing historical experience of stronger nations conquering and oppressing the Jews even when the Jews had been faithful.
- VII. Out of this tension arose the conviction that soon God would dramatically intervene and definitively save his people.
- VIII. There was disagreement over whether this intervention would lead to the destruction or conversion of Gentiles, though I believe the second opinion was more common.
- IX. From the sixth century B.C.E. onwards the Jewish community placed great emphasis on keeping the law in order to prevent individual Jews from assimilating.
- X. In first century Palestine, Judaism was under pressure.
  - A. Politically, the region was under Roman domination.
  - B. Culturally, Judaism was threatened by Hellenistic incursions.
  - C. Economically, taxation was high, and most property belonged to a small percentage of the population.
- XI. In response to this pressure, the leadership of the Jewish community emphasized
  - A. The importance of keeping the law.
  - B. The importance of not antagonizing Rome.
- XII. Partly as a result, first century Palestine had deep social divisions.
  - A. The poor versus the rich. The poor bore the brunt of the taxation and often had to pay rent. In an economy in which everything is made by hand and most of the population is impoverished, the only way someone can be rich is by exploiting the poor.
  - B. Jews versus Samaritans and Gentiles.
  - C. Jews who kept the law versus those who did not. The latter were considered "impure" and found themselves excluded from respectable society.
  - D. Divisions among those who kept the "law" over how it should be interpreted

1. The Sadducees, who included the high priestly families and were the leaders of Jewish society, basically restricted the law to what was actually recorded in the books of Moses (the first five books of the Bible).
2. The Pharisees, who were lay theologians, developed an oral tradition to apply the Mosaic Law more exactly and insure that the laity maintained the same standards of purity as the priests.
3. The Essenes, who withdrew from society, had a tradition of written interpretation, and it disagreed in fundamental respects with the practices of other Jewish groups. For example, the Essenes had a different calendar. The Essenes were probably the community that produced the famous Dead Sea Scrolls.

XIII. All these divisions were reinforced by negative group stereotyping.

XIV. In the midst of this unhappy situation there was a series of bandits, messiahs, and prophets, who were hunted down and killed along with their followers.

- A. The bandits plundered the rich and attracted the sympathy of the poor.
- B. The messiahs mobilized popular support for military action against Rome. During the lifetime of Jesus these (e.g., Barabbas) would have been primarily in Judea which the Romans ruled directly rather than in Galilee which the (nominally) Jewish ruler Herod Antipas governed as a Roman puppet.
- C. The prophets denounced the establishment and predicted that God would intervene to establish a new and more just society.

XV. It was in this social context that Jesus of Nazareth appeared with his message that the kingdom of God was at hand.

XVI. A sketch of Jesus's life and its immediate aftermath

- A. Jesus was born into a Jewish family around five years before the turn of the era.
- B. He was raised in Nazareth, a village in Galilee, and his family belonged to the common people.
- C. His early life is obscure, and there is no reason to assume that outwardly it differed greatly from the lives of his neighbors. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that he apparently did not choose to get married. There was some tradition of religious celibacy at the time, as we can see from the Essenes whose leadership consisted of celibate males living in a monastic community.
- D. When Jesus was a young adult, John the Baptist began his public ministry.
  1. John was a prophet who preached in the wilderness of Judea.
  2. His message was that God was about to judge the Jews though the coming Messiah and that only those who repented would be saved.
  3. He was apparently especially critical of the leaders of Jewish society.
  4. As a sign of repentance, he administered baptism.

- E. Jesus journeyed south and received baptism at John's hands and may have been John's disciple for a period.
- F. When John was arrested and executed, Jesus returned to Galilee.
- G. There he traveled about preaching and accepting hospitality and financial support from sympathizers.
- H. In contrast to John, he adopted a worldly lifestyle. He attended dinner parties and associated freely with "sinners" (e.g., Mat. 11:16-19).
- I. He drove out "demons" and healed the sick.
- J. He attracted followers and named an inner circle of twelve who apparently symbolized the new Israel.
- K. His followers pressed him to declare himself king, but he resisted.
- L. Meanwhile, his behavior shocked pious people.
- M. Toward what was to be the end of his life, he went to the capital Jerusalem to confront the nation with his message.
- N. There he staged a demonstration in the temple to symbolize that it was to be destroyed and replaced by his kingdom.
- O. In response, the high priests and their supporters got the Romans to execute him as a revolutionary.
- P. Shortly thereafter Jesus's closest followers began to proclaim that he had risen from the dead.
- Q. Within a year or two, some Christians concluded that the time had come for Gentiles to join the New Israel and began to invite foreigners into the Church.

### The Teaching of Jesus Part I--Kingdom

- I. The principal theme of Jesus's message was the kingdom of God. The kingdom of heaven is a synonym.
  - A. The theme pervades the material attributed to Jesus, especially in the synoptic gospels. Note that the kingdom is what the parables explain.
  - B. On the other hand, the kingdom is not a major theme in other early Christian writings (e.g., Paul's letters).
- II. The basic content of the idea seems to be God reigning over a renewed Israel. Like many other Jews of his day, Jesus believed that
  - A. The world had fallen under the power of evil.
    - 1. Israel had sinned and, as a consequence, God had allowed other nations to oppress it.
    - 2. Satan and his demons were loose in the world causing sickness and death.
  - B. One day (probably soon) God would intervene to
    - 1. Make Israel righteous and restore it to favor.
    - 2. Use Israel to bring the world to know him.
    - 3. Destroy the power of Satan, raise the dead, judge the world, and renew the creation (cf., e.g., Mat. 12:41-42).
- III. Jesus's fundamental contention was that the kingdom was beginning in the

movement that he himself was starting (e.g., Luke 11:20). Note, particularly, that he chose an inner circle of twelve to symbolize (the twelve tribes of) the new Israel.

IV. When Jesus was alive, his movement was small, uninfluential, and suffered reversals. Hence, he stressed that in the present the kingdom is hidden in our midst but is active and growing (e.g., Mt. 13:31-33). Nevertheless, the growth is spotty, and there are setbacks (e.g., Mat. 13:3-8, 24-30).

V. To join the movement that Jesus was starting (i.e., "to enter the kingdom" now), one had to realize that the kingdom was supremely valuable and be willing to give up everything else for it (e.g., Mt. 13:44-46).

VI. The present manifestations of the kingdom in the movement Jesus has begun.

A. The breaking of Satan's power, especially through exorcisms and healings (see section on miracles below).

B. The achievement of a new intimacy with God who is our loving and forgiving "Father."

C. The reconciliation of God's people and the inclusion of the lost and conventionally rejected (note the table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners).

D. The surrender of privilege ("The first shall be last" [Mk. 10:31]) -- including religious, economic, and sexual privilege.

E. The surrender of hatred toward outsiders ("Love your enemies" [Mt. 5:44]). Note that this surrender suggests enormous confidence in God's power, since openness to outsiders could lead to absorption.

F. Living one day at a time in trust that God will provide.

G. It is to be noted that Jesus did not think that the time had come to evangelize the Gentiles.

VII. In the future the kingdom would be suddenly manifest to all, but then it would come as judgment on those who earlier had rejected it (e.g., Mt. 25:1-30).

A. The coming would catch Israel unaware and expose each person for who they really were.

B. There would be a reversal of external circumstances (Lk. 20-26).

Hence, previous sacrifices for the sake of the kingdom would lead to a reward.

C. And a confirmation and extension of one's true spiritual status (Mt. 25:29).

D. Apparently, toward the end of his life Jesus believed that Jerusalem and the temple would be destroyed because Israel had rejected his message.

E. After this destruction the new Israel (the Son of Humanity [N.T. Wright; see Daniel 7:13-18, 27]) would triumph and reign over a new world.

F. Nevertheless, it is to be noted that Jesus did not give detailed predictions of the future, and most of what he did say was in metaphors and parables.

VIII. The relationship of Jesus to the kingdom.

- A. The kingdom begins with him and is present in his words and deeds. Note that for the Baptist the kingdom was wholly future, whereas for Jesus it was present, though hidden.
  - B. Through Jesus others could share in the same relationship with God and the same authority Jesus had to act and speak in God's name.
  - C. Jesus seems to have believed that in some sense he was the head of the kingdom. Note that he chose the twelve. Nevertheless, he was not comfortable with the title "Messiah," perhaps because of its traditional military and hierarchical connotations.
- IX. A major issue, regardless of one's faith, is whether Jesus's vision of the future proved to be accurate.
- A. On the one hand, one can argue that Jesus's vision proved to be false.
    - 1. Obviously, even after two thousand years we have not yet seen
      - a. The elimination of evil
      - b. A final judgment
      - c. A transformed creation
      - d. The resurrection of the dead.
    - 2. The community that Jesus founded ultimately broke with and persecuted Jesus's ethnic community.
  - B. On the other hand,
    - 1. The followers of Jesus had experiences that convinced them that soon after his death Jesus himself rose bodily from the grave and became Lord of the universe. (For a discussion of the resurrection experiences, see below).
    - 2. They then went out and began a movement that ultimately became the largest and most influential religion on earth.
    - 3. That religion has arguably done more to eliminate social evil than any other institution in history (though to be sure, the Church has also committed much evil).
    - 4. Adherents of that religion have claimed that it also has given them a deeper "inner" relationship to God.
    - 5. If we believe that there is a just God and there is eternal life, it follows that Christianity has enabled vast numbers of people to have a greater fulfillment after death than they otherwise would have enjoyed.
    - 6. Christianity has always seen itself as founded on the heritage of ancient Israel (especially, the Hebrew Scriptures) and has made that heritage known to the world.
    - 7. Jesus's prediction that Israel's rejection of him and his message of peace would lead to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem proved to be accurate. The effects of that destruction remain important even today.

Discussion: Was Jesus's prophecy about the future fulfilled or not? What is your vision of the ideal society, and how does it compare with Jesus's understanding of the "kingdom"? Do you think that there is any chance that your vision will be realized, and if so, how?

## The Teaching of Jesus Part II--Sin, Paradox, and Perception

- I. The teaching attributed to Jesus is full of things that are strange.
  - A. Overly radical material (e.g., Mt. 8:22, Lk. 14:26).
  - B. Stories that have realistic settings but unrealistic plots (e.g., Mat. 20:1-5, 25:1-12).
  - C. Comments that are so ambiguous as to be almost meaningless (e.g., Mark 9:50b, 12:17).
- II. It is clear that such puzzling material comes from Jesus himself.
  - A. Such material is typical of the Jesus tradition in all major sources, including John and Thomas, and sometimes we have seemingly independent versions of the same disturbing saying (e.g., Lk. 14:26, Th. 55, 101; cf. Mt. 10:37).
  - B. Apart from sayings attributed to Jesus or stories told about him we seldom find this kind of material in the early Christian tradition.
  - C. The tradition sometimes tries to soften or explain Jesus puzzling sayings (note, e.g., Mt. 10:37, Th. 101, and Mk. 10:25 versus Mk. 10:27).
- III. Once we recognize that disturbing original statements were sometimes softened later, we discover that many unobjectionable sayings must have been problematic initially (e.g., Mt. 18:12-13 and parallels [see above for a discussion]; Lk. 16:18 and parallels [as Bruce Malina has pointed out, by definition, a person cannot commit adultery by getting divorced and marrying someone else!]).
- IV. Because such disturbing material pervades Jesus's teaching, it is obviously important, and we must discover what its purpose was.
- V. Two possible viewpoints:
  - A. Conservative (e.g., Bruce Metzger): The wildness is only Semitic stylistic exaggeration.
  - B. Radical (e.g., John Crossan): The wildness is to shatter our normal way of perceiving.
- VI. These two viewpoints correspond to two great schools concerning religious teaching and its proper medium.
  - A. The tradition that instruction should be as clear as possible so one can easily learn what to believe and do. According to this school, the proper medium is creed and law. On the whole Judaism and Islam follow this tradition. It *affirms* one's present understanding of the divine and the world.
  - B. The tradition that teaching should be as paradoxical as possible so one must struggle to find the truth and so the truth one finds is really one's own. According to this school, the proper medium for instruction is either the unanswerable riddle (e.g., "What is the sound of one hand clapping?") or attacking the student's opinions without giving "answers." Zen Buddhism and some liberal education follow this tradition. It *destroys* one's present understanding of the divine and the world and thereby allows one to come to a radically different view.

VII. In my opinion, the teachings of Jesus mediate between these approaches both in terms of form and content.

A. Form

1. The sayings of Jesus avoid outright contradiction. There is no "one hand clapping."
2. Yet, the reality that is presented is exaggerated, twisted, made bizarre.

B. Content

1. Jesus's teachings point in a certain direction.
2. However, the specifics are so vague or outrageous that it is difficult to apply them exactly or take them literally.

C. Accordingly, the teaching of Jesus clearly presents general principles but yet does not let us take them or their application for granted. Instead, we must struggle and question and come to a personal appropriation. Hence, the teaching of Jesus *exposes* the world and challenges us to rethink our understanding of God. Jesus makes us see things the way they actually are and struggle with what they could become with the arrival of God's kingdom.

VIII. First century Judaism's concern for legal codification and instruction implies, or, at least, easily encourages, certain basic spiritual assumptions.

A. Sin, at least among pious people, is primarily due to a lack of information or effort.

B. External behavior is what is most important and normally reflects the intentions of the heart. Therefore, one can easily recognize who is righteous and who is wicked.

C. General legal principles are usually an adequate basis for responding to particular situations.

D. Without detailed instruction people cannot figure out what they should do.

E. Basically we understand God's viewpoint.

IX. It appears that Jesus disagreed with each of these assumptions. Note that although Jesus accepted the law, he was not interested in codifying it further and was critical of people who applied it in the customary ways. According to Jesus,

A. Sin is primarily due neither to a lack of information or effort but to a fundamental brokenness hidden deep within (e.g., Mt. 15:18).

B. What is most important is the "heart" (i.e., our hidden inner core), and outwardly correct behavior is often a mask for evil intentions.

1. We do not even know our wicked motives (Mt. 6:23).
2. We presume to teach and judge others even though we are more evil than they (Mt. 7:3).
3. Religious leaders are especially vulnerable to such hypocrisy and produce societal blindness.

C. Particular situations often cannot be correctly handled on the basis of general legal regulations. But once we have overcome the evil in our hearts, we can easily determine what should be done in specific circumstances. Note how Jesus himself dealt with what should be done on

- the Sabbath.
- D. God is both more merciful toward the sinner and more severe toward the righteous than we can readily imagine. And the truly righteous show love toward sinners.
- X. Of course, for Jesus the worst problem was that the hidden, unacknowledged sinfulness of people blinded them to the kingdom of God in their midst.
- XI. Hence, what was needed was not information, but the transformation of one's deepest self and of the structures of society.
- XII. To produce this transformation Jesus did at least three things:
- A. He gave unconditional acceptance to those traditionally regarded as sinful.
  - B. He was confrontational with those traditionally regarded as righteous.
  - C. He used paradoxes to force people to take a fresh look at God, at themselves and others, and at the kingdom in their midst.
- XIII. Underlying these challenges was the conviction that the kingdom God was empowering people to change their deepest selves and perceive and act in a more compassionate and egalitarian way.

#### Jesus's Miracles and Exorcisms from a Scholarly Perspective

- I. The accounts of Jesus's miracles and exorcisms raise basic questions about what is physically possible and historically verifiable.
- A. Can even God enable a human being to do such things as walk on water or raise the dead? Note that the claim that God *can* allow us to do such things raises the issue of why he does not do so more often, especially to overcome manifest evil.
  - B. Can a historian legitimately conclude that something took place that could not conceivably take place now? Normally we reconstruct the past by assuming it is analogous to the present.
- II. Naturally, how we answer these questions will help determine what we conclude actually took place.
- III. Several additional problems further complicate attempts to discover the historicity of Jesus's wonders.
- A. The great distance between an ancient world view that attributed certain symptoms to demonic possession and a modern one that attributes the same symptoms to physical and psychological factors (cf. Mk. 9:17-18).
  - B. The fact that Jesus lived in an age which more readily believed in miracles and which recorded that Pagan and Jewish figures also worked them. Note, however, that even in the ancient world there were a few people who did not believe that miracles ever happened, and that today the majority of people still believe that miracles can happen.
- IV. Some alternative viewpoints about what Jesus did and what we can do.
- A. Traditional orthodox Christian view: Jesus worked wonders that would be astonishing even today, and these help prove that he was divine. This viewpoint suggests we cannot do similar miracles.



- B. Jesus worked wonders, but he did so by appealing to God who performed the actual miracles. This viewpoint would permit us to do similar feats if God happens to be willing.
  - C. Jesus like other holy persons had developed special spiritual powers and, consequently, could work wonders. Saints today can do the same (cf., e.g., the Buddhist doctrine concerning spiritual powers).
  - D. Jesus did things which were astonishing to his contemporaries but which today are explicable in terms of ordinary psychological causation (e.g., psychosomatic healing). Naturally, we can do similar "miracles."
  - E. Jesus did nothing that was initially astounding. The miracle stories arose later thanks to the Church's faith in him.
- {Note: If you like, you can use different viewpoints to explain different miracle accounts.}

Discussion: Which viewpoint do you prefer and why?

V. Some historical and textual observations.

- A. The tradition that Jesus healed the sick, raised the dead, and expelled demons is very early and widespread and at least on these grounds has strong claims to historicity. Note that this miracle tradition is much more credible than similar ones about other first century miracle workers, whether Jewish or Pagan.
  1. Miracles account for a huge amount of material in the gospels, perhaps a quarter.
  2. The tradition that Jesus worked miracles occurs in every layer of the tradition (stories about Jesus, sayings attributed to him, the editorial comments of the evangelists, the entire synoptic tradition, including Mark and "Q," the Johannine tradition, the records about what Jesus's disciples did in the early church as they attempted to continue his work, the comments about Jesus in the non-Christian historian Josephus and in an anti-Christian passage in the Talmud).
  3. The earliest written records that Jesus worked miracles (especially, the Gospel of Mark) appeared only around forty years after his death.
  4. Hence, on objective historical grounds we have more evidence that Jesus worked miracles than any other fact about him, except that he was crucified.
  5. Radical historians who are skeptical about the miracles should probably be consistent and go on to conclude that we can know almost nothing about Jesus.
  6. The written accounts that contemporaries of Jesus (such as Apollonius of Tyana [d. c. 98] and Hanina ben Dosa) worked wonders come from a much later period than the gospels do and, therefore, seem far less reliable. For example, the biography of Apollonius appeared no earlier than 217.
- B. By contrast Jesus's "nature miracles" [e.g., the stilling of the storm; Mt. 8:23-27, Mk. 4:35-41, Lk. 8:22-25] are not well attested, with the exception of the feeding of the multitude (John Meier).

1. The gospels record just eight miracles in which Jesus changed something in the natural world, as opposed to restoring human beings.
2. Most of these miracles (e.g., changing water into wine [John 2:1-11] and the coin in the fish's mouth [Mt. 17:24-27]) occur only in a single source. Of course, since sometimes Matthew and/or Luke copy Mark, the appearance of a miracle in Matthew or Luke as well as Mark does not mean that there are multiple sources.
3. The nature miracles often do not cohere with what Jesus otherwise did (Meier). The cursing of the fig tree (Mt. 21:18-19; Mk. 11:12-14, 22-23) is the only curse miracle in the gospels and does not easily fit with Jesus's message of forgiveness and mercy (to say nothing of not being spiteful). Similarly, the walking on water is the only miracle that Jesus seems to work simply for his own convenience (Mt. 14:22-33, Mk. 6:45-52, Jn. 6:15-21), unless we include Jesus paying his own taxes plus Peter's through the coin in the fish's mouth!
4. The stories of the nature miracles could have arisen in the early Church to help express the faith that Jesus was divine.

C. Ancient critics of Jesus conceded that he actually worked miracles but claimed that he did them by the power of evil or that his miracles were no greater than those of other remarkable individuals (e.g., Apollonius of Tyana; the miracles in Apollonius's biography may have been modeled on those of Jesus).

D. According to Mark's Gospel, Jesus sometimes had difficulty working miracles, and this difficulty must be historical.

1. Mark records several miracles where Jesus has to strain or even take two tries (especially, 8:22-26, 9:14-29).
2. Since Mark is a Christian writing for Christians, he could scarcely have made up such an embarrassment, nor could the earlier Christian tradition. (Of course, as we saw, Mark made use of Jesus's difficulties in working miracles to help focus the reader's attention on the cross.)

E. Jesus's reputed ability to work miracles was primarily responsible for making him a public figure.

F. Jesus himself occasionally pointed to his miracles to verify his claims, particularly his claim that he was inaugurating the reign of God. For example, in response to John's the Baptist's inquiry as to whether he was the "one to come," Jesus pointed to his miracles (Mt. 11:2-6).

G. In the gospels, Jesus's "miracles" differ in important respects from the reputed deeds of ancient magicians (Meier).

1. In the gospels
  - a. Jesus often will not or cannot work miracles when faith is lacking. Here we may define "faith" as confident grasping out to receive God's power.
  - b. Jesus's miracles seem to have been signs of a larger

spiritual reality--the coming of God's kingdom.

c. Jesus does not like to be known only as a miracle worker. Note, especially, his refusal to work signs on demand (Mt. 16:1-4, Mk. 8:11-13).

d. He works his miracles by a simple command and never tries to coerce God.

e. He only works miracles to help people (the blasting of the fig tree is an isolated exception in the tradition and does not directly involve a human being).

f. Jesus does not expect payment for a miracle.

2. By contrast, ancient magicians used elaborate spells to manipulate spiritual forces, often invoked curses, and demanded remuneration.

H. Jesus apparently taught that the permanence of his exorcisms or cures might depend on spiritual growth in the one healed (Mt. 12:43-45; cf. Jn. 5:14).

VI. One scholarly hypothesis about the historicity of Jesus's miracles.

A. It seems to me historically undeniable that Jesus healed the physically and mentally sick in ways that astounded his audiences and that no other alleged miracle worker could do.

B. I am doubtful that Jesus did many nature miracles (with the notable exception of the feeding of the multitude).

1. These stories are not well attested.

2. Are typically the sort of thing that arises by legend.

C. The miracles of Jesus were not automatic.

1. He sometimes had trouble performing them.

2. Their permanence might depend on spiritual growth.

(time permitting) One Liberal Christian Reconstruction of the Miracles of Jesus

I. (partly review) What we conclude really happened in respect to Jesus's alleged miracles and exorcisms largely depends on philosophical assumptions about what is real or possible. (E.g., if we assume that miracles cannot occur, then we must conclude that Jesus did not work them and that the miracles stories are merely legends).

II. In this lecture I will give you my liberal Christian understanding of the miracles, in part so you can better determine what your own understanding might be.

III. Philosophical assumptions that I happen to make as a liberal Christian.

A. God can work miracles but does them rarely. I believe that this rarity is primarily due to two factors:

1. God wishes the world to come to know him through love not through tricks.

2. God wishes the human community to work to solve its problems. This effort is an ongoing one in history.

- B. The humanity of Jesus precluded his direct working of miracles as God.
  - C. Like the Buddhists (and others) I believe that saintly people can develop special healing abilities. I also believe that certain individuals have natural healing powers which strengthen with spiritual growth.
  - D. Exorcisms and psychosomatic cures are often basically the same thing.
- IV. I will now attempt from a liberal Christian viewpoint to examine and critique the various explanations of the miracles noted above and discern how Jesus in fact performed his wonders.
- V. A Christian evaluation of the miracles as legends.
- A. The most skeptical approach to the miracles of Jesus is to assume that Jesus himself did not work any miracles. Instead, the miracle stories arose later thanks to the Church's faith in him.
    - 1. This view is especially associated with David Strauss (1808-1874).
    - 2. It presupposes that miracles are scientifically impossible and that Jesus could not have faked them.
    - 3. The only remaining alternative is to assume that the miracle stories arose as legends among the faithful after his death. Of course, legends tend to arise around great historical figures.
  - B. In my view this skeptical view is untenable today, at least as an explanation for all of the miracles. We now realize
    - 1. Science has nothing to tell us about whether miracles are possible.
      - a. By definition a miracle is a unique event due to a special intervention by God or some other spiritual power.
      - b. Science only studies repeatable events and ideally studies them under controlled conditions. And by definition a miracle does not take place under controlled conditions.
      - c. Science can sometimes show that an alleged miracle was in fact due to natural causes.
      - d. But science cannot determine what the intervention of a spiritual power could do.
    - 2. The gospels were written too early for all the miracles to be legends.
      - a. Strauss believed that the gospels originated in the second century, and this late dating allowed time for massive legend to arise (as I believe it did arise around such figures as Apollonius of Tyana).
      - b. Today scholars would not date the gospels that late (see above for a modern approach to the dating of Matthew, Mark, and Luke).
      - c. Hence, the conclusion seems unavoidable that at the very least Jesus and his contemporaries already believed that he was working miracles.
  - C. Nevertheless like Strauss, as a Christian I can gladly affirm that
    - 1. The miracle stories about Jesus sometimes do contain legendary

accretions (e.g., the story of the demons entering into the herd of pigs in Mark 5:1-20).

2. Still, these accretions do reflect faith in Jesus (e.g., that Jesus has the power to expel demons and would have compassion even on them!), and this faith may contain truth that transcends the legendary details.

3. Some miracles (e.g., the cursing of the fig tree [Mk. 11:12-21]) are not historical. In Mark's Gospel the tree and its fate symbolize the temple. I suspect that the cursing of the fig tree is a "literary" miracle based on some version of a parable of Jesus now found in Luke 13:6-9.

VI. A Christian evaluation of the miracles as psychosomatic cures worked by the power of suggestion.

A. This view would, I think, be normal among skeptical scholars today.

B. There is no denying that suggestion can have a powerful, though perhaps temporary, impact on someone's health and that Jesus's healing ministry produced enormous expectations.

C. It seems to me that the primary medical and theological issue about any healing by suggestion is whether the "suggestion" is true.

1. A false suggestion (e.g., that a pill will cure the patient when in fact it is a placebo) is ethically dubious and normally only brings temporary relief from symptoms.

2. A true suggestion would be ethically sound and might bring permanent relief, especially if the sufferer took it permanently to heart.

D. Some of Jesus's most frequent "suggestions" were that

1. God forgave sinners

2. God loved the sick

3. Through the presence of Jesus himself a new "spiritual" power was available to restore someone to wholeness

4. And God was inviting the sick person to become part of a new community of love and service.

E. As a Christian I believe that these "suggestions" are true, and medically there is every reason to suppose they would have had a profound impact on sick people, especially those whose (mental) illness was caused (or aggravated) by a sense of worthlessness and social rejection. Note that in his ministry Jesus reached out to the despised.

F. Moreover, Jesus himself insisted that openness to his larger message (i.e., "faith") was a precondition to receive healing from him.

G. Hence, as a Christian I cheerfully affirm that "suggestion" was at least an important component in some of Jesus's exorcisms and cures. We may, one again, recall Jesus's own warning that spiritual growth might be necessary to keep the demon from returning (Mt. 12:43-54).

VII. A liberal Christian evaluation of the view that Jesus--like holy men and women of various traditions--healed by the power that comes from extraordinary spiritual growth.

- A. This viewpoint presumes that “saints” in various traditions (e.g., Tibetan Lamas) develop special (“miraculous”) powers.
- B. Jesus was such a saint and could do extraordinary things (though not necessarily more than spiritual masters in non-Christian traditions).
- C. Personally, I have no trouble with the claim that “saints” in various traditions do develop extraordinary powers either from unlocking normally untapped human potential or by becoming channels for spiritual forces from outside.
  - 1. This claim is made by many traditions (e.g., Shamanism).
  - 2. It coheres with my own limited experience.
  - 3. It coheres with the fact that most people realize only a small percentage of their potential and the fact that some people certainly seem to be naturally gifted in healing, e.s.p., and other mysterious areas.
  - 4. Prayer and meditation certainly unlock both our natural potential and bring us into contact with other spiritual powers (whether these are always good is an additional question).
- D. Since Jesus was a holy man and certainly was fully human (although, Christians believe, not merely that), we must suppose that he had developed special powers and that, inevitably, these were at work when he performed miracles. I would especially suggest that Jesus’s extraordinary compassion helped heal.
- E. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that Jesus himself believed that other people could also cast out demons (Luke 11:19).
- F. The question remains whether such power was all that was at work, and historically and theologically such does not appear to be likely.
  - 1. Jesus claimed that his miracles were greater than those of other people and were signs that through him the kingdom of God was coming. As we have seen, the tradition about Jesus’s miracles has more historical credibility than miracle traditions about his contemporaries.
  - 2. The resurrection even more forcefully implies the superiority of the wonders associated with Jesus. (Surely, dead saints--no matter how great their spiritual powers--do not raise themselves!). We will deal with the resurrection below.

VIII. As a Christian I believe that God sometimes gave Jesus the power to work extraordinary miracles that exceeded even what “saints” can do, and these miracles attested Jesus’s special mission and relationship to the Father.

- A. This is what Jesus and the tradition claim.
- B. It does explain extraordinary miracles (raising the dead!) for which we have considerable historical evidence.
- C. It coheres with the claim in the gospels that Jesus gave his followers the power to work miracles and these miracles helped attest his own message.
- D. It makes sense of the resurrection which is the Father’s final attestation of Jesus.
- E. It coheres with the Church’s continuing experience of Jesus’s lordship.

- F. And the continuing experience that some Christians have been able to bear witness to Jesus by working miracles in his name (and not their own).
- IX. As a liberal Christian, I am cautious about the view that Jesus worked miracles directly as God.
- A. Like the kenotic theologians I suspect that part of the incarnation must have been giving up divine powers.
  - B. If Jesus worked miracles directly as God, the historical evidence that he sometimes had difficulty performing them becomes problematic (unless we are prepared to limit God himself).
  - C. During his human life Jesus apparently did not claim to be God.
  - D. Hence, I would prefer saying that the miracles of Jesus are the Father's attestation of Jesus's divinity.
- X. As a Christian I believe that we are called to work miracles today in the same way that Jesus did.
- A. We are to heal people of psychological or physical problems by love.
  - B. We are also to heal certain people by forgiveness, call, and challenge when sufficient faith is present. We must also sometimes warn that growth is necessary or the condition will recur.
  - C. We are to pray for God to do other miracles.
  - D. If they occur, we are to proclaim that they are signs of a larger spiritual reality.
  - E. We are not to put on sideshows. Note Mark's theology of miracles (see above).

Assignment: Read Matthew 26-27, Mark 14-15, Luke 22-23, John 18-19.

(time permitting) The Eucharist and the Historical Jesus

Preface: The Eucharist is the most important Christian liturgy and now goes by many names, including Mass, the Divine Liturgy, the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, and Sacrament Meeting. Because of its later importance in Christianity, we must now examine its basis in the life of the historical Jesus.

- I. In Palestine when Jesus was alive there were at least three besetting problems (mostly review).
- A. Dire poverty for the majority of the population. In part this poverty was due to
    1. The need both to support the native hierarchy (particularly, the high priestly establishment) and pay taxes to the Romans.
    2. The vast gap between the bulk of the population and a small elite who owned not only most of the property but even many of the people.
  - B. Religious division between the various sects (Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes) and between these sects and the majority of the population who did not have the resources necessary to pursue the piety that these sects demanded.
  - C. A gnawing sense that God had not yet returned to "Zion" (Jerusalem)

- (N.T. Wright), and that this divine desertion was manifesting itself in foreign rule and widespread demonic possession.
- II. In a general way all of these problems somehow involved food.
    - A. Much of the population was hungry or even suffering from malnutrition.
    - B. Religious division especially manifested itself in exclusiveness at meals. Both the Pharisees and the Essenes emphasized “pure” meals, which their members shared and which were closed to outsiders.
    - C. A symbol of the hope that God would one day return to Israel was the vision of a final banquet that God would eat with his people (Isa. 25:6-10).
  - III. (review) The theme of Jesus’s message was that the “kingdom of God has drawn near,” and that this kingdom was beginning with the movement that he was starting and of which he was the head.
  - IV. Jesus promised that with the coming of the kingdom .
    - A. The hungry would have more than enough to eat (Lk. 6:21).
    - B. Those who had been excluded from Israel would be re-included and that ultimately even the Gentiles would share in God’s salvation and that there would be no oppressive hierarchies. The first would be last, and the last, first.
    - C. All would know God as their “Father.”
  - V. In the present Jesus modeled this hoped for future in his movement.
    - A. Jesus and his closest followers seem to have had a common purse (Jn. 13:29).
    - B. Jesus insisted on associating with those who had been excluded from pious society (prostitutes, tax collectors, “lepers” [people who suffered from unsightly skin diseases] and the “demon” possessed).
    - C. He called God his “Father” and taught that through him his followers could also address God as “Father.”
  - VI. Jesus symbolized his hopes for the future by talking about some final meal. Note the appearance of the image of a banquet in his parables (the Parable of the Great Supper, the Prodigal Son, the Wise and Foolish Virgins).
  - VII. And in the present he embodied the longed for future in meals at which he was either the host or the honored guest. At these meals everyone was welcome, especially those who had been excluded from respectable society.
  - VIII. After his demonstration in the temple, Jesus knew that he would soon suffer death, since the nation had rejected his message.
  - IX. To prepare his followers to continue his mission after his death, Jesus arranged a solemn final meal. I have no patience with radical scholars who claim that the Eucharist originated after the resurrection. Paul, writing only around twenty years later, already describes Jesus’s “celebration” of the Last Supper as a bedrock of Christian tradition (1 Cor. 10-11, particularly, 11:23-25), and Paul himself knew people who had been at the Last Supper.
  - X. Scholars especially debate two things about this meal.
    - A. Was it a Passover meal?
      1. In the synoptics the Last Supper is a Passover meal (e.g., Mark 14:12). Note: The Jewish Passover meal annually commemorates



God delivering the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, and in the time of Jesus the main course was lamb.

2. By contrast, in John's Gospel the Last Supper takes place on the day before Passover (Jn. 18:28, 19:31).

3. A decision about which version is correct is complicated by the fact that both chronologies have theological symbolism.

a. The synoptics are suggesting that the Eucharist is the Christian Passover.

b. John is suggesting that Jesus is God's sacrificial lamb (since in John Jesus dies as the Passover lambs were being slaughtered).

B. What exactly did Jesus say at the meal? We basically have two forms of the words of institution. Whereas all our traditions inform us that Jesus said that the bread was his body,

1. Matthew and Mark record that the wine itself is the blood of the covenant (Mt. 26:27-28, Mk. 14:23-24).

2. Paul and Luke record that the wine was the new covenant in Jesus's blood and add the command to repeat this ceremony in remembrance of Jesus (1 Cor. 11:24-25; Lk. 22:19-20).

XI. I have my own positions on these disputed questions, but in any event, the differences between these positions are not all that significant.

A. I believe that John is correct that the Last Supper took place on the day before Passover.

1. It is scarcely credible that Jesus would have been tried and executed on the holiday (cf. Acts 12:3-4).

2. If the Last Supper had been a Passover meal, the Eucharist would subsequently have been celebrated only on the Passover itself (Dom Gregory Dix).

B. Nevertheless, the Last Supper took place as the nation was preparing for the Passover, and the symbolism of the holiday would have been prominent in the thoughts of Jesus and his disciples.

C. The differences between the versions of the words of institution are not great and perhaps largely reflect both what was actually verbalized and what was understood without being explicitly stated. For example, Jesus may not have actually said, "Do this in remembrance of me," but in the context of a solemn final meal on the eve of Passover, the implicit command might have been obvious.

XII. From the various accounts of the Last Supper, it seems that Jesus did at least three things:

A. He solemnly announced (what everyone probably already suspected) that he would not dine with the disciples again until the next life.

B. He warned them not to betray him and his "covenant" in the meantime.

C. He said that henceforth the bread and the wine would be his body and blood.

XIII. Apparently, Jesus intended to institute a ceremony that would

A. Remind the disciples of his message of inclusion and hope.

- B. Give them an opportunity to recommit themselves to living and proclaiming that message.
  - C. Give the disciples the renewed expectation of one day being fully reunited with their leader in a renewed world.
  - D. In the meantime make their leader paradoxically present in a solemn meal, and, particularly present through bread and wine.
- XIV. We should also remember that the commandment to eat Jesus's body was paradoxical and sounded like cannibalism, and like many other puzzling sayings of Jesus
- A. Pointed in a certain direction but was not be taken literally
  - B. Invited continuing reflection
  - C. Gave his disciples a sense of equality (since all would share in the same "body").

### The Death of Jesus; Jesus's Personality

- I. The death of Jesus has played an enormous role in Christian thought because it has been the foundation both for ethics and the doctrine of the atonement.
  - A. Ethically, Christians are supposed to "take up their cross"--to show the same spirit of loving self-sacrifice that Jesus did when he accepted crucifixion.
  - B. Doctrinally, Christians hold that somehow Jesus's death overcame sin.
- II. Presumably, this theological interpretation of the crucifixion took place subsequently thanks to the resurrection.
  - A. Whatever Jesus may have told the disciples before the crucifixion, the gospels make it clear that the actual event was a shock to them.
  - B. Once the resurrection had taken place, however, the disciples naturally saw the cross as part of God's plan and reflected on the significance of Jesus's death.
- III. In this lecture we will concentrate on two historical questions regarding the crucifixion:
  - A. Did Jesus actually *choose* to die, and if so, why?
  - B. Why did the authorities decide to execute him?
- IV. The following complicates any attempt to answer these questions:
  - A. The answer may change depending on one's presuppositions about Jesus's nature. Thus, if one holds he was omniscient and omnipotent, then he must have died voluntarily.
  - B. Our major sources for the last days of Jesus are Christian and, therefore, completely one-sided and manifest an increasing tendency
    1. To shift the blame from the Romans to the Jews (e.g., Mt. 27:19-25) and make Jesus look as harmless as possible (e.g., Jn. 18:36).
    2. To stress Jesus's total knowledge and sovereign freedom (Jn. 18:4-6).
    3. To stress that his death was in accordance with the scriptures.
- V. In this lecture we will restrict the discussion to what a historian can

reconstruct, though even this limited inquiry is difficult.

VI. Fortunately, there are a few facts about Jesus's death and the relevant prior events that are virtually certain.

- A. John the Baptist was arrested and executed around the beginning of Jesus's ministry, and Jesus was aware of what happened.
- B. Herod Antipas executed John at least in part because of John's growing influence with the people (Josephus, Antiquities 18.2).
- C. From the beginning of his ministry Jesus had many critics.
- D. He chose to journey to Jerusalem for Passover and take the inflammatory step of staging a demonstration symbolizing the destruction of the temple.
- E. In first century Palestine from at least 6 C.E. on there was a series of revolutionaries ("bandits") and messianic pretenders, and it was government policy to execute such.
- F. Jesus was tried by the Romans and crucified on the charge of being a messianic pretender and was executed with two others who apparently were condemned on a similar charge.

VII. To these facts I believe we can safely add three more:

- A. A saying about not drinking of the fruit of the vine again until the next life (Mk. 14:25)
- B. Jesus's prayer just before his arrest that he not have to suffer (Mk. 14:36). Surely the Church would not have made this up!
- C. The basic reliability of the unanimous testimony of the gospels that Jesus made no attempt to escape or resist arrest or even to be found innocent. This behavior was in keeping with Jesus's preaching that we must love our enemies and not use violence against them.

VIII. Naturally, if one is more conservative, one will accept the authenticity of other passion sayings (e.g., the passion predictions), but I am inclined to be cautious because of the apologetic tendencies in the tradition. Note that the passion predictions also serve a literary function, preparing the reader for the crucifixion.

IX. On the basis of the above it seems that historically Jesus

- A. Must have known that he was living dangerously and might get killed when he went to Jerusalem.
- B. That he chose to take the risk in order to accomplish what he felt was his mission.
- C. That toward the time of his arrest he realized that the end had come, and after some struggle he accepted this as God's will for him.
- D. That because his death was God's will, Jesus subsequently made no attempt to defend himself.

X. Accordingly, Jesus did die voluntarily out of obedience to his sense of mission and of God's will. This conclusion is fully in accord with Church tradition and causes no theological problems, even if we may not be ready to imitate Jesus's example.

XI. The question of why the authorities chose to execute him is more difficult, since what information we possess presumably did not come from them.

- XII. At least three explanations are at least historically plausible.
- A. The Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, feared that Jesus was a potential revolutionary and had him crucified.
1. As all the gospels attest, Pilate ordered the execution, and the formal charge was treason (claiming to be "King of the Jews").
  2. Messianic pretenders had long been a problem in occupied Jewish Palestine (cf. Barabbas), and it was Roman policy to kill them.
  3. The authorities were leery of people who attracted popular support, since they could always lead a revolt. Josephus, the Jewish historian, records that Herod Antipas executed John the Baptist because the masses seemed ready to do anything he might request.
  4. Jesus's proclamation of the coming of God's kingdom already had alarmed the political leaders of Galilee (Luke 13:31).
  5. His triumphant entry into Jerusalem during the inflammatory Passover period, as the crowds hailed him as a Messiah, and his violent demonstration in the temple convinced Pilate that tolerating Jesus was an unacceptable risk.
  6. Hence, he quickly executed him as a preventative measure.
  7. The high priests may have cooperated in obtaining Jesus's death, but they had no choice because they were Roman appointees.
  8. The gospel accounts that stress Pilate's reluctance to execute Jesus are mere Christian propaganda.
    - a. The evangelists and the sources they used wanted to make the Church look harmless to the imperial government.
    - b. Hence, they disguised the fact that Jesus had in fact been a threat to Roman authority
    - c. And instead they transferred the blame for the crucifixion to the Jews who were widely disliked in the Roman world.
    - d. Unfortunately, blaming the Jews subsequently encouraged Christian antisemitism which ultimately led to the Holocaust, and it is essential that modern scholars set the record straight.
- B. A second possibility is that the high priests and their supporters forced Pilate to execute Jesus.
1. The gospels attest that the high priests arrested Jesus, condemned him after a perfunctory hearing, and demanded that a reluctant Pilate execute him.
  2. The high priests would have regarded some of the claims of Jesus (e.g., that he could forgive sins) as blasphemous, and the gospels record that the priestly charge against him was in fact blasphemy (Mk. 14:64; cf. Mk. 2:6-7).
  3. As John's Gospel explicitly states (Jn. 11:47-53), the high priests feared that Jesus would incite a revolt which would lead to the Romans destroying the temple. Therefore, Jesus needed to be eliminated.

4. Of course, the high priests also disliked Jesus's criticism of religious privilege.
5. And they found Jesus's predictions of the temple's destruction and his violent demonstration in the temple courtyard utterly unacceptable.
6. Hence, the high priests arrested and condemned Jesus and demanded that Pilate execute him.
7. As a Roman governor Pilate was much more concerned about keeping the high priests happy than saving the life of a nobody like Jesus.

C. A third possibility is that the Jewish populace forced Pilate to execute Jesus (N.T. Wright).

1. The gospels attest that Pilate wanted to release Jesus but was unable to do so because a mob was threatening to riot if he did.
2. Jesus had offended popular opinion by his demonstration at the temple which the populace rightly interpreted as an attack on violent nationalism. Note Jesus's words in Mark 11:17 that the temple was supposed to be a house of prayer for all nations but had become a stronghold for "bandits" (i.e., rebels against Rome).
3. Pilate as the Roman governor regarded Jesus as a political asset, since Jesus advocated non-violence and love of enemies.
4. Consequently, Pilate tried to release Jesus.
5. But he could not risk a riot during the Passover festival, since things would quickly get out of hand. To placate the nationalistic crowd, he not only ordered the execution of Jesus but also the release of a popular rebel, Barabbas.

Discussion: Which theory do you support, and why?

XIII. My own guess is that both the high priests and the Jewish populace successfully pressured a reluctant Pilate to execute Jesus.

- A. As we noted above, the high priests and Jewish populace desired the execution of Jesus because of his protest against the temple, though their objections to the protest differed.
  1. The high priests and their supporters saw the protest as an attack on their own power and prestige. However, to convince Pilate to execute Jesus, they argued that Jesus was a threat to Roman rule (e.g., Luke 23:2).
  2. The populace, by contrast, saw Jesus's protest as an endorsement of (submission to) Roman rule.
- B. Pilate knew that Jesus opposed violence against Rome and, therefore, did not wish to execute him.
- C. However, under pressure he placated both the high priests and the mob.
  1. In line with the expressed wishes of the high priests, Pilate executed Jesus on the charge of treason against Rome.
  2. In line with the nationalism of the populace, Pilate released a well-liked rebel named Barabbas.

- D. It seems to me that this solution is preferable to the alternatives discussed above.
1. This solution is intrinsically reasonable.
  2. It is basically what the gospels record, and *we have no other historical sources for what happened.*
- XIV. Whether or not my guess is correct, the following seems beyond dispute:
- A. The Romans at the very least carried out the crucifixion and justified their actions by claiming that Jesus was a traitor against Rome.
  - B. The high priests were at least highly in favor of Jesus's death.
  - C. The populace at least turned against Jesus, and, therefore, the authorities could execute him without fearing a riot.
- XV. One solution to the problem of the crucifixion and subsequent antisemitism.
- A. As we noted above, the gospels place the blame for the execution of Jesus primarily on the "Jews."
  - B. Consequently, the gospel accounts of the crucifixion have incited Christians through the centuries to persecute the Jews as "Christ killers."
  - C. Liberal scholars who are anxious to get beyond the evils of the past tend to argue that the Romans were solely responsible for the death of Jesus.
  - D. I do not think that the liberals are entirely correct (see above). Instead, as noted above, I think that Jewish nationalists pressured the Romans to execute Jesus.
  - E. Nevertheless, I do not believe that classical Judaism was in any way to blame.
    1. During the lifetime of Jesus, Jews were divided over whether it was best to engage in violent resistance to Roman rule or live in peace.
    2. Jesus was not the only important Jewish teacher who advocated peace. For example, Hillel, an older contemporary of Jesus, apparently also did.
    3. Unfortunately, those who advocated violent resistance inspired the disastrous revolts that led to the destruction of the Temple in 70 and the expulsion of all Jews from Judea in 135.
    4. After the failure of the revolts classical Judaism arose and followed the peaceful counsel of Hillel.
    5. All subsequent Judaism descends from this classical movement, and it is wrong to blame "Jews" (i.e., descendants of classical Judaism) for the death of Jesus.
- XVI. Some aspects of Jesus's personality. (Note that for Christians Jesus is in some sense the model human being.)
- A. He loved the pleasures of life but was not attached to them.
    1. In the gospels he is frequently at dinner parties, and his enemies accuse him of being a glutton and a drunk (Mt. 11:19).
    2. He was able to remain an itinerant.
  - B. He hated pain but was willing to endure it for the sake of love and God's call.
    1. Jesus was not an ascetic (see above), and the characters in his

- parables are seldom heroic.
- 2. Still, as we saw above, he journeyed to Jerusalem and accepted his death by torture as God's call for him.
- C. He lived one day at a time in trust (Mt. 6:25-35). Note that an itinerant has to live this way.
- D. He could see into people's hearts and respond to the real person, and, consequently, he brought people's true selves to light.
- E. He was compassionate toward people in need, sharing their pain and acting to eliminate their problems.
- F. He was impatient with pride and hypocrisy in religious leaders and confrontational toward people who had hidden agendas.
- G. He could not be manipulated either by individuals or social regulations.
- H. He acted with authority.
- I. He was humble and pointed away from himself to God.
- J. All the above came from his relationship to God which was characterized by
  - 1. Obedience
  - 2. Intimacy

Discussion: Whom do you admire and why? How do your heroes/role models compare with Jesus?

Assignment: Study Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, John 20-21, 1 Corinthians 15, and the Gospel of Peter (available on the web at <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/gospelpeter-brown.html>).

### The Historical Problem of What Happened on the First Easter; One Solution

- I. Even more than the miracles (see above), the resurrection raises crucial methodological problems for a historian, and we must pause for a brief theoretical discussion.
- II. History is the reconstruction of the past.
- III. We reconstruct the past on the basis of several things:
  - A. Data (i.e., bits of information that have survived).
  - B. General assumptions about what is real or important. These vary from historian to historian.
  - C. Analogy. We assume that the past was in some way similar to the present and can be understood through present experience.
  - D. Correlation. We assume that a past event was a coherent whole, and we strive for a reconstruction that brings all the data into a meaningful pattern.
- IV. Reconstructing the resurrection is problematic because the event poses severe difficulties in terms of the bases listed above.
  - A. The data is sparse, inconsistent, and often appears to be late and tendentious. And all of the data comes from Christian sources.
  - B. The general assumptions with which people approach the resurrection material vary enormously depending both on one's faith and one's

conviction about what is possible.

C. Christianity teaches that Jesus's resurrection has no analogy, and, historically, it cannot be established that a similar event ever occurred. It is even difficult to find a serious claim that something comparable happened (i.e., that a human being died, was buried, and rose from the dead as Lord of the Universe).

D. Theoretically, it is not clear that an event which contains both natural and supernatural elements would necessarily be a coherent whole, and in practice it is hard to come up with a single scenario that explains all of the data.

V. Given the above, the only undeniable historical fact is that at some point early Christians began to *proclaim* that Jesus had risen from the dead.

VI. To produce a more detailed reconstruction of the events, one can make different assumptions which produce different scenarios. Here are at least a range of options:

A. Fundamentalist

1. Assumption: The Bible is the inerrant word of God.
2. What took place: The resurrection events occurred exactly as the canonical accounts record. The seeming discrepancies can be harmonized and are in part due to selective reporting.

B. Conservative Christian

1. Assumption: The Bible is basically reliable, and God can work physical miracles.
2. What took place: The resurrection happened basically as the New Testament accounts say and was--in part, at least--an objective material event involving the removal of Jesus's body from the tomb.

C. Liberal Christian

1. Assumption: The Bible contains a lot of legendary material but does point to supernatural truth. God cannot work physical miracles and certainly does not raise dead bodies. Nevertheless, God does have objective existence and does raise the souls of the dead.
2. What took place: God raised and glorified the soul of Jesus and gave the disciples objective visions attesting this act.

D. Radical Christian

1. Assumption: The Bible contains a lot of myth which needs to be demythologized. Christianity has to do only with this earthly life.
2. What took place: After the crucifixion the followers of Jesus came to the realization that his cause was not lost (Willi Marxsen). Because of their mythological world view, they either experienced this realization as a vision of Jesus raised from the dead or else chose to talk about it in this symbolic way.

E. Sympathetic non-Christian

1. Assumption: Christianity is basically erroneous but contains some useful perspectives and is worthy of respect.
2. What took place: Belief in the resurrection began as an honest



mistake due to an error involving the tomb and/or a series of subjective visions perhaps resulting from grief, guilt, and wishful thinking.

F. Hostile non-Christian

1. Assumption: Christianity is a dangerous fraud.
2. What took place: Jesus or his followers deliberately perpetuated a hoax.

Discussion: What assumptions do you make, and what do you think happened on the first Easter?

VII. My own assumptions

- A. The New Testament does contain errors but should be given the benefit of the doubt.
- B. The divergences in the resurrection accounts are due to three factors:
  1. Faulty memory and reconstruction (including apologetic reconstruction).
  2. Theological editing to make diverse points.
  3. Different "translations" into earthly terms of experiences that were essentially unlike normal experience.
- C. Thanks to critical scholarship we can to some extent separate early and late traditions in the New Testament.
- D. I believe that God does work miracles but that miracles are only ambiguous signs which are intended to invite faith, not compel it.
- E. Accordingly, at most, historical research can make faith more plausible. A secure faith must have additional support from elsewhere.

VIII. One historical reconstruction of what "objectively" took place. (By "objective" I mean what someone at the scene could have observed regardless of their faith.)

- A. Mary Magdalene and several other women discovered that the tomb in which Jesus had been placed was empty.
  1. It has often been claimed that the story of the finding of the empty tomb is an apologetic legend which was probably late. This claim has some basis and is at least *possible*.
    - a. 1 Corinthians 15, which is our earliest written presentation of the resurrection, does not mention the empty tomb.
    - b. A late story about people finding the empty tomb could easily have arisen, especially if the grave's location was forgotten. The apocryphal Gospel of Peter demonstrates the apologetic creativity of the early Church. Moreover, given the fact that the Romans did not usually return the bodies of executed criminals and that Mary Magdalene was a visitor to Jerusalem, it is conceivable that the burial site was lost.
  2. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the preponderance of the historical evidence makes it *likely* that the tomb was empty, regardless of how we may explain this unsettling fact.
    - a. Little can be deduced from the silence of 1 Corinthians 15, particularly since "was buried" (1 Cor. 15:4a) may actually

imply knowledge of the empty tomb and certainly does imply faith in the physical resurrection of Jesus.

b. There are signs that the story of the tomb's discovery was early and widespread. The gospels of Mark and John have independent versions, and in both there is evidence of editing, and so apparently the evangelists reworked older material (Reginald Fuller).

c. It is not likely that the location of the tomb was forgotten, because the gospel accounts of the burial and discovery are basically credible.

1). The burial of Jesus by Joseph of Arimathea appears to be historical. If the Church had not known who buried Jesus, it would not have claimed that it was someone who

a). Came from an obscure town.

b). Actually belonged to the circles who engineered Jesus's execution. The gospels freely admit that Joseph was a member of the Sanhedrin (Jerusalem Council; e.g., Luke 23:50-51).

2). Joseph could scarcely have forgotten where he buried Jesus and certainly would have been able to verify that the tomb remained intact (if such had been the case).

d. It is most improbable that a late apologetic legend would have attributed the finding of the tomb to women, since in first century Judaism the testimony of women was considered unreliable. Women could not testify in court.

e. Of course, we could be dealing with an early apologetic legend about an empty tomb which arose at a time when it was still known that only the women remained in Jerusalem. Nevertheless, this hypothesis faces severe difficulties.

1). Such a legend would have originated and circulated when Mary Magdalene and her companions were alive and knew it was false.

2). There is no evidence that the males fled from *Jerusalem*. Both Luke and John specifically state that the males were still in the city on Easter, and Matthew and Mark implicitly assume the same, since the women must tell the men to go to Galilee for a resurrection appearance.

B. Certain disciples "saw" something which convinced them Jesus was alive, and there are some problems with dismissing these experiences as subjective visions.

1. Given what Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15:4-8, it seems to me virtually certain that many early disciples saw something which

they perceived to be Jesus risen from the dead.

2. It is *possible* that all they saw were subjective visions resulting from trauma and wishful thinking.

3. Nevertheless, there are difficulties with the assumption that we are dealing with subjective visions.

a. In Jewish tradition there was no precedent to enable people to imagine the resurrection of an individual before the end of the world.

b. The normal way to console oneself over the death of a martyr was to look for God to punish those responsible and perhaps to reward the martyr on the last day.

c. An empty tomb does not normally lead to visions of a resurrection.

d. The accounts of the resurrection appearances stress that those who witnessed them were initially incredulous, sometimes so much so that initially they did not even recognize him.

e. Jesus had taught his disciples the danger of hypocrisy and the need for discernment, and we may question whether his followers would have easily been deceived by a subjective experience.

f. None of the accounts of the resurrection appearances tells us that the followers of Jesus were having an “inner” experience. Instead, our sources claim that in a number of resurrection encounters more than one person was present and Jesus was somehow visible to everyone. Moreover, it is noteworthy that elsewhere Matthew is enthusiastic about dreams and elsewhere Luke is enthusiastic about visions, but neither evangelist suggests that the resurrection experiences were dreams or visions.

C. By contrast, it is likely that the resurrection accounts that stress the undeniable physical presence of Jesus (e.g., the risen Jesus eating a piece of fish; Luke 24:41-43) are not historical in the strict sense.

1. Such stories appear only in individual late works.

2. If such events had actually occurred, their absence in the earlier tradition would be hard to explain.

3. On the other hand, it is easy to explain their origin in terms of apologetic and theological interests. The Church had to reply to Jewish allegations that the disciples stole the corpse (Mt. 27:62-66) and perhaps radical Christian allegations that Christ did not have a body (e.g., 2 Jn. 7).

4. The tradition of apologetic and theological elaboration continued after the New Testament was written, as we can see from the Gospel of Peter.

5. Of course, such stories may be valid interpretations of the significance of the resurrection or even valid translations into

earthly terms of experiences which differed fundamentally from normal reality.

Assignment: Study for final examination.

Should We Believe in the Early Church's Understanding of the Resurrection?

I. (review) In my opinion, the historical evidence concerning the resurrection invites belief but does not compel it. The historical evidence makes it somewhat implausible that the disciples made a mistake, but by no means impossible.

II. Accordingly, we are left with the question of whether we can confidently believe in the resurrection, and if so, how?

III. The following is merely my own response as a critical Christian.

IV. The New Testament suggests there are at least four bases for its belief in the resurrection:

A. The testimony concerning the empty tomb.

B. The “appearances” to the first disciples. Note that the New Testament stresses that these were privileged encounters (e.g., Acts 10:41) which have ceased (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:5-8).

C. The continuing presence of the Spirit of the risen Christ.

D. The eschatological hope that the resurrection inspires (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:12-14).

V. There are objections that can be raised against each of these.

A. The empty tomb

1. (review) Historically, the story could conceivably be an apologetic legend.

2. Theologically, there are two problems:

a. The empty tomb could be seen to imply that Christ's resurrection was merely a resuscitation.

b. The empty tomb has traditionally been seen to imply our fleshly resurrection at the end of time, and this implication is troubling.

1). The main Christian tradition has also taught the resurrection of the self at the moment of death, and contemporary out-of-body experiences seem to confirm this.

2). The resurrection of the flesh raises logical and theological problems. Can cannibals be raised? Can we achieve final fulfillment in limited bodies?

B. The first disciples could conceivably have been deceived by subjective experiences, since the disciples were burdened with grief and guilt (for having abandoned Jesus) and uncertainty about their future.

C. The Spirit Christians experience today might be something other than the presence of the risen Christ.

D. The hope that the resurrection inspires could merely be unfounded optimism.

VI. In my opinion, the weakest proof of the resurrection is the empty tomb, and Christian faith cannot principally rest on it.

VII. Nevertheless, we can strengthen the testimony of the empty tomb if we take the position that the tomb is a special, miraculous *sign* of a transcendent event, Jesus leaving the created world and returning to the Father.

A. Such a position does not necessarily commit us to a resuscitation of Jesus or a fleshly resurrection of Christians.

B. It is apparently the theology of the evangelists, since in the gospels people do not come to faith primarily on the basis of the tomb.

C. It coheres with Jesus's view that his miracles were signs of the larger reality of God's lordship.

VIII. To determine whether we are merely dealing with subjective visions, we have to assess the spiritual content of what the disciples saw. Note that the Christian tradition has insisted that there are ways of unmasking "false" visions.

IX. To a remarkable degree the New Testament accounts of the resurrection appearances have a common structure (Charles Perry). The structure:

A. A presence which initially could be doubted and/or misinterpreted but which in time produced the conviction that Jesus was actually there.

B. A command to share the message.

C. Some kind of promise--a promise that was fulfilled when the message was shared.

X. It seems to me that this structure must basically have been in the actual experiences.

XI. It is up to us on the basis of our own growing spiritual insight to determine whether such an experience could arise from a subjective vision. Typically in subjective visions the experience initially seems real to us but later we begin to question it.

XII. The literary structure of the resurrection accounts suggests that one way to determine whether the experiences were genuine is to act on them ourselves and see if Jesus fulfills his promise to be faithful to those who believe and obey.

XIII. To determine whether the Spirit in the midst of Christian communities today is the Spirit of the risen Christ we must do three things (Peter Carnley):

A. Determine what the "Spirit of Jesus" is by studying the historical human being (see lectures on the historical Jesus above).

B. Learn to perceive what the Spirit in contemporary Christian communities is, including whether something more is present than just shared belief and commitment.

C. Ask whether the spirit that is "objectively" present is the Spirit of Jesus.

D. I would add: Be ready to receive the Spirit ourselves. I think that most people who sincerely believe in the resurrection do so because Christ's Spirit has come to them.

XIV. To determine whether the eschatological hope that the resurrection inspires is more than misplaced optimism, we must note precisely what the hope is and whether it corresponds to our fundamental needs as human beings.

A. In my opinion, we must assume that a hope which corresponds to basic human need is realizable, since otherwise the need is inexplicable.

B. The hope that the resurrection inspires is our entry into the fullness of God's love and glory by means of accepting Christ's message. Of course, part of that fullness is eternal life.

C. Accordingly, we must ask at least the following:

1. Do we as human beings need ultimately to share in the fullness of God's love and glory, or can we be completely satisfied with less? Would we be fully satisfied with a God who forever withheld something from us that he could give us?
2. Do we need to get to this consummation by imitating Christ's example of self-sacrificing love, or would we be satisfied with some other route?
3. Do we instinctively feel that we can only come to share fully in God's life if he shared fully in ours? Would we be comfortable with a God who demands that we experience debilitating suffering and death when God himself never did?
4. Do we sense that we have through Christ already experienced the "down payment" (2 Cor. 1:22, 5:5) of the final consummation?

Assignment: Study for the final examination.

Appendix: The One Christ and the Many (a personal Christian reflection)

- I. (review) The synoptics are the end result of a long transmission process.
  - A. Jesus said and did certain things.
  - B. These were reduced to a general narrative and to brief oral units and used to address the needs of the moment. The units lacked a fixed order or wording.
  - C. Perhaps brief portions of this tradition were also written down.
  - D. Mark collected this material and adapted it to produce a written narrative which addressed the needs of his own day.
  - E. Matthew and Luke then drew on Mark and other tradition to produce new narratives which addressed the needs of a later period.
- II. This process gives to the synoptic tradition great richness, since
  - A. The same material can have different meanings at different stages of the tradition.
  - B. At each stage new material was added.
- III. However, the process also raises disturbing questions:
  - A. Can we really know what Jesus himself taught?
  - B. Would we not be better off with a single account of Jesus's life and teaching that was historically reliable in all respects (e.g., a videotape documentary)?
- IV. My own answer to "A" is we can reconstruct that Jesus taught a set of principles and issued a challenge to discern their meaning and apply them in concrete situations. These principles included such things as God's command to love others and the danger of religious hypocrisy.
- V. The synoptics give us four things:

- A. The principles themselves
  - B. Specific applications of them to the problems of another era
  - C. A remembrance of the deeds and personality of the man who gave us the principles.
  - D. The testimony that God raised this man from the dead and made him Lord of all.
- VI. Hence, the synoptics challenge us to
- A. Remember Jesus and his principles
  - B. Apply them to our own situation. Note that the synoptics give us examples of how the principles can be applied.
  - C. Realize that the Jesus whom we meet in these gospels has risen from the dead and is Lord of all and will be our final judge.
- VII. The problem with having an account of Jesus that would be in all respects historically reliable is that we would be tempted to use it to avoid having to think (and pray!) ourselves. In John's Gospel Jesus actually tells his disciples that it is to their advantage that he is going away because only if he goes will the Spirit come (Jn. 16:7).
- VIII. William Countryman has remarked that the problems of the Bible are its glory, because the errors and limited perspectives make it difficult for us to turn the book into an idol (an external substitute for the Spirit of God).
- IX. Christianity has always taught that there are both one Christ and many.
- A. Jesus is the one Christ.
  - B. We are all called to become Christ for one another.
- X. The relationship between the one Christ and the many is rich and complex.
- A. The one Christ is the origin and standard for the many. If we forget there is only one Christ, he will no longer challenge us.
  - B. Yet, it is only through the many that we come to know the one--none of us has seen Jesus. If we forget that Christ is in all Christians (all people?), the one Christ will no longer be visible or relevant.
- XI. As we noted at the start of the course, there are both one gospel and many, and this fact is reflected in the gospel titles ("The Gospel [singular!] According to . . .").
- XII. The relationship between the one gospel and the many is rich and complex.
- A. The one gospel is the origin and standard for the many. By the one gospel we can judge how "Christian" the written gospels are. We can, for example, conclude that Matthew's antisemitism contradicts Jesus's command to love one's enemies.
  - B. Only through the many gospels can we discover the one.
- XIII. In this course we have both studied the many and the one.
- A. We have looked individually at Matthew, Mark, and Luke-Acts and seen how they each have a particular theological proclamation in response to a particular situation.
  - B. From the gospels we have attempted to reconstruct what Jesus himself proclaimed both by his words and his deeds.
- XIV. Ideally, this course will enable you to become one of the many Christs who bear witness to the one. Through studying the many gospels and the one Jesus

you too can come to know the one and become part of the many whose wisdom points others to him. I believe that this ideal holds regardless of whether you happen to be Christian, for the witness of any spiritually great individual challenges everyone.

Discussion: What in this course has been useful to you in your own spiritual journey?

Assignment: Study for the final examination.