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## One Year Introduction to the New Testament [Lecture Notes]

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# One Year Introduction to the New Testament:

Lecture Notes

by

Scott Gambrill Sinclair

## Table of Contents

My Methodology to Reconstruct the Historical Jesus in Comparison with That of Other Scholars .....	5
The Social and Political Setting of Jesus .....	8
The Life of Jesus until the Ministry of John the Baptist.....	13
The Life of Jesus from the Ministry of John until the Final Trip to Jerusalem .....	16
Jesus’s Vision of a New Kind of Human Being.....	19
The Miracles of Jesus.....	23
The Social Teaching of Jesus .....	27
Jesus’s Kingship and his Plan to Confront the Nation with His Royal Claims .....	30
The Final Days of Jesus .....	33
Competing Historical Explanations for the Claim that Jesus Rose from the Dead and the Larger Convictions Underlying Each .....	41
The Personal Assumptions that I Bring to the Resurrection Texts .....	45
The Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus, One Evaluation .....	49
(time permitting) The Theological and Spiritual Evidence for the Early Church's Understanding of the Resurrection.....	53
(time permitting) Can We Affirm Our Own Future Resurrection From the Dead, and Is This Affirmation Consistent with the Resurrection of Jesus?.....	57
The Significance of the Resurrection for the Early Church.....	60
The Jewish Diaspora and the Church Before Paul.....	63
Paul's Life and Thought .....	66
Paul's Letters and the Problem of Contextual Thought as Illustrated in Philemon and 1 & 2 Thessalonians a reading of Paul’s letter to Philemon .....	70
Corinthians as a Response to Enthusiasm at Corinth.....	73
Paul and the Law Part 1--The Problem of Whether Gentiles Should Adopt the Law. Galatians as a Response. ....	76
Paul and the Law Part 2--The Problem of the Purpose and Continuing Value of the Law. Romans as a Response. ....	79
Homosexuality and the Epistle to the Romans .....	82
The Transition to the Post-Pauline Era in Paul's Churches; Philippians, Colossians, and Ephesians .....	87
The Debate Over Paul's Legacy; James, 2 Peter, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus .....	90
The Struggle Over What Is Orthodox: Jude and 1, 2, & 3 John .....	93
(time permitting) An Additional Reflection on the Johannine Epistles: Towards an Understanding	

of Christian Love .....	96
Roman Persecution; 1 Peter and Revelation .....	99
Hebrews .....	101
Preface to the Synoptic Gospels .....	103
Literary Criticism and the Basic Message of Mark .....	104
Mark's Historical Context and Its Significance for His Presentation of Discipleship .....	109
Mark's Theology of Miracles .....	114
Mark's Christology .....	117
A Brief Methodological Introduction to Matthew: The relationship of Matthew to Mark: redaction criticism.....	121
The Basic Message of Matthew .....	123
Matthew's Historical Context and Its Significance .....	126
Anti-Semitism and Matthew's Gospel .....	129
Matthew's Theology of Law .....	130
Matthew's Christology .....	133
(time permitting) One Interpretation of the "Beatitudes" in Matthew 5:3-12 .....	136
Matthew's Gospel and the Problem of Divorce—One Liberal Interpretation .....	138
An Additional Reflection: The New Testament's--and, especially, Matthew's--Portrait of Peter and Its Significance .....	141
A Brief Methodological Introduction to Luke .....	145
The Basic Message of Luke-Acts .....	146
The Setting and Historical Accuracy of Luke-Acts .....	148
Luke's Theology of the Oppressed.....	150
Luke's Spirituality .....	153
(time permitting) The Eucharist in Luke-Acts.....	157
(time permitting) The Problem of the Atonement and Luke-Acts .....	159
Ascension, Pentecost, and the Achievement of Luke .....	160
(time permitting) Luke-Acts and the Problem of Unity in Diversity Then and Now .....	163
Introduction to John's Gospel: The Nature and Origin of the Fourth Gospel .....	165
The Theme of the Gospel: We Are Saved by Believing that Jesus is God Infleshed .....	168
The Problem of the Credibility of John's Gospel and Its Christology Now and Originally .....	171
An Illustration of the Technique of the Fourth Gospel and the Problem of Credibility: The Gospel's Treatment of John the Baptist.....	174
Learning to Read Johannine Narrative a reading of John 2:1-11 .....	176

Appendix not covered in lecture: One Possible Analysis of John 2:1-12, the Changing of Water into Wine.....	178
The Final Editing of John's Gospel as One Response to the Problem of Credibility; John 21...	181
Signs in John's Gospel .....	184
John 1:1-2:12, Jesus Challenges People to Initial Conversion .....	186
Judgment.....	189
John 2:13-6:71: Jesus Challenges Us to Receive the Sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist....	191
Testimony, Perception, and True Faith.....	194
John 7:1-10:42: Jesus Challenges Us to Committed Discipleship.....	196
Irony in John's Gospel.....	198
John 11:1-12:50: Jesus Challenges Us to Die and Gain New Life .....	199
Two Important Themes Which Appear in Chapters 10-12 .....	201
Introduction to Chapters 13-20 .....	203
John's Account of the Passion.....	204
John's Treatment of the Resurrection.....	206
Some Observations on Women in John's Gospel .....	208
The Handing Over of the Spirit .....	209
The Final Stage of Christian Growth: Taking Jesus's Place In This World .....	211
The Editor's Answer to How We Can Know John's Gospel Is True (summary and review) .....	214
The Formation of the Canon.....	216
Reconstructing the Text of the New Testament .....	218
Appendix: The Problem of the "Inspiration" of the New Testament; My Perspective as a Modern Anglican.....	221

(Note: Because of their subsequent importance to Christianity, this course will devote the most attention to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and to the four gospels.)

## **My Methodology to Reconstruct the Historical Jesus in Comparison with That of Other Scholars**

- I. There are numerous scholarly reconstructions of the historical Jesus, and these differ greatly.
- II. This diversity is due to many things:
  - A. The subjective biases of scholars in dealing with a figure of such importance.
    1. The continuing desire of scholars to make Jesus and his social situation relevant to their own different social situations.
    2. The impulse to make Jesus like the scholar in question.
    3. The desire of orthodox Christians to imagine a Jesus who supports subsequent orthodox dogma and the church institutions which teach it.
    4. The contrasting desire of heterodox scholars to imagine a Jesus who undermines orthodox dogma and church institutions.
    5. The desire of social activists to make Jesus a critic of existing political and social structures.
    6. The contrasting desire of social conservatives to make Jesus apolitical or even a supporter of existing institutions.
  - B. The limitations of the available historical sources.
    1. All sources were written at least decades after Jesus's crucifixion.
    2. Almost all sources are Christian and look back at Jesus through the lens of the resurrection and the development of Christianity.
    3. The sources sometimes conflict with one another (e.g., the genealogies in Matthew and Luke differ after David [Matt. 1:1-1:17, Luke 3:23-38]).
    4. The sources contain obvious historical errors (e.g., the census in Luke 2:1-2 took place long after the birth of Jesus rather than being the cause of Jesus's birth in Bethlehem).
    5. Much of what is in the gospels is literary rather than historical. For example, in Mark's Gospel Jesus's repeated predictions of his resurrection (Mark 8:31, 9:9, 9:31, 10:33-34) are literary foreshadowing to prepare the reader for the startling end of the narrative. If the historical Jesus had kept predicting his resurrection, the disorientation of the disciples at the discovery of the empty tomb (Mark 16:1-8) would be inexplicable.
    6. The gospels do not always present incidents in chronological order.
      - a. The gospels often have blocks of material on a single topic (miracle stories, disputes between Jesus and his critics, parables of the kingdom).
      - b. Sometimes the evangelists arrange material to develop a theological theme. For example, John's Gospel moves the protest at the Temple from the end of Jesus's ministry to the beginning in order to produce a long section which emphasizes that Jesus's own body and the Church's sacraments replace the Temple (John 2:13-

6:59).

C. Scholars make different assumptions about the supernatural.

1. Skeptical scholars assume that the alleged miracles of Jesus must have a natural explanation.
2. Credulous scholars accept the possibility of a supernatural explanation.

D. Scholars have different methodologies for separating authentic historical material in the gospels from inauthentic.

1. Skeptical scholars rely heavily on the criteria of dissimilarity and embarrassment.
  - a. These scholars assume that, since much of the material in the gospels seems due to literary artistry (e.g., the canticles in Luke 1-2) and reflects things that happened after Jesus's death (the resurrection, the persecution of the early church, the destruction of the Temple, the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles, belief in the divinity of Christ), we should be suspicious over whether something which the gospels claim goes back to Jesus actually does.
  - b. To establish a reliable core that must go back to him, skeptical scholars begin by isolating material that conflicts with subsequent church belief and practice.
  - c. Then these scholars cautiously accept as authentic additional material that coheres with the established core.
2. By contrast, other scholars accept that basically what the gospels record is historically authentic and only question material for which there is strong evidence for inauthenticity. For example, Matthew 17:24-27 is obviously a fable to justify paying the temple tax which the Romans made mandatory and confiscated after the Temple's destruction.

III. My own perspective.

A. I acknowledge my desire to make the historical Jesus compatible with orthodox Christianity and with the insights of other world religions.

B. I also acknowledge my desire to make the historical Jesus relevant to my view of the social situation in this decade (2021-2030). At present, the world is beset with fascism and ecological peril but also blessed with new possibilities for women, non-heterosexuals, indigenous peoples, and other long oppressed groups. At various points in these lectures, I will suggest how Jesus is relevant.

C. For both historical and dogmatic reasons, I believe that Jesus was fully human with all the mental and spiritual limitations which humanity entails. *Therefore, his life must be understandable as a human response to his historical situation.*

D. However, I do not rule out the possibility that God sometimes did miracles, especially if there is solid historical evidence for the miracle in question. Miracles still occur today (on one occasion, in my presence).

E. I agree that gospel material that is dissimilar to what Christians later taught or was embarrassing to them is historically authentic.

F. However, overemphasizing this indisputable core will lead to the loss of the thrust of what Jesus said and did if the Church remembered that thrust.

G. Therefore, I begin with the methodological assumption that what the synoptic gospels record is basically historically authentic, and I believe that the evidence

supports this assumption.

1. The fact that the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) even contain material that was dissimilar to what the early church taught or was embarrassing suggests that much of what is in these gospels must be historically authentic.
2. The use of material to address subsequent matters or to accomplish literary goals does not in itself prove inauthenticity but only the possibility of it.
3. Even material that is clearly inauthentic may still reflect an accurate remembrance of at least the sort of thing that Jesus taught or did. For example, Matthew 17:24-27, mentioned above, coheres with Jesus's teaching that it was lawful to pay taxes to the Romans (Mark 12:14-17).

H. Although the Gospel of John is by its own admission a reflection on the significance of Jesus as the incarnation of God, numerous details in this gospel are historically authentic, as many scholars now recognize.

I. Since the early church began with Jesus and subsequently remembered and honored him, what the early church believed and did is at least weak evidence for what Jesus believed and did.

J. Very skeptical scholarship (e.g., that of Rudolf Bultmann or the Jesus Seminar) that excludes almost everything in the gospels as inauthentic should not on the basis of so little remaining material produce a picture of Jesus which conflicts with what the synoptics basically portray and the early church remembered. Instead, such scholarship should conclude that we cannot know much about Jesus.

K. Because of the problems noted above, all I claim about my reconstruction of the historical Jesus is that it is more probable than the alternatives.

L. I invite those who disagree to see this portrait of Jesus as my attempt to emphasize those aspects of his life and teaching that are most relevant today.



## The Social and Political Setting of Jesus

### I. The Old Testament Legacy

A. Jesus and the New Testament arose out of first century Palestinian Judaism.

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

C. Hence, to understand Jesus and the New Testament we need to have some understanding of the Old Testament heritage.

D. The theology of the Old Testament can be summarized in two fundamental convictions:

1. Ethical monotheism

a. There is only one God who is creator of heaven and earth and is Lord of All.

b. This one God is just and is especially concerned about the poor and oppressed.

2. Special election: This one God has chosen to make a covenant with a particular people, the Jews. As part of this relationship, God requires Jews to keep a special law which has both ethical (e.g., "You shall not kill") and ritual requirements (e.g., dietary restrictions), 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 where most of the regulations appear.)

### II. Jesus lived from around 5 BCE until around 30 CE.

A. He certainly died when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea (26-36 CE).

B. An earlier date in Pilate's tenure is more probable, since Luke tells us that John the Baptist began his ministry around 28 CE (Luke 3:1), and apparently Jesus's own ministry lasted no more than two or three years.

C. The gospels record that he was born before the death of Herod the Great (probably 4 BCE; Matt. 2:1, Luke 1:5).

D. Luke states that Jesus was about thirty when he began his ministry (Luke 3:23).

### III. Jesus lived primarily in Galilee but made short visits to surrounding territories and, especially, to Jerusalem.

A. As his full name, "Jesus of Nazareth," implies, he grew up in Nazareth, an obscure village in Galilee about three miles from the ancient city of Sepphoris.

B. During his ministry he spent much time in the towns on the Lake of Galilee and also briefly visited areas bordering Galilee (Mark 5:1-20, 7:24-31, 8:27).

C. John's Gospel plausibly tells us that during his ministry Jesus visited Jerusalem repeatedly to observe the pilgrimage feasts (2:13, 5:1, 7:1-10, 12:1) and, if John is correct, Jesus would repeatedly have had to pass through either Samaria (John 4:1-42, cf. Luke 17:11) or Perea to get there.

1. Since all but the last of these visits to Jerusalem do not appear in the synoptics, they are not historically certain.

2. Nevertheless, I believe that they are likely.

- a. Theoretically, these pilgrimages were required for Jewish males (Deut. 16:1-17), and Jesus was devout.
    - b. These trips would have been brief, and the synoptic evangelists may have considered them unimportant or not known about them.
  - D. Of course, at the end of his life Jesus traveled to Jerusalem where he was executed.
- IV. Throughout these areas there was a stark contrast between a small, wealthy elite, and a huge mass of poor, many of them desperately so.
  - A. A tiny percentage of the population owned most of the material property and many slaves.
  - B. The middle class (i.e., people whose resources comfortably exceeded bare necessities) was small and included merchants, managers, military officers, well-off peasants and their families.
  - C. The vast majority of people (including craftsmen, hired hands, petty vendors, toll takers, common soldiers, servants, landless peasants, and their dependents) lived at subsistence and was very vulnerable in times of famine, war, or plague.
  - D. A significant portion of the population eked out a precarious and degrading existence as beggars, prostitutes, and outlaws.
- V. The grim economic situation of so many would lead to social unrest under special conditions, but usually these people accepted their plight as the “normal.”
- VI. During the lifetime of Jesus both Galilee and Judea were parts of the Roman Empire, but their political situations were very different from a Jewish perspective.
  - A. The Roman Empire ruled Judea directly with a heavy hand, and Jews were discontented.
    - 1. In 6 CE the Romans deposed the Jewish ruler of Judea and placed the area directly under a Roman governor, and this system of rule continued without interruption until after the death of Jesus.
    - 2. Consequently, the signs of Roman presence were obvious, including Roman troops and military fortresses.
    - 3. A continuing source of tension between the Romans and Jews was the Roman use of Pagan images, including on coins.
    - 4. Consequently, there was widespread resentment among the Jewish populace.
    - 5. This resentment forced the Roman government to be repressive. Josephus and Luke record that Pontius Pilate was responsible for massacres (Josephus, Antiquities XVIII; Luke 13:1).
  - B. By contrast, during the same period the Roman government ruled Galilee indirectly through the (nominally?) Jewish ruler Herod Antipas, and Jews there had little nationalistic reason to be unhappy.
    - 1. Although Herod Antipas was a Roman appointee and payed tribute, he managed to maintain the appearance of autonomy and respected Jewish sensibilities.
      - a. He had his own army.
      - b. He also minted his own bronze coins.
      - c. Out of respect for Jewish concerns, these coins had no forbidden images.

2. Except for the execution of John the Baptist whose popularity seemed threatening, Herod ruled more leniently than the Roman governors in the South, because his Jewish subjects were less resentful.

## VII. Judaism in Judea (and Samaria) had a number of important sects.

### A. The Sadducees

1. Consisted of the high priest and his supporters.
2. They were theologically conservative and did not believe in meaningful life after death.
3. Because of the enormous income produced by the temple at Jerusalem, at least the leadership of the Sadducees was wealthy and powerful.
4. The Roman government regarded the high priest as the leader of the Jews.
5. The Romans appointed high priests and removed many, including Caiaphas, who probably was high priest during Jesus's ministry.
6. The high priests seem to have been politically pragmatic and patriotic and cooperated with the Roman government when necessary and resisted when practical.

### B. The Pharisees

1. Were lay experts on the Mosaic Law.
2. They were legally innovative and attempted to spell out the implications of the Mosaic Law for all of daily life.
3. The Pharisees were also theologically innovative and accepted more books as canonical than the Sadducees.
4. They taught the late doctrine of the resurrection of the dead and presumably were open to apocalyptic speculation.
5. The gospels condemn the Pharisees as hypocritical, but this condemnation seems to reflect later hostility between the Early Church and the Pharisees rather than a balanced view.
6. At least from their own perspective, the Pharisees were attempting to allow all Jews to please God by fully living according to God's wishes as revealed in the Mosaic Law.

### C. The Essenes

1. Are less important for an understanding of Jesus, since they did not associate with other Jews and differed most from them theologically.
2. Today the Essenes are remembered primarily for the famous Dead Sea Scrolls which seem to be from an Essene library.

### D. Armed revolutionaries.

1. There were various groups who violently opposed Roman rule.
2. During the ministry of Jesus these groups would have been small and primarily in Judea.
3. The Romans regarded them as mere bandits.

### E. Samaritans

1. The Samaritans were not, strictly speaking, Jews.
2. But they accepted the books of Moses and claimed to be descendants of the Northern Tribes of Israel.
3. The Samaritans rejected the Temple in Jerusalem and instead

worshiped at a mountain in Samaria.

4. During the time of Jesus Jews and Samaritans did not associate.

VIII. Today we have little surviving evidence for Judaism in Galilee beyond what we can deduce from the gospels. The other written sources on which we depend for knowledge of first-century Judaism seldom mention Galilee during the lifetime of Jesus.

IX. But on the basis of what the gospels tell us and what politics and geography suggest, I would guess that in Galilee Judaism was traditional and insular. Galilean Judaism was largely unaware of and/or unconcerned about controversies in Judea and theological developments there.

A. Jews in Judea regarded religion in Galilee as backward and unworthy of much attention, though the Pharisees, who were eager to spread their influence, did visit. The following quote captures the prejudice well, “No prophet will arise from Galilee” (John 7:52).

B. Galilee was separated from Judea by Samaria.

C. Consequently, I assume that Judaism in Galilee focused on the traditional basics, on the literal meaning of the Pentateuch and the Prophets and the Psalms and on keeping the fundamentals of Mosaic Law.

D. To enforce compliance with distinctive Jewish practices, the religious system relied on shaming.

1. There were formal penalties (fines, flogging, execution) for violating what we would call criminal law.

2. But the specific ethnic regulations of the Mosaic Law were not enforced by formal punishment but public censure. People who did not abide by the food and purity and Sabbath laws were regarded as unclean and shunned.

3. The censure fell on both those Jews who had no desire to keep the regulations and on those who wanted to but lacked the time and money for the holidays and fees (especially, the temple tax) that the law required.

E. Theoretically, Galilean Jews believed the biblical promises that a Son of David would usher in a Golden Age of justice and prosperity.

F. But at least during normal times, there was no reason to assume that these promises would be fulfilled soon.

1. Centuries had passed since the ancient prophecies, and people were used to waiting.

2. Galilee already had a Jewish ruler who by ancient standards was fairly good, and imminent fulfillment was not urgent. The apocalyptic fervor that appears in Daniel or Paul’s letters was a product of conditions (religious oppression, enthusiasm after Jesus’s resurrection) that did not exist under Herod Antipas.

G. Through the influence of visiting Pharisees, most Jews in Galilee probably believed that sometime after the Messianic Age there would be a resurrection of the dead and a final judgment. There is not enough evidence to determine whether Galileans believed in some interim life after death between an individual’s demise and the general resurrection, but I suspect that many did.

H. Since the Maccabees conquered Galilee and allowed Jews to immigrate there from the South, I assume that the Maccabean martyrs and military heroes were

celebrated in popular culture (cf. European immigrants to the United States celebrating Columbus Day).

I. Such was the Judaism which molded Jesus.

## The Life of Jesus until the Ministry of John the Baptist

- I. The gospels give us little information about Jesus's life prior to his baptism, and most of this little is not historically reliable.
- A. Matthew and Luke give us brief stories of Jesus's birth and childhood.
  - B. However, since Matthew and Luke wrote no earlier than 80 CE, almost a century or more had passed since the purported events.
  - C. This long gap by itself raises questions about historical accuracy.
  - D. The goals of these accounts of Jesus's early life are theological, not historical. (Note: Therefore the question of whether these accounts are "true" must be decided primarily on theological grounds.) The accounts emphasize the theological claims that Jesus was
    - 1. The Son of God, begotten by the Holy Spirit and a virgin.
    - 2. The legitimate king of Israel, since he was a descendant of David and attested as Messiah by reliable witnesses (angels, prophets, contemporary saints, even Wise Men from the East and a star).
  - E. Matthew and Luke mostly contradict one another on historical matters.
    - 1. Matthew's account of Jesus's birth and early childhood assumes that Jesus's parents initially lived in Bethlehem where Jesus was born and only moved to Egypt and then Nazareth to escape him being murdered.
    - 2. By contrast, Luke's account of the same years assumes that Jesus's parents always resided in Nazareth and only temporarily visited Bethlehem where they registered for the census and Jesus was born.
  - F. Most of what Matthew and Luke record about Jesus's birth and infancy originated from sources other than accurate historical memory.
    - 1. Matthew's account is primarily based on material from the Hebrew Bible.
      - a. Jesus fulfills numerous biblical prophecies (Matt. 1:23; 2:6, 15, 18).
      - b. His life has major parallels with Moses's. For example, in his infancy Jesus like Moses was in danger of being killed due to an evil ruler.
      - c. Therefore, it appears that Matthew began with the prophecies and Moses and created an early life of Jesus to show that Jesus was the prophesied Messiah and a new Moses.
    - 2. Luke's account is primarily based on literary goals and his favorite themes.
      - a. There are numerous literary parallels between the birth of Jesus and that of John the Baptist (e.g., the Angel Gabriel appears first to John's father and then to Jesus's mother to prophesy the coming births).
      - b. The account is filled with canticles (1:47-55, 68-79; 2:14, 29-32) and Luke's favorite topics, including women, the Holy Spirit, and worship.
      - c. Therefore, it appears that Luke began with a literary agenda and his special interests and turned them into a narrative.

II. However, the following material about Jesus's early life is at least historically probable on the basis of reliable evidence.

A. There is no doubt that "Jesus of Nazareth" was raised there, especially since his background in this lowly village was a stigma (John 1:45-46). Matthew even attempted to provide a biblical justification for Jesus being from Nazareth by stressing that it fulfilled a prophecy (Matt. 2:23). Unfortunately, the text which Matthew cited does not occur in the Hebrew Bible.

B. Jesus's father must have been a "carpenter" (a worker in wood and stone), since this was a lowly profession which subsequent Christian tradition would not have invented (Matt. 13:55).

C. As was customary, Jesus followed his father's profession and became a carpenter himself (Mark 6:3).

D. It is highly likely that Jesus was a descendant of David.

1. Conceivably, the early church first concluded on other grounds that Jesus was the prophesied Messiah and incorrectly deduced that he must, therefore, have been a descendant of King David.

2. However, Paul, the earliest Christian writer, already recorded that Jesus was descended from David (Rom. 1:3), and Paul knew James, a brother of Jesus, personally (Gal. 1:18-19, 2:9). Hence, it seems that there was a family remembrance of davidic descent.

3. David took numerous wives and had many children, and over the generations the number of people who were descendants of David must have become a significant percentage of Israel's population. So statistically, it is not surprising that Jesus may have been one of them.

4. The knowledge that he descended from David helps explain why Jesus concluded that he was the great Son of David whose reign the prophets had foreseen (see below).

E. During his adolescence and early adulthood, Jesus probably struggled to provide for his family.

1. His father Joseph apparently died when Jesus was only a teenager.

a. The last that our sources attest Joseph being alive was when Jesus was twelve (Luke 2:41-51).

b. When Jesus was engaging in his ministry, Joseph had been dead so long that Jesus could be identified only as the "son of Mary" (Mark 6:3).

2. After the death of Joseph, Jesus, as the oldest son (Luke 2:7), would have been responsible for providing for his numerous siblings (e.g., Mark 6:3) until they grew up.

3. Jesus's prolonged struggle to support his family helps explain his profound sympathy for the poor (e.g., Luke 6:20).

4. And that prolonged struggle may also (partially?) explain why Jesus did not get married.

F. Jesus had only a basic Jewish education.

1. Joseph, as a carpenter, probably had little formal schooling and could not have educated Jesus well, and, as a woman, his mother Mary would not have had access to education outside the home.

2. Nazareth was not an intellectual center. At most, there might have been limited instruction available in the synagogue.
3. Jesus's struggle to provide for his family would have precluded him from engaging in prolonged study.
4. Jesus gained a basic knowledge of at least the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms from hearing them read and explicated during synagogue services. He seems to have become interested in the book of Isaiah, since in his subsequent ministry he frequently alluded to it (e.g. Matt. 11:2-6, cf. Isa. 35:5-6, 61:1; Mark 12:1-8, cf. Isa. 5:1-7).
5. He obviously was intelligent and became able to discuss the Bible in the synagogues and even debate points with the scribes.
6. However, he had little formal education, and probably the Hebrew Bible was the only book with which he had any familiarity.
  - a. In the gospels he never refers to another text.
  - b. Non-canonical scrolls, such as the Parables of Enoch, would have been expensive, difficult for him to obtain, and far less important in his opinion than the scriptures.
7. John's Gospel reflects historical reality when people note that Jesus "has never been taught" (John 7:15).



## **The Life of Jesus from the Ministry of John until the Final Trip to Jerusalem**

### **I. John the Baptist**

- A. Around 28 CE John the Baptist began a prophetic ministry in Perea (an area ruled by Herod Antipas just across the Jordan River from Judea).
- B. Luke records that John was from Judea (Luke 1:39-40), and his ministry may have been a response to the grim political situation there.
- C. His message was that God was about to judge the Jews through the coming Messiah and only those who repented would escape dire punishment (Matt. 3:11-12).
- D. As a sign of repentance, John administered baptism, a rite which he invented and in popular usage became part of his name.
- E. In line with much prophecy in the Hebrew Bible, the required repentance included ceasing to oppress the vulnerable (Luke 3:10-14).
- F. John's preaching especially attracted the marginal (Matt. 21:32).
  - 1. They were more aware of their sinfulness than the respectable.
  - 2. They had a greater appreciation for John's insistence that people stop oppressing the vulnerable and for John's hopeful message of a coming Savior.
  - 3. Hence, the marginal especially flocked to hear John and be baptized.

### **II. Jesus's association with John the Baptist.**

- A. In Nazareth Jesus heard about John and apparently was impressed.
- B. He journeyed south, listened to John preach, and received baptism.
- C. Perhaps during that baptism Jesus got the first intimation that God would call him to be the Messiah.
  - 1. The synoptic gospels record that at his baptism Jesus heard a voice proclaiming that he was God's Son (e.g., Mark 1:9-11).
  - 2. The proclamation recalls Psalm 2 in which God addresses an Israelite king as his "Son" and promises to make him the ruler of the world.
  - 3. Later Jesus would share his visions with his disciples (e.g., Luke 10:18).
- D. For a time, Jesus baptized as an associate of John (John 3:22-24). Presumably, during that period Jesus baptized many people who had sinful pasts and now wished to start a more spiritual life. This experience would contribute to Jesus's later claim that he was called to save sinners (Mark 2:17).
- E. Then Herod Antipas, aware of John's popularity and foreseeing the possibility of an uprising, had John arrested (Josephus, Antiquities, XVIII).

### **III. Jesus accepted a vocation to be the royal Son of David who would bring salvation.**

- A. John's arrest was traumatic for Jesus.
  - 1. John had been his mentor whom he must have admired.
  - 2. The arrest of John invited questions about Jesus's own safety as John's associate.
- B. In addition, the arrest raised the issue of who would continue John's mission.
- C. The synoptic gospels record (e.g., Matt. 4:1-17) that
  - 1. Jesus withdrew to the wilderness and fasted.

2. Satan tempted him to use his vocation as “God’s Son” (i.e., the davidic Messiah) to gain comfort, acclaim, and earthly dominion.
  3. Jesus rebuffed Satan, insisting that as the Messiah he must serve God, not himself.
  4. Jesus returned to Galilee and commenced his public ministry by announcing the beginning of God’s kingdom.
- D. Depending on larger convictions about the supernatural, human psychology, and literary conventions, one can assume that the account is anything from literally true to an edifying myth.
- E. In any case, Jesus somehow came to the conclusion that he himself was the Messiah for whom John the Baptist had been preparing.
- F. Jesus struggled with the questions of how he would get Israel to recognize his messianic identity and what sort of king God was calling him to be.
- G. He rejected the idea that he would be a conventional king who would live in luxury, oppress the poor, and reinforce social hierarchies.
- H. Instead, he would be a servant king who would refuse royal privileges and concentrate on improving the lot of the marginal.
- I. Some of the Old Testament prophets, perhaps especially Isaiah, had foretold a utopia in which
1. God would heal the disabled (Isa. 29:18, 35:5-6).
  2. Israel would repent of its sins and become a light to the nations (Isa. 49:6).
  3. The Son of David would have an ideal reign and bring justice to the poor (Isa. 9:1-6; 11:1-5).
  4. There would even be a new and superior humanity.
    - a. People would live much longer.
      - 1). Israel remembered a golden age when people lived hundreds of years (e.g., Gen. 5) but accepted that now due to sin humans rarely reached eighty (Psalm 90:10).
      - 2). Isaiah looked forward to a time when human lifespans would once more be much longer (65:20).
    - b. There would never be war again.
      - 1). In the distant past God had fought for Israel, and the Israelites had triumphed.
      - 2). But God no longer fought for Israel, but instead, as punishment for Israel’s sins, God had handed his people into the power of their enemies, most recently, the Romans.
      - 3). In the glorious future there would be no war (Isa. 2:4).
    - c. Everyone would be filled with God’s Spirit.
      - 1). In the past God had only given the Spirit to select individuals called to special missions.
      - 2). But in the glorious future God would pour out his Spirit on all (Joel 2:28-29; Isa. 44:1-5), and transform everyone’s “heart” (i.e., the hidden core of one’s being; e.g., Jeremiah 31:33).
- J. Jesus decided that he would proclaim that with God’s assistance he was

initiating the fulfillment of such promises and that this beginning was a sign of a more glorious fulfillment to come.

K. Jesus also believed that at some point in the future there would be a resurrection of the dead and a final judgment and how people would fare would depend on whether or not they accepted Jesus's message. Therefore, he would also proclaim that those who rejected him would suffer final condemnation (e.g., Matt. 12:41-42).

L. He returned to Galilee, but the people of his native Nazareth could not imagine that someone they knew was so special (Mark 6:1-6).

M. He established a residence in Capernaum, a town on the Lake of Galilee (Matt. 4:13).

N. He announced that the Kingdom of God was quietly beginning and later would come in power and how people responded now would determine their future well being.

O. Because the kingdom was already beginning, Jesus adopted a celebratory lifestyle and associated with both the respectable and "sinners," prompting scorn from critics (Matt. 11:18-19).

P. To begin the kingdom and show signs of its future greatness, Jesus

1. Offered himself as a model for the new and better kind of human being.
2. Worked miracles healing the sick and disabled.
3. Reached out to the poor and the despised and invited them to become part of the kingdom.
4. Challenged the rich and the prestigious to surrender their privileges, enter the kingdom, and associate with the marginal.
5. Called and began training a core group of followers who would later rule and to whom he privately revealed that he would be king.

We will now consider these things in detail.

## Jesus's Vision of a New Kind of Human Being

- I. In the gospels the most frequent title that Jesus uses for himself is “son of humanity” (usually translated, “son of man”).
- II. Linguistically, the phrase, “son of humanity,” means a human being. In Hebrew and Aramaic grammar “son of” means a member of a category (e.g., “the sons of Israel” means the Israelites).
- III. In the Hebrew Scriptures “son of humanity” emphasizes the lowliness of a human being in comparison with God (e.g., Psalm 8:5).
- IV. (time permitting) There has been an enormous scholarly debate over what the historical Jesus meant by using this title, and no position has been satisfactory. Here I give what in my opinion is the least unsatisfactory one.
- V. (time permitting) After Jesus's unexpected resurrection, the early church used the title, son of humanity, in two complementary types of sayings that do not go back to the historical Jesus.
  - A. The early church, suffering persecution and influenced by Daniel 7, used the title in formulating sayings in which Jesus predicts his imminent return to judge the world.
    1. In Daniel 7 God condemns the empires which have oppressed Israel and gives authority over the world to one like a son of humanity, who in the passage symbolizes faithful Israel.
    2. After Jesus rose from the dead and Christianity began to be persecuted, the Church enthusiastically looked forward to Jesus's imminent return to judge the world.
    3. The Church concluded that Jesus was going to fulfill the vision in Daniel 7 and produced sayings in which he speaks about himself as the future, apocalyptic “son of humanity” (e.g., Mark 8:38).
  - B. The early church also emphasized that Jesus's obedient suffering was a model for persecuted Christians and produced sayings in which Jesus talks about his future sufferings as a “son of humanity” and which insist that we must take up our cross and follow him (Mark 8:31-37).
  - C. These two usages were complementary, since the apocalyptic Jesus would judge Christians on whether or not they had been faithful to earthly Jesus's model of obedient suffering.
  - D. Since the title “son of humanity” literally meant a human being, it was the perfect title to capture the complementarity. Jesus, the risen human being, would judge us on whether we were faithful to his humble example of what a human being should do when serving God.
  - E. Since Jesus had used the title “son of humanity” to describe himself (see below), it was logical to continue to use the title in new theological reflections on his significance.
  - F. However, the historical Jesus did not know that he would rise from the dead and, until the end of his life, was not certain that he would be crucified.
    1. If the historical Jesus had predicted his resurrection, the initial confusion at the discovery of the empty tomb (Mark 16:8, Luke 24:3-4a, John 20:1-2) and disbelief at the resurrection appearances (Matt. 28:17;

Luke 24:11, 37, 41; John 20:25) would be inexplicable.

2. I will argue below that until the last days of his life Jesus hoped to become an earthly king and only predicted his coming murder after these hopes failed to materialize.

G. Therefore, Jesus did not use the title “son of humanity” to describe his future sufferings and resurrection and return to judge the world.

VI. (time permitting) Since Jesus was not well educated, he had no knowledge of the apocalyptic “son of humanity” found in the Parables of Enoch and did not speak of this figure.

VII. Occasionally, when the historical Jesus used the title for himself, he was emphasizing his own limitations, just as we might say that someone is only human.

A. The critics of Jesus dismissed him as a disreputable nobody.

B. A few of Jesus’s uses of the phrase “son of humanity” echoed their criticism. “The son humanity has nowhere to lay his head” (Matt. 8:20). “The son of humanity came eating and drinking” (Matt. 11:19).

VIII. Since “son of humanity” was Jesus’s most frequent title for himself, often it meant Jesus without any further implication (e.g., Matt. 12:32).

IX. I believe that the historical Jesus primarily used the title, “son of humanity,” to indicate that he was the first illustration of a *new kind* of human being.

A. He referred to himself as *the* son of humanity, a usage that seems unprecedented.

B. Since presumably no one doubted that Jesus was a human being, the claim that he was *the* human being suggests that he saw himself as the model for what a human being should or would be.

C. Some biblical prophecies look forward to the coming of a Golden Age in which God would raise up a new and better humanity (see above).

D. And certain texts make it clear that Jesus believed that this age had arrived with him. For example, “If by the finger of God I expel demons, the kingdom of God has come on you” (Luke 11:20).

E. A key text is, “Among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (Matt. 11:11), and this text must go back to Jesus.

1. The saying is in the enigmatic and hyperbolic style that was typical of Jesus. Note that Jesus's statements point in a direction but are often so extreme or general that the hearers must make the specific application.

2. Making John the Baptist inferior to the *least* in the kingdom does not fit with later tradition which honored him as a great forerunner of Jesus (e.g., John 1:6-7).

3. And this text made Jesus’s hope for a new kind of human being obvious

X. Jesus modeled the new human being by who he was as the first illustration.

XI. Some aspects of Jesus's personality.

A. He loved the pleasures of life but apparently was not attached to them.

1. His enemies accused him of being a drunk and a glutton (Matt. 11:19). Of course, the Church would not have made up this allegation!

2. He was able to remain an itinerant dependent on the hospitality of others, a hospitality that was not always provided (e.g., Luke 9:51-56).

- 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, and the characters in his parables are seldom heroic.
    - 2. He accepted his death by torture as God's call for him (Mark 14:35-36).
  - C. He lived one day at a time in trust and urged his followers to do likewise (Matt. 6:25-34). Note that as an itinerant Jesus himself had 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.
    - 1. (review) He healed people of physical and psychological problems.
    - 2. He felt people's pain and confusion (e.g., Matt. 9:36).
  - F. He was demanding of his disciples but put up with their failings.
    - 1. Jesus warned would-be disciples of the cost of following him (e.g., Luke 9:57-62, 14:26-33).
    - 2. But in the gospels, he never dismisses a disciple.
  - G. He was impatient with all forms of pride and hypocrisy, especially in religious leaders, and was confrontational toward people who had hidden agendas.
  - H. He could not be manipulated either by individuals or social regulations.
  - I. He acted with authority.
  - J. He was humble and pointed away from himself to God. He did not even claim to be good, since only God was good (Mark 10:18).
- XII. Jesus's extraordinary personality was an outward expression of his inner relationship to God, a relationship characterized by intimacy and obedience.
- A. In line with the Hebrew Bible Jesus taught that the most important commandment was to love God with all one's being (Mark 12:28-30, Deut. 6:4-5).
  - B. He referred to God as his "Father," a title for God that was not common in Judaism (Joachim Jeremias).
  - C. He would withdraw for prolonged periods of solitary prayer (e.g., Mark 1:35). Since Jesus criticized long windedness in prayer (Matt. 6:7), we may assume that he spent much time in silence with God.
  - D. He felt led by God's Spirit. He even claimed that rejecting his ministry as evil was blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:28-30).
  - E. Just before his arrest he begged God that he not have to suffer but nevertheless prayed that God's will be done (Mark 14:36).
  - F. Jesus's authoritative pronouncements came primarily from an intuitive sense of God's will.
- XIII. Topics for reflection: To what extent can any individual resemble Jesus? To what extent can any Christian community expect to have all of the gifts that Jesus had? To what extent can we insist that every individual and community today be radically different from Jesus?
- XIV. As the first illustration of the new humanity, Jesus exercised and perhaps gave to others the authority to interpret the law and forgive sins.
- A. The gospels emphasize that Jesus exercised an authority that differed from that of the scribes and shocked people (e.g., Mark 1:22).
    - 1. The scribes assumed the divine authority of the Mosaic Law and only based their own authority on the correct interpretation of this law, an

interpretation that was subject to discussion and debate.

2. Jesus exercised authority on the basis of a personal knowledge of God's will.

3. Jesus's contemporaries viewed his alleged authority as startling and even offensive (e.g., Mark 11:27-28).

B. As the first representative of the new humanity, Jesus claimed the authority to pardon sins. "The son of humanity has authority on earth to forgive sins" (Mark 2:10; see also Luke 7:48-50). His critics protested that only God can forgive sins (Mark 2:6-7).

C. As the first representative of the new humanity, Jesus also claimed the authority to interpret the Mosaic Law. "The son of humanity is Lord even of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:28). On occasion he nullified a clear implication of the Law. He forbade both taking oaths (Matt. 5:33-37) and divorcing one's wife and marrying another woman (Matt. 5:31-32), even though the Mosaic Law clearly allowed oaths (e.g., Numbers 30:2) and implied that a man could divorce his wife and marry another (Deut. 24:1-4).

D. Later the followers of Jesus claimed (I believe correctly) the right to nullify the Mosaic Law and forgive sins in the name of Jesus (Matt. 16:19, John 20:22-23, Rom. 14).

XV. By exercising the authority to interpret the law and forgive sins, Jesus

A. Undermined the authority of conventional religion.

B. Delivered from shame people who were stigmatized for not following the ritual law.

C. Gave everyone an opportunity to begin a new life regardless of how evil their past.

XVI. Therefore, a key part of becoming the new human being whom Jesus foresaw was no longer having to conform to a particular culture.

XVII. This freedom would in time allow all cultures to become part of the new humanity, and I believe that this was at least God's intent.

A. A number of biblical texts, perhaps especially Isaiah, looked forward to the entire world adopting the faith of Israel (e.g., Isa. 2:1-4, 45:22-24).

B. But the very purpose of the Mosaic Law was to make the Jews a special people and preserve their distinctive identity.

1. The Hebrew Scriptures insist that the Law is to make Israel holy, and the primary meaning of "holy" is set *apart* for God.

2. Historically, the codification of the Mosaic Law and the pressure to abide by it began with the Exile as a means to preserve Israel's culture when it was in extreme danger of being lost.

C. Jesus seems to have envisioned his mission bearing fruit in two phases.

1. First through him God would renew Israel (Matt. 10:5-7).

2. Then through the renewed Israel, God would change the world (Matt. 8:10-11).

D. I do not know whether Jesus had thought through the international implications of giving to others the freedom to forgive sins and interpret the law.

E. However, it was this freedom which allowed the early church to adapt to Gentile cultures and become international.

## The Miracles of Jesus

I. Part of the gospels that critical scholars are confident goes back to Jesus is his reply to the question of whether he was the person whom John had proclaimed was coming (Matt. 11:2-6).

A. John the Baptist was in prison and, as he must have expected, soon to be executed.

B. He had heard about Jesus's ministry and sent emissaries to ask whether Jesus was claiming to be the Messiah whom John had predicted.

C. In reply, Jesus pointed out that (in accordance with the words of Isaiah), he was miraculously healing the blind, the lame, and the deaf (Isa. 29:18; 35:5-6) and preaching good news to the poor (Isa. 61:1) and invited John to draw the appropriate conclusion.

D. Critical scholars are sure that this incident is historical, because elsewhere in the gospel tradition, John the Baptist believes that Jesus is the Messiah (e.g., Matt. 3:13-14), whereas in this passage John shows no faith. Hence, the Church would not have invented this scene.

II. As this incident makes clear, Jesus needed to work miracles as part of his mission.

A. The miracles fulfilled biblical prophecy of an era of salvation.

B. The miracles were the primary way of making Jesus's messianic identity credible.

1. As someone with a lower class background from a despised village, he appeared insignificant.

2. His association with "sinners" and his celebratory lifestyle made him disreputable.

3. Without his miracles, which even his critics could not deny, his claim to be starting God's kingdom was highly implausible.

C. Finally, the miracles demonstrated Jesus's concern for the unfortunate and his insistence that the kingdom was especially good news for them.

III. The accounts of Jesus's miracles 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?

B. Can we legitimately conclude that something took place which could not conceivably take place now? Normally we reconstruct the past by assuming that it is analogous to the present.

IV. How we answer these questions will help determine what we conclude "really" occurred.

V. Additional problems further complicate attempts to discover the historicity of Jesus's wonders:

A. The ancient world attributed certain symptoms to demonic possession, and the modern one attributes the same symptoms to physical and psychological causes (cf. Mark 9:17-18).

B. Jesus lived in an age which more readily believed in miracles and recorded that other figures also worked them. Note, however, that even in ancient times there were a few people who did not believe in miracles and that today most



people still do.

VI. Alternative viewpoints about what Jesus did and what we can do.

A. Jesus worked wonders which would be astonishing even today, and these help prove that he was divine. This viewpoint implies that we cannot do similar miracles.

B. Jesus worked wonders, but he did so only by appealing to God who performed the actual miracles. This viewpoint may permit us to do similar feats if God is willing.

C. Jesus like other holy persons had developed special spiritual powers and, consequently, could work wonders. Saints today can do the same.

D. Jesus did things which were astonishing to his contemporaries but which today can be explained by ordinary psychological causation (especially, psychosomatic healing). Naturally, we can do similar "miracles."

E. Jesus did nothing which was initially astounding. The miracle stories arose later due to the Church's faith in him.

{Note: One can use different viewpoints to explain different miracle accounts.}

VII. Some historical and textual observations.

A. The tradition that Jesus healed the sick, raised the dead, and expelled "demons" is early and widespread and, therefore, has strong claims to historicity. (The so-called "nature miracles" [e.g., the stilling of the storm; Mark 4:35-41] are not usually so well attested [John Meier].)

B. Ancient critics of Jesus conceded that he actually worked miracles but claimed that he did them by the power of evil (Mark 3:22) or that his miracles were no greater than those of other remarkable individuals.

C. (review) Jesus's reputed ability to work miracles was primarily responsible for making him a public figure.

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

1. Mark's Gospel records several miracles where Jesus has to strain or even take two tries (especially, 8:22-26, 9:14-29).

2. Since Mark was a Christian writing for Christians, he could not have made up such an embarrassment, nor could the earlier Christian tradition (though Mark used this embarrassment to focus the reader's attention on the cross).

3. Ironically, since the Church would not have fabricated these stories, at least these miracles must have occurred.

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

1. In the gospels

a. Jesus often will not or cannot perform miracles when faith is lacking (e.g., Mark 6:5-6). Faith here means trust in God's power working through Jesus.

b. Jesus's miracles are part of a larger spiritual reality--the coming of God's kingdom. Note that he works miracles to help those in great need.

c. He does not like to be known only as a miracle worker.

- 1). In the synoptics he tries to hush up some of his miracles (e.g., Mark 1:40-45).
  - 2). In John he calls his miracles “signs” of something greater, thereby indicating that he is not primarily a miracle worker (John 6:26-29).
    - d. He works miracles by a simple command and never tries to coerce God.
    - e. He does not charge.
  2. By contrast, ancient magicians did not expect faith, did not claim that their miracles pointed to a larger spiritual revolution, often pronounced curses on people, advertised their professional skills, used elaborate spells to manipulate spiritual forces, and demanded remuneration.
  - F. Jesus apparently taught that the permanence of an exorcism or cure might depend on spiritual growth in the one healed (Matt. 12:43-45, John 5:14).
  - G. The written accounts that contemporaries of Jesus (such as Apollonius of Tyana and Hanina ben Dosa) worked wonders come from a much later period than the gospels do and so, on objective historical grounds, seem less reliable.
- VIII. Philosophical assumptions which I happen to make.
- A. God can work miracles but does them rarely.
  - B. Since Jesus was fully human, he did not, during his incarnate life, have the divine power to work miracles. Note that Jesus sometimes had difficulty working miracles (see above).
  - C. Saintry people can develop special (“miraculous”) abilities. I also believe that certain individuals (including me) have natural healing powers which strengthen through spiritual growth.
  - D. Exorcisms and psychosomatic cures are often basically the same thing.
- IX. One historical reconstruction of the miracles and exorcisms.
- A. Because of good textual attestation, I think it certain that Jesus did at least some exorcisms and healings which impressed his contemporaries.
  - B. He did these on the basis of
    1. His natural healing abilities strengthened by his compassion and his intimate relationship to God.
    2. The openness of the victim to recognize and grasp this power.
  - C. At least sometimes this power included the mediation of forgiveness, call, or challenge (Mark 2:1-12, John 5:5-9).
  - D. Some of the wonders were psychosomatic. Note Jesus's demand for faith as a precondition for a miracle and his warning that growth was necessary or the demon would return (Matt. 12:43-45).
  - E. I think, however, there were other miracles, especially, the feeding of the multitude, that God worked in response to Jesus's request. These were special signs of the coming of the kingdom.
    1. The feeding of the multitude is the only miracle attributed to Jesus that occurs in all the gospels, and Mark and Matthew even have two versions of what appears to be the same event. So on the basis of attestation, the miracle has extraordinary claims to historicity.
    2. In the accounts of the feeding, Jesus seems to be requesting special

help from God by looking up to heaven (e.g., Mark 6:41) or giving thanks (Matt. 15:36, Mark 8:6, John 6:11).

3. The mass feeding especially emphasized important themes about the kingdom.

a. When God's kingdom comes in power, even the poor will have plenty to eat.

b. In the kingdom all can dine together regardless of purity or class.

F. Some of the miracle stories in the gospels are not historical but arose out of piety, legend, theology, or literary creativity. I think such is the case with most of the nature miracles (e.g., turning water into wine [John 2:1-11]).

X. In the gospels Jesus gives to his disciples the power to work miracles, and the disciples have limited success (Mark 6:7-13, 9:14-29).

XI. I believe that the followers of Jesus are called to work miracles today in the same way that he did.

A. Those who have the natural gift of healing are to strengthen it through spiritual growth and use it to cure people of psychological or physical problems.

B. Sometimes the healer will use forgiveness, call, and challenge when the illness is (partly) due to spiritual defects and the infirm person has sufficient faith to benefit.

C. The healer may also need to warn that growth is necessary or the condition will recur.

D. We are to pray for God to do other miracles.

E. If they occur, we are to proclaim that they are signs of a larger spiritual reality.

F. We are not to put on sideshows.

G. We are not to advertise miracles to raise funds!

## The Social Teaching of Jesus

- I. A principle of the social teaching of Jesus was that there should be basic equality, or to use Jesus's own image, the first should be last (Matt. 19:30-20:16).
- II. In addition, Jesus wanted all to be able to enter the kingdom if they chose.
- III. To achieve equality and allow everyone to enter the kingdom and be part of a loving community, Jesus had to overcome
  - A. Separating people on the basis of ritual purity.
  - B. Separating people on the basis of hatred.
  - C. Separating people on the basis of their past righteousness or sinfulness.
  - D. Separating his disciples from each other on the basis of present righteousness.
  - E. Separating people on the basis of their wealth.
  - F. Having the kingdom's leaders take advantage of their followers.
- IV. To do the first, Jesus stressed that ritual purity was far less important than love.
  - A. At least in everyday matters, the most important and noticeable markers for ritual purity were dietary restrictions and Sabbath regulations.
  - B. Jesus relativized dietary restrictions.
    1. He participated in meals where both the respectable and the impure ate together (e.g., Mark 2:14-17, 6:35-44).
    2. He taught that evil talk which comes out of the mouth was far worse than impure food that goes in (Matt. 15:10-20).
  - C. Similarly, Jesus relativized keeping the Sabbath rest.
    1. He worked miracles on the Sabbath and emphasized that alleviating human suffering took precedence over keeping the Sabbath rest (e.g., Luke 13:10-17).
    2. He stressed that the purpose of the Sabbath was to make life easier, and keeping the Sabbath was not required if it became a burden (Mark 2:23-28).
  - D. Jesus insisted that the two most important commandments were to love God and love one's neighbor (i.e., whomever one deals with; Mark 12:28-34).
  - E. And the test of love was whether it came from the heart (the core of one's being) and manifested itself in concrete acts of mercy.
- V. To overcome divisive hatred, Jesus emphasized that the God who provides for all expects people to love everyone, even their enemies (Matt. 5:43-47), and if we expect God to forgive our sins, we must forgive the sins of others.
- VI. To overcome division over past righteousness or unrighteousness, Jesus stressed that God would primarily judge people not on former conduct but on whether they chose to become followers of Jesus in the present.
  - A. Those who rejected Jesus would fare worse on the Judgment Day than the notorious residents of Nineveh, who at least had repented in response to Jonah's preaching (Matt. 12:41).
  - B. By contrast, those who joined Jesus's movement received from him forgiveness of past sins (Luke 7:47-50; E.P. Sanders).
- VII. To overcome division among his own disciples over who was most righteous, Jesus
  - A. Gave commandments that only pointed in a direction and could not be taken literally (e.g., "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off" [Mark 9:43]). Hence, it

was impossible to conclude who was following the rules and who was not.

B. Emphasized that what was most important was not external conformity to rules but what is in one's heart (i.e., in the hidden core of one's identity).

VIII. To overcome division on the basis of wealth,

A. Jesus insisted that (at least, theoretically?) the rich could not be part of his kingdom, and if the rich nevertheless wished to join, they must give away their wealth to the poor (Mark 10:17-31, Luke 14:33). Presumably, many of the poor in question had already become followers of Jesus.

B. On the Day of Judgment God would bless the poor and punish the rich (Luke 6:20-25).

IX. To prevent the leaders of his movement from taking advantage of their followers, Jesus insisted that the leaders must serve their followers.

A. Jesus recognized that his movement needed leaders, and he himself appointed leaders, especially, the Twelve.

B. However, he stressed that the leaders of his movement were to serve rather than dominate.

1. Leaders were not to have privileges. The first was to be the servant of all (Mark 9:35).

2. The primary concern of the community, including its leaders, was the welfare of the least. The least included

a. The poor. Jesus emphasized that his own ministry was bringing good news to the poor (Matt. 11:5; cf. Isa. 61:1).

b. The sick and disabled.

c. Despised sinners. Jesus insisted that his primary mission was to save sinners (Mark 2:17).

d. Women in general. Contrary to conventional practice, Jesus even had women disciples who accompanied him in his travels (Luke 8:1-2).

e. Children (e.g., Mark 9:37, 42).

1). The larger culture recommended beating children often (e.g., Sirach 30:1).

2). By contrast, Jesus emphasized God's concern for children (e.g., Matt. 18:10).

3). He even stressed that children were in some sense role models. We must become like little children to enter God's kingdom (Matt. 18:3).

X. It was, of course, hard in practice for leaders to forego all privileges, and, therefore, Jesus constantly warned against the danger of hypocrisy.

A. Jesus felt that the conventional religious authorities misused the Mosaic Law to gain privileges for themselves.

1. The purpose of the Law was to make life better for everyone. "The Sabbath exists for humans, not humans for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27-28).

2. However, in practice the people who had the responsibility to interpret the Law used the Law to exalt themselves over others (Matt. 23:1-28).

While pretending to interpret the Law impartially, they

a. Used their prestige as the interpreters of the Law to gain public

acclaim.

b. Used their interpretations to absolve themselves from any sacrifice.

c. Imposed heavy burdens on others, particularly the lowly.

B. Consequently, Jesus often attacked the lawyers for hypocrisy.

C. And these attacks were an implicit warning to the leaders of Jesus's own movement, and he kept insisting to them that they must actually renounce all privileges, even honorary titles (Matt. 23:8-10).

#### XI. Excursus: Jesus and the Pharisees.

A. Modern liberal scholars, sensitive to anti-Semitism, stress that the Pharisees were not as bad as the gospels portray and the aggressive attacks on them in the gospels do not come from Jesus but from the early church which the Pharisees persecuted.

B. There is no doubt that in response to the persecution, the evangelists used and augmented Jesus's attacks.

C. However, hyperbole was part of Jesus's rhetoric, and his bold claims to be able to interpret the Mosaic Law and forgive sins naturally incited angry exchanges.

D. Moreover, at the time religious debates between different factions tended to be polemical.

E. I believe that the historical Jesus directed his attacks against the more general group of the "scribes" (anyone who on the basis of education exercised authority).

F. Narrowing Jesus's criticism to the Pharisees occurred later when they assumed power following the destruction of Jerusalem and the disappearance of the high priesthood. Note the phrase, "scribes and Pharisees" (e.g., Matt. 23:2).

#### XII. A reflection on the structures of oppression and how the teaching of Jesus undermines them.

A. Oppressive leaders try to maintain power by

1. Persuading the oppressed that the leaders are morally superior.

2. Giving their more powerful supporters the authority to oppress others, usually women and children and ethnic and racial groups.

3. Posing as the necessary defender of the community against some enemy.

4. Claiming to have a mandate from God.

5. Using violence to suppress legitimate opposition.

B. At least by implication Jesus undermined these supports by teaching that

1. Moral worth depends not on externals but on what is in the heart (the hidden core of one's personality).

2. The test of a leader's behavior is whether it benefits the *least* in the community.

3. Individuals and communities are to love their enemies.

4. On Judgment Day God will be merciful to the weak and demanding of those who had power and wealth.

5. Love for all. Such love by implication precludes the use of violence for selfish ends.

C. Finally, in my experience, oppressive leadership always resorts to hypocrisy (Greek: play acting), and Jesus was especially concerned to expose hypocrisy.

## **Jesus's Kingship and his Plan to Confront the Nation with His Royal Claims**

- I. The principal theme of Jesus's message was the kingdom of God.
  - A. The theme pervades the material attributed to Jesus in the synoptics and the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas and is what most of his parables explain. Note: In my opinion, recent scholarship has shown that Thomas is dependent on oral tradition already influenced by the canonical gospels. Therefore, Thomas is seldom an independent witness to the authentic teaching of Jesus.
  - B. The kingdom is not a major theme in other early Christian writings (e.g., Paul's Letters) and would not have originated in the Church.
- II. A kingdom implies a king and courtiers and was the only kind of government that Israel had known for a thousand years.
  - A. In the very early history of Israel there was little central government and charismatic "judges" exercised temporary regional leadership.
  - B. But beginning around 1,000 BCE monarchy was the norm while an independent Israel or Judah survived.
  - C. Subsequently, foreign kings (actually, emperors) ruled over Israel until the Maccabean revolt.
  - D. The Maccabees were priests but ruled like a king and ultimately took the title.
  - E. Then Roman domination with its emperors began.
- III. The phrase "kingdom of God" implies God ruling through a divinely chosen earthly king, and was the ideal form of government that the Hebrew Bible remembered and looked forward to.
  - A. The Hebrew Bible emphasized that God chose David and his successors to be the kings of Israel forever (e.g., 2 Samuel 7:8-16).
  - B. When nevertheless the davidic dynasty collapsed, the Hebrew Bible looked forward to its restoration (e.g., Ezekiel 37:15-28).
- IV. Jesus informed his disciples that he was (or would one day be) Israel's king, and they would be his courtiers. A key quote is Matthew 19:28, "At the universal renewal, when the Son of Humanity [i.e., Jesus] sits on his glorious throne, you who followed me will also sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel." This quote must go back to Jesus.
  - A. After Judas betrayed Jesus, the Church would not have invented a saying in which Jesus appears to grant a throne to him.
  - B. After the death of Jesus, the leadership of the Church quickly became three "pillars" consisting of Peter, John, and James, the brother of Jesus, who was not one of the Twelve (e.g., Gal. 2:9).
  - C. In line with Jesus's emphasis that leaders must act as servants, the quote does not say that the Twelve would rule over the tribes but "judge" them, that is, bring justice.
  - D. This quotation is utopian and suggests that Jesus's kingship might come in stages and only be fully realized much later.
    1. The twelve tribes had not existed for centuries.
    2. The Twelve would reign only after the "universal renewal."Presumably, a lot had to happen before then.
- V. Because of the political situation in Galilee, Jesus could not reveal his royal claims

publicly.

- A. When John the Baptist proclaimed the coming of a Messiah and this proclamation drew crowds, Herod Antipas arrested and executed him.
- B. Even without announcing that he was a king, Jesus at least seemed to be in constant danger.

- 1. There was a rumor that Herod Antipas was about to kill Jesus, and although the rumor proved to be false, it was apparently credible (Luke 13:31).
- 2. Popular opinion held that Jesus was crazy for preaching about a kingdom, and his own family wanted him to stop and come home (Mark 3:21). Note that the early church would not have made up these negative responses to Jesus's ministry.

- C. Therefore, when Jesus revealed to his inner circle that he was indeed a king, he instructed them not to tell people (Mark 8:27-30).

VI. An additional reason that Jesus did not initially reveal publicly his claim to be a king was that his vision of a servant king differed drastically from how conventional kings behaved.

VII. Instead, Jesus had to

- A. Complete the difficult task of at least getting the leaders of his movement to give up the thought of having royal privileges.
- B. Formulate a plan for how to
  - 1. Reveal to the nation what sort of king he intended to be.
  - 2. Gain royal power.

VIII. There were at least three ways that Jesus might have considered gaining royal power.

- A. He could have considered leading a revolt.
  - 1. The Maccabees had successfully revolted against Greek rule two centuries before and become Israel's rulers, ultimately adopting the title "king."
  - 2. Various messiahs before and after Jesus's ministry unsuccessfully fought against Roman rule.
- B. He could have hoped for an apocalyptic intervention by God.
  - 1. The Hebrew Bible celebrated the intervention of God in the past to free the Israelites from bondage in Egypt.
  - 2. Apocalyptic documents predicting an imminent divine intervention to transform the world and save the Jews were common during the first century.
  - 3. In the gospels Jesus himself talks about his own coming apocalyptic triumph.
  - 4. Since the beginning of the twentieth century the mainstream of biblical scholarship has held that Jesus entertained apocalyptic hopes.
- C. He could have hoped to persuade the Romans to appoint him to be king. Both before and after Jesus's ministry the Romans appointed Jews to be client rulers.

IX. There were problems with each of these alternatives.

- A. Leading a revolt seemed hopeless and unethical.
  - 1. Jesus had no political or military resources.



2. Both before and after the time of Jesus all Jewish revolts against Roman power ended in disaster.
  3. Jesus in the gospels speaks against the use of violence (e.g., Matt. 26:52).
- B. It is doubtful that Jesus had any knowledge of apocalypticism.
1. The Bible that Jesus knew consisted of the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms.
  2. With the exception of Daniel, the apocalypses were esoteric documents which a carpenter from an obscure village would not read.
  3. Jesus did not rely on Daniel.
    - a. Daniel was not part of the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms, and Jesus would have considered it less authoritative.
    - b. In the gospels the only time that Jesus quotes Daniel is in his trial before the high priest (Mark 14:62, Matt. 27:64), and since the trial was not open to the public, it is doubtful that the evangelists had detailed knowledge of the proceedings.
  4. Jesus's predictions in the gospels of his own apocalyptic triumph reflect knowledge of the resurrection and come from the early church not from the historical Jesus (see above).
- C. The Romans only appointed Jewish royalty to high office, and in the end the Romans executed Jesus.
- X. I will now argue that the least improbable of these three alternatives is this last.

## The Final Days of Jesus

- I. Jesus sent out his disciples to gain support for his mission (Matt. 10:5-15; Mark 6:7-13, Luke 10:1-16).
  - A. The disciples were to preach that the kingdom was beginning.
  - B. To emphasize that the kingdom was good news to the poor, Jesus ordered his missionaries to travel without any money and not to solicit monetary donations. Instead, they were to be guests in people's houses.
  - C. Of course, Jesus knew that many of the people who would hear the preaching usually went to Jerusalem for the pilgrimage festivals.
- II. Jesus traveled toward Jerusalem with his core followers to confront the nation when it gathered for Passover.
- III. Before Jesus arrived in the vicinity of Jerusalem, most people there did not know what to expect of him.
  - A. Galilee was distant and under a different government, and this government had not regarded Jesus as sufficiently dangerous to arrest him.
  - B. (review) I believe that John's Gospel is correct that Jesus had sometimes come to Jerusalem for the pilgrimage festivals which were theoretically required for Jewish males.
  - C. But, presumably, these earlier visits were brief, and Jesus would not have been noticed among the huge festival crowds.
  - D. Matthew's Gospel records that when Jesus in his final trip to Jerusalem staged a dramatic entry, people wondered who he was (Matt. 21:10-11).
- IV. When Jesus entered shortly before the Passover, Jerusalem was seething with anti-Roman resentment.
  - A. Passover celebrated the liberation of the Jews from slavery in Egypt.
  - B. This celebration was deeply ironic under Roman rule with troops stationed in the city.
  - C. About the same time when Jesus was there, the Romans arrested a revolutionary named Barabbas (e.g., Mark 15:7) and only stopped short of executing him because of public pressure. There can be no historical doubt that Barabbas existed, since part of the Christian tradition remembered that his first name was Jesus (Matthew 27:16-17 in some ancient manuscripts)!
  - D. The Romans did execute two "bandits" (e.g., Mark 15:27), and "bandit" was the Roman label for an armed revolutionary.
- V. There was the strong possibility that both the people of Jerusalem and the government might conclude that Jesus intended to lead a revolt against Rome or at least would support one. John's Gospel records that the high priest had already come to this conclusion before Jesus entered the city (John 11:45-50).
- VI. When Jesus arrived, the people in Jerusalem had a heightened awareness of scripture.
  - A. Jerusalem was an intellectual center for Judaism.
  - B. The pilgrimage crowds were especially pious.
  - C. The celebration of Passover drew people's attention to scripture, including unfulfilled prophecies of national redemption.
  - D. To be sure, the Roman officials were not well versed in Jewish scripture, but

they were certainly in touch with Jewish leaders who could give scriptural information if needed.

- VII. In his visit to Jerusalem Jesus engaged in two highly public and aggressive acts.
- A. He approached Jerusalem on a colt while his disciples hailed him as the royal Son of David whose kingdom was beginning: “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David” (Mark 11:1-11; cf. John 12:12-15).
  - B. He staged a semi-violent protest in a temple courtyard disrupting business (Mark 11:15-17; cf. John 2:13-17).
  - C. There is no question that these two acts occurred, since they are independently attested in both the synoptic tradition and in the Johannine.
- VIII. Both acts consciously invoked scripture and were a signal that he was not a military threat.
- A. The approach without an armed guard and on a colt fulfilled the prediction in Zechariah 9:9 of the coming of a “humble” (i.e., peaceful) king.
  - B. The protest in the temple courtyard of the Gentiles consciously echoed Jeremiah’s protest centuries earlier and implied that the Jews needed to reform rather than rebel against the Romans (N.T. Wright).
    - 1. Six centuries earlier Jeremiah had stood at the gate of the Temple and predicted that the Temple would be destroyed unless the Jews of his day repented (Jeremiah 7:1-15).
    - 2. Jeremiah called the Temple a den of robbers (Jeremiah 7:11).
    - 3. Jeremiah warned the Jews not to rebel after God subjected them to Babylonian rule as a punishment for their sin (Jeremiah 27).
    - 4. When the Jews did rebel, the Babylonians destroyed the Temple along with the rest of Jerusalem.
    - 5. To explain his own protest in the temple courtyard, Jesus quoted Jeremiah’s condemnation of the Temple as a “den of bandits” (Mark 11:17).
    - 6. And, as noted above, “bandit” was a negative label for a violent Jewish revolutionary.
    - 7. The implication was obvious: Roman rule was God’s will, and the Jews must accept it peacefully and avoid catastrophe.
- IX. The protest in the Temple was also a condemnation of purity regulations which excluded people.
- A. The Temple greatly emphasized purity, and this emphasis divided people and implicitly degraded those at the bottom. The Temple had a series of zones of increasing purity and increasingly limited access:
    - 1. “The Court of the Gentiles” which was open to all.
    - 2. “The Court of the Women” which was open only to Jews.
    - 3. “The Court of Israel” which was open only to Jewish males.
    - 4. A final court and the Temple itself which only priests could enter.
    - 5. The Holy of Holies which only the high priest could enter and only once a year.
  - B. Even though Jesus as a Jewish male had legal access to a higher courtyard, he staged his protest in the Court of the Gentiles, the most impure place possible.
  - C. And to explain his protest, he quoted Isaiah that the Temple was to be a place

- of prayer for all nations (Isa. 56:7; Mark 11:17).
- X. In addition, the protest in the temple courtyard was a condemnation of the wealth of the high priest, and, by implication, a condemnation of using religion to exploit the poor.
- A. The Temple was a source of enormous revenue for the high priest and his circle often at the expense of the poor.
    - 1. The money came both through voluntary donations and the sale of sacrificial animals.
    - 2. Much of this wealth came from the pious poor, a fact Jesus emphasized by pointing out a widow who gave her last coin (Mark 12:41-44).
  - B. Jesus's protest disrupted commercial activity.
  - C. John's Gospel underlines the financial implications of what Jesus did, when it has Jesus condemn making God's house a business (John 2:16).
- XI. Finally, the protest in the temple courtyard emphasized for all to see that Jesus was a king and that he intended to serve the needs of the marginal.
- A. The kings of Israel and Judah and the emperors of Rome had the authority to regulate religion, and in his protest, Jesus was exercising a similar authority.
  - B. By condemning the marginalization of the ritually impure and the exploitation of the poor, Jesus was signaling what his royal policies would be.
- XII. As intended, Jesus's bold acts made him a celebrity and curious crowds came to hear him.
- XIII. Jesus hoped that he could gain enough public support that with God's help the Romans would (eventually?) consider making him king of Judea.
- A. Before 6 CE Rome had allowed the Jewish kings, Herod the Great and then Archelaus, to rule Judea, and only a decade after Jesus's death, Rome placed all of Israel under the Jewish king, Herod Agrippa I.
  - B. Jesus had lived under the Roman client ruler, Herod Antipas, in Galilee and could easily have envisioned himself in a similar role.
  - C. Presumably, Jesus was aware that the Persian Empire had given both Ezra and Nehemiah authority to renew Judaism, and God could use the Romans to appoint him to do the same.
  - D. Jesus had already signaled that he was not opposed to Roman rule.
  - E. As a king, Jesus would have authority over the internal affairs of Judea and could implement his vision of a society under a servant king who would promote social equality and, especially, help the marginal and punish those who oppressed them.
  - F. As king of Judea Jesus would, like Herod Antipas in Galilee,
    - 1. Spare Jews the religious humiliation and violence of direct Roman rule.
    - 2. Keep Jewish resentment against Rome from leading to a futile revolt which would end in catastrophe. Such a revolt did occur forty years later.
  - G. The hypothesis that Jesus wanted a political appointment from Rome and that the Romans at least suspected this explains two otherwise puzzling facts:
    - 1. Despite the brutality of Roman rule over Judea, Jesus never criticized Rome.
    - 2. Despite Jesus's aggressive proclamation of being a king, the Romans took no action against him until the Jewish authorities had already

condemned him to death and pressured Pilate to affirm their decision (see below).

XIV. Jesus's quest for a political appointment by Rome has important ethical implications for Christians today.

A. It is sometimes necessary and highly ethical to work within a system that is oppressive if one can moderate that oppression.

B. An important test for whether one is being ethical while cooperating with an oppressive system is if one is foregoing all personal advantages of leadership and instead is being a servant of the oppressed.

XV. To combat Jesus's growing popularity, representatives of elite Jewish groups, Herodians, Pharisees, Sadducees, priests, and scribes, debated with him over leading issues of the day, and Jesus made his own positions clear, implicitly appealing for public support (Mark 11:27-12:37).

A. Was it lawful for Jews to pay taxes to the Romans? Jesus's careful answer to render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's implied that Rome had the right to civil authority but not to regulate religious practice.

B. Was there going to be a resurrection of the dead? Jesus affirmed that there would be a final resurrection of the dead, and, by implication, affirmed that there would be a final judgment in which those who rejected him would suffer.

C. Which was the most important commandment? Jesus stressed that love, and by implication, not purity, was most important.

D. What do we know about the Messiah?

1. Jesus pointed out that even his adversaries acknowledged that the Messiah must be a descendant of David and, therefore, by implication Jesus was qualified.

2. Jesus argued on the basis of Psalm 110 that the Messiah must be a king even greater than David and thereby reinforced his own claim to be a new and better kind of king.

E. Who gave Jesus authority to disrupt activity in the temple? Jesus's counter question about where John got authority to baptize implied that Jesus's own authority like John's came from God. By implication, Jesus was appealing to admirers of John the Baptist for support.

F. Jesus lashed out at those who devour widow's houses and make long prayers, thus emphasizing his own solidarity with the poor, his loyalty to the prophetic tradition of social justice, and his hostility to the high priestly establishment (Mark 12:38-40).

XVI. It became clear that although the people in Jerusalem found Jesus entertaining, they were not going to support his royal aspirations.

A. The crowd enjoyed listening to him (Mark 12:37).

B. However, there was no movement to champion elevating Jesus to kingship.

XVII. In response, Jesus like the prophets of old predicted the destruction of the temple and a series of other catastrophes as punishment for Israel rejecting God's will (Mark 13:1-22). As in older prophecies, the description of the catastrophes was general and poetic rather than an exact forecast.

XVIII. Jesus realized that he would soon be killed, and he made this realization public in the surely authentic, allegorical Parable of the Wicked Tenants (Mark 12:1-8).

- A. A summary of the parable:
    1. A man planted a vineyard and leased it to tenants.
    2. At harvest time he sent a series of slaves to collect his share of the produce.
    3. The tenants abused the slaves.
    4. Finally, the owner sent his son whom the tenants killed.
  - B. In this parable the owner represents God, the tenants are Israel, the slaves are the Hebrew prophets, and the son is Jesus, the messianic king.
  - C. The parable certainly goes back to Jesus, since there is no mention of a resurrection, as there surely would be if the parable originated in the early church (John Meier).
  - D. We may note in passing that the parable is partly an adaption of Isaiah 5:1-7.
- XIX. Jesus in line with the theology of Isaiah and of the stories of the Maccabean martyrs expected that his suffering and death would help atone for the sins of Israel and that he himself would rise with the rest of the dead on the Day of Judgment.
- A. Isaiah 52:13-53:12 told about a servant whose tribulations brought salvation to sinners and who then triumphed, and Jesus would have applied this passage to himself.
    1. The “servant” suffered and died thereby bearing the punishment for the sins of others and bringing salvation.
    2. Subsequently, the servant was triumphantly vindicated, revered even by “kings” (Isa. 52:15).
    3. Since Jesus saw himself as a servant king, he would have understood the passage as a prophecy of himself.
  - B. The stories of the Maccabean martyrs which Jesus would have known emphasized that the sufferings of the martyrs atoned for Israel’s sin and that the martyrs would rise from the dead on the Day of Judgment and be rewarded (see 2 Maccabees 7, especially, vss. 37-38).
  - C. Therefore, Jesus’s words in Mark 10:45 that the son of humanity (i.e., Jesus himself) would give his life as a ransom for others at least reflect what Jesus believed.
- XX. To prepare his followers to continue his mission after his death, Jesus arranged a solemn farewell meal. There can be no question that the meal occurred. Paul, writing only around twenty-five years later, already described the Last Supper as a bedrock of Christian tradition (1 Cor. 11:23-25).
- XXI. From the various accounts of the Last Supper, it is virtually certain 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 (e.g., Mark 14:25).
  - B. He warned them not to betray him and his “covenant” in the meantime (e.g., Mark 14:21, 24). Note: A biblical covenant is a solemn commitment which establishes or deepens a relationship.
  - C. He said that the bread and the wine would be his body and blood (e.g., Mark 14:22-24).
- XXII. Apparently, Jesus intended to institute a memorial dinner similar to the Passover Seder. This new ceremony 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. Make their departed leader sacramentally present in a solemn meal, and, especially present through bread and wine.
- XXIII. The commandment to eat Jesus's body was paradoxical and sounded like cannibalism, and like other "hard sayings" of Jesus
- A. Pointed in a certain direction but could not be taken literally.
  - B. Invited continuing reflection.
  - C. Gave his disciples a sense of unity and equality (since all would share in the same "body").
- XXIV. Luke's version of the Last Supper stresses that Jesus is a servant king (Luke 22:24-30).
- A. Jesus reprimands the twelve for quarreling over which of them is the greatest and says that they are behaving like conventional kings.
  - B. Jesus acknowledges that the Twelve will reign in his kingdom.
  - C. But Jesus emphasizes that he has acted as a servant, and his disciples must not seek worldly eminence.
- XXV. Luke's material referred to above occurs in other contexts in Matthew and Mark (Matt. 19:28, 20:24-28; Mark 9:34) and may not record what Jesus said at the Last Supper.
- XXVI. However, I believe that Luke correctly underlines who Jesus was and what being faithful to the Eucharistic covenant requires.
- XXVII. Jesus's statement about the future at the Last Supper showed that despite his coming death and the disappointment of his royal ambitions, he still trusted that God would vindicate him but did not know how or when.
- A. He spoke cryptically about drinking wine again with his disciples in God's kingdom but provided no details (Mark 14:25). This saying must go back to Jesus, since there is no mention of a coming resurrection.
  - B. I strongly suspect that Jesus had no idea what God would do to salvage his messianic hopes but remained confident that God would do something in the near future.
  - C. Three days later what God would do became clear.
- XXVIII. The arrest and priestly trial of Jesus.
- A. Shortly after the Last Supper, retainers from the high priest seized Jesus and took him to the high priest's residence.
  - B. The high priest had ample reason to want the death of Jesus.
    1. Jesus had disrupted commerce in the temple courtyard, commerce which was necessary both for the rituals of the temple and for the economic support of the high priest himself.
    2. Jesus had denounced the temple as a stronghold for bandits.
    3. He had predicted the temple's destruction.
    4. He considered ritual purity to be relatively unimportant, attacked wealth, and was trying to become king, whereas the high priest's influence depended on purity, riches, and being the Jewish leader.
  - C. The high priest was probably alarmed that the Romans were, at the very least,

tolerating Jesus.

D. The details of the trial are uncertain.

1. The gospel accounts differ on particulars.
2. Since the trial was not public, the evangelists may not have known the details.

E. Nevertheless, I see no reason to doubt the synoptics' testimony (e.g., Mark 14:53-65) that

1. The hearing was brief and abusive and focused on Jesus's attack on the Temple and his messianic claims.
2. Jesus acknowledged that he was indeed a king, but not the kind that his accusers thought. In Matthew's account (whether remembered or imagined) when the high priest demands that Jesus state clearly if he is the Messiah, Jesus replies: "You are the one who said that" (Matt. 26:64).
3. Jesus was found guilty of blasphemy for his messianic claims and condemned to death.
4. The Jewish high council (Sanhedrin) agreed to the verdict.

XXIX. The Roman trial of Jesus.

A. The Roman government did not let Jewish authorities execute anyone, lest they execute Roman collaborators (John 18:31; Raymond Brown).

B. Therefore, the high priest had Jesus delivered to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, with a request for execution.

C. A crowd mostly consisting of Jews who resented Roman rule and Jesus's support of it gathered.

D. Pilate had no desire to execute Jesus.

1. As a Pagan, Pilate had little sympathy for the Jewish temple.
2. Jesus's actions had made it clear that he had no designs against Roman rule. Indeed, Jesus had denounced violence against Rome by condemning the Temple as a stronghold for bandits (i.e., Jewish revolutionaries).
3. When Pilate inquired if Jesus was claiming to be a king, Jesus insisted that he was a different sort of king.
  - a. Mark records that when Pilate directly asked if Jesus was claiming to be "king of the Jews," Jesus replied, "That is what you would say" (Mark 15:2).
  - b. In John Jesus says that his "kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36-37), and although the statement reflects later theology, it still preserves the memory that Jesus insisted that he was not a normal king.

E. Consequently, as all the gospels attest, Pilate initially tried to release Jesus.

F. However, as he did so, the Jewish crowd threatened to riot (e.g., Matt. 27:24) and to denounce Pilate to Rome for tolerating a royal pretender (John 19:12).

G. In response, Pilate reluctantly released a popular revolutionary, Barabbas, to placate the crowd and ordered the crucifixion of Jesus.

H. To protect himself, in case the followers of Jesus protested to Rome, Pilate

1. Found Jesus guilty of treason, which was plausible, since Jesus had claimed to be a king.
2. Ordered the execution of two bandits (i.e., revolutionaries against



Rome) alongside of Jesus.

XXX. The death and burial of Jesus.

A. Jesus died a few hours after he was crucified.

B. And he was hastily buried by Joseph of Arimathea. There can be no historical doubt about the burial.

1. Jewish Law demanded that the exposed bodies of executed criminals be buried before sunset (Deut. 21:22-23). And violating this law would have been outrageous on the Passover (John 19:31).

2. The early church would not have invented Joseph, since he came from an obscure village, and he was a member of the Sanhedrin which acceded to the high priest's desire for Jesus's execution (Mark 15:43).

3. The gospels record the names of women who witnessed the burial (e.g., Mark 15:47).

XXXI. One solution to the problem of the crucifixion and subsequent anti-Semitism.

A. 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." Note that blaming the Jews for the death of Jesus did not fit well with the Church's claim that God sent Jesus to die to atone for the sins of all.

C. Liberal scholars who are anxious to get beyond the evils of the past tend to argue that the Romans were primarily responsible for the death of Jesus. Since the evangelists did not want to antagonize Roman authorities, the gospels stress that Pilate did not wish to kill Jesus, whereas in reality Pilate viewed Jesus's messianic activity as a threat.

D. I do not think that the liberals are correct (see above).

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.

F. Of course, no one alive today has any responsibility for what happened two thousand years ago!

## **Competing Historical Explanations for the Claim that Jesus Rose from the Dead and the Larger Convictions Underlying Each**

- I. The resurrection of Jesus raises crucial methodological problems for a historian, and we must start with a brief theoretical discussion.
- II. History is the reconstruction of the past which, of course, no longer exists.
- III. We reconstruct the past on the basis of several things:
  - A. Data (i.e., bits of information that have survived).
  - B. General convictions about what is real or most important. These vary from historian to historian and from culture to culture. Different historians and cultures assume that what (primarily?) shapes history is supernatural forces (e.g., the gods), changes in nature (e.g., in climate), great individuals, new ideas (e.g., monotheism or democracy), economics, or various other things.
  - 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 of Jesus is problematic because the event poses severe difficulties concerning the bases listed above.
  - A. The data is sparse (only a few pages), sometimes inconsistent (e.g., there are discrepancies over who went to the empty tomb and when), and often appears to be late (the earliest gospel, Mark, was four decades later) and tendentious (later accounts are more sensational). 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. I am not even aware of a serious claim that something comparable happened (i.e., that a historical human being died, was buried, and rose bodily from the tomb as Lord of the Universe). Note that the nearest analogy is the bodily assumption of Mary into heaven, and this doctrine was based on the idea that Mary's death and entrance into heaven should be similar to Jesus's.
  - 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 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 with different problems. Here is a range of options:
  - A. Fundamentalist
    1. Assumption: The Bible is the inerrant word of God, since God would want us to have an absolutely reliable source of information about

important matters of faith.

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.

3. Problems:

a. It is difficult to harmonize many details in the canonical accounts, and heroic efforts to do so soon call into question the reliability of the narratives as a whole.

b. Is the inerrancy of the Bible the only way to receive certainty about important matters of faith? What about the guidance of the Holy Spirit and communal experience? The Catholic Church proclaimed that the doctrine of the bodily assumption of Mary into heaven was infallible on the basis of the consensus of the faithful, not the clear testimony of scripture.

c. And do Christians need certainty, as opposed to sufficient probability? Are people absolutely certain of anything? Perhaps absolute certainty belongs to God alone.

d. A theological danger of Fundamentalism is that it can easily turn the Bible into an idol, i.e., an external substitute for God.

#### B. Conservative Christian

1. Assumption: The biblical accounts of the resurrection are basically historically reliable, and God can work physical miracles.

2. What took place: The resurrection happened basically as the New Testament accounts say and included the miraculous removal of Jesus's body from the tomb.

3. Problems:

a. If God can work physical miracles, why do we not see more of them when they are so desperately needed?

b. What happened to Jesus's body, and where is it now?

#### C. Liberal Christian

1. Assumption: The Bible contains a lot of legendary and purely literary 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.

3. Problems:

a. The gospel texts clearly claim that the tomb was empty and that when Jesus appeared he still had a body.

b. If the "resurrection" of Jesus does not differ fundamentally from the resurrection of everyone else, what evidence is there for the divinity of Christ? How could monotheistic followers of Jesus have ever come to the conclusion that he was God?

c. Even today things that appear to be physical miracles (e.g., sudden healings under religious circumstances) still occasionally occur.

#### 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.
3. Problems:
  - a. Is the common-sense notion that we can still work for the “cause” of Jesus sufficient grounds for Christian hope?
    - 1). Every individual dies, and after two thousand years of Christians working to realize Jesus’s vision, the world is still in a mess.
    - 2). The Church always taught that faith in life after death was central to Christianity.
  - b. Due to recent medical advances, out-of-body, near-death experiences have become common and seem to confirm that there is life after death.

#### E. Sympathetic non-Christian

1. Assumption: Christianity is basically erroneous but contains 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 (for having abandoned Jesus), wishful thinking, and fear of a future without Jesus.
3. Problem: Could people have come to the wild conclusion that someone rose from the grave on the basis of an honest mistake? Has a similar mistake ever been made?

#### F. Hostile non-Christian

1. Assumption: Christianity is a dangerous fraud.
2. What took place: Jesus or his followers deliberately perpetuated a hoax.
3. Problems:
  - a. How could Jesus have perpetrated a hoax? How did he survive the crucifixion, since it was the responsibility of the executioners to ensure that he was dead? And if he somehow did survive, he would have been in terrible medical condition.
  - b. If the disciples knew that they were proclaiming a lie, how could they have gotten anyone to believe a story that sounded completely crazy?
  - c. Christianity has in practice been far from perfect, but surely it is going too far to say that it is merely a dangerous fraud.

G. Hybrids: One can combine elements from the various positions noted above to produce a hybrid, such as the resurrection of Jesus was a hoax, but nevertheless Christianity is a good thing. But combining the positions does not

eliminate the problems, since each position has them.

H. Of course, one can take the position that today we cannot know what led to the claim that Jesus rose from the dead. But it is only responsible to resort to this position after one has made a thorough examination of the issues and the evidence. An informed agnosticism about a crucial issue may be responsible, an uninformed agnosticism about a crucial issue is not.

Discussion: What assumptions do you make, and what do you think happened on the first Easter? And how do you deal with the problems listed above for your position? Or do you have a position that is not listed and analyzed above, and if so, what is it, and what are its underlying assumptions?

Warning: Most people base their fundamental perspectives not on evidence but on taste (Charles Peirce).

## The Personal Assumptions that I Bring to the Resurrection Texts

I. Assumption 1: New Testament does contain errors but should be given the benefit of the doubt. Below we will carefully test the biblical witness to the resurrection and see that the basic claims seem to be historical.

II. Assumption 2: The divergences in the resurrection accounts are due to three factors:

A. Faulty memory and reconstruction (including apologetic reconstruction). An illustration of faulty memory is the variation in the names and number of Mary Magdalene's companions in the synoptic gospels (Matt. 28:1, Mark 16:1, Luke 24:10). Note: I believe that John eliminates the companions to make the narrative simpler.

Two illustrations of apologetic reconstruction:

1. Matthew's tradition that the tomb of Jesus was guarded.
  - a. Matthew makes clear that when he wrote the enemies of the Church were saying that the disciples of Jesus stole the body and proclaimed that he had risen from the dead (Matt. 27:62-66, 28:11-15).
  - b. Matthew (and probably his community) then had to respond by explaining where this allegation came from and why it could not be true.
  - c. The response was that
    - 1). Because the tomb was guarded, the disciples could not have stolen the body.
    - 2). After the guards reported that Jesus rose from the dead, the fearful authorities bribed the guards to spread the fiction that the disciples stole the body of Jesus.
  - d. Since Mark, Luke, and John record nothing about a guard at the tomb, it seems unlikely that historically there was one.
2. The tradition that Mary Magdalene on Easter morning saw an angel.
  - a. In both Matthew and John, Mary Magdalene first sees one or two angels and then sees the risen Jesus.
  - b. While I hesitate to limit how God chooses to make revelations, it does seem strange that it was necessary to have an angel appear prior to having Jesus himself appear. It is even stranger that the angel in Matthew tells Mary Magdalene to proclaim the resurrection even though Jesus has not yet appeared to her and is still going to do so (Matt. 28:7-8).
  - c. I would suggest that Mary Magdalene (and her companions?) saw Jesus, that this was the first appearance of the risen Christ, and that Mary Magdalene reported this startling event to other disciples. I suspect that Luke is correct that initially the male disciples did not believe her (Luke 24:10-11).
    - 1). In the gospels the divine messenger tells Mary to proclaim the resurrection to the disciples, and this command implies that they do not yet know about the resurrection.
    - 2). The tradition that Jesus rose on the first day of the week

(i.e., very shortly after the crucifixion) is only associated with Mary Magdalene and her companions.

- d. The testimony of women was not considered reliable in first-century Judaism. Women could not testify in court.
- e. Therefore, it was essential for the Church to downplay the fact that Mary Magdalene was the first witness to the resurrection. Note that the official list of witnesses as recorded in 1 Corinthians 15:3-7 only lists males.
- f. At least part of the Church downplayed Mary Magdalene's testimony by saying
  - 1). She did not see Jesus himself but only an angel or two.
  - 2). She could not have been the origin of the tradition that Jesus rose from the dead, since even though an angel told her that Jesus was alive, she was too disoriented to share the message (Mark 16:7-8).
- g. If the above analysis is historically accurate, I would nominate Mary Magdalene to be the patroness of that never ending chain of women whose contributions to the Church were not fully acknowledged.

B. Theological and literary editing also has contributed to the discrepancies between resurrection texts or even led to the invention of some appearances.

Two illustrations:

- 1. John's claim that Mary Magdalene came to the tomb "while it was still dark" (20:1) is literary not historical.
  - a. Historically, it is unlikely that Mary Magdalene would have gone to a tomb when it was dark, and the other gospels record that she came when there was light.
  - b. Apologetically, Mary seeing the empty tomb when there was darkness casts doubt on the reliability of her testimony.
  - c. Throughout John's Gospel darkness and night are literary symbols of spiritual ignorance and alienation from God. Note, e.g., 1:4-5, 8:12, 9:39, 13:30.
  - d. In John's Gospel when Mary Magdalene sees the empty tomb, she assumes that the body has been stolen.
  - e. Hence, she is in spiritual darkness, and John uses the physical darkness of the scene to symbolize her state.
- 2. The trip to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35) may be a Eucharistic meditation on the resurrection rather than a historical event.
  - a. This particular story only occurs in Luke, and it cannot be any of the appearances listed in 1 Corinthians 15:5-8.
  - b. The story is thoroughly Eucharistic.
    - 1). The climax of the story is Christ being known in the breaking of the bread.
    - 2). And earlier in the story we almost have a "ministry of the word" with Christ interpreting the scriptures.
  - c. Therefore, it is quite plausible that the story arose as a

Eucharistic meditation on the historical fact that at least one of the resurrection appearances occurred when the disciples were eating together (Acts 10:41) and that subsequently disciples experienced the presence of Jesus during Eucharistic celebrations.

3. I strongly suspect that different "translations" into earthly terms of experiences that were essentially unlike normal experience also led to discrepancies in the resurrection accounts.

a. Since the appearances led to the claim that Jesus had risen and become Lord of the Universe and no analogous claim seems to exist, it seems logical that the appearances were also utterly different from any other experience.

b. Things which are unique cannot be described literally, since language is based on common experience.

c. However, unique experiences can be partially translated into terms which people who have not had the experience can understand, and very different translations are possible. One could say to a blind person that shocking pink is like the taste of a hot pepper or like the blast of an electric guitar.

d. I believe that the details of the resurrection appearances (e.g., what Jesus said) are at least often translations of the convictions that originated in the appearances.

III. Assumption 3: Thanks to critical scholarship scholars can to some extent separate early and late traditions in the New Testament. At the very least, traditions which appear in a document are as old as the document.

IV. Assumption 4: God does work miracles, but miracles are only ambiguous signs which are intended to invite faith, not replace it. Here by "faith" I mean the knowledge and trust that arise primarily from an individual or communal relationship with God.

Note that in the gospels Jesus sometimes

A. Declares that his miracles are signs of the truth of his larger message (e.g., Matt. 11:5-6).

B. Refuses to work a miracle when there is no faith already (e.g., Mark 8:11-12, John 4:46-50).

V. Assumption 5: God often gives miraculous signs (whether small or great) to help beginning Christians have an initial faith and then invites Christians to grow into a mature faith that does not depend on miracles. Indeed, a mature faith based on a relationship with God can become strong evidence that God can work miracles when appropriate. I believe that the organization of John's Gospel underlines the transition from a faith based primarily on miracles to a faith based primarily on the presence of Jesus known through love.

A. In the earlier part of John, miraculous signs lead people to faith who are open to it (e.g., John 2:1-11). Note that in John's Gospel no sign, no matter how great, will lead people to faith who are closed to it (e.g., John 9).

B. In the later chapters of John Jesus insists that if the disciples love one another, Jesus will dwell in them and they will know him as divine (14:18-23).

VI. Assumption 6: The energy that comes from the presence of the Holy Spirit is imparted by the Spirit herself and is not (exclusively) a subjective enthusiasm in



believers. I base this assumption on my own prayer experience.

VII. Assumption 7: Accordingly, at most, historical research can make belief in the resurrection more plausible. A secure faith must have additional support from elsewhere.

## The Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus, One Evaluation

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

A. Mary Magdalene and probably one or more other women discovered that the tomb in which Jesus had been placed was empty.

1. It is *possible* that the story of the finding of the empty tomb is an apologetic legend.

a. 1 Corinthians 15, which is our earliest written presentation of the resurrection and is a quarter of a century later, 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 about the resurrection. Moreover, since the Romans did not usually return the bodies of executed criminals and 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" and "was raised" (1 Cor. 15:4a) may actually imply knowledge of the empty tomb and 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 demanded Jesus's execution. The gospels freely admit that Joseph was a member of the Sanhedrin (Jerusalem Council; Mark 15:43, Luke 23:50-51) which condemned Jesus and petitioned Pilate for his execution (Mark :14:53-64, 15:1; Luke 22:66-23:22).

2). Joseph could scarcely have forgotten where he buried Jesus and certainly would have been able to verify that the body of Jesus was still there (if such had been the case).

3). It is historically likely that Mary Magdalene (and her

companions?) knew the location of the tomb. It was the solemn obligation of family and friends to give the deceased an honorable burial. Therefore, it is probable that the women would have a) witnessed the crucifixion, and b) seen where the body was put, as the gospels record (e.g., Mark 15:40, 47).

d. It is most improbable that a late apologetic legend would have attributed the finding of the empty 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 originated 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 begun 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 (e.g., Luke 24:33), and Matthew and Mark implicitly assume the same, since the women must tell the men to go to Galilee for a resurrection appearance (e.g., Mark 16:7).

3. A natural explanation for the tomb becoming empty is conceivable but not plausible.

a. It is conceivable that someone removed the body (e.g., the disciples stole the body and said that Jesus had risen from the dead [Matt. 28:12-15]).

b. But such explanations seem most unlikely.

1). The disciples appear to have fled and gone into hiding; would they then have stolen the body?

2). What possible reason would anyone else have had to remove the body?

3). The removal would have taken place on the Sabbath when such strenuous activity was forbidden or (after the Sabbath ended at sunset) in the dark.

B. Certain disciples “saw” something which convinced them Jesus was alive, and there are 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 bodily 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 at the resurrection on the last day.

c. An empty tomb does not normally lead to visions of a resurrection. Note Mary Magdalene's response to the empty tomb in John 20:1-2.

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

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. After the resurrection there was a continuing experience of the presence of Jesus's Spirit.

1. After the resurrection appearances ended, the people who had them continued to experience the presence of Jesus, but in a less dramatic and tangible way.

2. Disciples who did not have an appearance could also experience this presence.

3. The experience of Jesus being present reinforced faith in his resurrection, since if Jesus was present, he could not still be dead.

4. Consequently, various New Testament texts connect the resurrection appearances with the gift of the Holy Spirit. When Jesus appears, he either gives the Holy Spirit (John 20:19-23) or promises that he will do so soon (Luke 24:49).

5. Depending on one's understanding of what the experience of the Holy Spirit is, the presence of the Spirit can support any of the various Christian positions on the resurrection enumerated above.

D. By contrast, it is likely that the resurrection accounts that stress the undeniable physical presence of Jesus (the risen Jesus eating a piece of fish [Luke 24:41-43], Jesus challenging Thomas to put a finger into the nail wounds [John 20:24-29]) 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. It is easier 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 (Matt. 27:62-66) and perhaps radical Christian allegations that Christ did not have a body (e.g., 2 John 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. 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. The presence of the risen Christ was so tangible that it was as if he could have eaten something or someone could have felt his wounds.

II. Given my methodological assumptions (see above), I conclude that the most *probable* explanation for the historical evidence is that Jesus physically rose from the dead and appeared to his disciples.

III. An attempt to reply to the problems of my position.

A. As we saw, there are two major objections to the “conservative” Christian position which I hold as the most likely:

1. Concern about what happened to Jesus’s body.
2. If God can work physical miracles, why do we not see more of them, since often they are so desperately needed?

B. In reply, I would venture

1. By definition, a miracle is something that we cannot fully explain by natural causation and must be due to some special act of God.
2. Therefore, to ask for a complete natural explanation of what happened to Jesus’s body is implicitly to return to the assumption that God cannot work miracles, an assumption that I do not make.
3. In response to the question of what God *might* have done with the body, I would speculate that God transformed the corpse of Jesus into a “spiritual” body (i.e., a body consisting of energy rather than matter). This spiritual body appeared to the disciples and entered into heaven (cf. 1 Cor. 15). Note that even in nature caterpillars become butterflies, and mass can turn into energy and radiate to somewhere else! A body consisting of energy would explain the otherwise puzzling fact that in the accounts of several resurrection appearances the disciples do not initially recognize Jesus but subsequently do so.
4. The resurrection did not involve God saving Jesus from suffering and death, but saving Jesus after his faithfulness in accepting suffering and death.
5. Consequently, the resurrection challenges us in earthly tragedies to focus on final salvation rather than expect God to fix the situation here and now with a miracle.

Discussion: How do you feel about my position that the most probable explanation for the historical evidence is that Jesus physically rose from the dead?

**(time permitting) The Theological and Spiritual Evidence for the Early  
Church's Understanding of the Resurrection**

- I. (review) In my opinion, the historical evidence concerning Jesus's resurrection invites belief but does not compel it. The historical evidence makes it implausible that the disciples made a mistake, but not impossible.
- II. Christians are left with the question of whether we can confidently believe in the resurrection, and if so, how?
- III. Let us now briefly review the historical evidence and consider in detail the theological and spiritual evidence for the resurrection.
- IV. The New Testament suggests there are at least four bases for belief in Jesus's 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, namely that those who are faithful to Jesus will also rise from the dead and share in his glory (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. Note: I do not think that theories which hypothesize either a mistake or a plot to explain the empty tomb are historically plausible.
    2. Theologically, there are two problems which we have not yet discussed:
      - a. The empty tomb could be seen to imply that Christ's resurrection was merely a resuscitation in which Jesus returned to earthly life.
      - 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 ("soul") at the moment of death, and contemporary out-of-body experiences seem to confirm this.
        - 2). The resurrection of the flesh raises various problems. Can cannibals be raised? Can we achieve final fulfillment in limited bodies? It must, however, be added that traditional theology also taught that after the fleshly resurrection of our present bodies, our bodies would be changed into a more glorious form (1 Cor. 15).
  - 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 which Christians experience today might be something other than the presence of the risen Christ. Any gathering has a "spirit," and this spirit often reflects the values and beliefs of the group in question.

- D. The hope that the resurrection inspires could merely be unfounded optimism (“pie in the sky when you die”).
- 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 the rest of us.
  - 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, and in 1 Corinthians 15 Paul does not even appeal to the empty tomb when challenging the readers to believe.
  - C. Jesus taught that his miracles were signs of the larger reality of God's lordship (e.g., Luke 11:20).
  - D. John's Gospel explicitly calls Jesus's resurrection a “sign” (20:30), and in John signs are miraculous events which point beyond themselves to larger truths.
- 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, and even common sense suggests that some visions must be only subjective.
- 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 a lasting 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.
- We may note in passing that here we have an illustration that experiencing the risen Jesus was like experiencing God (cf. Exod. 3:1-12).
- X. It seems to me that this common structure in the accounts 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 (at least sometimes?) 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. Note, for example, that Jesus was compassionate toward people in need, demanding of his disciples but bore with their failures, impatient with hypocrisy in religious leaders, obedient to God.
  - 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. By the "Spirit" the Bible means
  1. A divine energy. The biblical words for "spirit" literally mean wind.
  2. Something that changes our way of thinking and perceiving so that we see the world more like the way that God does.

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, a hope which corresponds to basic, universal 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? Does the faith that God had a human life and is, therefore, our brother/sister as well as our Lord and Creator invite us into a richer relationship with God?
4. Can we affirm on the basis of our own experience the Church's witness and continuing experience that through Christ Christians in earthly life already have the "down payment" (2 Cor. 1:22, 5:5) of the final consummation? Have we felt the power of God lifting us up, and does the power that we have experienced point backward to the power that raised Jesus and forward to the power which will give us life after death? Note that St. Paul believed that Christian life is a series of deaths and resurrections.

a. In his own life Paul repeatedly felt that he was all but dead and that the power of God raised him from the dead (2 Cor. 1:8-11, 11:23-30).

b. Paul insisted that in baptism Christians share in the death of Jesus and enter a new life sustained by the Spirit (Rom. 6:3-11).

XV. Because of my answers to the questions listed above, I feel certain that Jesus did rise from the dead.

A. The empty tomb and the resurrection appearances led to Christian faith, and that faith makes so much sense of life as a whole.

B. Therefore, it is entirely reasonable that God would have provided the



resurrection as a special sign.

**(time permitting) Can We Affirm Our Own Future Resurrection From the Dead, and Is This Affirmation Consistent with the Resurrection of Jesus?**

- I. In the earlier books of the Old Testament there is no belief in meaningful life after death for individuals.
  - A. The assumption was that the mind and the body were inseparable.
  - B. Therefore after death as the body obviously decayed, the mind decayed also, and consciousness faded.
- II. Later in response to new historical and philosophical developments there arose two competing understandings of meaningful life after death in Judaism.
  - A. The mainline one was resurrection of the body at the Day of Judgment. This view arose to justify martyrdom, especially during the persecution by Antiochus Epiphanes and appears in Daniel and 2 Maccabees which deal with that persecution.
    1. At the Day of Judgment, God would raise the bodies of the dead from their graves and pass sentence on everyone.
    2. God would also transform the earth into paradise.
    3. The righteous would reign on a renewed earth.
    4. The wicked would suffer elsewhere, perhaps underground.
  - B. An alternative picture was that at an individual's death the spirit would leave the body and go to God for judgment, and the righteous would be rewarded and the wicked, punished. This view especially appears in books like 4 Maccabees and the writings of Philo which show the influence of Greek philosophy.
- III. A compromise position which may have existed already in the time of Jesus (N.T. Wright) and which the Church certainly adopted later was a two stage life after death.
  - A. At an individual's death the soul went to judgment and temporarily ended up in heaven or hell.
  - B. On the Day of Judgment, God would raise the bodies of the dead, reunite the bodies with their souls, and transform the earth into paradise where the righteous would now live.
  - C. Perhaps Jesus himself believed in this compromise position, since there are sayings which presuppose both individual judgment at death (Luke 16:19-31) and resurrection on the Day of Judgment (e.g., Matt. 11:20-24). However, since Jesus was not a systematic thinker and taught in images, he may only have believed that there was life after death and left the details up to God.
  - D. In any case, it is clear that subsequently, the Church adopted the compromise position which combined both the resurrection of the soul at death and the resurrection (and transformation) of the body on the Day of Judgment. The Day of Judgment would occur when Christ returned in glory to the Earth.
- IV. There were obvious problems with these various beliefs, even if the problems were not always admitted.
  - A. Since human bodies decomposed and in some cases even got recycled into other bodies, the resurrection of the body was hard to imagine and sometimes bordered on being logically impossible.
  - B. The departure of the soul from the body at death presupposed that

1. Human beings during earthly life were composed of a corruptible body and an immortal soul.
2. But it was never clear how these two very different things could work together.
3. There was little evidence that an immortal soul even existed, especially since a sick body impacted spiritual functions.
4. The dualism of body and soul denigrated the body and the material world and, especially, sex. Note that sex is the physical act that most influences our “spirits.”

C. The combination of the soul going to judgment and temporarily being in heaven or hell and then being reunited with an earthly body was complicated and implied that the dead in heaven lacked final fulfillment.

V. In modern times several things have occurred that raise further questions of whether resurrection of the body on the Day of Judgment is credible.

A. The Day of Judgment which the early Church felt was near has delayed for two thousand years.

B. Scientists have discovered that the universe is nearly fourteen billion years old with an unimaginable number of planets, some of which could contain intelligent life.

C. Life on earth has evolved for eons, and the earth itself will ultimately die when the sun novas.

D. Therefore, to believe in a final resurrection of the body after which people will live *for ever on earth*, one must believe that God will intervene on one planet and

1. End billions of years of geological and biological evolution
2. Somehow restore life to bodies which have decayed and been recycled, even recycled into other human beings!

E. In response to such problems mainline Christian denominations have increasingly stressed the resurrection of the self at the moment of death and downplayed waiting for Christ’s return to earth to raise the dead.

F. Meanwhile, marginal Christian groups have kept predicting the imminent return of Christ, and these predictions have always been at least premature and have weakened Christian faith in people who believed them.

G. For what it is worth, I think that it is now time for the Church to admit that bodily resurrection on some future day is no longer plausible (if it ever was).

VI. By contrast, several things have happened which make the resurrection of the self at the moment of death and some sort of judgment highly likely even without any religious evidence.

A. We now know that the self is a complex electronic pattern produced by the firing of nerve endings and that in this present life the body sustains the pattern.

B. Thanks to computer technology, we know that a complex electronic pattern containing human thoughts and emotions can be sent wirelessly into another place. One example of the process is called e-mail.

C. Thanks to advances in medicine, it is now often possible to revive people who were clinically dead, and we have numerous reports of near-death, out-of-body experiences. People report

1. When their bodily functions ceased, they left their body.

2. They soon went through a “tunnel.”
3. On the other side they met their departed friends and relatives.
4. The deceased were then interviewed by a “Being of Light” who showed them all that they ever did and how their good deeds benefited others and their evil deeds harmed others. The deceased were proud of their good deeds and ashamed of their evil ones.
5. Then thanks to the advances of modern medicine, the deceased were able to return to their bodies and earthly life.
6. The deceased are almost always certain that their out-of-body experiences were accurate and not hallucinations.
7. And at least in some cases people learned things when clinically dead that subsequently have turned out to be verifiable.

D. On the basis of such information it seems very likely that at death the body, so to speak, punches the send button, the “spirit” (i.e., the electronic pattern) leaves the body and goes to another realm and faces judgment by God.

E. Of course, religious experience confirms this conclusion and is what the Church always taught. We experience that God gives to us new energy (during prayer, for example), and the Church has always taught that God who empowers us here raises us to new life when we die.

VII. If one likes, one can argue that this new understanding of life after death at least partially vindicates the older compromise of the departure of the soul at death and a subsequent bodily resurrection, since an electronic pattern has similarities to both a body (an energy field is something physical) and a soul (an energy field is not matter).

VIII. This new understanding of life after death is compatible with the bodily resurrection of Jesus if the bodily resurrection of Jesus is a special sign of his divinity and that there is life after death, rather than an exact model for our future resurrection. The theology that the bodily resurrection of Jesus was a special “sign” already appears in John’s Gospel (20:30).

## The Significance of the Resurrection for the Early Church

- I. Traditionally, Christians have distinguished between the resurrection, the ascension, and coming of the Holy Spirit, and the liturgical calendar devotes a different date to each.
  - A. The resurrection is commemorated on Easter Day and celebrates Jesus's triumphant return to life.
  - B. The ascension is commemorated on the fortieth day after Easter (or the nearest Sunday) and celebrates Jesus's triumphant entrance into heaven where he receives universal authority.
  - C. The coming of the Holy Spirit is commemorated on the fiftieth day after Easter and celebrates Jesus's mysterious return to the Church in the Spirit.
- II. These traditional distinctions are based on the narrative in Luke-Acts.
- III. Originally, however, the resurrection, ascension, and the coming of the Holy Spirit were more like different aspects of a single event, as other New Testament texts make clear (e.g., John 20:1-23).
- IV. The schema in Luke-Acts is a theological construct which stresses several points.
  - A. The resurrection emphasizes the identity of the risen Lord with the earthly Jesus (Luke 24:39).
  - B. The ascension emphasizes
    1. Jesus has been glorified and reigns in heaven (Acts 7:56).
    2. He is no longer with us in the same way that historically he had been (Acts 1:11).
  - C. The coming of the Spirit stresses that, nevertheless, Jesus is present with us in a new way, bringing to us power, joy, and vocation.
- V. However, Luke's schema is not merely a construct but is based on the actual resurrection experiences and their early interpretation, as we can see from other New Testament documents.
- VI. Accordingly, we will use Luke's categories to analyze the resurrection experiences and will note the theological implications the early church drew from these experiences.
- VII. Resurrection
  - A. It is clear that "resurrection" (i.e., that it was Jesus himself who had risen) was an integral part of the complex Easter experience.
  - B. From the conviction that Jesus the human being had risen, the Church drew two conclusions
    1. The rest of us will rise if we live like Jesus. Note that in first century Judaism resurrection was debated.
    2. The general resurrection was at hand (cf. Matt. 27:52-53). This conclusion reflected Jewish traditions that the dead will be raised together at the end of time (see, e.g., Daniel 12).
- VIII. Ascension
  - A. The ascension had at least two bases in early experience:
    1. The risen Lord whom people encountered exercised the authority of God himself and was at least functionally divine.

- a. New Testament resurrection texts tend to equate the risen Jesus with God despite the theological problems involved (Matt. 28:18-20, John 20:28, Phil. 2:9-11).
  - b. The experiences as presented in the texts have similarities to experiences of God in the Old Testament and (I think) the experience of God that we have today. Common elements include mystery, command, and promise (e.g., Exod. 3:1-12 vs. Matt. 28:16-20).
  - c. In the resurrection stories (as during his ministry) Jesus acts with God's authority and yet does not appeal to God to authenticate that authority.
2. The second basis of the Ascension was the experience that after a time the series of special appearances stopped, and it seemed that Jesus had definitively departed.
- B. Conclusions that were drawn from the experience of the Ascension:
- 1. Jesus reigns in heaven and has authority over all things.
  - 2. "We have an advocate with the Father" (1 John 2:1). Note that in first century society advocates were very important.
  - 3. Christ will come again in glory.
  - 4. Nevertheless, the end of the world will be somewhat delayed.
  - 5. God has vindicated the life and teaching of Jesus by exalting him.
  - 6. Since the death of Jesus led to his glorification, his death must somehow have overcome the evil powers of the universe and be a model for us.

## IX. The coming of Christ's Spirit.

### A. The experience

- 1. After the resurrection appearances, the people who had them continued to feel Christ's presence but in a less tangible way.
- 2. With the proclamation of the resurrection, people who had not had the appearances nevertheless had an experience of Christ's Spirit being present.
- 3. This experience continued after all the appearances ceased and continued to affirm the resurrection proclamation.
- 4. The experience included the following elements:
  - a. Joy and enthusiasm
  - b. An outpouring of gifts, especially ecstatic gifts.
  - c. A sense of community with one another in the Lord.
  - d. A sense that even now Christ was inwardly conforming his followers to his divine self.
  - e. A fervent desire to share the "good news" with outsiders.

### B. Conclusions which were drawn from the experience of the Spirit:

- 1. Christians were in the last days and were already experiencing some of the final blessings God would give (cf., e.g., Joel 2:28ff.).
- 2. Hence, it was not so important that the world end at once (Acts 1:6-8).
- 3. The resurrection proclamation was trustworthy.
- 4. The Church was a holy, elect community and was Christ's body in the

world.

5. The time to convert the Gentiles had come, and the Church should spread the gospel to the ends of the earth.

## The Jewish Diaspora and the Church Before Paul

- I. As we have noted already, the genius of Judaism consisted in two ideas which were in tension: ethical monotheism and special election.
- II. Both ideas had a fundamental impact on the Mosaic Law, the code which regulated Jewish life.
  - A. On the one hand, the law rested on the absolute authority of the one God and contained much that was purely ethical.
  - B. On the other hand, the law separated Jews from others and contained much that we would call "cultic" and "ethnic."
- III. In the areas of first century Palestine where most people were Jewish, the tension between ethical monotheism and special election was not a great problem in everyday life.
- IV. However, in the first century many Jews lived in predominantly Gentile cities.
  - A. In the centuries immediately before the common era, Jews migrated into the regions surrounding the Mediterranean Sea and the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.
  - B. By the first century C.E. the "Diaspora" (Greek: "scattering," i.e., Jews living among other nations) had become very large, and there were Jews in almost every urban area of at least the eastern Mediterranean.
  - C. The Diaspora Jews often lived together in their own neighborhoods and, hence, could collectively keep the Mosaic Law.
  - D. The members worshiped at synagogues and paid a tax to support the Jerusalem temple.
  - E. They had a Greek translation of the scriptures (called the Septuagint) and produced other sacred books and apologetic works.
- V. Like minority immigrant groups elsewhere, the Jews needed to do two contrasting things:
  - A. Preserve their self-identity by insisting that the faithful adhere to their special religious and cultural traditions.
  - B. Ingratiate themselves with the dominant culture by showing that they lived up to its values and deserved respect and good treatment.
- VI. In the case of the Jews two factors made doing these things especially difficult:
  - A. Their own culture was in certain respects geographically specific since there was only one Holy Land and only one temple (the one in Jerusalem).
  - B. Many of their customs (such as the refusal to worship the gods of other people) were very distasteful to others.
- VII. Partly in order to bolster self-esteem and gain outside support, Diaspora Jews engaged in missionary and propagandistic work.
- VIII. In this work monotheism was sometimes helpful, since it accorded with much of Greco-Roman philosophy, but the Mosaic Law was a great barrier. Circumcision was especially troublesome, since it was socially unacceptable to Pagans.
- IX. There arose a group of Gentiles (sometimes called "God Fearers") who accepted ethical monotheism and attended synagogue, but who did not keep the Mosaic Law.
- X. During his ministry Jesus had concentrated on Jews, and all his hand-picked followers were Jewish, but he also had a vision that the whole world would one day become part of Israel (e.g., Matt. 8:11). Of course, the vision of the world becoming part



of Israel appears in some Old Testament passages (e.g., Isa. 49:6).

XI. After the resurrection Jesus's disciples continued upholding both Jewish faith and practice.

XII. Nevertheless, they believed that the most important revelation of God was the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and this belief subtly altered the traditional Jewish understanding of ethical monotheism and special election.

A. The one God was primarily the Father of Jesus who raised him from the dead. Moreover, in some sense Jesus was divine too.

B. Ethics were primarily the ethics of Jesus with their emphasis on the heart and the relative unimportance of law.

C. Election was primarily being chosen by Jesus and the Spirit and entering into the Christian community.

XIII. The emphasis on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus also distanced the rest of Christian life and practice from Jewish roots. One example is the sacraments.

A. The Christians continued the traditional rituals of washing and a common meal.

1. Basically, Christian baptism originated from John's baptism (and perhaps other traditional water ceremonies in Judaism).

2. Basically, Christian Eucharist originated from the Jewish Passover (and perhaps other solemn meals).

B. But because of Jesus's life, crucifixion, and resurrection the significance of these traditional acts changed.

1. Baptism involved sharing in Christ's death and resurrection and receiving his Spirit and thereby becoming a member of the Church.

2. Eucharist recalled the last meal Christ had with his followers. It proclaimed his subsequent death, involved fellowship with the risen Lord, and looked forward to his triumphant return. In the Eucharist, the bread and wine represented Christ's body and blood. Consequently, Eucharist reaffirmed one's commitment to the Christian community.

XIV. The Christian movement actively sought Jewish converts, but initially faced two serious problems due to Jesus's execution.

A. Persecution from the authorities who feared a movement which proclaimed that someone they had put to death was the Lord.

B. Hostility to the proclamation that an executed criminal could be God's savior.

XV. In response, the early church produced an elaborate passion apologetic showing

A. The scriptures predicted the cross, and, consequently, it was God's will.

B. Jesus was innocent and the Jews (not the Romans) were to blame for his death.

XVI. Soon, however, there arose a series of events which led to a mission to Gentiles. (review) Jesus had looked forward to the Gentiles becoming part of God's kingdom.

Now some Christians decided to make this hope a reality. Unfortunately, our knowledge of these events depends on sketchy and not entirely reliable materials in Acts. Basically, it appears that

A. Some Greek-speaking Jews in Jerusalem became Christians (Acts 6:1-5).

B. These Christians became increasingly critical of traditional Jewish practice, including the Mosaic Law and the Temple (Acts 6:13-14, 7:48).

- C. Consequently, they were persecuted and fled (Acts 7:57-59, 8:1).
- D. When they arrived in Antioch (near the border of modern Turkey and Syria), they converted some Gentiles (11:19-21).
- E. The Jerusalem church heard about this and sent Barnabas to determine how to respond (11:22).
- F. Barnabas was delighted with what he found and enlisted the support of a man named Paul (11:23-26).

## Paul's Life and Thought

- I. Although the role of Paul in early church history can be exaggerated, he was still the most significant figure in early Gentile Christianity.
  - A. A number of missionaries, such as Priscilla and Aquila and Apollos, were apparently very important, but we know little about them.
  - B. In addition, we have no idea how Christianity arrived and grew in such crucial Gentile areas as Rome and Egypt.
  - C. However, Paul was surely the most important force in the early Gentile mission.
    1. He was enormously successful in making converts and founding churches.
    2. He was the most ardent and stubborn defender of the law-free gospel.
    3. His letters remained influential after his death and ultimately became a major portion of the New Testament.
    4. His students became church leaders.
- II. Consequently, Paul more than anyone else is responsible for making Christianity an international religious movement.
- III. The sources for Paul's life and their value.
  - A. There are two major sources.
    1. Paul's own letters. A couple of introductory remarks about about the letters:
      - a. Paul did not write down his letters but dictated them to a scribe (e.g., Rom 16:22, Gal 6:11).
      - b. The letters were not mailed, since there was no public post office.
      - c. Instead, Paul had to get someone to deliver them.
      - d. Only seven of Paul's letters are certainly by him. These seven are Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, Philemon.
    2. Luke's Acts of the Apostles.
  - B. On the whole these sources are good, and, consequently, we know more about Paul than about any other early Christian.
  - C. Still there are problems.
    1. It is sometimes hard to place information gleaned from the letters into an overall chronology of Paul's life. We do not know when and where some of the letters (e.g., Galatians) were written.
    2. The material in Acts is not always historically reliable.
      - a. Acts was written at least a generation after Paul's death.
      - b. We do not know what sources of information were then available and whether Luke knew any of Paul's letters.
      - c. We also do not know how far Luke would go in using his imagination or literary conventions to fill in gaps. Luke has a flair for the dramatic and sometimes includes what were stock scenes (e.g., the miraculous escape from prison) in contemporary literature.
      - d. Luke simplifies and schematizes and downplays the negative.

- e. He especially idealizes Paul.
- f. Luke loves literary parallels, and some of the parallels between Jesus, Peter and Paul, may be literary rather than historical.
- g. Some details in Acts contradict what Paul records.
- h. Paul's sermons in Acts may be by Luke himself. Note that ancient historians often produced speeches for characters in their books.

IV. One plausible sketch of Paul's life. Because of the problems noted above, any reconstruction of Paul's life can only be tentative. This present reconstruction assumes that what the Acts of the Apostles records about Paul's life is basically accurate.

V. Paul had early roots in the Diaspora.

- A. He was born in Tarsus (e.g., Acts 9:11), an important center of Greco-Roman culture.
- B. He apparently received some classical education, since he can write Greek well.
- C. His family was at least at some point socially prominent in Tarsus, since Paul was apparently born a citizen of that city (Acts 21:39) and perhaps also a Roman citizen (Acts 16:37, 22:25-28).
- D. "Paul" was a common Roman last name and probably attests his family's desire that their son be comfortable with Greco-Roman culture.

VI. Nevertheless, his primary background was Palestinian Jewish.

- A. His family was Jewish, and his first name was Saul. Saul was the first king of Israel and from the tribe of Benjamin as was Paul (1 Samuel 9:1-2, Phil. 3:5).
- B. His first language was either Hebrew or more probably Aramaic (the language of Jesus!), and Paul became fluent in both languages.
- C. His family migrated to Jerusalem when Paul was young, and there he received an advanced education in Judaism (Acts 22:3).

VII. At some point Paul began earning his living by being a tent-maker/leather worker, and he would continue supporting himself this way for the rest of his life (Acts 18:3).

VIII. Paul also suffered from an embarrassing medical problem ("thorn in the flesh" [2 Cor. 12:7, Gal. 4:13-14]), though what it was is unknown.

XIX. Paul became a fanatical Jew.

- A. Throughout his life Paul was a fanatic (i.e., a person who subordinates all of his life to pursuing one goal).
- B. By his own testimony he exceeded his contemporaries in observing and studying Jewish tradition (Phil. 3:5-6).
  - 1. He became a Pharisee.
  - 2. And claims to have been blameless in following the Mosaic Law.
- C. He was proud, especially, of his Jewish identity.

XX. Paul persecuted the Church, but we can only conjecture what his specific problems with Christianity were.

- A. It is clear that Paul violently persecuted the church, since both Acts and his own letters repeatedly tell us so (e.g., Acts 9:1-2, 1 Cor. 15:9).
- B. Paul records he acted out of his zeal for the traditions of his "fathers" (Gal. 1:14).
- C. It would seem that he primarily persecuted the more radical Greek-speaking

Christians, since it was these who fled to Damascus where Paul was later converted.

D. Perhaps Paul was especially offended by

1. The claim that a crucified person was the Messiah (cf. Gal. 3:13).
2. The further claim that this person (Jesus) could be “Lord”—a claim that seemed to compromise monotheism.
3. Christian missionaries winning converts among God Fearers by eliminating Jewish legal requirements.
4. The preaching that in Christ Jews and Gentiles were one and that Jews should not hate their Romans oppressors.

XXI. What we sometimes refer to as Paul's "conversion" was his acknowledgment of Jesus's lordship and his acceptance of a law-free mission to the Gentiles.

A. Paul never ceased to think of himself as Jewish, and in his letters he emphasizes his own Jewish identity (e.g., Rom. 11:1).

B. From what Paul tells us, his "conversion" involved

1. Seeing Jesus (1 Cor. 9:1), and acknowledging him to be God's Son.
2. Accepting a mission to invite Gentiles to become followers of Christ without adopting the Mosaic Law (Gal. 1:16).

C. Paul's change from being a persecutor of Christianity to being a supporter seems to have been sudden.

D. However, there was a much longer process in which Paul went from being self-centered to being centered in Christ. Note that the mature Paul could even write, "I no longer live; Christ lives in me" (Gal.:2;20).

XXII. In his missionary work Paul had two contrasting goals:

A. To convert quickly as many Gentiles as possible, since he believed that the return of Jesus to judge the world was near.

B. To give Jewish Christianity as much support as he could without compromising his gospel.

1. By preaching a law-free Christianity, Paul was discrediting the Jewish church among non-Christian Jews, and this concerned Paul.
2. Paul labored to collect money for the Jerusalem church.
3. He also made it clear that Jews should keep their heritage (1 Cor. 7:17-18), and he himself kept the law when he was with Jews (1 Cor. 9:20).

XXIII. The major events of Paul's Christian life.

A. Immediately after his conversion at Damascus, he went to "Arabia" (i.e., modern Jordan) but does not seem to have made a lasting impact there (Gal. 1:17).

B. After returning to Damascus and visiting Jerusalem, he went to the regions around his native Tarsus (i.e., the southeastern corner of modern Turkey) (Gal. 1:17-21).

C. Barnabas, a Jewish Christian leader, brought him to Antioch, and together they preached there.

D. Then together they engaged in a first missionary journey in the eastern Mediterranean.

E. Paul went to Jerusalem and managed to get the leadership of the Church to endorse his law-free Gentile mission.

- F. Subsequently, he separated from Barnabas and undertook missionary work on his own.
  - G. He spent long periods in Corinth and Ephesus, where he worked along with his staff (e.g., Timothy, Titus) and apparently had considerable success.
  - H. When he visited Jerusalem to bring money to the church there, he was arrested.
  - I. He used his rights as a Roman citizen to appeal for a trial at Rome.
  - J. After long delays which he spent in prison, he was finally sent to Rome where after another long delay he was probably executed.
- XXIV. Although it is difficult to be certain, it appears that we can isolate Paul's basic ideas.
- A. Because Paul presents his theology contextually rather than systematically, the center of his thought is not entirely clear.
  - B. What I give is my personal opinion; not all scholars would agree.
  - C. Like other Jews, Paul emphasized that there is only one God.
  - D. Like other Christians, Paul emphasized that through the crucifixion, resurrection, and the giving of Christ's Spirit God has revealed the final truth.
    - 1. The cross demonstrates God's love for sinners and the wickedness and folly of the world. Hence, it teaches that we must suffer to show God's goodness and resist accommodation to this age.
    - 2. The resurrection demonstrates that Christ is mightier than the powers of this age, including death. Hence, Jesus now reigns as Lord and will soon return in glory. We will share in his final reign and be transformed into his risen likeness if we live as he lived.
    - 3. The Spirit gives us a "down payment" of that final salvation now. Consequently, we live both in the future blessedness and the present tribulation and have the paradox of strength in the midst of weakness.
  - E. Accordingly, Paul takes the basic emphases of earlier Christianity (and Judaism) but sees profound new implications in them (e.g., the paradox of strength in weakness).
- XXV. From these ideas Paul argues that in Christ there is no Jew or Greek (Gal. 3:28).
- A. The oneness of God means that he saves both Greeks and Jews without partiality (e.g., Rom. 3:29-30).
  - B. The cross demonstrates the folly of this age and of the (Jewish) law which regulated life during it.
  - C. The resurrection confirms Christ's triumph over the world and the law.
  - D. The Spirit does not come through works of the law but through hearing with faith (Gal. 3:2) and is given equally to Jews and Greeks.

## **Paul's Letters and the Problem of Contextual Thought as Illustrated in**

### **Philemon and 1 & 2 Thessalonians a reading of Paul's letter to Philemon**

- I. Traditionally academic institutions have tried to get people to think systematically and objectively.
  - A. We are to consider all the data and to argue consistently from it.
  - B. Ideally, we should be open to every viewpoint and only be concerned with establishing which position is objectively correct. Selfish interest should not influence us.
- II. In practice it is possible to think in this way only if our personal stake in the outcome is not too great.
- III. By contrast, if our personal stake is great, we think subjectively and selectively.
  - A. We begin with the conclusion that we desire.
  - B. Then we concentrate on the data that supports our conclusion, and on the basis of that data we choose those arguments that lead to the desired result.
- IV. Nevertheless, we can learn much from someone's selective and subjective argumentation including
  - A. What the person wants
  - B. The situation
  - C. At least some of the principles which the person holds (i.e., the principles that the person selectively invokes).
- V. The extant writing of Paul consists entirely of letters.
- VI. It is to be noted that they basically follow the customary letter form for his time but that Paul Christianized it.
  - A. The customary form (see, e.g., Acts 15:22-29)
    1. Name of sender
    2. Name of intended recipient
    3. "Greeting"
    4. (often) A brief prayer or thanksgiving
    5. The letter body (i.e., the real message)
    6. (often) Greetings to and from people
    7. "Farewell"
  - B. As we can see from Philemon, Paul christianized this format.
    1. He added Christian material to the identification of the senders and recipients (e.g., "Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus").
    2. In place of "greeting" he used "grace to you and peace" and added other Christian material (Philem. 3).
    3. He made the prayer Christian.
    4. In place of "farewell" he used a Christian blessing (Philem. 25).
- VII. The letters we are sure Paul wrote are always addressed to a specific situation and have goals in which Paul had a personal stake. To some degree we can reconstruct the situation and the goals. In the case of Philemon
  - A. The situation was apparently as follows:
    1. Paul converted Philemon who was wealthy.
    2. Philemon's slave somehow offended him, perhaps by stealing or

damaging something.

3. Onesimus went to Paul, who was in prison, to get him to intercede.

Note: It was customary for slaves who got in trouble with their masters to seek the intervention of the master's friends.

4. Paul converted Onesimus to Christianity and found him to be a helpful assistant.

5. Now Paul has to send Onesimus back to his master, and Onesimus is afraid of being severely punished.

B. Paul's goal is to insure that Onesimus is not punished and to get his master to return him to Paul. It may be that Paul also was hoping that Philemon would free Onesimus.

VIII. From his letters we can reconstruct Paul's principles. In the case of Philemon we can state the following:

A. Paul derived much of his authority from his willingness to suffer for the gospel (vs. 1).

B. He was willing to take on himself the consequences of someone else's sin and ask people to treat others as they would treat him (vss. 17-18).

C. He accepted that the traditional social order would continue for the present, but he insisted that all Christians were nevertheless brothers and sisters and that love should be the basis of relationships among them.

D. He gave people some freedom to decide for themselves exactly what to do. In Philemon there are hints but few specifics. Note vs. 21.

IX. We can see how Paul applied his principles. As Philemon illustrates, he acted sensitively and with tact but also firmly and boldly. In addition, Paul did not hesitate to use flattery and threats to achieve what he felt was vital.

X. Because Paul's thought is contextual we often have difficulty knowing how he felt about major issues. For example, Philemon does not make it clear whether or not Paul was opposed to the institution of slavery in this passing age.

XI. Paul's letters are a reminder, however, that it is dangerous to impose principles on situations. We must also start with the situation and see what needs to be done and then see what principles we should emphasize.

XII. If we realize that Paul's letters attempt to accomplish pastoral goals and that they invoke theological principles selectively, we can make sense of tensions between them.

XIII. As an illustration, we will consider the discrepancy between 1 and 2 Thessalonians concerning when Christ will return in glory.

A. 1 Thessalonians emphasizes that Christ could return at any time (1 Thes. 5:1-4) and that Paul expected the second coming to take place in his own lifetime (4:15).

B. 2 Thessalonians emphasizes that the second coming is a long way off, because a number of historical events must precede it (2 Thes. 2:1-12).

XIV. The reason 1 Thessalonians emphasizes that Christ's return could be imminent and will surely take place soon was to reassure the readers.

A. 1 Thessalonians is probably Paul's earliest letter (c. 50 C.E.), and he wrote it after he apparently had to leave Thessalonica early due to persecution (1 Thes. 2:14, Acts 17:1-10).

B. Perhaps because of its date and Paul's premature departure, the



Thessalonians had gotten the impression that Christ would return very soon, and they apparently did not know about the resurrection of the dead.

C. Then when Christ's return delayed and some members of the congregation died, there was concern (1 Thes. 4:13-18).

D. To reassure them about the dead and the reliability of what he had told them, Paul emphasizes in the letter

1. That the dead will rise at Christ's return.

2. That the second coming is probably not far off.

XV. The reason 2 Thessalonians emphasizes that Christ's coming will not be soon is to force the congregation to get back to work.

A. 2 Thessalonians is probably later than 1 Thessalonians, but as numerous similarities in wording and structure show, the two epistles are closely related. Apparently, 2 Thessalonians is a deliberate imitation of 1 Thessalonians.

B. Consequently, some scholars believe that a disciple of Paul wrote the letter perhaps after his teacher's death to tell the church how Paul would have responded to the crisis if he had lived. Other scholars (inc. me) think that Paul had a secretary draft a letter in his name and that Paul subsequently read the letter and signed it (3:17). Note that the actual letter lists Silvanus and Timothy as co-authors. The secretary used 1 Thessalonians as a model.

C. In any case, the crisis was that some members concluded that Christ's return was imminent and stopped working (cf. 2 Thes. 3:6-13).

D. In their idleness they began sponging off the church!

E. In response, the letter insists that Christ will not return soon and that the church should not feed loafers.

XVI. Once we realize Paul speaks contextually, we can often deduce a basic position underlying the contextual variations. In the case of the second coming, Paul believed it would be fairly soon but certain events would have to occur first.

## Corinthians as a Response to Enthusiasm at Corinth

- I. The letters we call 1 & 2 Corinthians are only part of a larger correspondence between Paul and the Corinthian church, but unfortunately the other letters are lost. Paul wrote at least once prior to 1 Corinthians (1 Cor. 5:9), and the Corinthians wrote back (1 Cor. 7:1). 1 Corinthians followed and then 2 Corinthians.
- II. There is debate over whether 2 Corinthians was originally a single letter, but I believe it was.
  - A. Many scholars hold that the canonical epistle was assembled after Paul's death by combining parts of originally separate letters.
  - B. These scholars feel that only by positing separate epistles can one explain the striking shifts (e.g., the transition from ch. 9 to ch. 10) or the sudden resumptions (e.g., 2:12-13, 7:5) in the present document.
  - C. Personally, I feel these shifts and resumptions resulted from Paul trying to accomplish contrasting goals in a single letter. Thus, he was complimentary in chapter 9 to coax the Corinthians to give generously and critical in chapter 10 to pressure the readers to acknowledge his authority.
- III. The Corinthian letters suggest that the congregation had nearly boundless enthusiasm and self-confidence (note, e.g., 1 Cor. 4:8). Specifically, the Corinthians were especially proud of
  - A. The gift of ecstatic speech
  - B. Their freedom from conventional law and morality
  - C. Their spiritual wisdom
  - D. Some of their leaders
- IV. In part the enthusiasm came from the fact the congregation was newly converted.
- V. Nevertheless, much of the enthusiasm and the problems it produced came from the congregation's history, especially the repeated changes in leadership.
  - A. In only a few years three different sets of leaders had come and departed.
    1. Paul, aided by Priscilla and Aquila, founded the church and stayed for about a year and a half and left (Acts 18:1-18; 1Cor. 16:19).
    2. Some time later Apollos arrived, preached, and left (e.g., Acts 18:27-28). After Apollos's departure 1 Corinthians was written. Note 1 Corinthians 16:12.
    3. Then a group of Jewish Christian missionaries, whom Paul labels "false apostles," visited the congregation and apparently left (2 Cor., especially, ch. 11). After their departure 2 Corinthians was written.
  - B. Each leadership probably furthered a different type of enthusiasm.
    1. Paul himself introduced speaking in tongues (cf. 1 Cor. 14:18) and proclaimed that in principle Christians are free from law (cf. Galatians and Romans). Note "tongues" are nonsense syllables which express an emotion (as tears and laughter do).
    2. Apollos inspired an enthusiasm for wisdom, perhaps especially for the allegorical interpretation of scripture (cf. Acts 18:24).
    3. The "false apostles" produced an enthusiasm for charismatic leaders who see visions, work miracles, and have proper credentials (cf. 2 Cor., especially, chs. 3, 11-12).

- C. One assumes that during the periods when no missionary was in Corinth the congregation lacked experienced supervision and drifted into further excess.
- VI. The enthusiasm had grave consequences in the life of the congregation. Note especially the following:
- A. Division over leadership (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:11-12).
  - B. Disorder at community worship (cf. 1 Cor. 11, 14) apparently due to the uncontrolled use of tongues and a naive confidence in the magical power of the sacraments.
  - C. Sexual irregularities, including exaggerated demands for celibacy and a toleration of extra-marital sex (1 Cor. 5-7). These irregularities seem to have been due to an unrealistic view of what Christians filled with the Spirit could do if "all things are lawful" (e.g., 1 Cor. 6:12).
  - D. Widespread contempt for Paul because of his ill-health and inferiority in certain gifts (especially, preaching; e.g., 2 Cor. 10:10).
- VII. In this difficult situation Paul had two basic goals:
- A. To restore sensible belief and behavior
  - B. To re-establish his credibility and authority as a leader.
- VIII. The Corinthian letters emphasize three themes:
- A. The centrality of love (especially, 1 Cor. 13).
  - B. The cross and future judgment (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:17-2:9).
  - C. God's strength can be made perfect in weakness (e.g., 2 Cor. 12:1-10).
- IX. Since love is central, tongues are the least of the gifts and should play only a minor role in public worship (esp., 1 Cor. 13-14).
- A. Love is the greatest gift, and without it no other gift is helpful.
  - B. The primary purpose of gifts is to build up the community, not promote the person who has them.
  - C. Tongues are the least of the gifts, because they only affect an individual's relationship to God and, hence, do the least to build up the community.
  - D. In public worship no more than three people should speak in tongues and then only if there is an interpretation. Note, if it is genuine, "interpretation" is identifying the cause of the emotion that tongues express.
- Note: Since they are a response to the abuse of tongues, Paul's comments are not a balanced evaluation and should not be applied uncritically.
- X. The cross and future judgment demonstrate the folly of worldly wisdom, including that of the Corinthians.
- A. The cross is God's wisdom because though it God saves us (1 Cor. 1:18).
  - B. The cross discredits the self-seeking wisdom of this world, since the world's wisdom sees the cross as foolishness (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:19-25).
  - C. The cross points to God's hidden wisdom by which at the final judgment the self-sacrificing will be rewarded, and the self-seeking, destroyed.
  - D. The wisdom of the Corinthians is selfish and in reality is foolishness. For example, it is selfish and, thus, foolish to destroy a fellow Christian for the sake of one's freedom to eat sacrificial meat.
- XI. God's strength is made perfect in weakness, and, consequently, the Corinthians should not despise Paul.
- A. As human beings we can rely on our own strength or on God's, and we can

invite others to rely on us or God.

B. If we are strong, we are tempted to rely on our own power and invite others to rely on us too, whereas if we are weak we must rely on God and invite others to do the same.

C. Of course, God is stronger than human beings, and so even when the weak rely on him, they shame the strong.

D. In Paul God's strength was made perfect in weakness.

1. Paul is naturally weak, since he is a poor preacher (e.g., 2 Cor. 11:6), has a physical problem (2 Cor. 12:7), and suffers crushing persecution (2 Cor. 1:1-11).

2. Because of this weakness

- a. He has to rely on Christ

- b. He has to invite others to do the same.

3. Consequently, Christ's power has been at work in Paul and his congregation and has made them stronger than those who are powerful through mere human strength.

## **Paul and the Law Part 1--The Problem of Whether Gentiles Should Adopt the Law. Galatians as a Response.**

- I. (Review) The Mosaic Law divided Jews from Gentiles.
  - A. It was the basis for Jewish identity and caused the Jews to be visibly different and to keep to themselves.
  - B. Much of the law (especially, circumcision) was objectionable to Gentile society.
- II. (Review) The first Christians had all been Jewish and had basically kept the law.
- III. (Review) Paul before his conversion was a Pharisee and had been zealous for the law (e.g., Phil. 3:4-6).
- IV. At his Christian call, however, he received a commission to preach a law-free gospel to Gentiles. Note that only such a gospel had any hope of winning many Pagan converts.
- V. Accordingly, Paul's attitude toward the law was paradoxical.
  - A. On the one hand, he had nothing against the law.
    1. Jews were free to keep it.
    2. When he was among Jews, he even kept it himself (e.g., 1 Cor. 9:20).
  - B. On the other hand, he insisted the law was not necessary for salvation. Someone could be a Christian without following the law and even inherit the Old Testament promises which were given to those under the law.
- VI. Paul's law-free gospel was controversial, and he continually had to explain and defend it.
- VII. Two related theological issues were especially troublesome:
  - A. Why do Gentiles not have to keep the law if they become part of God's people?
  - B. If keeping the law is not necessary, why did God give it?
- VIII. The first of these issues is especially prominent in Galatians; the second, in Romans.
- IX. Paul wrote Galatians to churches he founded in Asia Minor, though there is debate over whether the epistle was to Northern (i.e., Celtic) or Southern (i.e., Greek) Galatia.
- X. In either case, the basic situation which led to the letter is clear.
  - A. When Paul came to Galatia, he preached his law-free gospel, and founded a number of congregations.
  - B. These were composed primarily (exclusively?) of Gentiles, and, at first, no one questioned Paul's teaching.
  - C. After his departure, however, the congregations somehow got the idea that they should adopt at least the basics of the Mosaic Law.
  - D. When Paul wrote, they were already observing some of the Jewish calendar (Gal. 4:10) and at least considering getting circumcised (e.g., 5:2).
- XI. Theologically, the Galatians had come to the following conclusions:
  - A. Paul dropped the legal requirements himself, and he did so primarily to ingratiate himself with the Gentiles (cf. Gal. 1:10).
    1. He got his gospel from the Jerusalem community.
    2. On his own authority he changed it to win converts.
  - B. Previously, however, the law had always been part of the gospel.
    1. It was part of the heritage of Israel.

2. Jesus had lived under the law (cf. Gal 4:4).
  3. The real leaders of the church, such as James and Cephas (i.e., Peter), live by it.
- C. Adopting the law is necessary to receive the ancient promises which God gave along with the law.
- D. The law helps us resist sin (cf. 5:16ff.).
- XII. These positions contained at least some truth, but they completely denied both Paul's vocation and theology, and he had to oppose them vigorously.
- XIII. In reply to the accusation that Paul debased the gospel, Galatians points out
- A. His gospel came through direct revelation, and he preached it before he ever saw the leaders of the Jerusalem church.
  - B. Subsequently, they recognized and confirmed it.
- XIV. In reply to the theology that the law is necessary, Paul argues that the law is part of this world, and Christ has delivered us from this world (e.g., Gal. 1:3-4, 6:15).
- A. Paul assumes there are two lordships.
    1. That of this present fallen existence.
    2. That of Christ.
  - B. The Old Testament was written under the present evil age but looked forward to the coming savior.
    1. The promises to Abraham looked forward to Christ and the salvation he would bring.
    2. The law was a temporary restraint until salvation would come.
  - C. By his death on the cross and the gift of the Spirit, Christ has made it possible to become free from this present age and its law.
  - D. We receive this freedom when we in trust
    1. Surrender to Christ's love by accepting his sacrificial death and the Spirit as a free gift
    2. And enter a new Israel in which there is "no Jew or Greek," "slave or free," "male and female" (3:28; cf. 6:15-16).
  - E. Christ then dwells in us, and we die to self.
  - F. Consequently, we gain the power to do what is right, which is basically loving our neighbor as ourselves (Gal. 5:14-15).
  - G. Hence, to adopt the law after Christian conversion is to reject the gospel.
    1. To adopt the law is to return to this fallen age.
    2. It is to reject God's loving gift.
    3. It is to state that what Christ did was not enough.
    4. It is to return to an ethnically divided spiritual community.
- XV. A brief reflection: The relevance of what Galatians is saying.
- A. We can do goodness out of sense of ethical obligation and a fear of punishment, or we can do goodness out of the power of having been loved by God in Christ.
  - B. If we do the first, we are living out of this world's resources, and our goodness will be self-centered and grudging.
  - C. If we do the second, we are living in response to Jesus. Consequently, our goodness will come from the heart, and we will become one with God in Christ.
  - D. Hence, to return to the bondage of ethics is to forsake the gospel.

- E. We may have to start with the old age (e.g., in training children), but we need to advance to the new.
- F. An ethnic religion cannot save the world.

## **Paul and the Law Part 2--The Problem of the Purpose and Continuing Value of the Law. Romans as a Response.**

- I. There has been debate over Paul's goal in writing Romans.
- II. My own position is that Paul wrote to gain unified support from Roman Christians for his planned missions to Jerusalem and Spain (15:24-32).
- III. Since the Christian community at Rome included both Jews and Gentiles and at least some of the Jews were suspicious of Paul's gospel (cf. Rom. 3:6-8), Paul had to present his gospel and do so in such a way that it would please both Jewish and Gentile Christians and make him look like a reconciler.
- IV. Paul's major problem was how to present the Mosaic Law.
  - A. This was what divided Jews and Gentiles and apparently had led to problems between the "weak" (conservative Jewish Christians) and the "strong" (everybody else) in the Roman church (Rom. 14:1-15:13).
  - B. This was the issue on which Paul had received criticism.
    1. Conservatives disliked his law-free gospel.
    2. Many felt that Paul's policy of accommodation (living like a Jew when among Jews and a Gentile among Gentiles) demonstrated that he had no principles.
    3. Some accused Paul of advocating moral license (Rom. 3:6-8).
- V. To achieve his pastoral goal, Paul had to defend an extremely paradoxical set of positions:
  - A. To please Jewish readers, Paul had to argue that the Mosaic Law is positive.
    1. The law's ethical demands are good and holy.
    2. Its promises to Israel will be fulfilled.
  - B. To please Gentile readers and defend his law-free gospel, Paul had to argue that the Mosaic Law is no longer necessary.
- VI. Since Paul presents his arguments pastorally and rhetorically rather than systematically, any theological synthesis is a little artificial and must to some extent reflect the viewpoint of the synthesizer.
- VII. A personal synthesis of Romans' teaching concerning the validity of the law.
  - A. Human beings have a natural knowledge of God and what is right.
  - B. Nevertheless, instead of rejoicing in God and being centered in him, human beings historically proudly chose to ignore him.
  - C. As a result, they lost at least much of their awareness of who God was and what goodness was.
  - D. This ignorance began when the first human being sinned and has gotten passed down through history.
  - E. Consequently, people began worshiping idols. Note that Pagan gods were often the personifications of such things as love, wine, and military strength. Idols were material images of these personifications.
  - F. Misplaced worship then led to distorted desires which in turn led to concrete acts of abuse. Note that if you live for sexual love, you will fall into lust, and end up in promiscuity; if you live for alcohol, you will drink more and more and end up DUI. When we worship something that is beneath us, we degrade ourselves



and that degradation leads to destructive behavior.

G. These acts in turn lead to death.

H. Historically, when God gave the (Mosaic) Law, it was a great benefit.

1. It made people aware that sin was the cause of their problem.
2. It revealed the righteous decrees of God and thus told people how to live.
3. It pointed forward to final salvation for all in Christ.
4. Hence, our inmost selves rejoice in the law.

I. However, before the coming of Christ, the law caused sin to abound.

1. The law teaches us that we are sinners.
2. Yet, it does not give us the power to change.
3. Hence, we are tempted by pride to try to save ourselves and boast of our success. But pride was the initial problem that led to the others.
4. Nevertheless, we fail to keep the law, and the resulting shame and self-loathing lead to more sin.
5. The result is that we are crushed and humiliated, but in retrospect this is all right since it prepares us for Christ.

J. Then Christ came and did several things which have continuing consequences:

1. His death definitively reveals God's unconditional love for sinners like ourselves.
2. His resurrection overcame death and inspires hope in us.
3. He fulfilled the demands of the law and shows us what goodness is (self-sacrificing love, including for the undeserving).
4. He gave us God's Spirit. Note that this Spirit is especially available in the community of the Church, and the Spirit gives us strength.

K. Through the preaching of Christ, we are invited to enter into the power of what God in Jesus has done.

L. When we enter into that power through trusting belief ("faith")

1. We are filled with the ability to overcome sin.
2. We are humble and grateful.

3. Hence, we die to ourselves, and Jesus lives in us.

M. The Gentiles at the present time are more receptive to the gospel, since they are not tempted to seek salvation by following the Mosaic Law.

N. Their spiritual achievements through faith will humble the Jews and make them jealous and ultimately cause them to accept the gospel.

O. Hence, in the end, the Jews will be saved, and thus the promises to Israel in the law will be fulfilled.

VIII. On the basis of the above Paul can claim

A. The law is holy and good.

1. Its ethical requirements are just.
2. Its promises have been or will be fulfilled.
3. It prepared for Christ's coming.

B. Nevertheless, the law is unnecessary for Gentiles.

1. The commandments did not actually lead to goodness but to sin.

2. Thanks to Christ and the Spirit, we know and can do what is right which is loving our neighbor as ourselves.
  - C. Paul does not preach moral license because sin always leads to death.
  - D. Although the dietary requirements of the Mosaic Law are unnecessary for Gentiles, it is all right for Jews to follow them.
  - E. It would be wrong for Gentiles to pressure Jews to act against their consciences, since to choose to do what one believes to be wrong is to choose to do wrong.
- IX. Historically, Romans had a major influence on Christian theology and even the intellectual history of the world as a whole.
- X. The reason is that the letter's understanding of such things as sin, law, shame, and salvation is profound.
- XI. A word about Romans 13:1-7.
- A. Taken at face value, this passage seems to advocate unquestioning obedience to civil authorities, since it proclaims that all authority is from God and to disobey a governmental authority is to disobey God himself.
  - B. Unfortunately, this text has been used to instill blind compliance to unethical government policies.
  - C. In fact, the passage was surely written *ad hoc* and should be seen primarily as a pastoral response to a particular situation rather than a universal demand for uncritical obedience to all governmental authority.
    1. Previously, at least some Christians in Rome had gotten involved in civil disturbances (probably fights with other Jews).
    2. These provocations had led to the wholesale expulsion of Jewish Christians from the capital and probably continuing suspicion from the imperial authorities.
    3. It was essential for Christians not to provoke the civil authorities again. Probably everyone in the congregation was fervently in agreement with Paul's remarks that people should obey the civil authorities. Indeed, when Paul wrote these words, he may have been aware that they would be popular.
    4. Note also that 13:1-7 explicitly assumes that rulers are punishing the wicked and not the righteous. When Paul wrote these words, the Roman government was unusually good.
    5. Hence, the passage should not be used to justify obedience to evil leaders, especially since
      - a. Earlier in the letter Paul blasted Pagan religion.
      - b. The Roman government officially supported Pagan religion.
      - c. Paul himself repeatedly suffered at the hands of Roman officials.

## Homosexuality and the Epistle to the Romans

- I. In recent years there has been debate among Christians over whether homosexual acts are ethically acceptable and, if so, under what circumstances.
- II. Part of that debate has centered on whether homosexuality is compatible with scripture. Scripture's perspective on homosexuality is especially important because on this issue tradition and reason seem to give differing perspectives.
  - A. Church tradition until very recently always held that homosexual conduct was sinful.
  - B. Reason suggests that for many people homosexual relationships can be life-giving.
    1. There is a growing consensus among psychologists, anthropologists, and other experts that homosexuality is not abnormal or harmful. A small percentage of people are gay or lesbian in all societies, and these people are no more destructive than the rest of the population.
    2. The experience of gay men and women is that their sexual relationships bring fulfillment and can even lead to a deeper relationship with God.
- III. In any Christian discussion of what the Bible teaches concerning homosexuality, the writings of Paul and his followers must play the central role.
  - A. The passages in the Hebrew Scriptures (the Christian Old Testament) concerning homosexuality are few and problematic.
    1. Only four texts probably refer to homosexuality: Leviticus 18:22, 20:13, Genesis 19:1-29, Judges 19. We may note in passing that there are no texts in the Old Testament referring to lesbianism.
    2. All these passages pose grave problems for the Christian interpreter.
      - a. Leviticus does not in general distinguish between what we would call taboo and ethics (note 18:19 versus 18:20-21). Accordingly, it is unclear whether the prohibition of homosexual acts is relevant to Christians, since, largely because of Paul, we do not hold that Old Testament taboo (ritual) law is valid today.
      - b. In the closely related stories of the men of Sodom and the outrage at Gibeah
        - 1). It is not clear whether the sin the evil men intended included homosexual assault or was only the rejection of the sacred duty of hospitality. The key verb "know" can be taken sexually but does not have to be. Commentators are divided. Probably the assumption underlying the texts is that homosexual assault is the ultimate violation of hospitality.
        - 2). Even if homosexual assault is what is intended, all that the stories condemn is homosexual rape. To be sure, the stories seem to regard homosexual rape as even more serious than heterosexual, but a patriarchal society would naturally consider the violation of a man to be more serious than the violation of a woman. Moreover, as we noted above, all homosexual activity was contrary to sacred law.
        - 3). These stories are in other respects ethically dubious. For

example, no responsible person today could countenance how Lot or the Levite treat women, but the stories seem to.

B. Apart from the pauline writings, there are no clear references to homosexuality in the New Testament.

IV. There are three pauline passages which deal with homosexuality: Romans 1, especially, verses 26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9, and 1 Timothy 1:10. Although critical scholars today do not think that 1 Timothy is from Paul, it is at least from his “school.”

V. In 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy there are condemnations of some sort of sexual activity between males. Nevertheless, there are difficulties.

A. It is not clear whether or not these passages condemn monogamous single-sex relations between consenting adult males.

1. The references to homosexual activity are limited to single words in lists of vices.

2. The two terms may refer to homosexual prostitutes, particularly to kidnapped boys sold into slavery (note 1 Tim. 1:10).

3. On the other hand, one of the terms may be derived from Leviticus and refer to people engaging in any homosexual intercourse.

B. These passages do not give a rationale for their condemnations.

VI. Accordingly, the issue of what the Bible has to say about homosexuality depends heavily on Romans 1, especially, since it is the only passage in the Bible that refers to lesbianism.

VII. In this passage Paul seems to be appealing to Jews in the Roman church and expressing sentiments that they would appreciate. Note that in chapter 2 Paul will then attack non-Christian Jews by claiming that they also are guilty before God.

VIII. The flow of the argument in Romans 1 is approximately as follows.

A. Human beings had a natural knowledge of God but proudly chose to ignore him.

B. Consequently, they lost their understanding of God and began to worship idols.

C. God then gave them over to degrading sexual practices contrary to nature and over to various other vices.

D. Note that this argument basically appears elsewhere in Jewish writings (see Wisdom of Solomon 12-14) and reflects ancient Judaism's anti-homosexual position and condemnation of Gentile sexual practices.

IX. Liberal commentators who are anxious to argue that the Bible does not condemn homosexuality have claimed the following:

A. Paul is not here presenting his own viewpoint, but only that of his Jewish audience. Jewish culture in the first century condemned homosexual activity as a Gentile perversion.

B. Paul had no knowledge of monogamous same-sex relationships between consenting adults. Instead, he was thinking of homosexual pederasty, which was widely practiced by upper-class adult males who exploited slave boys.

C. Paul is not discussing homosexuals but heterosexuals who are choosing to commit homosexual acts. Only in modern times did we discover that people have different sexual orientations.

D. Since Paul views homosexuality as a punishment for idolatry, if we disagree

with him over whether idolatry is the cause of homosexuality, then we need not accept his condemnation of homosexuality either.

E. Paul assumes a patriarchal understanding of sexual roles, and, if we reject that understanding, we can reject the conclusions about homosexuality that Paul draws from it.

1. The patriarchal culture which Paul knew assumed
  - a. Men were inherently superior to women.
  - b. Part of that superiority was that male bodies were hard and penetrated soft female bodies.
  - c. Males who were sexually penetrated were effeminate and, therefore, weak and lacking in honor.
2. If we reject this patriarchal bias, we can reject what Paul has to say about homosexuality.

F. Paul does not claim that homosexuality is sinful, only that it is disgusting (i.e., disgusting to Jews) [Countryman].

G. The Bible condemns homosexuality primarily because of the Israelite desire for more offspring, whereas today our problem is overpopulation.

X. In my opinion, there is a little something to be said for each of these positions, but on the whole they are unconvincing.

A. Of course, Paul is presenting a traditional Jewish viewpoint which his Jewish audience would like. But it appears to be his own viewpoint too. Moreover, nothing in the letter suggests that the Gentile Christians in the Roman church would have any problem with Paul's condemnation of Gentile homosexuality. Note: Pagan writers were divided over whether or not homosexuality was ethical. Hence, it is possible that even before their conversion to Christianity Paul's Gentile readers may not have approved of homosexuality. My own suspicion is that the lower classes (which were the vast majority of people) were not as tolerant of homosexuality as the elite.

B. Paul probably is thinking especially of homosexual pederasty, because it was widely practiced and discussed and offensive. Nevertheless, the passage never refers to minors. Instead, it refers both to lesbianism and homosexuality, both to desire and activity, and, hence, Paul seems to condemn homosexuality as a whole. Paul argues from "nature" (though, to be sure, he does not define this vague term).

C. Paul does indeed describe heterosexuals falling into homosexual desire and activity, but he seems to assume that such people have now become what today we mean by homosexuals (i.e., individuals whose primary erotic desire is for someone of the same sex).

D. It is an exaggeration to say that the ancient world had no idea of sexual orientation, since even the ancient world knew that some people preferred having sex with their own gender.

E. Jewish culture, including Paul, would not have claimed that homosexuality was due to idolatry unless it had already decided that homosexuality was evil.

F. It is true that Paul's condemnation of homosexuality in part reflects the patriarchal values of ancient society, but it is striking that Paul begins by condemning lesbianism as "unnatural." Therefore, his primary objection to

same-sex desire and activity cannot be due to a patriarchal bias about the proper behavior of males.

G. Of course, Paul views homosexuality as disgusting (and so as itself a punishment), but something can be both disgusting and sinful, and that is apparently how Paul views homosexuality. Note that he discusses homosexuality as one of the many vices which result from abandoning God.

H. It may well be that the Hebrew Bible condemns homosexuality out of a desire for more offspring, but Paul did not think that people needed to have children. He thought the world as we know it was about to end (cf. his discussion of marriage versus celibacy in 1 Cor. 7). Of course, in the new creation everyone would live forever, and there would be no need for new generations to replace the old.

XI. Several things about Paul's larger theology of sin and grace are also relevant to the question of homosexuality and how to respond to it today. According to Paul,

A. Sin can be involuntary.

1. Sin for Paul is cosmic as well as personal (i.e., it includes the demonic and the corruption of nature).

2. It (in some sense) can be inherited. We inherit the results of Adam's sin.

3. Even when we will the good, we cannot necessarily do it.

B. Merely condemning sin will cause it to abound.

C. The beginning to overcoming sin is the acceptance of God's free forgiveness in Christ.

D. Sometimes God does not eliminate the brokenness due to evil but instead invites us to allow his strength to be made perfect in weakness. Notice how Paul dealt with his own "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7-12).

E. Theoretically, "all things are lawful" (1 Cor. 6:12, 10:23) for Christians; indeed, in Romans Paul even insists that all things are clean (Rom. 14:14). The only question is what is helpful, and this question must be answered in the light of particular people in particular situations.

F. Most especially, anything which expresses genuine love is in accordance with God's will (Rom. 13:8-10).

G. Our need to condemn someone else's behavior may be an indication that in some sense we are doing the same thing ourselves (cf. Rom. 2:1).

XII. Discussion: What should we do today with Paul's teaching on homosexuality?

A. Should we accept it as fully valid?

B. Should we reject it as basically erroneous?

C. Should we accept certain elements of it as we attempt to produce a more helpful perspective in the light of our contemporary scientific knowledge and social experience (much of which Paul could not have known)? If so, what would that perspective be?

D. It seems to me that there are five possible views of homosexuality.

1. It is sinful (as, for example, pederasty is). A problem with this viewpoint is that sex between consenting adults of the same gender does not obviously harm one of them, whereas pederasty obviously severely harms the minor.

2. It is a disability that can be accommodated (as, for example, deafness is). Hence, it should not be chosen but can be accepted.
3. It is a meaningless variation (as, for example, red hair is).
4. It is a "lesser good" (i.e., it is good to have sexual love for your own gender but better to have sexual love for the opposite gender).
5. It is a meaningful variation, i.e., homosexuality makes a special contribution to the wholeness of the human community. Of course, if this is our position, we should seek to discern what this contribution is. One possibility is that homosexuality and lesbianism undermine patriarchy.
6. Homosexuality is a disability that can become a gift if it is offered up (as Helen Keller's blindness and deafness were).

Discussion: Which view do you hold, and how would you deal with homosexuality and Paul's theology, especially when talking to people whose viewpoint differs from yours?

## **The Transition to the Post-Pauline Era in Paul's Churches; Philippians, Colossians, and Ephesians**

- I. Around half a century (c. 50 C.E.- c. 100 C.E.) elapsed between the earliest letter (1 Thes.) attributed to Paul in the New Testament until the latest ones (1 & 2 Timothy, Titus).
- II. Accordingly, these letters document the changing situation in Paul's churches from the middle of the first century until the end.
- III. So far we have dealt with letters which Paul wrote in his maturity.
- IV. Now we will deal with three epistles which I believe come from the years immediately before and after his death.
- V. Philippians
  - A. Scholars debate the date and unity of Philippians.
  - B. My own view is that the letter was always a unity and that this is Paul's last surviving epistle written just before his death. In the letter Paul explicitly entertains the possibility he may be executed (e.g., 1:20). Since the document labors to instill joy (e.g., 4:4), Paul would only tell us that he might die if in fact it was likely. Note that the very fact that Paul may be executed suggests that his legal appeals have run out and that he is, therefore, at the imperial court in Rome.
- VI. Pseudonymity, especially in letters attributed to Paul.
  - A. Literally, "pseudonymity" means "false name" in Greek.
  - B. The term refers to the practice, which was frequent in the ancient world, of publishing a document under the assumed name of a dead hero.
  - C. Despite its frequency in the ancient world, the practice is not well understood today.
  - D. No matter how one understands the motives for pseudonymity, implicit in pseudonymity is the claim that the actual author is writing what the dead hero would have written in response to the present situation. Cf. the claim implicit in a letter from "Abraham Lincoln" about civil rights today.
  - E. Whether or not pseudonymity should be dismissed as forgery depends on two conditions:
    1. Whether the intended audience knows what the actual authorial situation is
    2. Whether the claim that one is merely writing what the ancient figure would have written is justified.
      - a. If one is merely writing what someone else would have written, it is more honest not to take credit for it oneself.
      - b. The ancient world did not use the devices (bibliographies, footnotes, prefaces) which allow modern authors to give full credit to their sources.
  - F. In the case of those who wrote in Paul's name, these conditions were probably met.
    1. These authors were probably Paul's students. They had known Paul personally and absorbed his ideas and character. Note that Paul



instructed by example as well as speech.

2. The pseudonymous pauline letters probably come from the period after Paul's death, and people in Paul's churches would have assumed that Paul did not literally write them.

3. It is also to be noted that pseudonymity is more natural in a society that unlike ours did not strive for individuality, but for imitation.

G. Even if a document is a forgery, the actual author may (at least in part) be acting ethically.

1. Even a forged document may contain valuable material.

2. If the actual author assumed a fictional identity to gain a larger audience with the hope that this larger audience would benefit, the author had good intentions.

H. Theoretically, we should be able to separate the genuine pauline epistles from the pseudonymous ones on the basis of such things as style, thought, and social situation.

I. With more or less probability the following letters are pseudonymous:

1. 2 Thessalonians and Colossians may possibly be pseudonymous.

2. Ephesians probably is pseudonymous.

3. 2 Timothy is probably pseudonymous and 1 Timothy and Titus almost certainly are.

VII. Whether or not Colossians is pseudonymous, it is a late epistle. If Paul did write it, he must have done so some years after such letters as Romans, because the style of Colossians is so different. Note, especially, the long sentences.

VIII. Ephesians is even later than Colossians.

A. Ephesians and Colossians use much of the same material, and it appears Ephesians borrowed from Colossians rather than the reverse, since Ephesians provides theological justification for things in Colossians. Compare, for example, Colossians 4:7-8 with Ephesians 6:21-22 and Colossians 4:18-19 with Ephesians 5:21-33.

B. Stylistically, Ephesians is even farther from Romans than Colossians.

C. Ephesians seems to be an attempt to reinterpret Paul's life and thought to a later time.

1. The tone of the letter is very general and detached.

2. The intended audience may also have been general.

a. The words "in Ephesus" in Ephesians 1:1 do not appear in the best manuscripts.

b. The early Christian Gnostic, Marcion, referred to this letter as "to the Laodiceans."

c. Of course, the present title is not original--letters do not have titles!

IX. Hence, Philippians, Colossians, and Ephesians document the evolution of the thought of Paul and his followers immediately before his death and in the subsequent years.

X. Paul expected that the return of Christ would occur soon and was not concerned about continuing life in this world. Note, e.g., 1 Corinthians 7:29-30. Consequently, he did not deal with a number of issues satisfactorily.

- A. How are Christians supposed to relate to the continuing institutions of this world?
  - B. How should the leadership of the Church be structured? Note that Paul's failure to deal with this issue helped produce the chaos in the Corinthian church.
  - C. Is Christ the ruler of this present age?
  - D. What happens to the dead before Christ's return?
  - E. What is the role of the Church in ongoing human history?
- XI. The longer the second coming delayed, the more pressing these issues became.
- XII. Significantly, the letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Ephesians deal with these issues.
- A. Colossians and Ephesians in the "household codes" (Col. 3:18-4:1; Eph. 5:21-6:9) discuss how Christians should live with this world's institutions. The basic perspective is that Christians should accept the conventional social structures, including the hierarchies of obedience and duty (e.g., Slaves must respect their masters.) Nevertheless, Christian love is to leaven every relationship. Note: The acceptance of conventional social structures was necessary to avoid persecution.
  - B. Philippians and Ephesians imply the importance of church leaders.
    - 1. In its opening verse, Philippians explicitly mentions "supervisors and servants" (literally: bishops and deacons), though we do not know what these titles referred to in this early period.
    - 2. Ephesians stresses that the foundation of the church is a traditional, hierarchic leadership (note 2:20).
  - C. All three letters emphasize that Christ is the ruler even of this present age. All things were made through him, and with his resurrection he is Lord of all (Phil. 2:5-11, Col. 1:20ff., Eph. 1:20-22).  
Topic for reflection: In what sense is Christ the ruler of the present age?
  - D. The Church now plays a crucial role in the history of this age. The Church delivers people from sin and brings them into unity (Eph. 2:14-22).
  - E. Finally, Philippians emphasizes that immediately after death we begin eternal life with Christ (Phil. 1:21-23). Paul probably always believed this, but it is interesting that he emphasizes this belief here more than elsewhere.
- XIII. These perspectives are the ones which subsequently most Christians have had as we lived in this continuing world.

## **The Debate Over Paul's Legacy; James, 2 Peter, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus**

- I. Within a few years of his death, Paul was revered as a founder of the Church.
- II. Consequently, Christian leaders appealed to his life and letters to justify their own conduct and theology.
- III. However, because his thought was complex and tailored to specific situations, Paul's life and letters could be interpreted in diverse ways.
  - A. Paul could be taken as pro- or anti-ethical. Paul's letters are full of conventional ethical advice, but he also argued that the mosaic law was outmoded and that salvation comes through God's gift not human achievement. Even during his lifetime some thought he was teaching, "Let us do evil that good may come" (Rom. 3:8).
  - B. Paul could be taken as pro- or anti-esoteric. As 1 Corinthians shows, he taught esoteric wisdom (1 Cor. 2:6) but yet cautioned against it.
  - C. He could be taken as pro- or anti-material and sexual. Note, for example, his waffling over whether celibacy is an ethical ideal (1 Cor. 7:1-2, 38).
  - D. He could be taken as pro- or anti-Old Testament. He constantly appeals to the Old Testament but also treats much of it as outmoded and potentially dangerous. The Mosaic Law was a temporary measure which must not be adopted now (e.g., Gal. 3:17-20).
  - E. He could be taken to affirm that salvation was primarily present already or primarily still to come. We already have the Spirit but await the final resurrection.
  - F. Finally, he could be taken to be pro- or anti-apostolic, since his own relationship to Peter and James and the Jerusalem church had been ambiguous, and since he never resolved the issue of the relative authority of the Spirit versus the tradition.
- IV. Accordingly, radical Christian thinkers appealed to Paul to justify their opposition to what came to be called "orthodox" Christianity.
  - A. In the middle of the second century the great Gnostic thinkers, perhaps especially, Marcion and Valentinus, appealed to Paul to justify their
    - 1. Separation of Christianity from the Old Testament
    - 2. Their condemnation of sexuality and their claim that matter is evil
    - 3. Their esoteric speculation about heavenly beings.
  - B. But even previously it appears that Christians had appealed to Paul to justify these and other radical viewpoints.
- V. As a result, even in the New Testament itself there are attempts to insure that Paul's teaching will not lead to such radicalism.
- VI. The Epistle of James and its correction of Paul's interpreters.
  - A. There is debate concerning the authorship and date of James.
    - 1. Some scholars argue that James, the brother of Jesus, wrote it, probably through a secretary who was fluent in Greek.
    - 2. Other scholars argue that the epistle is pseudonymous and comes from the decades immediately after Paul's death.
  - B. What seems clear is that the document is *Jewish* Christian.
    - 1. "James," the brother of Jesus, was the head of the conservative Jewish

wing of the early church (cf., e.g., Gal. 2:12), and even if the document is pseudonymous, it appeals to his authority.

2. The epistle echoes the Old Testament wisdom and prophetic traditions. Note the short sections of pious exhortation and the searing condemnations of the rich and the concern for the poor (James 2, 5:1-6).

3. The document does not mention the crucifixion, resurrection, or the Spirit, but repeatedly echoes the teaching of Jesus (note, e.g., James 5:12, cf. Mat. 5:34-37).

C. In 2:14-26 James clearly attacks an interpretation of Paul which holds that mere belief is enough.

D. James insists that works are the necessary sign of faith and complete it. Note that Paul would have agreed, since for him faith is that trust which leads to surrendering one's total life to God.

VII. 2 Peter and its correction of Paul's interpreters.

A. 2 Peter comes from the end of the first century or even the beginning of the second and is certainly not by Peter. Note that 2 Peter depends on Jude, struggles to explain the long delay in Christ's return (2 Pet. 3:3-10), and regards Paul's collected letters as *scripture* (3:15-16)!

B. 2 Peter is concerned about people who

1. Lack moral restraint, apparently because of a theology which emphasizes spiritual freedom (ch. 2).

2. Deny that Christ will return (ch. 3).

C. The epistle deals with the proper interpretation of Paul.

1. It insists that scripture is not a matter of individual interpretation (1:20).

2. It complains that people have twisted the meaning of obscure passages in Paul and that in fact Paul supports the author's viewpoint (3:15-16).

VIII. The "Pastoral Epistles" consist of three closely related letters from "Paul" to Timothy and Titus.

IX. These letters are probably not by Paul.

A. They lack the basic characteristics of the undisputed epistles.

1. The theology has a completely different foundation. Note the absence of any focus on the cross, resurrection, and Spirit.

2. The literary style is not at all the same.

B. 1 Timothy and Titus reflect a much different social situation. Note the developed organization of the Church with bishops, priests, deacons, and an order of widows.

C. They do not fit into what we know of the travels of Paul and his companions.

X. Yet, they do reflect Pauline thought and biography to such a degree that they seem to have come from Paul's successors.

XI. The Pastorals enlist "Paul" to combat a misinterpretation of him.

A. The Pastorals in the name of Paul repeatedly attack false teachers (e.g., 1 Tim. 1:3-7).

B. These teachers hold doctrines that could be seen in Paul, including ethical license (1 Tim. 1:19), esoteric speculation (especially, 1 Tim. 1:3-4), asceticism (e.g., 1 Tim. 4:2), the idea that salvation has fully come already (2 Tim. 1:18).

- C. In response, the "Paul" of the Pastorals does the following:
1. He preaches against such ideas.
  2. He affirms the structures of the mainline church, including authoritative doctrine and church hierarchies (note the subordination of slaves and women).
  3. He uses his own life as an example.
- D. To me the Pastorals are attractive because of
1. Their pragmatism
  2. Their affirmation of this world and church tradition
  3. Their concern to inculturate the Christian message. Note that many of the virtues which the Pastorals emphasize (e.g., self-control, dignity) seem to reflect Greco-Roman values.
  4. Their faithfulness to much of what is in Paul.
- E. Nevertheless, something of the richness and radicalism of Paul--to say nothing of Jesus--has been lost. Note that the historical Paul could not have met the qualifications for bishop (1 Tim. 3:1-7).
- F. They also are a reminder that inculturation comes at a price. All cultures are sinful, and when we make Christianity "relevant" to a society, we inevitably adopt not just virtues but failings. Note that the patriarchalism of the Pastorals is an accommodation to conventional Greco-Roman values.

## The Struggle Over What Is Orthodox: Jude and 1, 2, & 3 John

- I. Christianity began as a religious movement around Jesus rather than as an organization with a specific set of dogmatic beliefs.
- II. As we have seen, Christianity quickly went from being a Jewish denomination to an international religion.
- III. Consequently, already in Paul's lifetime there was a struggle over how Jewish the Christian community should remain and also over whether people who were loyal Jews should continue to be part of the Church as the latter became increasingly Gentile.
- IV. By the second century we have the emergence of orthodoxy and "heresy."
  - A. The orthodox (mainstream) version of Christianity. (The word orthodox in Greek means "right thinking.")
    1. Retained from Judaism
      - a. Monotheism
      - b. Conservative sexual ethics
      - c. The historical fact that Jesus was a human being.
    2. Added to Judaism the claims that
      - a. Jesus was also divine
      - b. The ritual requirements of the Mosaic Law were no longer binding.
  - B. By contrast there arose various "heresies" which did not accept this synthesis. (The word heresy in Greek means a sect or an opinion).
    1. Some Jewish Christians called the Ebionites ("the poor") rejected the divinity of Jesus and insisted on following the ritual requirements of the Mosaic Law.
    2. Many Gentiles Christians whom we lump under the vague category of "Gnostics" (the "knowledgeable")
      - a. Denied that Christ had a material body and was human
      - b. Claimed that the God of the Old Testament who created the world was not the God of Christ
      - c. Claimed that, therefore, matter and sex were evil. Note that some Gnostics demanded celibacy for everyone, but at least anti-Gnostics claimed that the reality was rampant promiscuity.
- V. Of course, as we have seen, even in the first century both these tendencies were emerging. For example,
  - A. Many of the critics of Paul attacked him for saying that the Mosaic Law was not necessary for Gentile Christians.
  - B. People at Corinth claimed that since "all things were lawful" a man could have sex with his father's wife.
- VI. The books of Jude and 1,2, and 3 John attack "heresies" but unfortunately, it is unclear what the heresies in question taught.
  - A. These books attack other (former?) members of the church in extreme language.
  - B. But do not give us enough reliable information to determine what the other side taught.
  - C. And we must allow for the possibility that some of the charges which these

- documents make may only be propaganda.
- VII. Partly because it is so brief, it is difficult to say much about who wrote Jude or when.
- A. The letter claims to be by "Jude," "the brother of James," and we should assume that this means the Jude who was a relative of Jesus (e.g., Mark 6:3).
  - B. Nevertheless, the letter may be pseudonymous.
  - C. The letter could have been written almost any time in the second half of the first century.
- VIII. Jude is a good, brief illustration of a response to a heresy.
- A. Unfortunately, we cannot reconstruct the heresy in detail from the letter, but it included sexual freedom and angelic speculation (cf. 6-9).
  - B. In response, the letter stresses traditional doctrine (Jude 3) and the need for practical ethics, especially in sex.
  - C. Of course, the author also insists that his opponents will be punished at the final judgment (13).
  - D. An interesting feature of Jude is that it uses material from two books that did not make the Old Testament canon. Significantly, these references do not appear in 2 Peter which in other respects borrows freely from Jude.
- IX. The Epistles of John allow us to reconstruct the history of a split in a Christian community around 100 C.E. between "orthodox" Christians and some other group.
- A. The epistles make it clear that originally both sides had belonged to the same Christian community which included several congregations (especially, 1 John 2:19). Note: The Gospel of John originated in this community.
  - B. A split occurred in some major center (Ephesus?).
  - C. Then a struggle ensued for control over outlying congregations. 2 & 3 John attempt to gain support for the author's representatives and deny a hearing to opponents.
  - D. It is clear that the author of the letters (the "Elder") and his supporters were insisting that Jesus was the Messiah ("Christ") and had come in the flesh and that the other side denied some or all of this claim.
  - E. However, it is unclear what the other side was claiming.
    - 1. Some scholars (e.g., Brown) argue that the other side had the Gnostic position that Christ did not have a human body. This theology would explain the denial that Jesus Christ "came in the flesh" (1 John 4:1-3, 2 John 7).
    - 2. Other scholars (e.g., Streett) argue that the other side were Jewish missionaries who were trying to convince Jewish Christians to abandon "orthodox" Christianity and return to mainstream Judaism, since Jesus was not the Christ (Messiah). This theology would explain the repeated insistence in the letters that "Jesus is the Christ" (1 John 2:22, 5:8).
  - F. In any case, the other side clearly did not believe the orthodox doctrine that Jesus was the human life of God, or to use classical language was both human and divine.
- X. In response to the heresy, 1 John offers a profound theology. Basically, it teaches that love is the foundation of Christianity, and love is only real if it manifests itself in concrete acts of self-sacrifice. Hence, love demands belief in the incarnation and

commitment to practical ethics.

A. The final basis of 1 John's theology is "God is love" (4:8, 16).

B. God manifests his love by the concrete act of sending his Son (4:9), who suffered and died for us in the flesh (cf. 5:6).

C. This love cleanses us from all sin and enables us to love. "We love because he first loved us" (4:19).

D. Accordingly, we show that we have known God and abide in him by doing two things:

1. Believing that God sent his Son Jesus in the flesh.

2. Doing concrete acts of charity (note, e.g., 3:16-18).

E. An important implication is that the doctrine of the incarnation and the life of practical ethics reinforce each other.



## **(time permitting) An Additional Reflection on the Johannine Epistles:**

### **Towards an Understanding of Christian Love**

- I. As innumerable quotes from the New Testament make clear, “love” is the center of the Christian proclamation. We may especially note:
  - A. Jesus insisted that the two great commandments were to love God with all one’s being and to love one’s neighbor as oneself (e.g., Mark 12:28-31).
  - B. Paul insisted that the center of Christian life was “faith, hope, and love” and, “the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13:13).
- II. The Johannine Epistles bring the centrality of love to its logical conclusion by insisting that “God is love” (4:8, 16), thereby making love the foundation of all reality both in the old and new creations.
- III. Unfortunately, fundamental principles tend to be difficult to grasp, perhaps because there is nothing more basic that one can use to define them.
- IV. Hence, for Christians love must in some sense always remain both a mystery and a gift, especially since love is the supreme expression of God who is the ultimate mystery and gift in our lives.
- V. Nevertheless, we should make some attempt to understand Christian “love.”
- VI. We may begin by comparing two models of Christian love and the strengths and weaknesses of each.
  - A. The model of Christian love as one type of love—namely, self-sacrificing love.
    1. According to this model there are several kinds of love.
      - a. Eros: Romantic love that gratifies the need for a sexual relationship. By extension eros can be any passionate and possessive love.
      - b. Philia: The affection between friends that gratifies our general need for fellowship.
      - c. Agape: Self-sacrificing love that gratifies the needs of someone else without giving us any selfish benefit.
    2. Christian love is agape and was especially shown by Jesus’s death on the cross.
  - B. In evaluating this school of thought we may say
    1. It does respect that
      - a. Greek does have different words for love, and usually the New Testament uses “agape” for Christian love. Note that sometimes in the New Testament “philia” and “agape” (or their cognate verbs) seem to be synonyms.
      - b. The New Testament does make clear that self-sacrifice is central.
    2. Nevertheless, there are besetting problems with this model of love.
      - a. Christian love is not merely self-sacrificing but longs for fellowship. Note that an “agape” was a Christian fellowship meal.
      - b. Love that is purely self-sacrificing will inevitably begin to become either
        - 1). Patronizing or
        - 2). Masochistic.

B. The model that Christian love is the ideal blending of every type of legitimate love (Otto Bird, Donald Gelpi).

1. According to this model, there are several types of love
  - a. Gift love. I love you because you are in need.
  - b. Appreciative love: I love you because you are beautiful.
  - c. Need love: I love you because I need you.
2. The deepest form of love must combine all these dimensions.
3. In evaluating this school of thought we may say
  - a. All of these dimensions are necessary for the deepest kind of love.
  - b. Nevertheless, there are problems:
    - 1). The other school of thought is surely correct in emphasizing the primacy of self-sacrifice in the Christian proclamation.
    - 2). In many cases this combination of love is virtually impossible if we concentrate on the way things are. Thus, it is simply untrue that everyone is “beautiful.”

VII. I think that we can combine the strengths of the two schools of thought by remembering that from a Christian perspective “the really real” is the eschatological and our freedom to choose. Hence,

A. Christian love must begin with self-sacrifice.

1. Our love is itself a response to the self-sacrifice of Jesus who died for us while we were sinners.
2. This self-sacrifice allows us to become lovers.
3. In our own lives we must bestow undeserved love on others so that they too may have the opportunity to grow. Note that this self-sacrifice includes
  - a. Bearing the spiritual and psychological pain of others (e.g., as we listen to their problems).
  - b. Bearing the social pain of others (as we accept criticism for associating with them).
  - c. Bearing the financial burden of others.

B. Nevertheless, Christian love always looks forward in hope to union with the beloved, a union that will be an unspeakable blessing to us. Note, especially, that God looks forward to us becoming his “friends” when we will be utterly “beautiful” (John 15:13-15).

C. As love looks forward, however, it respects the freedom of the other to accept or reject love and the growth it necessitates.

D. As we look forward, we can see sinners as “beautiful,” but yet be realistic.

1. Their beauty consists in the fact
  - a. Through God’s power (including God loving them through us) they can choose to become better.
  - b. Because they are not yet living up to their potential, they are suffering or are numb now.
2. Nevertheless, we must respect their freedom to choose not to answer God’s call, and we must realize that in and of themselves they may not be

beautiful, and they may choose not to become so.  
Assignment: Read 1 Peter and Revelation.

## **Roman Persecution; 1 Peter and Revelation**

- I. Prior to 64 C.E. Roman persecution was not a significant problem for the Church.
- II. From 64 C.E. until 67 the emperor Nero persecuted Christians in the city of Rome on the charge of arson. He did so in order to find a scapegoat for the great fire of 64.
- III. For the remainder of the first century, the Church lived under the constant threat of persecution.
  - A. The public was aware the Church existed and regarded it as undesirable.
  - B. The legal status of Christianity was at best dubious.
  - C. Consequently, persecution was a constant possibility.
- IV. The Church was concerned about public opinion and struggled with how far Christians could go to placate it.
- V. There were at least three things about Christianity that could cause offense:
  - A. Christians (like Jews) refused to worship other people's gods, including the Roman emperor. This refusal was offensive because
    1. It seemed disloyal to the government.
    2. It was disrespectful to the beliefs of others.
    3. It seemed to threaten the public welfare, because if the gods did not receive their due, they might punish the whole society.
  - B. Christians had an egalitarian bias going back to Jesus. This was threatening to a society based on slavery and the subordination of women.
  - C. Christianity was a recent innovation, and it was widely assumed that innovations in religion were depraved.
- VI. As Revelation illustrates, the Church refused to worship the gods or the emperor despite the pressure.
  - A. Revelation was sent to churches in Asia Minor (modern Turkey) probably toward the close of the Emperor Domitian's reign (81-96).
  - B. Perhaps due to Domitian's paranoia, local officials seem to have become aggressive in promoting the worship of the emperor and his deceased relatives.
  - C. When he wrote Revelation, "John" was already in exile on the island of Patmos (Rev. 1:9) and feared that a catastrophic persecution was imminent. Apparently, this John was an itinerant prophet and not "John," the fisherman and apostle.
  - D. In presenting his message John makes use of a traditional symbolic language, much of which goes back at least as far as the Old Testament book of Daniel.
  - E. The major symbols of Revelation
    1. The Dragon is Satan.
    2. The Beast from the Sea is the line of Roman emperors, with the heads representing the individual rulers.
    3. The Beast from the Land is the local authorities who support emperor worship. From John's perspective, church leaders who advocate compromise probably form part of this "Beast."
    4. The Whore is the city of Rome.
    5. The Lamb is Christ.
    6. The Lamb's Bride is the Church.
  - F. The basic message is that Jesus is coming soon and those who worship the

Beast will be destroyed, whereas those who are faithful unto death will be rewarded.

G. Revelation presents a very profound and relevant theology of political idolatry. I especially like the perspectives that

1. Political power produces the aura of divinity. It actually looks like the Beast is divine. Note the many parallels between the descriptions of the Beast and God or the Lamb or between the Whore and the Bride.
2. However, this aura of divinity rests on oppression. In the case of Rome this oppression includes mass enslavement and brutal persecution (especially, ch. 13; note 18:13).
3. Political idolatry depends on a social contract in which authority is delegated downward in exchange for worship which is passed upward. A vital part of the process is seemingly good spiritual leaders who in return for authority work to deceive people about the real nature of a regime. Satan delegates his authority to the Beast from the Sea (13:2), who in turn gives authority to the Beast from the Land (13:12). The Beast from the Land looks like a lamb even though he speaks like a dragon (13:11) and gives "spirit" to the image of the other Beast and gets the world to worship it (13:13-17).
4. Political idolatry will in the end be exposed and destroyed because political rulers are transitory, whereas God and his justice are eternal.

VII. In response to Pagan fears of egalitarianism and Christian immorality, the Church told its members to respect cultural hierarchies and lead exemplary moral lives. 1 Peter illustrates this response.

- A. 1 Peter is probably pseudonymous. Note that the Greek is elegant, quite beyond what a Galilean fisherman could have produced.
- B. The situation that the epistle presupposes is typical of the church after 64 C.E. The larger society is suspicious and hostile, and persecution seems imminent (e.g., 1 Pet. 3:15-16, 4:12-19).
- C. In response, 1 Peter's basic message is the same as Revelation's: Christians must endure patiently now in order to be saved at Christ's coming which will be soon (4:7).
- D. However, unlike Revelation, 1 Peter strongly insists that Christians must be model citizens both in personal ethics and in humble submission to all civil (e.g., the emperor) and household (masters, husbands) authorities (2:13-3:16). This conduct will shame those who revile the church (3:16).

VIII. Personal reflection

- A. From Revelation we learn to recognize and resist political idolatry.
- B. From 1 Peter and such other works as the Pastoral Epistles we learn two things.
  1. It is permissible for the Church to be obedient to oppressive cultural norms when meaningful resistance is futile.
  2. New Testament material about being submissive to masters and husbands was a temporary response to oppressive systems and is not binding now if we live in a freer society (cf. e.g., 1 Tim. 6:1).

## Hebrews

- I. The book which we call "Hebrews" does not give us enough information to be sure where, when, to whom, or by whom it was written. Perhaps the best guess is that a Christian leader wrote the letter to a house church in Rome shortly before 70 C.E.
- II. Nevertheless, the basic situation to which the document responds is clear. Some people in the community are wavering.
- III. The book's goal is to keep people from apostatizing.
- IV. To achieve this goal, the author emphasizes that those who forsake the faith will inevitably suffer eternal punishment. Indeed, he even claims that there is no possibility of forgiveness for apostasy (e.g., 6:4-8).
- V. Theologically, the book tries to achieve its goal by arguing that the new covenant in Christ is superior to the old covenant under Moses and is final and to abandon it would be disastrous.
- VI. Unfortunately, much of the argument is unconvincing to modern, critical readers, because it depends on ancient methods of scriptural interpretation which we find questionable.
  - A. For us Hebrews is in many ways the most problematic book in the New Testament (note, e.g., the strangeness of the treatment of Melchizedek).
  - B. Ancient interpreters assumed that the Old Testament was perfectly inspired and one could
    1. Isolate any passage from its immediate context
    2. Draw theological conclusions from minute (and to us, often meaningless) details
    3. Look at the passage in the context of any other (isolated) passage.
  - C. Ancient interpreters also assumed that the biblical text looked forward to the situation of one's own day. Of course, Christians saw the Old Testament as predicting in detail the coming of Christ.
  - D. Unfortunately, these ancient perspectives which were taken for granted at the time seem dubious now.
- VII. We can examine Hebrews' use of the Old Testament by studying how the epistle interprets material about Melchizedek and why.
  - A. Hebrews wishes to show the superiority of the new covenant in Christ to that of the old one with Israel at Sinai.
  - B. The early church assumed that Psalm 110:1 looked forward to Christ (note, e.g., Mark 12:35-37).
  - C. The author of Hebrews noticed verse 4, "The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind, 'You are a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek.'"
  - D. He concluded that Jesus must be this priest.
  - E. Then in line with his goal, he strives to show that this priesthood and the corresponding covenant are greater than the priesthood of Levi and the Mosaic covenant.
  - F. To show this, the author turns to the other reference to Melchizedek in the Old Testament, Genesis 14:17-20.
  - G. On the basis of a detailed analysis of this passage, he argues that Melchizedek was superior to Abraham and, hence, to Abraham's descendant Levi.

- H. The writer also argues on the basis of the silence of Genesis that Melchizedek had no father or mother or beginning or end of days. Of course, this also makes him greater than Levi.
- I. Jesus's priesthood fits all the above, and so the writer has shown that Jesus's priesthood and covenant are superior.
- VIII. In pursuing its goal of preventing apostasy, Hebrews stresses Christ's greatness and his ability to help those who are faithful to him.
- A. Christ is divine (e.g., Heb. 1) and existed before his earthly birth (e.g., 1:2) and chose to become incarnate (10:5-9).
  - B. Christ's self-sacrifice on the cross is definitive. It alone does away with sin (10:1-18).
  - C. Christ can help those who turn to him, because he was tempted as we are yet did not sin. Hence, he sympathizes with our weaknesses, having experienced them himself, but nevertheless challenges us to do better (esp., 4:14-5:10).
- IX. In pursuing its goal of preventing apostasy, Hebrews also emphasizes that this earthly life is a pilgrimage to our heavenly homeland through suffering.
- A. Hebrews suggests that human beings seek something beyond this world (Heb. 11:13-16).
  - B. The way to that homeland is through patient endurance here.
  - C. Faith is an orientation toward unseen realities which allows us to endure pain now in order to obtain our ultimate hope.
  - D. We nourish our faith by remembering what God did for us as a community in the past and by remembering that we made a commitment to be faithful to him.
- X. It would be easy to dismiss Hebrews' theology because of Hebrews' faulty exegesis and limited purpose.
- XI. Nevertheless, I believe that Hebrews' theology is of continuing relevance.
- A. Hebrews did not so much develop its theology out of its exegesis of the Old Testament as read its pre-existing theology into the Old Testament. Moreover, the Old Testament does bear witness to an ultimate hope which Hebrews then specifies.
  - B. Personally, I think that the following is very profound:
    1. The idea that God became incarnate in order that he could sympathize with our weaknesses and encourage us by his example. Note that God does not demand more of us than he did of himself.
    2. The idea that our true homeland lies beyond this present world but that the way to it is through suffering here. This understanding is much better than either denying the importance of this world or making it the only reality.
    3. We must be faithful to our past commitments to God, and in times of difficulty Christians live by memory and hope.

## **Preface to the Synoptic Gospels**

- I. We now turn to the perspectives of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. We will look at the writing of each evangelist and see what he was saying to his readers originally and what those particular messages might say to us today.
- II. In trying to determine the individual perspectives of the first three evangelists, we must concentrate on why they included or excluded material and how they worded and arranged the material.
  - A. The basic material in the synoptics goes back to the period before the evangelists wrote and tells us about Jesus and the earliest Christian perspectives on him.
  - B. To determine the special slant of the evangelists we must look at what they were free to contribute.
  - C. This freedom was especially great in what material the evangelists chose to include and in how they worded and arranged it.
    1. The evangelists mostly drew on oral tradition, and oral tradition tends to retain basic facts but not exact wording or the arrangement of blocks of material.
    2. The evangelists had to supply wording and arrangement and, of course, selected what material to include.
  - D. Therefore, the wording and arrangement of the material and what material the evangelists chose to include and exclude are the most reliable indicators of the special situation and theology of each synoptic evangelist.
  - E. As we shall see later in detail, John's Gospel is basically a reflection on the significance of Jesus and will require a different methodology.



## Literary Criticism and the Basic Message of Mark

- I. In literature the whole to a surprising degree determines the meaning of the parts. Often the meaning of a word or sentence or even a larger unit depends on its context.
- II. Structural features shape the meaning of the whole. Notice, for example, 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 and be converted?
  - B. 8:22-26. Why does Mark include a story in which Jesus must take two tries to heal someone completely? Matthew and Luke omit it, even though they were using Mark's Gospel as a source!
- 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. Consequently, it may be a title. The present title of the gospel "According to Mark" presupposes the existence of other gospels and is not original. Mark is probably the earliest of these books (cf. Luke 1:1).
- VII. Mark's introduction 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 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 (the basic Christian proclamation) is the awareness that before we can rightly confess that Jesus is the Christ (Messiah), we must first confess in word and deed that he is the one who suffered.
- X. A closer look at Mark confirms this basic hypothesis about its structure.
  - A. Chapters 1-8 contain almost all of Jesus's miracles. Note the summary in

8:19-20 and the following miracle.

B. The cross dominates chapters 9-16.

1. We first have the passion predictions (especially, 8:31, 9:31, 10:32-34).
2. Then the arrival in Jerusalem (11:1ff.) and the passion itself. Note that in comparison with the length of the entire book, the section about the final 24 hours of Jesus's earthly life is extraordinarily long.
3. The centurion's climactic confession comes immediately after Jesus's death and the rending of the veil of the temple.
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). Note that the longer endings do not appear in the earliest and best manuscripts and seem to be due to later scribes who wanted a more triumphal conclusion (like those in the other gospels).

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). Note that Jesus also calls Peter "Satan" when he confesses that Jesus is the Christ but objects to the cross.

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, 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. Note that the three major passion predictions (8:31-38, 9:30-35, 10:32-45) have the following pattern:

1. A prediction by Jesus that he will suffer
2. A misunderstanding or negative response from the disciples
3. A teaching by Jesus that humble discipleship is necessary.

E. The inversion of the confession of Peter and the denial of Peter (14:53-72; note the intercalation) emphasizes that we cannot rightly confess Jesus until we have learned that he has suffered and we may have to.

1. In the first scene Peter confesses Jesus and objects when Jesus proclaims that he and his followers must suffer, and Jesus tells Peter not to tell anyone that he is the Messiah.
2. In the second scene Jesus confesses himself and as a result suffers while Peter denies knowing Jesus (which ironically may be the truth!), because Peter is not willing to risk suffering.

F. The healing of Bartimaeus (10:46-52) symbolically makes the point that those who can see learn that confessing Jesus involves accepting the way of the cross.

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! note that the phrase "on the way" occurs in each of the major sections predicting the passion).

XII. This hypothesis concerning the theme 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. In the scene 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. Note that the first scene predicts the coming of the kingdom in power, and the transfiguration occurs "after six days" (probably on the same day of the week; 9:2) and gives a preview of that triumph.

E. In the transfiguration God himself declares to Peter and the others that Jesus is his Son and tells them to listen to Jesus. 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 we confess Jesus is the Christ but fail to realize the need to suffer, we are beginning to see, but 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 during 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, and later in the gospel Jesus insists that the gospel must be proclaimed to all the nations (13:10).

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. Literary criticism also helps explain why Mark, who was writing, at least in part, for Gentiles, included the story of Jesus and the Syrophenician woman (7:24-30).

A. Since Mark explains Jewish customs (7:3-4, 15:42), he must have had Gentile readers in mind.

B. Immediately before the mention of the Syrophenician woman Jesus insists

that defilement does not come from the outside but from the inside.

C. As a Gentile, the woman is outwardly defiled, but she is made pure by her words which reveal that she trusts Jesus despite the fact that he tests her. Once Jesus has verified her faith (dogged trust and determination, pun intended), he is willing to work a miracle for her. Then she shows her faith by departing without any proof that Jesus has healed her daughter.

D. Therefore, in Mark's Gospel the story affirms the validity of Gentile Christianity.

We may note in passing that John Meier, perhaps the leading expert on the historical Jesus and a fairly conservative scholar, does not believe that this story literally took place. Instead, the story is a theological construct to make points about how Gentiles can become faithful followers of Jesus.

XV. Finally, literary criticism explains the significance of the cursing of the fig tree in Mark (11:12-25).

A. Mark has intercalated the cursing with the cleansing of the temple.

B. The state of the fig tree mirrors that of the temple, and the tree's fate foretells the temple's. Just as the fig tree has leaves and no fruit and perishes after a brief interval, so the temple has outward beauty but no spiritual substance and will be destroyed shortly (13:1-2).

C. I would suggest, therefore, that Mark started with a saying of Jesus like that now found in Luke 13:6-8, and altered it slightly and inserted it into the story of the demonstration in the temple. By this editorial work Mark made the tree a symbolic commentary on the temple. Note that by telling us that this incident happened when it was not the season for figs Mark invites us to interpret the story symbolically.

XVI. An important literary way that Mark manipulate 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 that the characters themselves do not know.

A. Mark makes it clear to the readers 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 demonstrates that Jesus's words come true.

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

C. Consequently, the reader often passes judgment on the characters. E.g., 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 frequently allows us to detect an irony in what the characters say. An extreme example is the mocking of Jesus.

1. The various 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

(Moloney), namely that Jesus must die in order to save others (10:45).

## **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) comes from God and is addressed to Jesus alone. Subsequently Jesus tries to stop the demons from telling others who he is (e.g., 3:11-12).

B. The second confession (9:7) comes from God and is addressed to disciples in secret. 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 and the veil of the temple is torn apart. The world is at last ready to receive the gospel. Note that the veil separated God's dwelling from the world.

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 their present titles.

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

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. Note that it would have been natural and reassuring to assume that an eyewitness wrote the gospel.

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

C. Nevertheless, we cannot simply assume 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 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 certainly does not justify these conclusions. Note that Origen (c. 185- c. 254) did deduce this from 1 Peter!

4. Mark was a common name, and it would have been easy for later Christians to assume that two different "Marks" were the same person.
- V. Accordingly, we must primarily rely on the information we can glean from the gospel itself to determine its original setting.
- 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 second coming in glory.
  - B. Naturally, much of the material goes back to Jesus and to Old Testament prophecy (which Jesus saw himself fulfilling).
  - C. However, Mark also must have shaped the discourse. Notice, for example, that 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, we must assume that the events before 13:14 were past from Mark's perspective.
- VII. On the basis of Mark 13 and some other material in the gospel, we can see that 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 missionaries preached in the power of the Spirit and healed (13:11, 6:7, 13).
    2. They 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. Many 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 relatively long period of difficult progress there was a 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. Note that the first century historian Josephus tells us of similar Jewish messianic figures in Israel. But the figures in Mark must be Christian because they come in Jesus's name (13:6), and Mark must warn his Gentile Christian readers against them.
  - C. Mark wrote the gospel in this second period.

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 crises 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 war which culminated in the Roman re-conquest of Palestine and the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem.

Probably both sides persecuted Christians. Note that Jesus's speech in Mark 13 responds to the question of when the temple will be destroyed and that the phrase "devastating sacrilege" (13:14) must refer to the defilement of the temple (Dan. 9:27, 11:31, 12:11; 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 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.

3. Were expecting other Christians to honor them as prophets or even as messiahs.

C. By stressing that Jesus called us to suffer, Mark's Gospel 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).

Note that the disciples replace Jesus's family (especially, 3:31-35) and will meet him at his second coming (13:26-27).

1. 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).

2. 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. Note that at one point Mark parallels the ignorance of the disciples who have secret instruction from Jesus with the ignorance of outsiders who have not (4:12 vs. 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. Note 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. Mark looks forward to a later time of tribulation when some will remain faithful and endure to the end, whereas others will fall away (esp., 4:14-20, 13:5-13). Of course, this later time is the period in which Mark is living.

D. Hence, the failure of the disciples in the narrative is a warning to Mark's readers. Note, especially, the three commands to watch in chapter 13 and the three failures of the disciples to watch in chapter 14.

E. I feel, however, 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 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 the Garden 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).

XII. (time permitting) 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], 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

1. Are women, including the woman with the hemorrhage (5:24-34), the Syrophenician woman (7:24-30), the widow who contributed all her "living" (12:41-44), and the woman who anointed Jesus (14:3-9).

2. Suffer from mental, physical, or social disabilities, including the demon possessed person in chapter 5 (note vss. 18-20) and Bartimaeus (10:46-52) and Levi, the tax-collector (2:14).

F. It would be a stretch to claim that Mark is a feminist, let alone an activist for the disabled. Note that Mark's Gospel also has women and disabled people who are bad examples. (E.g., the women who obtain the death of John the Baptist;

6:14-29).

G. Still, the many times in Mark that women and disabled people model ideal behavior does suggest that Mark believed that the Church should support women and the disabled, and they could especially show what a Christian should be.

XIII. The problem of discipleship and the failed prediction of the imminent end of the present world.

A. As an incentive to be faithful in a time of suffering, Mark promised his original readers that the present evil world would soon end (God has “shortened” the time; Mark 13:20).

B. 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.

C. Yet, it is interesting that even Mark's treatment of the imminent second coming is strange—and theologically helpful.

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

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

F. Accordingly, 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.

G. We must not seek some greater security than this. Note that Mark is being faithful to the teaching of Jesus (cf. e.g., Mat. 6:19-21, 25-34).

## Mark's Theology of Miracles

Topic for reflection: What are the strengths and weaknesses of broadcasting miracles to convert people to Christianity?

I. Like other early Christian tradition, Mark emphasizes that Jesus worked miracles and gave to his disciples the same power (Mk. 6:7-13).

II. Mark also assumes that the miracles of Jesus and his disciples were primarily acts of compassion to those in desperate need (the sick, the hungry, those in danger).

III. Hence, the miracle stories also challenge readers to give concrete help in more conventional 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 especially significant for understanding Mark's Gospel, however, is that Mark *chose* to include this material and the other evangelists did not even when using Mark as a source. Compare, for example, Mark 9:14-29 with Matthew 17:14-21 and Luke 9:37-43).

B. Sometimes 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 effect.

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

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

V. As William Countryman has shown, in much of Mark Jesus's power to work miracles decreases.

A. Note especially the literarily significant summary in 8:14-21 where Jesus challenges the disciples (and Mark challenges the reader) to pay attention to what is happening.

B. Note also the surrounding miracles of 7:31-37, 8:22-26, 9:14-29.

VI. This decrease is due to the decreasing faith of the disciples and others. Notice that

A. Even after the first feeding of the multitude, the disciples still have no confidence in Jesus's ability to feed people (8:4, 16).

B. 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 and the miracle would lead to public acclaim, but he sometimes insists on publicizing miracles if faith is present (e.g., 5:21-54; note that by intercalating two miracles Mark invites us to compare them). (time permitting): 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. Note that 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. I believe that the manuscripts that have Jesus "was angry" preserve the correct reading, and this anger alerts the reader to find something wrong in what the man said to Jesus.

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 a 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, since it is Jesus's last positive miracle in the gospel and reverses the pattern of decline and provides a transition to the entrance into Jerusalem (10:46-52).

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. Note that despite the public miracle there is no popular acclaim.

C. The faith consists of persistent coming to Jesus with confidence despite obstacles.

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." Note that each of the passion predictions happens "on the way" (8:27, 9:33, 10:32). Note also that in Gethsemane Jesus himself requests a miracle to save himself but in faith accepts God's call to suffer and die (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 easily from the major sections in Mark dealing with Jesus's miracles.

A. In 1:21-44 we have a series of 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 (i.e., a human being--see next session). 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 also looks forward to the passion.

C. From 3:7 on, 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).

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 he is the Messiah (15:30-32). Jesus does not comply for several reasons:

1. To comply would negate the cross.

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 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 explicitly warns against "false Christs" who work miracles to verify messianic claims and to protect their followers.
- B. Presumably, since such figures came in Jesus's name (13:6), they claimed to be following his example.
- C. In reply, Mark insists that Jesus refused to use miracles to verify claims, and he called his followers to suffer. Moreover, the faith that is necessary to work miracles produces steadfastness in the way of the cross.

XVI. Since today we continue to have false prophets who claim to work miracles and preach that Christianity leads to worldly success, Mark's theology remains most relevant.

XVII. (time permitting) Discussion: Does the cursing of the fig tree (11:12-14, 20-25) echo Mark's theology of miracles?

## 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," "Son of Humanity," "Son of God."
  - A. These titles are prominent in the gospel, especially in literarily important passages (e.g., 1:1).
  - B. Mark tends to balance the titles. Note that in key passages 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. Note, especially, Mark 14:61.
- III. The basic concept of the "Anointed" (Messiah) is a davidic king, and Mark realizes this (12:35-37, 15:32).
  - A. In the Bible anointing conferred authority, and people could be anointed to various offices (e.g., high priest).
  - B. Nevertheless, *the* anointed was the king.
  - C. The archetypal king was David.
  - D. In New Testament times the Jews looked forward to the coming of a royal successor to David who would liberate Israel.
  - E. 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 traditionally 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 apparently 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, 9:31, 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 example of suffering while serving God is the basis on which he will judge us at the end of this age.
  - 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.
- XI. In Jewish tradition "Son of God" was a vague term which might or might not refer to the messiah.
- A. Basically, Son of God had two dimensions (Oscar Cullmann):
    1. It implied being intimate with God and sharing his power.
    2. It also implied total obedience to God.
  - B. It was used as a title for various figures who somehow fit one of these two dimensions.
    1. Divine figures, especially angels. Of course, in Paganism male gods could also be sons of other gods.
    2. Israel.
    3. The king, including a davidic figure. 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.
- 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 the sort people expected. He is the son of David, indeed David's Lord (12:35-37), 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 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 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). Note that this scene occurs immediately after John the Baptist predicts that Jesus will baptize people with the Holy Spirit. Since Mark ends with the announcement of the resurrection (16:8), the reader assumes that Jesus will send the Holy Spirit subsequently, as other early Christian tradition affirms.
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. Note: "Moses" and "Elijah" probably also symbolize the Jewish scriptures. Hence, 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.

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

XVI. Consequently, Mark's Gospel supports the orthodox Christological confession that Christ is both divine and human.

XVII. Mark's basic reply to the Christology of the "false prophets," who apparently claimed that the greatness of Jesus justified their own prestige as his successors.

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. Note that 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 truly 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, but we only really learn who Jesus is by being conformed to his suffering servanthood.

## **A Brief Methodological Introduction to Matthew: The relationship of Matthew to Mark: redaction criticism.**

- I. There are detailed similarities between Matthew and Mark.
  - A. About 90% of the substance of Mark is in Matthew.
  - B. According to De Solages, of Mark's 10,650 words, 7,768 are in Matthew. Note that these figures are a little soft, partly because of the difficulty in determining whether closely related terms are the same word (e.g., "rose" and "arose" in English).
  - C. The order of the material is often similar.
- II. These similarities seem to guarantee that there is literary dependence (i.e., one evangelist copied the other). Note that the similarities are in Greek and, therefore, cannot be primarily due to independent recording of what Jesus said and did, since he spoke in Aramaic and those who knew him would have related his life in Aramaic.
- III. Nevertheless, Matthew and Mark have significant differences in style and content.
  - A. Mark's narratives are often longer and have more incidental details than the corresponding stories in Matthew.
  - B. Matthew has a great deal of discourse, especially sayings of Jesus, that Mark lacks. Matthew arranges much of this material into five great sermons (e.g., the Sermon on the Mount [Mat. 5-7]). Note that after each of these sermons Matthew has the formula, "When Jesus had finished . . ."
  - C. Matthew's Greek is better than Mark's.
- IV. On the basis of these differences, as well as other evidence, most scholars feel that Matthew made use of Mark rather than the reverse.
  - A. Matthew left out superfluous details in the narratives and added important material about Jesus's teaching. Note that normally when we use a source we leave out superfluous material and add significant material from elsewhere.
  - B. He corrected Mark's Greek. Note that it is easier to recognize and retain correct style than to produce it. Hence, a derivative document is more likely to have fewer mistakes in common material.
  - C. He also looks back on the destruction of Jerusalem (which happened about the time Mark wrote) as a past event (Matt. 22:7).
- V. If these scholars are correct (as I believe they are), we can gain insight about Matthew's unique perspective by examining how he used Mark, especially how he altered material he took from Mark. This method of study is called redaction criticism.
- VI. An exercise: Compare Mark 4:35-41 and Matthew 8:23-27. What did Matthew change and why?
- VII. Of course, Matthew had other sources of information about Jesus, since Matthew contains a lot of material that is wholly absent from Mark.
  - A. Matthew must have drawn on oral tradition.
  - B. He may also have had written sources other than Mark. Many scholars postulate that there was a written collection of the sayings of Jesus that Matthew and Luke used independently. Note that Matthew and Luke often share discourse material that does not appear in Mark, and much of this material is the same virtually word for word. Traditionally, this sayings source has been called

“Q” (from the German “Quelle”–source). Note: I do not happen to believe in “Q” but prefer to think like a minority of scholars that Luke made use of Matthew directly.

## The Basic Message of Matthew

- 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 numerous 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. Note that this climactic appearance is only to the eleven.
  - C. This new holy community and, especially, this new leadership have serious failings and need Christ's continual support and guidance. Note that 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. Note the inclusion of Gentile women in the genealogy. Matthew seems to be implying that Gentiles were always part of God's plan.
    2. In the past God has worked through an official, chosen leadership. Note that 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. Note 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." Note that contrary to his usual practice Matthew expands this section.
- 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, especially, 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, the old ethnic people of God, 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). Note that the Parable is an allegory in which the tenants are the Jewish people (and, especially, their leadership). The vineyard is the land and other privileges of the Jews.

VI. Nevertheless, 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 the members 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. Note that Matthew explicitly acknowledges the former authority of the Jewish scribes to interpret scripture (23:1-2) and even 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, including 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 (23:16ff.).

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, its leaders could fall into these same patterns, and so he warns

1. We must do God's will and not be like false prophets who bear no fruit (e.g., 7:15ff.).

2. We must not use titles like "father" and "rabbi" (23:8ff.).

3. We must be patient with the little ones and the lost (ch. 18).

IX. The old holy people and their leaders forfeited 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, 25:31ff.). Here the "least" especially means the least in the Church "my brothers [and sisters]"; however, since Matthew also emphasizes the importance of loving even our enemies, the least includes everyone.

XI. Historically, the Church has tended to pay more attention to the authority 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). Note that Peter recognizes what he has done and weeps. Of course, Matthew believes that Peter is the foundation of the future church.

Topic for reflection: Does the leadership of the Church today need to repent of past abuses of power and live?

## Matthew's Historical Context and Its Significance

- 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.
  - B. Matthew's bitter polemic against the Pharisees (especially, ch. 23) presupposes they are in control of Judaism, and they assumed this position no earlier than around 80. Note that 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 have seen, Matthew 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 so 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). Note that Ignatius was bishop of Antioch.
- III. The author was probably a second generation Christian who may not have had the name "Matthew." Note: We 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.
  - 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." Note that the gospel is in Greek.
    2. Church tradition tended to attribute gospels to apostles to guarantee accuracy.
    3. Only Matthew's Gospel tells us that the tax collector named Levi in Mark and Luke (Mark 2:14, Luke 5:27) was called Matthew (Matt. 9:9), 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 that 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 the apostle would still have been alive in 80 C.E. (the *earliest* the present gospel could have originated). In the ancient world someone who was fifty was considered old (cf. John 8:57).
      - e. The gospel does not feel like an eyewitness account. Would the author have taken the story of his own call 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 (some of?) 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 increasingly Gentile.
  - B. Institutional structures developed. Note that 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 that was still predominantly Jewish and was bitter over the (impending?) expulsion. The tone of the gospel suggests such a 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, especially, 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 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 Jesus preaches in Matthew he seems to speak directly to the reader (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. Matthew's achievement in his historical situation was that he managed to affirm both the Church's Jewish heritage and also the right to go beyond that heritage.
- A. Matthew everywhere affirms both the Jewish Scriptures and the historical fact that Jesus's earthly mission was only to Jews (10:5, 15:24). Note: Jesus apparently expected the conversion of the Gentiles to come later.
  - B. Yet, the gospel stresses 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 (28:19). Note that unlike male circumcision, baptism is equally available to women.
- XI. 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 (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 "bring out from their treasure new things and old" (13:52).
- XII. Matthew's challenge to be anchored in the past and open to new things remains important today.
- Topic for reflection: How can we be anchored in the past and open to the future?

## Anti-Semitism 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 especially emphasize the dangers implicit in the scene where the Jewish people say, "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 was an attempt to explain to Jewish Christians why they should not abandon the Church.
  - C. Hence, Matthew had to emphasize the negative features of the rabbinic faith.
  - D. Moreover, in first century religion and philosophy generally, it was common to attack other viewpoints with extreme rhetoric. Note that Matthew's anti-Semitic material is less virulent than New Testament attacks on "idolatrous" Pagan religion (e.g., Romans 1:19-31).
  - E. Consequently, Matthew's Gospel does not give a balanced, let alone charitable, view of orthodox Judaism, and in some instances he probably even gives wrong information (e.g., regarding Corban; 15:5). For a balanced and accurate 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 anti-Semitism is not ethnic, only religious. Matthew's church had many Christian Jews in it.
  - H. Matthew only claims that the Jewish people is no longer the means by which God will save the world. Matthew does not claim that the Jews bear some permanent stain because of the death of Jesus.
    1. Matthew believed that the "guilt" of the Jews 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 Jews call 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 the Jews rejecting Jesus's message that we must overcome our enemies through love and instead resorting to violent revolt.
    4. After the revolt was crushed, the Jews rejected that violent nationalism and adopted the teaching of Hillel which emphasized being charitable toward Gentiles and living in peace. The school of Hillel remains the official authority in Judaism today, even if not all Jews (just like not all Christians) live up to the moral ideals of "orthodoxy."

## Matthew's Theology of Law

- 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). Note that these regulations included both ethical and taboo prescriptions and helped keep the Jews separate from the Gentiles. This separation made a major contribution to preserving Jewish identity.
  - B. The scriptures, especially 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). Note that here Matthew is following the Jewish custom of putting a hedge around the Torah.
    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 Gentiles 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. An especially vexing problem 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. Note that Jesus used paradox to make people think. Typically, Jesus's commandments point in a certain direction but are too extreme or vague to be taken literally. Hence, the disciple must come up with a personal appropriation.
  - 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 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 insists that moral demands must not become crushing (11:30 vs. 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 consists of 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 that in his passion, Jesus lives up to the radical commandment not to engage in violent resistance even against abuse (Matt. 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 and does not impose a great burden.

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. Reduce us to dependence on Jesus who is especially loving to the lowly.

3. Make it difficult to separate good Christians from bad ones. Note the parable of the wheat and the weeds (Matt. 13:24-30).

E. Once one has accepted the vision of perfection, become humble, and received Jesus's forgiving love, one can begin to love from the heart and with the help of the Church discern what must be done in specific situations.

F. Hence, 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 (13:52).

H. This power is especially necessary when the church provides guidance for the Gentiles, since they 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.

## 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., Matt. 16:16; cf., e.g., Psalm 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. Jesus's followers, are to imitate Jesus in each of his roles as a "son of humanity."

a. We must imitate Jesus in his obedient suffering by taking up our cross (e.g., 20:27-28).

b. Because we do take up our cross, we will somehow also participate in judging the world. Note 19:28.

c. Because we have suffered and will judge, we too have the power to interpret the law and pronounce forgiveness of sins. Note 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 to the Church, particularly its leaders (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). Note that in Greek "Lord" often mean "Mister," and that the Jewish community translated YHWH with "Kyrios" [Lord" in Greek].

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 (1:1, 2:2ff. etc.) 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 in the Bible and other Jewish tradition (e.g., Matt. 2:20; cf. Exodus 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 are two:

A. Jesus is a healer from God.

- B. Jesus is the teacher who embodies Divine Wisdom. Some of what Matthew says about Jesus sounds like what God's Wisdom says in the Old Testament (e.g., 11:25-30).
- V. The richness and complexity of Matthew's Christology seem to 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 (especially, 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. Note that perhaps the most overarching promise of the Old Testament is that one day God will be fully with his people.
    2. Reveals and interprets God's will (especially, the law) 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 his followers the authority to go out and save the world and abides with them as they do.
    6. Of course, Matthew believes in the divinity of Christ (e.g., 24:31).
- VIII. Basically, 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 law was the way to discover God's will and serve him. Note that 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. Note that 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 holds (especially, 28:18-19).



## **(time permitting) One Interpretation of the “Beatitudes” in Matthew 5:3-12**

- I. The “Beatitudes” (from the Latin word for “blessings”) are the traditional name for Jesus’s declaration of who is blessed or “happy” at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount.
- II. Since the Beatitudes occur as the introduction to Jesus’s first great sermon in Matthew, they obviously are important to his theology as a whole.
- III. The Beatitudes in Matthew have also been much beloved in the Christian tradition.
- IV. Unfortunately, their meaning is not entirely clear. The first (“blessed are the poor in spirit”) is especially problematic. What is it to be “poor in spirit”? Note that no equivalent word to “in” occurs in the original Greek. A literal translation would be, “Blessed are the spirit poor.”
- V. A lot of modern exegesis has tended to spiritualize Matthew’s beatitudes by claiming that they represent virtuous inner attitudes. Thus, we read that being “poor in spirit” means
  - A. Having a deep sense of one’s own spiritual poverty.
  - B. Or having no desire to be rich (e.g., Craig Keener).
- VI. Popular Christianity has sometimes made the dubious suggestion that Matthew (and Jesus) believed that miserable circumstances (e.g., dire poverty) are somehow a spiritual blessing.
- VII. I believe that such interpretations miss Matthew’s primary intent.
- VIII. Statements about who is “blessed” or happy are common in ancient literature, including the Old Testament (e.g., Psalm 1:1).
- IX. Biblical scholarship labels these statements as “macarisms” (from the Greek word for “blessed” or “happy”) to distinguish them from the liturgical act of conferring a ceremonial blessing.
- X. The macarisms tend to have at least two different functions:
  - A. They recognize who is truly happy.
  - B. They exhort us to do what is necessary to join that group.
- XI. A theme in the preaching of the historical Jesus is that at the last judgment there will be a great reversal. Those who had material or religious privileges will suffer, whereas those who did not will fare well.
- XII. Jesus exhorted his followers to prepare for the judgment by giving up their privileges, living as servants of one another, and helping those who were in special need of material or spiritual support. Note, e.g., Mark 10:17-31. Of course, the exhortation to help those in need presupposes that being in dire need is in and of itself a curse!
- XIII. In the context of preaching this basic message Jesus pronounced various “macarisms” which
  - A. Gave hope to those living in miserable conditions.
  - B. Challenged those who were well off to share.
- XIV. Very likely most of these macarisms were originally separate statements (cf. Thomas 54).
- XV. It would have been natural, however, for the oral tradition to group these statements together, and it seems that such a grouping does underlie both Matthew 5:3-12 and Luke 6:20-26. This group seems to have consisted of declarations that three or four groups were blessed:

- A. The poor
- B. The sad
- C. The hungry
- D. The persecuted.

XVI. Luke then expanded this material by adding a corresponding list of woes. This expansion reflected Luke's larger theology that

- A. Part of God's justice was balancing the blessings/woes of this life with the opposite situation in the next one (note Luke 16:25).
- B. With great resources come correspondingly great responsibilities (Luke 12:48).

XVII. By contrast, Matthew turned the macarisms into virtues. Thus, for example,

- A. The "poor" are "poor in spirit."
- B. The "hungry" hunger for "righteousness."

XVIII. The issue is what these virtues primarily consist of.

XIX. Matthew emphasizes the importance of concrete acts of mercy. We must feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit those in prison. Note that the last great sermon in this gospel ends with the theme that the concrete acts of mercy which we extend to the least person we extend to Jesus himself (25:31-46). Of course, in this text those who did concrete acts of mercy end up happy, since they inherit the kingdom, whereas those who did not do concrete acts of mercy end up damned!

XX. Hence, I think that the virtues in the beatitudes of Matthew consist primarily of relieving those in misery.

- A. Thus, for example,
  1. The "poor in spirit" are those who have a spiritual a commitment to help the poor.
  2. Those who "hunger and thirst for righteousness" long for justice for those in need.
  3. Those who are "merciful" extend acts of economic and psychological mercy.

B. No doubt the beatitudes in Matthew have many other dimensions, including "inner" ones. Note the blessing on the "pure in heart." However, even here I think that Matthew is primarily concerned about the hypocrisy that allows the pious to think that they are serving God when they ignore the needs of the "least" (cf., e.g., 23:23).

XXI. Underlying Matthew's beatitudes is a larger theology that the Church in the present should in a preliminary way embody the justice that will be fully manifest in the life to come.

## **Matthew's Gospel and the Problem of Divorce—One Liberal Interpretation**

- I. Matthew spends more time on the problem of divorce than any of the other gospels. The theme appears in the infancy narratives (1:18-19), and in the Sermon on the Mount (5:31-32), and in a debate between Jesus and his critics (19:1-12).
- II. Because of the tremendous pastoral problem of divorce in the contemporary church, we need to take a look at the treatment of divorce in the New Testament in general and Matthew in particular.
- III. Like his gospel in general, Matthew's treatment of divorce has two different goals:
  - A. To discredit the Pharisees with whom the Church was in competition.
  - B. To give pastoral guidance to Christians.
- IV. Both Matthew 5:31-32 and 19:1-12 attack the laxness of (other) Jewish grounds for divorce, and chapter 19 explicitly condemns the Pharisees for ignoring the will of God.
- V. Nevertheless, it is clear that Matthew is concerned with the pastoral application of Jesus's teaching about divorce, since Matthew adds an exception clause, which certainly weakens his claim that the Pharisees are too lax.
- VI. Unfortunately, there is debate over the meaning of the clause "except for sexual immorality." Many scholars argue that here "immorality" means incest. Matthew is advocating that Pagans who enter the Church should dissolve marriages which were incestuous from a Jewish perspective.
- VII. However, the primary issue is not whether Matthew is thinking of incest here, but whether he would have included adultery as proper grounds for divorce, and 1:18-19 makes it clear that he would have. Joseph was righteous in deciding to divorce Mary when she was pregnant by someone else. Note that in Jewish culture the betrothal was legally binding, and it was normally expected that a husband would divorce an unfaithful wife (if she had not already been stoned to death!).
- VIII. Another issue is the relationship between the discussion on divorce in chapter 19 and the immediately following comments on becoming a eunuch. Traditionally, the Church has interpreted becoming a "eunuch for the kingdom of God" as the vocation of celibacy.
- IX. I think that there is little to be said for this interpretation at least in the context of Matthew's Gospel.
  - A. The material about eunuchs was probably a separate statement of Jesus originally. As such,
    1. It could have referred to voluntary celibacy, perhaps to facilitate radical discipleship.
    2. I think it is more likely that the saying meant giving up patriarchal privilege (William Countryman).
  - B. However, in the context in which Matthew chose to place it, the saying surely refers to remaining celibate after a divorce.
- X. The historical Jesus taught that a man who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery.
  - A. This core occurs in Matthew 19:9, Mark 10:11, Luke 16:18. Admittedly, 5:32 only mentions divorcing a wife, not divorcing her and marrying another woman. However, I think that here Matthew is condensing.
  - B. These passages then expand the core saying in various ways:

1. A woman who divorces her husband and marries another man commits adultery (Mark 10:12).

2. A man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery (Matt. 5:32, Luke 16:18).

C. Many scholars, including me, believe that these expansions are from the early church. Note that a woman divorcing her husband would have been difficult in Jewish Palestine but was possible under contemporary Greek and Roman law.

XI. This core teaching is both paradoxical and extreme: By definition, adultery is only possible if someone is (still) married (Bruce Malina)!

XII. Like other such teachings of Jesus, this saying was meant to point in a particular direction and provoke the hearers to come up with their own specific applications.

XIII. Apparently, Jesus wanted to make at least three points:

A. Marriage is not primarily a legal contract but a psychosomatic unity, and, therefore, adultery is primarily a matter of the heart, not a matter of law. Hence, divorce and remarriage can be adultery.

B. Jewish law about divorce and remarriage did not sufficiently honor the rights of women. A husband could divorce his wife for any reason, and a divorced woman was in a precarious economic and social position.

C. With the preaching of Jesus and his followers, people were gaining a new power to love and be faithful.

XIV. The New Testament passes on the basic teaching of Jesus but makes exceptions permitting divorce and remarriage under certain circumstances. Note that Paul makes the departure of an unbeliever grounds and states that not everyone has the gift of celibacy, and "God has called us to peace" (1 Cor. 7:15).

XV. Matthew seems to make two exceptions.

A. Divorce is appropriate if the psychological union of a marriage has been destroyed by adultery.

B. Remarriage after a divorce is acceptable if a person does not have the gift of celibacy, since not everyone can be a "eunuch" for the kingdom of God.

XVI. Nevertheless, Matthew, following Mark, stresses that psychologically getting divorced and remarried is a violation of our created nature and spiritually is adultery (i.e., it has the spiritual effect of adultery on all the parties).

XVII. One suggestion for what the Church should teach about divorce and remarriage today.

A. Since marriage produces a psychosomatic unity, divorce and remarriage always involves some "adultery" from a psychological and spiritual perspective. Naturally, the less time between the divorce and the remarriage, the greater the "adultery" is likely to be.

B. Hence, divorce should only occur as a last resort, and, ideally, after the divorce, a person should remain single, especially for a time. Of course, before taking the drastic step of seeking divorce, people should avail themselves of every possible spiritual resource, including an awareness of God's empowering love and forgiveness.

C. Nevertheless, there are legitimate grounds for divorce and remarriage, and the Church must help people discern what these are, being mindful that God has called us to peace and not everyone has the gift of celibacy.

(time permitting) Discussion

## **An Additional Reflection: The New Testament's--and, especially, 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., Matt. 16:17).
  - B. He apparently came from Bethsaida (John 1:44), and later lived in Capernaum (Mark 1:16-21), both villages on the Lake of Galilee.
  - C. He followed his father's profession as a fisherman.
  - D. He married.
  - E. In response to Jesus's call, he left work and followed Jesus from place to place.
  - F. Jesus gave him the nickname of "Cephas" (Greek: Petros), "Rocky."
  - G. Jesus made him a member of the Twelve who apparently were to be the leaders of the new Israel that Jesus was calling into being.
  - H. At one point Peter made a dramatic confession that Jesus was the Messiah.
  - I. Either at this time or at another Jesus rebuked Peter sternly, calling him "Satan."
  - J. Peter was present at the last supper and followed Jesus to courtyard of the high priest's palace after Jesus was arrested.
  - K. There under questioning Peter panicked and denied being associated with Jesus, a denial that he later deeply regretted.
  - L. Subsequently, Peter was the first male who received a resurrection appearance, and his faith helped reassure others.
  - M. He along with John and Jesus's brother James became the leaders of the church in Jerusalem.
  - N. Subsequently, Peter became an itinerant missionary.
  - O. In the early struggle over whether Gentiles should have to become Jews in order to join the Church, Peter seems to have taken a moderate (and sometimes inconsistent) position.
    1. He baptized Gentiles.
    2. At the Apostolic Council he successfully supported Paul's position that Gentile converts did not need to get circumcised or adopt most of the Jewish Law (Acts 15:1-29, Gal. 2:1-10).
    3. Nevertheless, he seems to have waffled over whether Jewish and Gentile Christians could eat together without the Gentiles following some Jewish dietary practices. At Antioch he got involved in a public wrangle with Paul (Gal. 2:11-13).
      - a. Initially, Peter was eating with Gentile Christians.
      - b. Then when representatives came from James, who was more conservative, Peter stopped eating with the Gentiles.
      - c. Paul responded by publicly blasting Peter for hypocrisy.
  - P. Peter apparently suffered imprisonment on multiple occasions.
  - Q. In the end he was martyred, probably at Rome.

III. A consistent personality trait of Peter was that he would make bold moves and then waffle, and I suspect that the nickname of “Rocky” was Jesus’s ironic comment on Peter’s inconstancy.

IV. In Christian history Peter became subject to controversy because of Papal claims.

A. The popes have claimed to have universal authority over the Church.

B. They base this claim on the contention that

1. Christ made Peter the head of the Church, giving him the power to forgive sins and interpret Christ’s teaching.

2. Peter was the first bishop of Rome.

3. The popes as bishops of Rome inherit his authority.

C. Naturally, non-Catholics have disputed these claims. Here we cannot review the historical debate but only note that it is anachronistic to claim that Peter was the *bishop* of Rome, though he may have been influential there for a time. Paul’s letter to the Romans suggests that during Peter’s lifetime there were independent house churches in the city.

V. In the synoptics Peter plays the dominant role among the disciples.

A. His name appears first in the lists of the 12.

B. He is the first disciple that Jesus calls and the first to confess that Jesus is the Christ.

C. He is in a privileged inner circle (along with James, John, and, sometimes, Andrew).

D. There is far more material about him.

E. Luke, who goes on to describe the early history of the Church, stresses

1. Peter’s faith became a basis for the faith of the early church as a whole (Luke 22:31-32, 24:34).

2. Peter was the leading figure in the first days of Christianity.

3. He gave crucial support to the position that Gentiles could become Christians without following the Jewish law.

a. Peter himself baptized the first Gentiles.

b. At the Apostolic Council he successfully supported Paul’s position that Gentiles did not need to be circumcised.

VI. The dominant role of Peter is particularly evident in Matthew which contains the famous scene of Jesus giving Peter the keys of the kingdom (Matt. 16:17-19), as well as other special petrine material (Peter walking on water, paying the tribute money).

VII. 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.

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 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.

VIII. Matthew may also emphasize Peter to support 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.
  - D. Note: This moderately Jewish Christianity died out. All surviving Christianity stems from the more radical pauline Church.
- IX. Sometimes in non-synoptic traditions Peter does not enjoy the same prominence.
- A. In John's Gospel Andrew is called prior to Peter and is the first to confess Jesus as the "Messiah" ("Christ;" 1:40-41), and the "Beloved Disciple" is always one step ahead of Peter.
  - B. In the Gospel of Thomas, James (log. 12) and Thomas (preface, log. 13) are the key disciples.
- X. In the synoptics Peter also plays a literary and theological role, and this is particularly true in Matthew.
- XI. As the first disciple 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 (Matt. 4:18-20).
  - B. Sometimes he asks the questions we all want to ask (e.g., Matt. 18:21).
  - C. More often he is a symbol of our weakness and sinfulness, our lack of perception (e.g., Matt. 15:15ff.), our lack of faith (e.g., Matt. 14:30-31), and our lack of steadfastness (especially, Peter's role in the passion).
  - D. Of course, 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.
- XII. 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 and walking on water.
- XIII. In addition, however, Peter is also the first *leader* of the Church. He is one of the 12, and in the New Testament lists his name always comes first, and Matthew even adds the word "first" (Matt. 10:2).
- XIV. As such he becomes every leader. We can see this clearly from a comparison of 16:19 and 18:18 in Matthew. The same theology appears in other passages in the New Testament (e.g., Luke 12:35-48).
- XV. 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
- A. Much of the material here appears in other contexts in John's Gospel (John 1:42, 20:23), and it seems that here Matthew is expressing his own theology.
  - B. When Matthew wrote his gospel, Peter had been dead for decades, and Matthew does not deal with the question of whether Peter had a successor.
- XVI. My own guess is that Matthew holds that Peter is the first among equals and, 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.

XVII. For what it is worth, I, as a non-Roman Catholic, would be willing to accord this same role to the popes.

XVIII. 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 to pay more attention to whether people are able to work miracles in his name than whether they are following church leaders (Mark 9:38-39, Luke 9:49-50).

## **A Brief Methodological Introduction to Luke**

- I. Luke begins his gospel by explicitly telling us that other gospels already exist (1:1).
- II. As this opening suggests, Luke relied on multiple written sources (as well as oral ones). The written sources included
  - A. Mark. Note that according to De Solages, 7,040 of Mark's actual Greek words reappear in Luke.
  - B. Matthew or "Q." Note that Matthew and Luke have around two hundred verses in common that do not appear in Mark, and the Greek wording is often very close.
- III. Hence, we can gain insight into Luke's unique perspective by comparing his gospel to Mark and Matthew and seeing what changes he made.
- IV. We can gain additional insight into Luke's Gospel by seeing it in the larger context of Acts (see below).
  - A. Sometimes Luke draws parallels between the life of Jesus and things in early church history (e.g., the death of Jesus and the death of Stephen).
  - B. At times in Acts, Luke reviews or even explains something that occurs in the gospel (e.g., Luke 23:12, Acts 4:26-27).
- V. Partly because we must understand Acts to understand the gospel fully, we will look at Luke-Acts as a whole, not just the gospel.

## The Basic Message of Luke-Acts

- 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 the ascension.
  - B. The Acts then describes the early expansion of Christianity.
- II. As the gospel preface (Luke 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. Moreover, in his account Luke deals with things that especially interest historians, such as rulers and dates (note Luke 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. We may note 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 early 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.
  - B. Christians and, especially, their leaders behaved in an exemplary manner. Note that Luke idealizes the early church. Of course, by idealizing early Christians Luke holds them up to the reader as models to imitate. (Note that Mark usually does the opposite: The behavior of Peter and the 12 normally illustrates mistakes we should avoid!)
  - C. Informed people always recognized that the Christians were harmless.
  - D. Popular opinion had often been favorable (note, e.g., Luke 23:27).

- E. The Jewish scriptures and Jesus himself had foreseen persecution, and it resulted from God's mysterious decree, not from the shortcomings of Christians.
- V. To make the transitions in early church history 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 (Luke 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]). Note how often Paul first preaches in a synagogue and then moves on to preach to Gentiles.
  - B. Luke records many signs which 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 us to effect a fundamental transition (e.g., ordaining women, authorizing gay marriage). We must look for the signs of the Spirit (e.g., seeing new things in scripture, looking at what happens during prayer).
  - C. It tells us what the Church's enduring identity is: We remain the people who follow the Spirit, and this is the Spirit who inspired the scriptures and points to Jesus.

## The Setting and Historical Accuracy of Luke-Acts

- I. Luke-Acts originated no earlier than 80 and might be as late as the beginning of the second century. It cannot be earlier than around 80 because other written gospels already existed (Luke 1:1), and Jerusalem had already been destroyed (Luke 19:41-44, 21:20-24).
- 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, it would have postulated a prominent disciple of Jesus.
  - B. However, we have no way of knowing whether this was the "Luke" mentioned in the Pauline letters (e.g., Philemon 24), as later church tradition claimed. (Note that the tradition that Luke was a physician comes from Colossians 4:14.)
    1. On the one hand, the Church could have preserved an accurate memory concerning the author.
    2. On the other, Luke was a common name, and the Church may have confused two people with similar names.
  - C. The author apparently was a second or third generation Christian (Luke 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 living outside of Palestine. Luke drops Aramaic terms (e.g., "abba") and adjusts material to fit extra-Palestinian circumstances (Mark 2:4 vs. Luke 5:19; Matt. 7:27 vs. Luke 6:48-49). Of course, the narrative of how Christianity got to Rome would be especially interesting to this group of people.
  - F. I suspect the "Theophilus," to whom Luke dedicates both the Gospel and the Acts, was Luke's patron.
- III. Scholars disagree over how historically reliable Luke-Acts is.
  - A. Conservatives assume that what Luke wrote is very reliable.
  - B. Radicals hold that the gospel and, especially, 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 history of the Church.
    2. It seems likely that the early Church would have been more concerned about preserving accurate information about Jesus than about subsequent events.
    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. And/or 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 these goals.
  - A. He expressly states that he wishes to produce a reliable narrative (Luke 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.
- VII. Of course, usually when Luke did not have hard data, neither do we, and so the question of how much Luke depended on his imagination must be left largely unanswered.
- VIII. Another crucial question is whether the "we" passages in Acts (e.g., 16:10ff.) are eyewitness testimony (either Luke's or someone else's). They could indicate that Luke was personally present or less probably that a source was personally present. However, the use of "we" could a literary device.
- IX. Another important question is how much Luke relied on literary parallelism rather than historical memory. It is clear that Luke loves literary parallelism. Note already the many parallels between Luke's telling of the birth of John the Baptist and that of Jesus (e.g., the Angel Gabriel first announces the coming birth of John to his future father and then announces the coming birth of Jesus to Jesus's future mother).
- X. My own view is that Luke was basically faithful to the information that he had, but that he was very creative when he lacked information.
  - A. When we look at Luke's use of written sources (especially, Mark), we see that Luke sometimes idealizes and simplifies, but on the whole he is careful to retain the essential information.
  - B. However, to me much of the Acts appears to be fiction. For example, I suspect that the highly dramatic narrative of the sea voyage in Acts 27 is mostly creative writing. Probably the speeches in Acts are compositions by Luke, since it was customary for historians to write speeches for their characters that would have been appropriate for the occasion.

## Luke's Theology of the Oppressed

- I. Literarily, one of the most important scenes in Luke-Acts is Jesus's visit to Nazareth in Luke 4:16-30. Note
  - A. Luke has greatly expanded the scene in comparison with Mark 6:1-6, which presumably was his written source.
  - B. The passage contains Jesus's inaugural sermon in Luke-Acts.
  - C. The passage is very dramatic, and foreshadows key themes in the subsequent narrative (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., Luke 8:1-2, Acts 17).
    2. In Luke-Acts God vindicates women, especially when they suffer criticism from human beings (e.g., Luke 1:25, 1:48, 1:60-63, 7:36-50, 10:40-42).
    3. Luke sometimes portrays women playing important leadership roles (e.g., Acts 18:26), though on the whole he emphasizes male leadership, particularly in public evangelism.
    4. The modern question of whether we should think of Luke as a "feminist" has no simple answer.
      - a. I see no evidence that Luke believed that theoretically women and men are equal.
      - b. What Luke does seem to believe in is
        - 1). The humanity and dignity of women. This belief is striking given the tendency to disparage women in the larger culture and even in the Church of Luke's time (note, e.g., the sexism of the Pastoral Epistles).
        - 2). The ability of the Holy Spirit to empower the marginal to do great things. Note what Mary says in 1:47-55.
        - 3). God's lack of concern for the hierarchies of this world and God's tendency to reverse them in the life to come.
  - B. The poor
    1. In line with traditional Jewish teaching, Luke emphasizes that the poor are sometimes especially holy (Luke 21:1-4, Acts 3:6).
    2. He stresses that we must share what we have with the poor and not oppress them (Luke 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 (Luke 6:20-26, 16:19-31).
  - C. Social outcasts ("sinners"), including tax collectors (e.g., Luke 18:9-14), immoral women (e.g., Luke 7:36-50), even a bandit (Luke 23:40-43). Note that Jesus gives to outcasts inclusion, forgiveness, and the promise of salvation.
  - D. Other powerless groups: the sick, children (e.g., Luke 1:17), Samaritans (e.g.,

Luke 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). Note that biblical “Ethiopia” was the area south of Egypt (especially, the ancient kingdom of Meroe, today in the Sudan) and to Greeks and Romans Sub-Saharan Africa was 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 (Luke 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 (Luke 23:40-41!).

C. Instead, the reason that 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 (Luke 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. Note, especially, Luke 12:48: From those to whom much is given, much will be expected.

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

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

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.

1. In the ancient world people were tightly integrated into larger groups (family, village, ethnic groups), and the primary reality was the community. Hence, the Bible is especially concerned about the spiritual condition of the community and of our personal relationships.
2. In the modern United States, people are much more isolated, and we often talk as if the primary reality is the individual (which I doubt). Hence, we emphasize how individuals feel about themselves (self-esteem, guilt feelings) rather than their relationships and communities.
3. Therefore, biblical scholars who want to be relevant need to spell out the implications of the social perspectives of the Bible for personal psychology.

B. In my opinion, the way to do this is to remember that the inner voices of the disordered psyche are often the internalization of the outer voices of the disordered society (the dysfunctional family, the racially oppressive society, 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 especially 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.

## Luke's Spirituality

- 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 (e.g., Jesus's baptism [Luke 3:21]; the choosing of the 12 [Luke 6:12]; the confession of Peter [Luke 9:18] the transfiguration [Luke 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. Luke-Acts has many references to the temple and the synagogue. Note that the gospel begins and ends with prayer in the temple.
  - D. And Luke-Acts has 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, of course, 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., Luke 24:53, Acts 1:14).
  - B. Especially engage in prayer in times of crisis or decision making.
  - C. Be open to charismatic spiritual gifts.
- IV. Luke believed that prayer and worship are only effective when they are done sincerely and are genuinely directed to God (Luke 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 (Luke 11:5-13), and this principle is borne out in the narrative, even under the most seemingly hopeless circumstances (Luke 1:13-20, Acts 12:3-17).
  - B. However, sometimes in order to receive a positive answer, we must persevere in prayer (Luke 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 (Luke 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. Note: "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, especially 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 the Didache 8:2-3.
2. A shorter form in the better manuscripts of Luke.

<b>Matthew 6: 9-13</b>	<b>Luke 11:1-4</b>
Our Father in heaven,	Father,
May your name be kept holy;	May your name be kept holy;
May your kingdom come; May your will happen on earth as in heaven.	May your kingdom come.
Give us today our "daily" bread, And forgive us our debts,	Give us each day our "daily" bread, And forgive us our sins,
As we also have forgiven our debtors.	For we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
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.]	And do not bring us into temptation.

B. Basically the version in Luke is the original. The longer version 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 today in American culture.

1). The father was the undisputed authority within the family and its primary economic support.

2). The father normally worked at home.

3). Hence, 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. May your name be kept holy; May your kingdom come;"
    - a. This seems to be 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 (Matt. 6:7ff.).
    - 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. Note 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 acts in the future.
  3. "Give us each day our daily bread."
    - a. The Greek word for "daily" is rare, and its meaning is not certain. While "daily" (either for the current day or for the next one) is the most likely meaning, "necessary for existence" is also plausible.
    - 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. However, he has correctly rendered the original intent of the prayer by using the present tense in the words "for we ourselves *forgive*." Note that the tense system in Aramaic does not correspond to the one in English. 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 into temptation."

a. The intent here is that God would spare us from trials. Note Matthew's expansion. A trial

1). Could be a tribulation which tests our character.

2). Or it could be (as in this translation) a temptation narrowly speaking, i.e., an impulse to do evil.

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. Note 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.

6. The familiar doxology, "For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen," does not occur in Luke at all; nor does it occur in the more reliable manuscripts of Matthew, but only in inferior manuscripts and in the Didache (the first liturgical guide of the ancient church).

7. However, it is possible that originally people always added a personal word of praise, and that later tradition merely fixed the wording (Jeremias).

## **(time permitting) The Eucharist in Luke-Acts**

- I. Food in general—and meals in particular—are a major theme in Luke-Acts. Indeed, these come up especially 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 it (Paul getting everyone to eat just before the shipwreck [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. Note, for example, the contrast between the behavior of the rich man in respect to Lazarus (Lue. 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. Note 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. Note, for example, the beatitudes and woes in the sermon on the plain (Luke 6:20-26).
- V. As we wait for that judgment, Jesus and the Church model the ideal by giving to all food and inclusion and by having the leaders act as servants.
- VI. In both his 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. Note, e.g., the breaking of bread in the Emmaus story (Luke 24:13-35).
- 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 inserts two major blocks of material which appear elsewhere in Matthew.
- 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; cf. Matt. 18:1, Mark 9:34, Luke 9:46).
  - B. The promise that the twelve will eat at Christ's heavenly banquet and judge Israel (22:28-30; Matt. 19:28).
- 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.
- B. The hope of a new order of existence in which the structures of exclusiveness and oppression will be done away.
- C. However, Luke assumes that the Church must have leaders and even believes that this leadership will somehow continue into the next world.
- X. In his narration of the Eucharist Luke also strengthens two themes which already appear in Mark (which Luke was using as a source).
- A. Luke emphasizes more than any other evangelist that the Last Supper was a Passover meal. Note 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. Historically, the Last Supper probably was not a Passover meal.
- B. Luke also places a greater emphasis on the theme that the next time Jesus dines with the disciples will be in the kingdom, since Jesus says this twice (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 especially 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 history the Eucharist became the primary means of reinforcing hierarchies of exclusion and power in the Church.
- 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. And the final fulfillment is still to come.

## **(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 originated 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, 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. Note that the Church never took an official position of which (if any) was correct.
- 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. Note that 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 realized 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. I suspect that the omission in some manuscripts is (alas) due, at least in part, to anti-Semitism.



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

- I. (review) As we have seen above, there are great discrepancies between the New Testament's accounts of the resurrection.
- II. (review) These discrepancies seem to be due to at least three factors.
  - A. Faulty memory and reconstruction (including apologetic reconstruction).
  - B. Theological editing to make diverse points.
  - C. Different "translations" into earthly terms of experiences which were essentially unlike normal experience.
- III. (review) 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 recognition 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. Note that the narratives insist 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 the resurrection experiences 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 at least half a century after the resurrection 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 soon?
- 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 is now 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 (Luke 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 (Luke 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., Luke 3:16; cf. Acts 1:5). Of course, the Spirit after her coming guides what happens in the remainder of Acts.

X. By breaking up the complex resurrection experience in this way, Luke makes the various dimensions of the original experience 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 his disciples on earth in a new way and is inspiring them 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. 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 Christians have as they continue to wait.

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

2. How to deal with the "second coming" today is, of course, an additional problem. My own solution is as follows:

a. Jesus historically did not predict his own second coming, but only a personal reunion with his disciples symbolized as drinking wine with them in the kingdom (Mark 14:25).

b. Belief in the personal return of Jesus began with the resurrection experiences.

c. I think that today we can see that the resurrection experiences do not necessitate believing in the personal return of Jesus.

d. One thing that I would insist on is that we still hope for (and

pray for and work for) the triumph of God's will on earth (cf. the Lord's Prayer).

3. In any event, Luke affirms that 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 (Luke 16:19-31, 23:43; Acts 7:59) and that we can die unexpectedly at any moment (Luke 12:16-20, Acts 12:20-23).
  - h. A final hope for all the world.

XIII. 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.

## **(time permitting) 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. As he describes 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 (Luke 3:38). Note that Matthew only deals with Jesus’s Jewish ancestry, since Matthew stops at Abraham (the first person in the biblical narrative to receive circumcision; Matt. 1:1-2).
  - B. Paul in his speech to the philosophers at Athens declares that
    1. All human beings have a common ancestor (Acts 17:26) whom God created.
    2. All 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 at least most true awareness 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. Note, 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 could be fellow

Christians was that they too had received the Spirit (Acts 15:8-9).

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

VIII. There are three basic models for how to achieve unity between human beings, and each 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 commitment to diversity will achieve the necessary harmony.

B. Instead, he holds that a common religious experience and faith are necessary for true unity.

C. Of course, for Luke this experience and faith are Christianity, and Christianity impels people to join the international church movement which is itself an outgrowth of the history of Israel.

Reflection: What is your solution to achieving unity among diverse groups, and how is your solution better than Luke's?

## **Introduction to John's Gospel: The Nature and Origin of the Fourth Gospel**

I. John's Gospel does not so much give us the actual words and deeds of Jesus, as an interpretation of their ultimate significance. Or to put it in another way, the gospel attempts to tell the story of Jesus from God's perspective.

A. At a couple of points, the gospel itself stresses that it is not giving us what people at the time thought was happening (e.g., 2:21-22, 12:16).

B. In the gospel Jesus himself stresses that after his death the Spirit will lead the disciples into all truth (16:12-13), and Jesus will no longer use veiled saying but will speak plainly (16:25).

C. The gospel repeatedly claims that it is telling us what God was doing (e.g., 11:49-52).

D. Presumably then, the authors (see below) of the gospel thought that they had been led into all truth, knew what God had done through Jesus, and should pass this priceless information on to the reader.

E. Note that in the ancient world it was an accepted practice for historians to compose speeches that reflected the historians' own conclusions about what it would have been appropriate for a character in history to have said.

II. Consequently, John's portrait of Jesus differs greatly from that in the first three gospels and presumably from that of the "historical" Jesus (i.e., what Jesus seemed to be at the time). Note, especially, that in John's Gospel

A. The chronology and events of Christ's life are different from those in Matthew, Mark, and Luke (the "synoptics").

1. In John there are three Passovers during Jesus's ministry, whereas in the synoptics there is only one.

2. In the synoptics during his ministry Jesus only goes to Jerusalem at the end of his life, whereas in John Jesus repeatedly travels to Jerusalem.

Even in the earlier part of his ministry most of the time he is there.

B. Christ's way of speaking is very different. Instead of short sayings and parables, we have long, unified discourses.

C. The content of Jesus's teaching differs. Instead of the coming of the kingdom, we have Jesus proclaiming himself.

D. Normally, the other gospels appear to be more historically accurate, though occasionally John seems to preserve superior traditions. Note, for example, only John claims that for a time Jesus worked alongside of John the Baptist (John 3:22-4:2). Historically, this claim is very plausible.

III. The gospel itself often reflects things that happened long after Jesus's death. The most significant are:

A. The expulsion of Christians from (some of?) the synagogues (9:22, 12:42, 16:2).

B. The unexpected death of the Beloved Disciple (21:22-23).

C. Perhaps a schism within the Johannine community over whether or not Christ had a normal human body (1:14, cf. 1 John 2:18-19, 4:1-3; 2 John 7-11).

IV. The origins of John's Gospel are obscure, but the following seems likely.

A. Ultimately, the gospel depends on the testimony of an eyewitness to Jesus's ministry whom the Gospel calls the disciple "Jesus loved" (e.g., John 21:24;

hereafter referred to as the “Beloved Disciple”). Unfortunately, we can only deduce a little about him.

1. The ancient tradition (which led to the present title of the book) that he was the Galilean fisherman John, the brother of James, and a member of the twelve appears to be mere speculation.
2. The gospel itself suggests that its author lived in Jerusalem (e.g., John 19:27).
  - a. The gospel concentrates on Jesus’s ministry in Judea, especially during the pilgrimage feasts.
  - b. We never see the Beloved Disciple himself in Galilee until after the resurrection.
3. Accordingly, it seems likely that the author did not travel with Jesus to Galilee but saw him whenever Jesus came south for the festivals.
4. This person wrote most of the present gospel, as Chapter 21 explicitly claims.
  - a. To be sure, liberal scholars doubt this claim, because of the differences between this gospel and the synoptics.
  - b. But if we acknowledge that the author is deliberately writing about the meaning of what happened rather than the actual historical events, I see no reason why someone who knew Jesus could not have written the book.

B. After the Beloved Disciple died, an editor revised the book (21:23-24). It is especially clear that the editor added chapter 21. Note, for example,

1. In 20:30 the gospel says that it will not present Jesus’s other signs, but then the gospel in chapter 21 proceeds to present one!
2. 21:23 refutes a rumor that the Beloved Disciple would not die, and this refutation suggests that he is already dead.
3. In 21:24 the writer, apparently speaking in behalf of the Church, distinguishes between himself and the author.
4. Subsequently, we will see how other literary “problems” imply that there was an editor and help us understand what the editor changed and why.

C. The present form of the gospel comes from approximately 90-100 C.E. (i.e., after the expulsion from (some of?) the synagogues and the death of the elderly Beloved Disciple and before P52 [125-150]) and various second-century Christian writers (e.g., Heracleon) who use or refer to the gospel.

V. Many scholars attempt to give a more detailed reconstruction of the steps that led to the gospel (e.g., that the evangelist wrote a second edition [Raymond Brown]), but since there is little evidence to go on, these reconstructions are very hypothetical.

VI. The style and content of the gospel suggest that what the book has to say is very basic and yet too profound to grasp all at once.

A. The style is artificially simple and repetitive.

1. The vocabulary is limited.
2. The sentence structure is basic.
3. The same images (light, water, life) and the same phrases (e.g., “I am,” “truly I say to you”) keep coming up.

- B. The plot takes predictable turns, especially the alternation between event, dialogue about the event, and monologue by Jesus.
- C. There are basically only two themes:
  - 1. Jesus's relationship to the Father
  - 2. Jesus's relationship to the world and the believer.
- D. The implication seems to be that what the gospel is saying is not complicated but nevertheless is so profound that we need to hear it over and over in order to understand it fully.



## **The Theme of the Gospel: We Are Saved by Believing that Jesus is God**

### **Infleshed**

Topic for reflection: What, if anything, do we need to believe about God or the world in order to be deeply loving and hopeful? How can we come to believe it?

- I. From a literary perspective 1:1-18 and 20:24-31 are crucial for the interpretation of John's Gospel as a whole.
  - A. To be sure, each of these passages is closely connected to adjacent material and is part of a larger unit.
  - B. Still these sections are crucial, because they are the introduction and the climax of the gospel, as we can see from position, content, and style. Consequently, they should give interpretative guidelines for the book as a whole.
- II. From these passages, to say nothing of the rest of the gospel, we can see that John's Gospel is chiefly concerned to make three points:
  - A. Jesus is God infleshed.
    1. Note the uncompromising statements that Jesus is divine (1:1, 1:18 [P66, P75, S, B, etc.], 20:28). An emphasis on the divinity of Jesus pervades the gospel. Note particularly the "I am" statements. In the Bible (especially, Exod. 3:13-14, Isa. 43:13) God reveals himself with the phrase, "I am."
    2. Note also the uncompromising emphasis that Jesus has a fleshly body (1:14, 20:24-27). This emphasis also occurs elsewhere (e.g., 19:34).
  - B. Why it is important to believe Jesus is God infleshed.
    1. In order to know God and see his glory; receive grace and truth; become God's children.
    2. Receive life in his name.
    3. Additional reasons appear in other passages: receive requests in prayer; receive the Spirit; become God's friends.
    4. All of these seem to be closely related or are even different ways of saying the same thing. Through belief in the incarnation we can become united with God and receive all the blessings which this unity gives.
  - C. An explanation why believing is possible and makes sense.
    1. The testimony of the Baptist and the gospel writers and the Church.
    2. The resurrection appearances and the miraculous signs and the witness of those who saw them
    3. The structure of the gospel as a whole as it leads us from conversion to mystical union (William Countryman; see below for further explanation).
- III. A more detailed examination of the claim that Jesus is God infleshed.
  - A. John maintains the divinity of Christ and monotheism by stressing that Jesus is both one with the Father and yet distinct from him.
  - B. John is not only aware that this is a paradox but insists that we must accept it as such (e.g., 1:1).
  - C. Still, John does provide explanatory models of how Jesus and the Father can both be the one God.
    1. The word and the speaker (1:1ff.). Jesus is the self-expression of God.

2. Mutual knowledge (e.g., 10:15).
3. Mutual donation, mutual honoring (e.g., 5:22-23).
4. Perfect imitation (e.g., 5:19).
5. Mutual indwelling (e.g., 17:21).
6. Progressive mission (e.g., 17:18-19).
7. Of course, the very terms "Father" and "Son" suggest how Jesus can be God. He derives his being from the one divine nature and shares in an intimate personal relationship with his "parent."
8. All of the models are somehow part of the mutual love of the Father and the Son.

D. Excursus on logos:

1. The term is broader than the English translation "word" and includes "reason."
2. It was an important concept in some Greek philosophy, especially Stoicism.
3. Perhaps the primary background of the term in John is the Old Testament's belief in pre-existent wisdom (cf. Proverbs 8).
4. Nevertheless, I suspect that in calling Jesus the "logos" the evangelist also wants to underline the saving power of the words of Jesus.

E. For John, Jesus is the only link between God and the world. This theme is prominent already in the prologue. As the only link Jesus somehow summarizes and replaces (or fulfills) all other links.

1. Jesus absorbs all titles. Note that shortly after 1:18 the gospel gives Jesus a host of titles (Lamb of God, Messiah, Rabbi, Son of God, King of Israel, Son of Humanity).
2. All that is good in the past bears witness to him (e.g., 8:56).
3. Everyone who is sincere comes to Jesus (e.g., 18:37).

IV. It is because Jesus is the only link that he needs to be both divine and human, since he must fully bridge the gap between God and us.

A. Because Jesus is divine, he can perfectly mirror God and thereby reveal Him. Hence, "he who sees me has seen the Father" (14:9).

B. Because he is human, we can see Jesus (1:14) and strive to pattern our own lives on his.

C. Through the combination of divinity and humanity in Jesus we can enter into the life of God himself. The models of how Jesus and the Father are one are also models of how we enter into the divine life.

1. The word comes to us, and through his teaching we become divine (10:34-36).
2. Jesus's knowledge of the Father allows us to know Him through Jesus (1:18).
3. We become involved in the mutual donation and honoring, since we are what the Father and the Son give each other (e.g., 17:6), and we enter into the honor. Consider the tremendous implications of this.
4. The perfect imitation allows us to imitate God. E.g., we love one another as the Father loved Jesus.
5. The indwelling of the Father and the Son includes us (e.g., 14:20).

Their spirit becomes our spirit.

6. The progressive mission, of course, includes us.

7. We may summarize the above by saying that the love that unites the Father and the Son is always reaching out to us. Note that the ultimate goal of human life is to see the eternal glory of Jesus and the Father (17:24) and to become God's friends (15:13ff.).

V. Accordingly, John's Christology is soteriological (concerned about salvation).

## **The Problem of the Credibility of John's Gospel and Its Christology Now and Originally**

- I. Review: The basic message of John's Gospel is that we are saved by believing that Jesus is God infleshed.
- II. John's Gospel claims to be based on real history.
  - A. The gospel explicitly states that its primary author was an eyewitness of what it records and that his testimony is reliable (21:24).
  - B. Except for the prologue, the gospel deals with earthly events.
- III. At times we can verify that the historical record is basically accurate.
  - A. Many of the events in John appear to be independent accounts of events recorded in the first three gospels.
  - B. Some of these events (e.g., the cleansing of the temple) have all the signs of having actually taken place.
  - C. Occasionally, John even gives details (especially, that the Last Supper and the crucifixion were on the day before Passover) that are more likely than what the synoptics record.
  - D. It would appear that the evangelist had special access to information about Jesus's work in Judea and that, therefore, at least some of what the gospel tells us about this work is reliable.
    1. The synoptics concentrate on Jesus's ministry in Galilee until his final trip to Jerusalem and apparently had little knowledge of his prior work in Judea.
    2. The Gospel of John spends a lot of time on this previous work in Judea, especially Jesus's trips to Jerusalem for the pilgrimage festivals.
    3. It is likely that Jesus went to Jerusalem for these festivals, since theoretically every Jewish male was required to go to Jerusalem three times a year (Deut. 16:16), and Jesus as a devout person would have felt obligated.
    4. In the first twenty chapters of John's Gospel the Beloved Disciple only appears in material about Judea.
    5. Hence, the Beloved Disciple probably lived there and, as a result, had special information about Jesus's early work in the South.
    6. Accordingly, we should assume that some of what the gospel says about this work may be historical even when unsubstantiated by the synoptics.
- IV. From what the gospel itself tells us, we can see that even its high Christology had its starting point in some facts about the "historical Jesus." Note, especially, John 5:16-18. Here the gospel cites the surely historical facts that Jesus worked miracles, had his own interpretation of Sabbath regulations, and called God "Father" and uses these facts to claim that Jesus is equal to God.
- V. Nevertheless, the gospel insists that scripture and the Holy Spirit guided its interpretation of the history and that no one can know the truth about Jesus by their own power.
  - A. The gospel repeatedly notes that at the time certain events occurred no one realized their true significance (2:22, 12:16, 20:9).

B. In the gospel Jesus himself declares that after his death he through the Spirit will explain to the disciples the significance of what he said and did (14:26, 16:12-15, 16:25).

C. Jesus also insists that no one can recognize the truth about him unless God the Father leads them (e.g., 6:44).

VI. From a negative perspective we can certainly attest that on our own power we cannot verify John's claims today.

A. Historically the gospel often conflicts with the synoptics and usually seems far less accurate. Whole scenes (e.g., the conversion of Samaritans in chapter 4) appear to be fiction. Our other sources indicate that there were no Samaritan followers of Jesus until after the resurrection (Matt. 10:5, Acts 8:5ff.).

B. It seems that much of the material was freely composed by the author.

C. Especially Christ's speeches appear to be the theology of the evangelist, not the sayings of the historical Jesus. Note the vast difference between the speeches of Jesus in John and in the synoptics. It was common practice in ancient histories to compose speeches which reflected the author's point of view.

D. Naturally, the opening of the gospel cannot be based on history.

E. It seems unlikely that Jesus ever made explicit claims that he was more than a human being.

F. Hence, we must conclude that the historical evidence itself scarcely justifies the gospel's claims, especially its claims about Jesus.

VII. In the period when the Beloved Disciple wrote, many people probably attacked the reliability of his gospel.

A. As the gospel itself makes clear, the Jewish establishment was outraged by the claim that Jesus was divine (e.g., 10:33).

B. Many Christians within the Beloved Disciple's community may have denied that Christ had a fleshly body (1 John 4:2-3, 2 John 7).

VIII. Jewish members of the community were under enormous pressure to disown the gospel's Christology. The gospel narrative makes it clear that Jewish synagogues were expelling people who confessed Jesus's divinity (9:22, 12:42, 16:2), and some Jewish Christians chose to remain secret followers of Jesus rather than confess him publicly (cf., e.g., Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea [3:1-2, 7:50-52, 19:38-39]).

IX. The credibility of the Gospel may have become even less with the Beloved Disciple's death.

A. The Beloved Disciple was an eyewitness both of Jesus's ministry and of the resurrection, and in his own life he had come to the Christology that Jesus was God infleshed. Hence, as long as he was alive, he could attest that the gospel was true.

B. With his death probably no one could defend the gospel in the same way, since it appears that he was the last living eyewitness.

1. People in the community assumed that he would not die until Christ's second coming (John 21:23), and this assumption seems to be based on a promise recorded in Mark 9:1 that some of Jesus's original followers would live until then.

2. The fact that this assumption got applied to the Beloved Disciple suggests that he was the final person in the community who had actually

known Jesus.

C. Apparently, about the time he died, people in the community began to be aware of other gospels, and these had a very different record of what happened (cf. John 21:25).

X. Accordingly, the final editor had to face the problem of how people could now know that the gospel was true.

Topic for reflection: How do people who believe that the Bible is true respond to attacks on the Bible? How should they respond?

Assignment: Read Matthew chapters 3 and 11. Study John chapters 1 and 3.

## **An Illustration of the Technique of the Fourth Gospel and the Problem of Credibility: The Gospel's Treatment of John the Baptist**

- I. (review) John's Gospel draws on history but interprets it in a special way.
- II. (review) According to the gospel, we can only come to see the truth of this interpretation by the leading of God.
- III. We may go on to say that what the gospel intends to offer is God's perspective on human history. The gospel tells what God was doing. Note that in the gospel various characters unwittingly accomplish God's will (e.g., Caiaphas; see John 11:49-53).
- IV. We can see the technique of the evangelist by looking at the gospel's treatment of John the Baptist.
- V. In the gospel John the Baptist repeatedly bears witness to Jesus as the Christ and perhaps even as God (e.g., 1:29-34), and it is thanks to this testimony that many believe.
- VI. However, in the first three gospels the Baptist's relationship to Jesus seems very different.
  - A. John baptizes Jesus in Matthew and Mark.
  - B. When John is in prison, he sends to Jesus to *ask* if the latter is the one who is to come (Matt. 11:2-6; Luke 7:18-23).
- VII. Moreover, we must reckon with the probability that even the synoptics exaggerate John's support of Jesus, since they too reflect subsequent Christian theology. The Jewish historian Josephus briefly discusses John the Baptist and never suggests that the Baptist was connected with Jesus.
- VIII. Historically, it seems likely that John predicted that soon God would send the Messiah to judge Israel and the nation had to get ready. Note that the sayings that most likely actually come from the Baptist merely predict that the Messiah will somehow administer a spiritual baptism and save the righteous and destroy the wicked (e.g., Matt. 3:11-12).
- IX. It is at least possible that Jesus was originally John's disciple, and Jesus withdrew to Galilee only after the Baptist's arrest (cf. Mark 1:14).
- X. It is striking that the Fourth Gospel in its portrait of John includes some of this old tradition.
  - A. John the Baptist stresses that the one who is to come is to baptize with the Spirit (1:33).
  - B. Before John is put into prison, Jesus is baptizing alongside of him (3:22-24).
- XI. Even more interesting, in the gospel John the Baptist himself insists that although God sent him to prepare for Jesus, he did not recognize Jesus's mission initially but only after Jesus received the Holy Spirit (1:31-33).
- XII. Of course, the writers of the gospel heavily edited the words of the Baptist and supplied most of what he says in the book.
- XIII. From the perspective of these writers Jesus was the messiah and did baptize with the Holy Spirit and judge Israel and thus fulfilled John's prophecy of what God would do. These writers probably also felt that the destruction of Jerusalem fulfilled the Baptist's prediction that God would destroy those who were not prepared for the coming of the Messiah.
- XIV. The gospel is claiming that *from God's perspective* John the Baptist was sent to

prepare for Jesus's coming and John's prediction of the coming of the Lord did get at least some of Israel ready to believe in Jesus (note John 10:40-42). Of course, the Baptist himself was not fully aware of what God was accomplishing through him.

XV. It is quite possible that the Beloved Disciple himself started out as a disciple of John the Baptist and through his testimony ultimately came to believe in Jesus.

A. In the present gospel the Beloved Disciple is always anonymous and normally is one step ahead of Peter (13:23-25, 20:2-8, 21:7).

B. In 1:35-42 we read of an anonymous disciple who listens to the Baptist's testimony and comes to Jesus immediately before Peter does.

C. Many scholars (including me) assume that this is the Beloved Disciple, and that historically he was a disciple of John the Baptist and subsequently became a follower of Jesus.

XVI. If so, the Beloved Disciple in his own life came to Jesus at least in part because of the Baptist's ministry. John the Baptist convinced the Beloved Disciple that the Messiah was soon to appear, and the Beloved Disciple then recognized Jesus as this Messiah.

XVII. Hence, we can well understand how the Beloved Disciple could claim that John the Baptist bore witness to Jesus, and that from God's perspective the Baptist's primary mission was to prepare for Christ's coming even if the Baptist himself was not fully aware of this. The Gospel passes on this claim.

XVIII. Of course, we need not accept the claim.

XIX. The question we must face is on what grounds we can decide whether or not the gospel's interpretation of the Baptist's role is correct.

XX. I think we should admit that at least in the case of the portrayal of John the Baptist we cannot determine the gospel's truth simply on historical grounds.

A. Historically, the gospel's presentation of the Baptist has a firm basis.

B. However, it also remains a very special interpretation which cannot be proven from the data.

XXI. What is true of the presentation of the Baptist is true of the rest of the Fourth Gospel as well. The gospel has a firm basis in historical facts but also remains an inspired interpretation of those facts. Hence, its truth must primarily be decided on some other basis than historical accuracy, and the gospel itself agrees.



## Learning to Read Johannine Narrative

### a reading of John 2:1-11

- I. The narratives in John's Gospel are paradoxical from a literary perspective.
  - A. On the one hand, they are full of problems, such as missing information, improbable psychology, awkward intrusions, strange turns of events.
  - B. Yet, on the other hand, the stories in John often are literarily brilliant.
- II. The uneven literary quality of the gospel narratives is primarily because the evangelist and the editor had special goals and techniques.
  - A. The gospel is primarily concerned about theological issues and is willing to sacrifice literary values to achieve theological goals. Two related goals are paramount:
    1. Making points about Jesus
    2. Showing how one comes to faith in him.
  - B. The gospel is also concerned about the needs of the Johannine community and is willing to sacrifice historical accuracy to be able to speak to later pastoral problems.
  - C. In general the gospel is not interested in making its narratives realistic or even plausible.
  - D. The gospel writers also have only a very limited concern with the psychology of the characters in the narrative.
  - E. Instead, the writers rely heavily on theological symbolism. Often this symbolism appears in the multiple meanings that a word or phrase may have.
  - F. However, the gospel sometimes achieves brilliant literary effects in making its theological and pastoral points.
- III. We can illustrate what has just been noted by looking at the healing of the man born blind (ch. 9).
  - A. As the conclusion makes clear, the purpose of the story is theological (9:38-41), and the plot primarily symbolizes spiritual development.
  - B. Moreover, the story portrays "the Jews" not as they were in the lifetime of Jesus, but as they were when the gospel was written. Note, especially, the expulsion from the synagogue that was "*already*" in view (vs. 22).
  - C. The plot has various holes (How do the disciples know that the man was *born* blind [vs. 2]? How does the man born blind know that "Jesus" [vs.11] is the name of the person who healed him? When did the Pharisees at the end of the story come to Jesus?) which the writers could have eliminated if they had cared.
  - D. Nevertheless, on the whole the story is literarily impressive. Consider, for example, the following (Raymond Brown):
    1. The gospel cleverly manipulates the plot so the blind man begins confessing Jesus before seeing him. Note that the climax of the story is when the man sees Jesus, and this seeing symbolizes full insight.
    2. The Pharisees keep stressing what they know as they descend into deeper and deeper ignorance, whereas the blind man who admits ignorance and has little knowledge comes to more and more truth.
    3. In the end the Pharisees pass judgment on themselves (from the

reader's viewpoint), since they condemn a courageous individual whom the reader knows to be innocent.

4. We even have a convincing portrait of how religious teachers become defensive and dishonest when they are exposed.

E. These literary achievements, however, primarily express John's theology.

#### IV. How to analyze Johannine narrative.

A. First read the story and its larger context and determine the theological and pastoral points that are being made. Take special care to be open to any theological symbolism. Oddities in the story may be due to such symbolism.

B. Then see how the narrative features dramatize those points.

#### V. An analysis of another Johannine narrative, the raising of Lazarus (11:1-53).

A. From a strictly literary viewpoint, the plot is full of very disturbing features. Why does Jesus weep, since he delayed coming when Lazarus was sick and thus allowed Lazarus to die and now is about to raise Lazarus from the dead (vs. 35)! How does Lazarus manage to come out of the tomb if his feet are still bound (vs. 44)?

B. From a strictly historical viewpoint, the story has many inaccuracies.

1. It is most improbable that the raising of Lazarus is what led the Jewish authorities to kill Jesus as the story claims.

2. This stupendous miracle is not mentioned in the synoptics, and we can only wonder whether it actually happened, at least in the highly dramatic way that the gospel portrays.

C. The theological and pastoral purpose of the story is

1. To show that Jesus is the resurrection and the life (11:15, 25-26), i.e., the one who gives spiritual life in this world and eternal life in the next.

2. To show that Jesus can give life to others only by giving up his own. The story is a transition to the passion.

3. To portray Lazarus as the symbol for a martyr. Note that later in the gospel the authorities decide to kill Lazarus because he is causing people to believe in Jesus (12:10-11).

D. Once we keep these points in mind, many details become literarily powerful. For example:

1. Thomas's resigned, "let us also go that we may die with him" (11:16) is full of irony.

a. In Jerusalem Jesus will give up his life to save his disciples from physical death (esp., 18:8).

b. Yet, ultimately the price of faithfulness will indeed be dying because of Jesus (16:2).

2. Jesus's tears take on a new meaning: Jesus weeps because raising Lazarus will lead to his own death (12:45-53). Note the irony of 11:36-- Jesus loves Lazarus more than the bystanders know!

VI. Assignment: Try doing a literary and theological analysis of John 2:1-12. After you have done your analysis, compare it with mine immediately below.

## **Appendix not covered in lecture: One Possible Analysis of John 2:1-12, the Changing of Water into Wine**

- I. The Gospel of John attempts to look at the past from God's point of view.
  - A. To some extent all historians do this.
  - B. Nevertheless, John does so consciously. Note
    1. In the gospel Jesus promises the disciples that after his death the Spirit will remind them of what he said (14:26) and lead them into all truth (16:12-13).
    2. At various points in the story, the narrator explicitly says that he is now telling you what no one at the time understood but what in retrospect he knew that God was doing (e.g., 12:12-16).
- II. Hence, the Gospel of John does two things simultaneously
  - A. It still tells us what happened in the past.
  - B. It guides the reader to see this past differently from the characters in the narrative (except for Jesus) and differently from the way that historically people understood the events at the time.
- III. To accomplish its double goal, the gospel
  - A. Exercises considerable freedom in inventing the past, but, in my opinion, the gospel always maintains some real contact with "what actually happened."
  - B. The gospel relies heavily on literary symbolism which the characters in the narrative do not understand, but which the reader is supposed to notice.
- IV. We can see an excellent illustration of pervasive literary symbolism in the gospel by looking at the story of the miracle at the wedding feast in Cana.
  - A. An abundance of wine in the Bible is a characteristic of the blessed age to come (e.g., Amos 9:13).
  - B. A wedding feast is a symbol of the blessed age to come, and the groom, a symbol of the Messiah (e.g., Matt. 22:2).
  - C. The "hour" in John's Gospel is the crucifixion and the resurrection (e.g., 13:1).
  - D. "Six" in biblical numerology connotes incompleteness or even evil. In Revelation 666 is the number of the Beast (Rev. 13:18).
  - E. Concern with ritual purity in John's Gospel bespeaks the old age. For Christians baptism replaces/fulfills the purification rites under the old Law (cf. 3:25-26).
  - F. Obedient servants in the Bible are the true followers of God.
  - G. A "sign" in John's Gospel is a miracle that points to Jesus and reveals some dimension of who he truly is.
- V. Consequently, read on the symbolic level the story suggests that
  - A. Jesus is the true Messiah ("groom") who brings the true blessings of final salvation. Note that whereas the nominal groom provided the inferior wine in insufficient quantity, Jesus provides the superior wine in startling abundance.
  - B. This salvation fulfills the hopes of the Old Testament faith and makes its rites obsolete. The six water jars which were intended for purification are now used for a different purpose.
  - C. This salvation comes through Christ's death and resurrection (his "hour").

The story stresses that Jesus's true hour has not yet come.

D. To recognize who Christ is and become his true disciples, we must be prepared to "do whatever he tells" (2:5) us. The servants draw 180 gallons of water simply because Jesus tells them to do so.

E. If we faithfully obey Christ's commands, he will give us some secret "sign" that he is indeed the Messiah who is bringing salvation, but the world probably will not even notice that the sign occurred. The servants know where the wine originated, and the disciples see Christ's glory, but the master of ceremonies and the groom notice nothing.

F. That secret sign will strengthen our faith.

VI. Because the story is so full of symbolism, the story may be fictional.

A. The story does not appear in the other gospels which otherwise tell us more about Jesus's miracles and ministry in Galilee (where Cana is located) than John's Gospel does.

B. If we strip the story of all its symbolic elements, virtually nothing remains (John Meier).

VII. Nevertheless, the story clearly resembles the feeding of the multitude which is in all the gospels and, I believe, is historical.

VIII. I believe that the historical feeding of the multitude basically had the same symbolism as the story of the changing of water into wine. By miraculously feeding the multitude Jesus intended to give a foretaste of

A. The full coming of the kingdom when all would have plenty to eat

B. His own special role as the inaugurator of the kingdom.

IX. Hence, the story of the changing of water into wine is one illustration of the freedom of John's Gospel to present a fictional retelling of the past which

A. Brings out the "spiritual" meaning of what happened that the evangelist discovered in retrospect

B. Remains basically true to what literally took place during the ministry of Jesus.

X. From a literary perspective the changing of water into wine is a transitional story.

A. The previous section of the gospel concerns conversion (William Countryman), and John uses a series of successive "days" to structure the section (1:29, 1:35, 1:43).

B. The story of the changing of water into wine brings that section to a conclusion by

1. Completing the week. "On the third day" probably means three days later, since four days have already been mentioned, and it would have taken Jesus a couple of days to get to Cana from Judea (cf. 1:43). The structure of days explicitly ends with Cana (2:12-13).

2. Telling us that secret signs will complete our initial conversion.

a. According to the stories in the conversion section,

1). Conversion begins when someone bears witness to Jesus.

2). And invites you to come and see for yourself.

3). If you do, Jesus tells you something about who you truly are, and you respond by believing in him.

b. The material immediately before the story of the changing of

water into wine climaxes with the promise that the disciples will see greater things that will confirm their faith (1:51).

c. Then, as we have seen, Jesus works a miracle which confirms the faith of the disciples (2:11), but the other guests at the wedding do not even realize what occurred.

d. The story of the changing of water into wine also fulfills the symbolism of the strange promise in the previous verse "you will see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Humanity [Man]."

1). The promise refers to Jacob's ladder (Gen. 28:12) and means that the disciples will discover that Jesus is the link between God and the world.

2). The changing of water into wine shows that Jesus is the one who brings God's salvation to the world.

C. At the same time the changing of water into wine is the "beginning of the signs" and points forward to all of the subsequent signs in the gospel. Note, especially, that the story of the second "sign" explicitly refers back to the first and also occurs at Cana (4:46-54).

D. The themes of the "signs" in John's Gospel are

1. We misunderstand the miracles of Jesus if we only see them as physical wonders to provide for our material needs (especially, 6:26-27).

2. Instead, we must see the miracles as pointers to Jesus, the one who brings people into a new relationship to God. Note that Jesus will sometimes refuse to work a miracle unless the person requesting it shows some faith (e.g., John 4:48-50).

3. We must also see the miracles as pointing to the definitive "sign," namely the death and resurrection of Jesus. Note what Jesus says in the story that immediately follows the changing of water into wine (2:13-22). Note 20:30 also.

E. All of these themes are present in the story of the changing of water into wine.

1. Jesus does more than simply provide physical wine.

2. The miracle points to Jesus as the Messiah who brings final salvation.

3. Jesus refuses to work the miracle until the characters show faith.

Notice his challenge to Mary and her confident directions to the servants and that the miracle apparently did not even occur until after they had drawn 180 gallons of water and taken the water to the master of ceremonies.

4. Nevertheless, Jesus insists in the story that his "hour" (i.e., his death and resurrection) must come before final salvation is possible. The changing of water into wine is only a pointer.

## **The Final Editing of John's Gospel as One Response to the Problem of Credibility; John 21**

- I. (review) After the death of the Beloved Disciple, there was considerable doubt about the reliability of his gospel.
- II. At this point an editor revised the book.
- III. It would appear that for the most part the editor did not compose new material, since Johannine style is fairly uniform. Within the first 20 chapters of the gospel, the most likely free compositions of the editor are the passages about the Beloved Disciple.
  - A. These passages interrupt their contexts (note, e.g., 19:25-27).
  - B. They would have been immodest coming from the Beloved Disciple, since they portray him as the ideal disciple.
  - C. After the Beloved Disciple's death the final editor would have wished to put the hero of the community into the gospel and portray him as the ideal disciple.{For stylistic smoothness, I will subsequently refer to the final editor as "he." However, we cannot exclude the possibility that the editor was a woman.}
- IV. The editor rearranged material (e.g., he reversed what are now chapters 5 and 6) in the gospel and probably added additional material taken from the writings (sermons?) of the Beloved Disciple (e.g., chs. 15-16).
- V. The editor was reluctant to compose new material probably because the Beloved Disciple had been a disciple of Jesus and an eyewitness of the resurrection and a leading figure in the early history of the Johannine community. The editor undoubtedly revered the Beloved Disciple and did not have the authority to change his work drastically.
- VI. To discover the editor's viewpoint, therefore, we need to pay special attention to the changes he made in the order of the material and look carefully at the additional materials he took from the Beloved Disciple's other writings and inserted.
- VII. We must concentrate on the basic message of these additions and changes, since the editor's freedom was limited. Some of the details in the material may not have fit his overall goal.
- VIII. The place where we are most likely to discover the editor's overall design is chapter 21.
  - A. This chapter is the passage that most obviously comes from the editor. Note that the conclusion of the Beloved Disciple's gospel must have been 20:30-31.
  - B. As the concluding passage of the edited gospel, chapter 21 would be an appropriate place for the editor to summarize his own perspective. By summarizing it here, he would also make that perspective an interpretative key to the gospel as a whole. We expect concluding passages to guide our overall understanding of a work.
  - C. Consequently, most scholars agree that we must study chapter 21 to learn the editor's methods and goals.
- IX. In interpreting chapter 21, as in interpreting other Johannine narratives, we should focus on its symbolic system, and we should see the story as addressing the situation of the intended readers.
  - A. The editor as a follower of the Beloved Disciple would naturally have wanted to imitate the master's style as much as possible, especially when revising the

master's book.

B. Moreover, by this point the reader has been conditioned to read narratives in a certain way, and the editor would have assumed that the reader would approach the final narrative in the same way.

X. As in the other narratives, we should see oddities in the plot as a potent indicator that deeper theological symbolism may be present.

XI. In chapter 21 there are at least two oddities.

A. The story of the catch and of the meal do not fit together well. Jesus is cooking fish on the beach and yet asks Peter to bring him some.

B. It is odd that the narrative tells us that Peter was naked and that he tied on a covering and jumped into the water.

XII. We can make sense of the chapter as a whole if we assume that it portrays the stages in a Christian's spiritual life.

A. In a pioneering work, L. William Countryman argued that the arrangement of John 1-20 mirrors the stages of Christian life by going from conversion to baptism to Eucharist to higher spiritual attainments, culminating in mystical union.

B. In response, I have argued that this arrangement is most apparent in chapter 21 and, therefore, comes from the final editor.

C. 21:1-7a suggests conversion.

1. The disciples are back in their pre-conversion setting as it appears in the synoptics. They are home in Galilee fishing.

2. Christ has already risen from the dead, but the potential disciples do not know him and are in darkness.

3. The story of the miraculous catch is a conversion story in Luke 5:2-11, and the editor and his intended readers may have known it as such.

4. In the story Jesus challenges the disciples and then provides a sign. As a result they recognize him and come to him (i.e., they are converted).

D. The section about Peter jumping into the water (21:7b) symbolizes baptism. In the early church baptismal candidates probably stripped, tied on a temporary covering, and were then baptized by immersion.

E. The subsequent scene in which Jesus feeds the disciples (21:8-14) symbolizes Eucharist. Note, especially, Jesus taking the bread and giving it. Elsewhere the New Testament uses such language in connection with the Eucharist. In the early church only the baptized could receive the Eucharist.

F. The beginning of the dialog between Jesus and Peter (21:15-17) stresses committed discipleship (cf. 18:15-27). Peter must now go on to love Jesus and feed his sheep.

G. The end of the dialog (21:18-19) points to giving up one's very life for Jesus. After feeding Jesus's sheep, Peter must suffer a martyr's death.

H. Then we have a scene (21:20-23) in which Jesus announces a still higher vocation: Replacing him in the world until his second coming. The Beloved Disciple must abide until Christ's return. Just as Jesus was at the Father's breast and revealed him to human beings (1:18), so the Beloved Disciple was at the chest of Jesus and must now reveal him. Of course, the Beloved Disciple abides in the testimony of the book, since the passage makes it clear that Jesus did not promise

that the Beloved Disciple would not die.

XIII. On the basis of chapter 21 we may make a hypothesis: The editor of John's Gospel subtly shaped the material left behind by the Beloved Disciple so that the present canonical gospel basically recapitulates the growth in the Christian life from conversion to taking Jesus's place in this world. I say "basically" because the editor mostly rearranged material, and, as a result, the gospel could not perfectly reflect the Christian life. The editor had to paint in broad strokes.

XIV. We may test this hypothesis by looking at the first 20 chapters of John section by section and seeing what changes the editor seems to have made and noticing where the major divisions in the present gospel are and what the predominant themes are in each section. Of course, we cannot always be sure whether a seeming change was due to the editor. If there is a consistent pattern, however, we can at least be certain of what he was trying to do.

XV. We may further hypothesize that if the gospel depicts the spiritual growth in the Christian life, this growth also might explain how readers can come to know that the claims of the gospel are true. Note that 21:24 suggests that the editor was concerned about establishing the truth of the gospel. This concern is logical, since the gospel's credibility was under attack (see above).



## Signs in John's Gospel

- I. As the literary climax of the gospel makes clear, "sign" is an important theme in John (20:30-31).
- II. The concept of sign dominates the first half of the gospel.
  - A. The theme of Christ's "hour" divides the gospel into two halves approximately at 13:1, with the first half emphasizing that the hour has not yet come and the second half emphasizing that it has.
  - B. About the dividing point we have a summary (12:37ff.) which suggests that the first 12 chapters are a series of signs.
  - C. In line with what the summary says, the first half of the gospel gives us a series of "signs" with accompanying discourse and differing reactions. Specifically, there appear to be 7 narrated miracles: 1) changing water into wine, 2) the healing of the royal official's son, 3) the healing of the man by the pool, 4) the feeding of the multitude, 5) the walking on water, 6) the healing of the man born blind, 7) the raising of Lazarus. Note that there are no signs in the second half of the gospel, except for the supreme sign of the resurrection.
  - D. Accordingly, scholars sometimes label the first half of the gospel as "the book of signs."
- III. Many scholars feel that the gospel incorporates a written sign source, but I do not think that the evidence that they cite is persuasive.
- IV. The numbering of the two miracles at Cana draws attention to them and suggests that we should find in them the basic theology of sign.
- V. From these "signs," as well as other material, we can conclude that a sign is a miracle that points beyond itself to Jesus, especially to some aspect of his ministry. It is noteworthy that Jesus can respond to a demand for a sign by pointing to himself and his death and resurrection (2:18b-19). Some of the signs and their symbolism:
  - A. Turning water into wine at the wedding at Cana points to Jesus as the eschatological bridegroom who provides messianic food. Note, especially, 2:10. For a more detailed discussion see above.
  - B. Multiplying the loaves at Passover points to Jesus as the one who provides the bread of life which is both his Divine Wisdom and his flesh in the Eucharist.
  - C. Walking on the water stresses the divinity of Christ. Notice that Jesus identifies himself by saying literally, "I am; do not be afraid" (cf. Exodus 3:14). In the Old Testament God controls the waters.
  - D. Healing the blind man points to Jesus as the one who enlightens. Note, especially, the end of the story.
  - E. Raising Lazarus points to Jesus as the one who gives eternal life. Note the dialog with Martha.
- VI. If we look at the two numbered signs, we see that both increase faith, but only because some (potential) faith exists already.
  - A. In the first story, the servants draw the water and even take it to the master of ceremonies before we learn that it turns to wine. After the miracle we read that the disciples believed.
  - B. In the second story Jesus refuses to work the sign until the man first believes (especially, 4:50) but nevertheless the miracle increases the man's faith (4:53).

VII. What is true in these stories is true of the whole gospel: Signs strengthen faith, but only when some openness is already present. NO sign will convince those who are closed.

VIII. Accordingly, a sign exposes people and helps the righteous move toward greater faith and salvation and causes the evil to move toward death. Compare 5:1-18 & chapter 9.

IX. Nevertheless, the increased faith that results from signs is still weak and unreliable (2:23-25).

X. Accordingly, we must go beyond a faith based primarily on miracles.

A. If we do not, we think of Jesus only as a helpful miracle worker, and the miracles cease to be signs (6:26-27).

B. What the signs point to and what ultimately replaces them in the pilgrimage of faith is the cross, resurrection (2:18ff.), and the Spirit, and the love Christ's followers have for one another. Note that 20:29-30 suggests that the resurrection is the supreme sign and that in John the resurrection includes the gift of the Spirit.

## **John 1:1-2:12, Jesus Challenges People to Initial Conversion**

Topic for reflection: What makes people convert to a religion? Do recent converts often become overenthusiastic?

I. The opening verses of the gospel have a striking literary problem: The sections about John the Baptist (1:6-8, 1:15) are intrusive.

II. This problem is probably due to the final editor who added material about John the Baptist and produced the awkwardness.

III. Literarily, the additions concerning John the Baptist unite the opening verses of the gospel (1:1-18) to 1:19-2:12 (Countryman) and so make a single unit. Structurally, a series of successive days ties 1:19-2:12 together.

A. Each scene takes place "on the next day" until 2:12. There the sequence ends, because Jesus and his entourage go to Capernaum for "not many days."

Subsequently, Jesus goes to Jerusalem for the Passover, and, as we shall see, the next major literary unit consists of what happens between this Passover and the next.

B. 1:19-2:12 concerns the testimony of John the Baptist and the conversion of the first disciples.

C. The editor's insertions into 1:1-18 concern the testimony of John and his invitation to become Jesus's disciples and so unite 1:1-18 to what follows. Note that 1:15 and 1:30 are virtually identical. Apparently the editor found 1:30 and added 1:15.

IV. Countryman claims that the gospel traces the stages of the spiritual life and that 1:35-2:25 (I prefer 2:12) is about conversion. I would merely add that it is only in this section that we have stories in which people who will become committed followers of Jesus achieve initial faith.

A. Elsewhere we have stories in which people believe but where this belief apparently goes no farther.

B. We also have stories in which people believe and then at once go on to more mature faith (e.g., the story of the blind man in ch. 9).

C. By contrast, in 1:35-2:12 we have initial conversions of at least four people who will later become committed followers.

V. By connecting the opening verses to 1:35-2:12, the editor gave the opening verses of the gospel an additional dimension of meaning. Now they are also a description of the situation of a person before individual conversion. This situation is

A. All that exists was made through the Divine Word, and he is the light which enlightens everyone.

B. He has become incarnate as Jesus, and various people (e.g., John the Baptist) have borne witness to him.

C. Most of Jesus's own people have rejected him.

D. However, some people accepted him, and he gave them power to become God's children.

E. No one can know who Jesus actually is unless God or some other person bears witness.

F. Those who have not heard this witness are in darkness and are out of touch with the source of all light and life.

- VI. 1:35-51 consists of two parallel scenes, the calling of Andrew and Peter and the calling of Philip and Nathaniel. These scenes are about the same length, occur on succeeding days, and have the same literary structure.
- VII. These stories present parallel accounts of conversions.
- A. In each scene we have a conversion chain: Jesus calls someone who then immediately goes and brings a third person to Jesus.
  - B. In each case the invitation issued by the new convert is basically the same: We have found the one foretold (1:41, 1:45).
  - C. In each scene we have the statement, "Come and see."
  - D. In each scene the stress falls on an encounter between Jesus and the final person called, an encounter in which Jesus makes a solemn pronouncement which tells the final person something about himself.
- VIII. There are striking parallels to 1:35-51 in the later stories of the woman at the well (4:1-42) and of Nicodemus and the Jewish leaders (7:45-52). Notice, especially, the challenge to come and see/or give Jesus a hearing.
- IX. A Johannine model for conversion.
- A. Conversion begins when someone testifies to the identity of Jesus. The person giving the testimony may be a recent convert.
  - B. The person gives an invitation to come and see for oneself, but the readers of the Gospel cannot come and see in the same way that the characters in the narrative can.
    1. In the Gospel, characters can come and see the physical Jesus.
    2. Of course, the readers of the gospel cannot do this.
    3. Probably now coming and seeing is reading the gospel itself and visiting a Christian community where Christ's Spirit dwells.
  - C. The invitation to come and see is a challenge to one's openness, and how one responds reveals one's deeper spiritual state. Note the contrast between Nathaniel who is without deceit (1:47) and the Jewish leaders in 7:45-52.
  - D. If one chooses to come and see, Jesus confirms the message by revealing something about one's true self.
  - E. When this occurs, a convert can become too enthusiastic, and it may be necessary to advise that more is to come (1:49-51).
- X. This model of conversion had a special relevance to John's church which often had to depend on the testimony of recent converts, because people who were known to be Christians were expelled from the synagogues (e.g., 16:2). However, the model continues to be relevant today.
- A. Recent converts often have an enthusiasm and a connection to the world that facilitate missionary work.
  - B. A conversion only becomes complete when it leads to a new self-understanding.
  - C. New converts often have an unrealistic confidence in their own faith.
- XI. 1:35-51 points forward to the Wedding at Cana (2:1-12) which somehow completes it.
- A. The gospel ties these units together by the system of consecutive days--a system that ends with Cana (note 2:12).
  - B. 1:35-51 ends with the promise that Nathaniel will see greater things which will

confirm his initial faith.

C. The miracle at Cana is then described as the beginning of the signs, and we are told "his disciples believed in him" (2:11).

XII. I think that the basic theme of Cana is that hidden signs will help establish the initial faith (or openness) of those who follow Jesus. The narrative emphasizes that the people in charge do not even know that a miracle has occurred, but yet the miracle inspires faith in Jesus's disciples.

XIII. There is a clear literary break between 2:12 and 2:13 with a change in time, place, and tone.

XIV. A theme of the next section is that faith based on miracles is insufficient, and one must go on to something more.

A. The double climax of 2:13-25 contrasts the immediate, untrustworthy faith of the many (vss. 23-25) and the later, better faith of the disciples (vs. 22). The first type of faith is based on signs only, whereas the superior type is based on the resurrection, the scripture, and the words of Jesus.

B. Shortly thereafter Jesus declares that belief on the basis of signs is only a prelude to being born again (3:2-3).

XV. An attempt to explain 1:51.

A. This verse is of extraordinary literary importance since it is both the climax of a section and a major prediction about coming events.

B. Nevertheless, the passage is difficult because the prophecy is odd and has no literal fulfillment in the gospel.

C. I think Countryman is correct when he says that in this passage Jesus replaces Jacob's ladder as the only link to God (cf. Gen. 28:10-17).

D. The prophecy is fulfilled because the signs all point to Jesus as the link.

E. Consequently, 1:51 supplies the correct understanding of who Jesus is in contrast to the partial understandings of the initial converts.

1. Andrew, Philip, and Nathaniel give Jesus various titles ("Rabbi," "Messiah," "King of Israel"). Note that in this context "Son of God" only means "King of Israel" (= "Messiah;" see Psalm 2).

2. These are all true but insufficient.

3. By contrast, Jesus in this passage insists that he is a human being ("son of humanity") who nevertheless is the only link to the Father. This claim is the same as the definitive Christology of the gospel's opening verses.

F. One implication is that converts cannot immediately know who Jesus actually is. They must learn this later, and they can only learn it from Jesus himself.

## Judgment

Topic for reflection: Does God judge people and punish them? If so, on what basis does he judge us, and how does he punish?

- I. In John the theme of judgment is frequent and important. Indeed, judgment seems to be the very purpose of Jesus's ministry (9:39, 12:31).
- II. John's presentation of judgment is full of paradoxes.
  - A. Sometimes the gospel tells us that Jesus does not judge (3:17, 12:47), and sometimes it tells us that he does (5:30, 8:26), or even both (8:15-16a).
  - B. Sometimes judgment is in the future (especially, 5:26-29); sometimes in the present (3:18, 5:24), or even, from the reader's perspective, in the past when Jesus died (12:31-32).
  - C. 5:45 tells us that Moses will judge.
- III. These paradoxes arise in part because Jesus only judges in behalf of the Father and does not seek his own glory (e.g., 5:30).
- IV. These paradoxes also arise from John's attempt to deal with three perennial questions:
  - A. Is salvation past, present, or future?
  - B. How can God be perfectly loving and yet judge?
  - C. Is judgment on the basis of external criteria or one's own conscience?
- V. John's basic theology of judgment--a synthesis.
  - A. The Father and the Son are the only source of light and life.
  - B. Hence, apart from the Son who reveals the Father, the world is in darkness and death.
  - C. The Son comes to save the world by revealing God's love and humankind's sinfulness and who we can become through answering God's call (i.e., we can become like Jesus).
  - D. The Son's coming exposes the world and, by doing so, divides it.
    1. Those who are good are open to him and become disciples.
    2. Those who are evil are closed and become his enemies.
  - E. Therefore, Jesus's coming initiates judgment, since those who acknowledge him enter life, and those who do not acknowledge him reject the one source of genuine hope.
  - F. The final judgment at the resurrection is simply the culmination and ratification of the process. I think this final judgment is ultimate exposure. That is why Moses and the word Jesus has spoken (12:47-48) will be the final judge. The characters in the gospel (and the reader) know the teaching of Moses and the words of Jesus and are responsible for accepting or rejecting them.
- VI. John's answer to the three perennial questions.
  - A. When is judgment?
    1. It is past in the sense that Jesus has already definitively revealed God's love and human sinfulness and who we can become through Jesus.
    2. It is present because Christ's revelation continues to challenge and expose us.
    3. It is future because on the last day God will definitively ratify and end the process.

B. How can God be loving and still judge us?

1. God's love causes him to reveal the truth about himself and us.
2. By accepting that truth we enter into God's life-giving presence; by denying it we cut ourselves off.
3. Our response is largely based on whether we are good or evil. Those who are good welcome the truth, whereas those who are evil flee from it (3:18-21). Hence, God is loving, and there is judgment.

C. Are we judged by external or internal standards? Internal standards (e.g., Moses) prepare us to receive Christ, and he is the ultimate standard.

VII. One helpful corollary in John's theology is that there is no judgment for those who have not heard God's word. Such people, of course, are in darkness; however, since they have not rejected God, they are not under judgment (especially, 9:41, 15:22a).

## **John 2:13-6:71: Jesus Challenges Us to Receive the Sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist**

- I. In the edited Gospel, 2:13-6:71 is a unit with the theme that the sacraments are Christ's body and replace the temple.
  - A. In the scene describing the demonstration in the temple, we learn that Jesus's body is the true temple (2:21).
  - B. In chapter 4 Jesus insists that the Jerusalem temple has lost its value and must be replaced by true worship (4:20-26).
  - C. Then in chapter 6 Jesus insists that salvation comes through eating his flesh and drinking his blood.
  - D. Note that the section begins and ends with the Passover, and this symmetry ties the unit together literarily.
- II. To a striking degree, sacramental material in John is restricted to chapters 3-6. John lacks references one might expect elsewhere, particularly the baptism of Jesus and the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper.
- III. However, in 3-6 the most explicit sacramental references are poorly integrated into the text, and, apparently, the editor added them.
  - A. 3:5 has the only reference to "water" in Jesus's conversation with Nicodemus which otherwise deals with "spirit."
  - B. 6:35-51a is a complete composition by itself, and 6:51b-58 seems tacked on.
    1. In 6:35-51a Jesus is the bread of life, and we believe in him. Here Jesus is the Wisdom of God. Note that in the Old Testament, Wisdom invites people to eat her bread (Proverbs 9:1-6).
    2. 6:51a brings the previous material to an appropriate literary conclusion.
    3. By contrast, in 6:51b-58 Jesus's flesh is the bread of life and we must eat that! Here we have emphatic eucharistic language.
    4. The insistence in 6:35-51b-58 that we must eat Jesus's flesh to have life does not fit smoothly with the statement a few verses later, "The flesh is of no use" (6:63).
- IV. In the present gospel the theme of 3:1-5:47 is Jesus invites people to receive baptism.
  - A. The section begins with Jesus telling Nicodemus that one must be born again by water and the Spirit (3:1ff.).
  - B. We then have a section in which Jesus and his disciples baptize alongside John the Baptist, more people go to Jesus than to John, and the Baptist acknowledges Jesus's superiority (3:22-26). One implication is that baptism in the Name of Jesus is better than John's baptism.
  - C. Next we have the encounter of Jesus with the woman at the well (4:1-42). The section begins with a reference to baptism (4:1-2), and in the following story Jesus insists that he alone can give the living water which lasts forever. Of course, in the larger context, this water must at least include the water of baptism.
  - D. Then we have the story of the healing of the royal official's son (4:43-54). Jesus challenges the father to go from an initial faith to a firmer one--a faith more appropriate for baptism.



- E. Finally, we have the story of the healing of the paralytic by the pool (5:1ff.). Like the woman by the well he could not be saved by natural water. Note too the theme that it is disastrous to return to sin (5:14). Post-baptismal sin was a serious problem in the early church.
- V. In the edited gospel chapter 6 concerns the Eucharist.
- A. In the story of the feeding of the multitude there are Eucharistic overtones in the mention of Passover and in Jesus taking the bread and giving thanks.
- B. Subsequently, Jesus insists that the feeding is a sign of something more than normal food (6:26-27).
- C. Finally, Jesus declares that life comes only from eating his flesh and drinking his blood, because his flesh and blood are real food and drink (6:51b-58).
- VI. Accordingly, it seems that the editor deliberately produced a section on baptism followed by a section on Eucharist.
- VII. If so, this editing would continue the recapitulation of the Christian life, since the next step after conversion is normally baptism followed by Eucharist. Note that the Didache, which comes from the same period as the gospel, explicitly forbids an unbaptized person from receiving the Eucharist (Didache 9.5).
- VIII. John's Gospel insists that one must go on to receive the sacraments. Conversion and signs are not enough; people must be born from above in baptism (3:2-3) and eat real bread (6:26ff.) in the Eucharist. Note 4:48. The gospel links the sacraments to the giving of the Spirit. Hence, without the sacraments there is no salvation.
- IX. Baptism and Eucharist are the realities to which the Old Testament purifications (3:25, Countryman) and manna (6:31ff.) point and which replace them.
- X. One reason that coming for baptism is essential is that it necessitates a public confession of Jesus. Consequently, it is a step beyond conversion which can take place secretly. The baptismal section begins when Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night and confesses faith and Jesus then challenges him to take the next step (3:1-3; cf. 19:38-39).
- XI. The challenge to make a public confession by coming for baptism was especially appropriate for Jewish Christians who kept their faith secret to avoid expulsion from the synagogues (12:42-43).
- XII. One reason that the Eucharist is essential is that it involves an acknowledgment of the reality of the incarnation. Note that the end of chapter 6 insists that in the Eucharist we eat Christ's flesh and drink his blood.
- XIII. The theology that the Eucharist points to the reality of Christ's flesh would have been especially challenging to people in the Johannine community who may have denied that Christ had a real body (1 John 4:2-3, 2 John 7).
- XIV. The passages about future resurrection in John's Gospel occur in the sections on baptism and Eucharist (5:21-29, 6:39-40, 44, 54).
- XV. Apparently, the editor links the sacraments to meaningful life after death. Since human beings are a psychosomatic unity, we can only believe in real life after death if we also believe that the Spirit can be present in material things and transform them. That faith is the same faith that vindicates the sacraments.
- XVI. Like Jesus's body, the sacraments are material embodiments of spiritual realities and make those realities available to human beings.
- XVII. Because the sacraments like Jesus's body are the material embodiments of spiritual realities, they are paradoxical and their importance can be missed.

XVIII. Hence, Jesus speaks about them in ironical ways which challenge people to come to deeper perception.

XIX. Because the sacraments are paradoxical and require a public confession, they necessitate another stage of spiritual growth beyond conversion.

XX. John insists this growth can only come through God's leading (e.g., 6:44).

XXI. Not everyone takes this next spiritual step or sticks to it.

A. Nicodemus does not understand how he can be born again.

B. At the end of the Eucharistic section "many" people desert Jesus (6:66).

XXII. Nevertheless, John also emphasizes that the sacraments are themselves very elementary, and one must go farther. In response to Nicodemus's protest, Jesus insists that so far they have only been discussing "earthly things" (3:12). See also 3:30-32 and 6:61-63.

XXIII. I believe that the gospel's presentation of the sacraments is of continuing importance.

## Testimony, Perception, and True Faith

- I. As 1:6-7, 15-16 already make abundantly clear, testimony is a central theme in John's Gospel. Testimony is, of course, testimony to Jesus.
- II. We can see from various passages and, especially, from 5:33-37 that there are several different kinds of testimony.
  - A. The testimony of human beings (e.g., that of the woman at the well).
  - B. The testimony of Jesus's own words and deeds.
  - C. The testimony of the Spirit which seems to include the scriptures and inner experience.
- III. Of these types of testimony, the lowest is that of human beings.
  - A. Often this is the testimony that initiates someone's interest in Jesus.
  - B. To profit from it, all people have to do is "come and see," but this invitation exposes them. Those who are evil are not willing to come and see (7:51-52).
  - C. Note that 5:33-37 (especially, vs. 36) explicitly states that even John the Baptist's testimony is inferior to that of Jesus's words and works.
- IV. The testimony of human beings is the lowest because it is relatively unimpressive and cannot mediate a direct relationship with Jesus. It only bears witness to someone else's faith and is a challenge to "come and see."
- V. Hence, the testimony of human beings becomes less important once one encounters Jesus. Then one verifies for oneself that the testimony is true, and the testimony of others becomes less significant. Note, especially, John 4:39-42.
- VI. Consequently, the ideal evangelist is content merely to bring people to Jesus and pass from the scene.
  - A. In this gospel there are two ideal evangelists, John the Baptist (whose testimony already appears in the prologue) and the Beloved Disciple (whose testimony includes the Fourth Gospel itself).
  - B. It is noteworthy that these individuals have no dignity of their own apart from their testimony to Jesus, and they wish none.
    1. The Baptist refuses to make any claim for himself except that he is preparing for Christ's coming (1:19ff.).
    2. Similarly, the Beloved Disciple does not even have a name in the gospel but is simply "the disciple whom Jesus loved."
  - C. Both individuals apparently are also content to pass from the scene once their testimony is complete (3:29b-30, 21:20ff.).
  - D. Paradoxically, because of this selflessness these two people and, by implication, others who are like them, are of singular importance. Indeed, the Baptist appears to be an important part of God's eternal plan (1:6-7), and the Beloved Disciple is the link to Jesus, just as Jesus is the link to the Father.
  - E. What the gospel says about the ideal evangelist coheres with its theme of not seeking one's own glory and is profound and relevant. The testimony of those who seek their own glory is suspect.
  - F. By not seeking their own glory the Baptist and the Beloved Disciple imitate Jesus himself.
- VII. The second type of testimony, which is one step up the spiritual ladder, is Jesus's words and deeds (5:36).

- A. This testimony is greater because it is more impressive (7:46, 9:32) and mediates a more direct relationship with Jesus. Accordingly, it is more certain, especially since Jesus does not seek his own glory.
- B. Consequently, Jesus can insist that people should believe on the authority of his words reinforced by his works (10:36-38, 14:10-11).
- C. Nevertheless, this greater testimony is more difficult to receive.
  - 1. The miracles can be misleading, since they tempt us to see Jesus primarily as a wonder worker who satisfies our material needs (6:26).
  - 2. Jesus's preaching by itself is incredible, since it consists essentially of a person saying that he is God (cf., e.g., 10:33).
- D. Hence, to receive and profit from this testimony, we need a deeper spiritual perception. We must see the miracles as signs pointing to spiritual truths about Jesus and detect the Father bearing witness to him (8:17-18).
- E. This deeper perception depends both on our openness, especially to doing God's will (7:17), and on God's gift (6:65).

VIII. The third type of testimony, which is the final step, is the inner testimony which comes from the Father and the Son dwelling in us through the Spirit (e.g., 14:15-20, 25-26).

- A. This testimony is superior for two related reasons.
  - 1. It consists of an unmediated relationship, and, consequently, is certain. We know Jesus and the Father as we know ourselves. We know the Father as Jesus does (no longer as servants, but friends [15:15]).
  - 2. This testimony also tells Christians all that they need to understand, including the proper interpretation of scripture and of the life and the teaching of Jesus. ("She [the Paraclete--see below] will teach you all things" [14:26].)
- B. This testimony is the most difficult to receive and is utterly beyond "the world," because it depends completely on divine gift and graced perception, and these come only through living as Jesus lived (14:15-21).

{If the second kind of testimony to some extent replaces the first, the third kind to some extent replaces the second.}

IX. Some implications (homily):

- A. The problem with most theological discussion is that it deals only with the first and second kinds of testimony and can never lead to certainty.
- B. We need to grow so we can receive the third kind.

## **John 7:1-10:42: Jesus Challenges Us to Committed Discipleship**

- I. John 7:53-8:11, "The Woman Caught in Adultery."
  - A. On the basis of external attestation (ancient manuscripts), literary style, and narrative flow, it is certain this story was not part of the original gospel (i.e., the latest text from which all surviving manuscripts derive).
  - B. However, the story may be historical. And even if it is not, it reflects the character of Jesus.
  - C. The story is a striking example of Jesus's
    1. Mercy toward women and "sinners"
    2. Challenge of religious leaders
    3. Ability to expose hypocrisy and the hidden depths of human hearts.
  - D. In the context of chapters 7-8 the story illustrates the paradox that Jesus judges and yet does not judge (Brown).
- II. 7:1-10:42 is a single literary unit because all of it concerns Jesus's dangerous trip to Jerusalem.
- III. Chapters 7-8 contain two things that are extremely odd:
  - A. The demand that Jesus reveal his works to his disciples (7:3).
    1. This demand seems to conflict with the further demand that he reveal himself to the world which is what Jesus and his brothers discuss in the subsequent verses.
    2. If Jesus is in Galilee, why are his disciples in Judea?
    3. It is strange that Jesus's brothers who do not believe in him would be concerned about his disciples who do.
  - B. 8:30-31. How can people believe in Jesus here and seek to stone him only a few verses later (8:59)? Note that 8:31 explicitly states that the "Jews" believe, whereas in 8:45 it appears that they never believed.
- IV. I would suggest that both these oddities are additions by the editor.
- V. With these additions the theme of chapters 7-10 is Jesus asks his followers to go on to committed discipleship. Note, especially, 8:31.
- VI. To become a committed disciple, one must do two things:
  - A. Humbly acknowledge that one is still in slavery and ignorance and must continue to follow Jesus. This is what the would-be disciples in chapter 8 and the Pharisees in chapter 9 fail to do.
  - B. Suffer rejection from a world that will not believe in Jesus. This is what Nicodemus and the man born blind do.
- VII. These two requirements were particularly relevant to some Christians when the gospel was written.
  - A. The need to acknowledge that a "committed" Christian is still enslaved to sin and ignorance and must grow further was especially relevant to members of the Johannine community who apparently thought that baptism automatically makes Christians sinless and spiritually wise (cf., e.g., 1 John 2:27, 1:8-9).
  - B. The realization that committed disciples must be prepared to suffer rejection from the world was especially relevant to the Jewish Christians who kept their faith secret so that they would not be expelled from the synagogues (cf., e.g., 9:20-23).

- VIII. To address this community, the editor re-directed the invective in chapters 7-10 away from Jews and toward hypocritical Christians.
- IX. John 7-10 suggests that with committed discipleship comes an inner spiritual seeing.
- A. In chapter 7 Jesus offers the gift of the Spirit.
  - B. In chapter 8 Jesus proclaims that he is the light of the world.
  - C. In chapter 9 the man born blind gradually comes to perceive that Jesus is from God before ever physically seeing Jesus.
  - D. In chapter 10 Jesus insists that the sheep recognize their master's voice.
- X. Only with this inner spiritual perception can someone know that Jesus is God.
- A. In chapter 7-10 Jesus reveals his divinity openly (especially, 8:58, 10:30).
    - 1. The section begins with the challenge to Jesus to show himself to the world (7:4).
    - 2. In the climax of chapter 8 and one of the climaxes of chapter 10 Jesus publicly insists on his divinity.
  - B. However, in response the "Jews"
    - 1. Become divided and confused
    - 2. Attempt to kill Jesus. Note: The hostility between Jesus and the "Jews" here probably reflects later Christian history (especially, 9:22) more than the situation when Jesus himself was alive.
  - C. Jesus insists that the knowledge of who he is cannot come to people who do not wish to do God's will (7:17), but only comes to his sheep who follow him (10:14, 10:26-30).
  - D. These sheep participate in his divinity and can rightly be called "gods" (10:34-35).
- XI. Of course, belief in the divinity of Jesus is absolutely necessary (e.g., 8:12).
- XII. Nevertheless, committed discipleship and the perception and faith that accompany it are still not enough. In chapters 7-10 the evangelist keeps insisting that Jesus's hour has not yet arrived (7:30, 33; 8:20).

## Irony in John's Gospel

- I. Irony pervades John's Gospel.
  - II. The irony is achieved by
    - A. Giving the reader more information than the characters have.
      1. Beginning with the opening verses, the reader knows that Jesus is the incarnation of the Divine Word.
      2. However, the characters in the narrative do not know this.
      3. Hence, the reader understands things that the characters do not and passes judgment on the incomprehension of the characters.
    - B. Jesus using words and phrases which have double meanings (e.g., born again/born from above) which the characters interpret in one way, but the reader correctly interprets in another.
    - C. Statement which the characters rightly recognize as being true, but which the reader recognizes as being true in a much deeper and wider sense (e.g., 11:35, 11:50-52).
  - III. Literarily the irony
    - A. Adds an edge to the narrative and challenges readers to come to a deeper perception.
    - B. Binds readers to the narrator, since we share an insider's knowledge.
  - IV. John's Gospel insists that Jesus used such irony during his earthly life but after the resurrection spoke plainly (16:25).
  - V. Historically, Jesus did use irony (exaggerated statements, ambiguous ones, stories with unexpected endings) and the Church did reinterpret his teaching after the resurrection.
  - VI. Of course, Jesus's promise in the Fourth Gospel that he will speak plainly after the resurrection is fulfilled in much of the book itself.
  - VII. In the edited gospel Jesus's promise to speak plainly suggests that as the readers grow spiritually, they no longer need paradoxical explanations.
  - VIII. Consequently, irony is appropriate in speaking to the sinful or the spiritually immature.
  - IX. In John's Gospel there is also frequent irony in the sinful/immature responses to Jesus. Here are some examples
    - A. The arguments against Jesus's claims are contradictory (7:27 versus 7:42).
    - B. Sometimes people unwittingly speak the truth or part of it (e.g., 7:35, 8:22).
    - C. A person's objection to Jesus is in fact evidence for him. Note 9:29 vs. 7:27.
    - D. A particularly rich and impressive illustration of Johannine irony is 11:47-52.  
Note that this passage was written after the Romans had destroyed the temple!
  - X. The irony in sinful/immature responses to Jesus suggests that the problem of unbelief is not one of simple ignorance. People know at least much of the truth even though they cannot perceive.
- Topic for reflection: Do people often know more of the truth than they can admit?

## **John 11:1-12:50: Jesus Challenges Us to Die and Gain New Life**

- I. The theme of life is a basic one for John. It occurs in the beginning (1:4) and climax (20:31) of the Gospel and is very common elsewhere.
- II. The theme of life has two sets of polarities:
  - A. Physical versus spiritual life (e.g., 6:27).
  - B. Future resurrection versus eternal life which begins in the present (e.g., 11:24-26).
- III. Jesus (or the eternal Word) is the source of all dimensions of life.
  - A. He gives physical life to all things (1:3-4) and saves the lives of his followers (ch. 11 & 18:8-9).
  - B. He is the source of future resurrection (5:25, 28-29; 6:39, 54).
  - C. He is also the source of spiritual life that is already available now (14:19).
- IV. Nevertheless, it is clear that the gospel is primarily concerned about spiritual life, not physical, and about present eternal life, not resurrection on the last day.
  - A. The gospel contrasts physical life unfavorably with spiritual (e.g., physical bread vs. living bread) and makes physical life a symbol for spiritual. Moreover, for some, the price for spiritual life is martyrdom (see below).
  - B. The texts promising future resurrection are few, only appear in the sacramental section (chs. 3-6), and reflect traditional theology.
  - C. By contrast, what the gospel emphasizes and what is most original in its thought is eternal life.
  - D. My own suspicion is that the evangelist did not believe in future resurrection and that it was the editor who added references to it (Rudolf Bultmann).
- V. Eternal life is a dimension to life which disciples receive through Christ and which
  - A. Is hidden from the world (14:18-19).
  - B. Is powerfully real and energizing.
  - C. Necessarily lasts forever (4:14). We are in eternal life or death now; final judgment merely affirms our present state (e.g., 5:24-29).
- VI. Eternal life is like this because it comes from knowing Jesus and God (17:3) who are life (6:57).
- VII. In the edited gospel chapters 11-12 are a single literary unit.
  - A. The very purpose of the otherwise puzzling 11:2, which previews material that will not be narrated until chapter 12, is to tie the chapters together.
  - B. The material about Lazarus, Mary, and Martha pervades both chapters. We even have a reference to Lazarus after Jesus makes his triumphal entry into Jerusalem (12:17).
  - C. A single theme unites this section, namely the theme of life through death.
    1. The section begins with the story of Lazarus dying and Jesus raising him from the dead.
    2. Then in chapter 12 Jesus repeatedly refers to his own death (7-8, 23-36) and how it will draw all people to himself.
    3. The conclusion of the otherwise puzzling 12:44-50 is "and I know that his commandment is eternal life. So what I speak, I speak just as the Father has told me."
- VIII. In the present gospel, this section repeatedly proclaims that first Christ must die



for the Christian and then the committed Christian must be prepared to die as Christ did.

A. Near the start of the section Thomas says, "Let us also go that we may die with him" (11:16). As often in John's gospel, a character speaks more of the truth than he realizes. In this case Jesus must die first so Thomas and others may have life; however, then they must also die.

B. In this section Lazarus represents the committed Christian whom God/Jesus calls to martyrdom. Note that Lazarus is Jesus's friend whom he loves (11:5, 11).

C. Jesus must die in order for Lazarus to live. Thanks to the work of the editor, it is the raising of Lazarus which impels the chief priests to kill Jesus (11:45-50).

D. Jesus asks Lazarus to die. Indeed, Lazarus has to face death twice.

1. Because of his love for him, Jesus does not keep Lazarus from dying.

2. After Jesus raises him from the dead, the chief priests decide to kill Lazarus, because through him others are believing in Jesus (12:9-11).

E. In chapter 12 Jesus insists that not only must he die, but so must his servants (12:24-26).

IX. If committed Christians die with Jesus, they will rise to new life immediately (11:24-26).

X. Jesus's challenge to die for him had a special relevance to the Johannine community which was suffering bloody persecution (16:2).

XI. Of course, for those whom Jesus calls to martyrdom, it is the last step of the ideal spiritual life. Martyrs sacrifice their very lives and join Jesus in heavenly glory.

XII. Hence, martyrdom is a privilege. It is because Jesus loves Lazarus that Jesus deliberately allows him to die.

XIII. However, as we shall see, those whom Jesus does not call to martyrdom have a different spiritual goal--taking his place in this world.

## Two Important Themes Which Appear in Chapters 10-12

I. John 10-12 contains the climax of a major theme, the definitive rejection of the gospel by Jesus's own people.

A. This theme is already in the prologue (1:11), and it grows in intensity thereafter. Finally, 12:35ff. stresses that time is running out and then that it has run out.

B. John gives two contrasting views as to why "the Jews" rejected Jesus:

1. Sin (e.g., 15:22ff.)
2. Lack of election (10:26, 12:39-40).

C. John makes no attempt to reconcile these contrasting explanations, and perhaps we should not either. Just as belief is a virtue and a gift, and, therefore, a mystery, so unbelief is a mystery.

D. Some passages say that the rejection of the Jews is irreversible, because they have gone to the ultimate sin of trying to kill Jesus and have rejected the greatest of signs. Consequently, they will not be able to take the necessary step of perceiving Jesus spiritually when he has departed (13:33, 14:19).

E. Nevertheless, other passages seem to leave hope for the salvation of all (e.g., 12:32).

F. The theme of the Jews rejecting Jesus reflects social problems in John's community.

1. It explains Jewish unbelief to the Church.
2. It expresses the anger of the Church after expulsion from the synagogue.
3. It may be an attempt to force secret Jewish Christians (12:42-43) to take a public stand (Brown).

G. Excursus: Anti-Semitism and John's Gospel. In addition to what has been said above, the following is to be noted about John's hostility to the "Jews."

1. The anti-Semitism in John is not ethnic, only religious. The gospel insists throughout that Jesus himself is Jewish (especially, 1:11, 4:9, 18:35).
2. The gospel (and the New Testament in general) is polemical and does not give an unbiased presentation of Jewish belief and conduct.
3. John's community was a persecuted minority, not a persecuting majority.
4. The gospel provides no justification for injustice.
5. To some extent, the editor makes "the Jews" a symbol for uncommitted Christians. Note, especially, 8:30-31.
6. At least occasionally, the term "Jews" in the gospel only means the inhabitants of Judea (e.g., 7:1). In Greek the same word refers both to the residents of this geographical region and to the adherents of its dominant religion.
7. And sometimes where we read the word "Jews," it seems to refer only to a much smaller group (e.g., Jewish leaders).
8. Anti-Semitism was widespread in the ancient Greco-Roman world.
9. John's Gospel presupposes a period when the "Jews" have a different

religion than Christians do and, therefore, does not give a reliable picture of the relationship of Christians to (other) Jews during the time of Jesus and the earliest church.

10. Of course, the Judaism that John's Gospel attacked is not the same Judaism which nearly two thousand years later exists today.

11. And, of course, no person living today is in any way to blame for what happened two thousand years ago.

II. A second major theme that reaches its climax in 10-12 is the spread of the gospel to the Non-Jewish world.

A. This theme is already implied in the prologue (1:12) and elsewhere in the gospel's opening chapters (e.g., 3:15-16), and in chapter 4, Samaritans convert.

B. The theme reaches its climax in 10-12 (10:16; 12:19, 32) with the "Greeks" asking to see Jesus and with Jesus's announcement of his hour (12:20ff.). Note:

1. These "Greeks" seem to be Greek-speaking Jews, since they have come to Jerusalem to worship at the festival. Nevertheless, they symbolize the larger (non-Jewish) world.

2. The Greeks do not get to see Jesus, because the conversion of the world can only take place after the crucifixion.

C. The gospel apparently looks forward to the conversion of members of different ethnic groups but often seems to assume that the bulk of humanity will reject Christ.

D. Presumably, this perspective reflects the experience of the Johannine community.

E. Excursus on John's theology of the world.

1. John's presentation of the "world" is disturbing to many modern Christians, because John regards the world as evil, almost irremediably so (e.g., 15:18-25). At one point Jesus declines even to pray for the "world" (17:9).

2. In part this negative attitude is the result of persecution and missionary failure (16:2-3).

3. Still, John's theology of the world reflects his conviction that the only link to God is Jesus and John's awareness that the world rejected Jesus and often rejects the Christian message.

4. We should also admit that the "world" (i.e., the realms of politics, economics, institutional religion, and other structures of power) often seems to be irremediably evil.

5. Moreover, John insists that God loves the world (3:16) and that Christians challenge it.

6. Hence, the world has the potential to follow Jesus, and occasionally in John's Gospel we even read that it does (e.g., 12:19).

7. Christians are to be in the world, but not of it (17:16). I think this is profound.

8. For John the "world" is only the human and spiritual forces that are separated from God. John's Gospel has little to say about matter and does not regard it as evil.

## Introduction to Chapters 13-20

- I. Jesus's "hour" divides the Gospel of John into two halves. This "hour" is the hour in which Jesus is "lifted up" (note the multiple meanings) and includes both the passion and resurrection.
- A. In chapters 1-11 we have numerous passages which insist that the "hour" has not yet come (e.g., 2:4, 7:30, 8:20, 11:9).
  - B. Beginning in the middle of chapter 12 we have numerous passages which announce that the hour has come (e.g., 12:23, 12:27, 13:1, 17:1).
- II. As this division suggests, the heart of the gospel is the second half (roughly ch. 13 on). Note the solemn introductions (12:20ff., 13:1ff.).
- III. Paradoxically, John's Gospel portrays even the passion as a time of "glory." Note how John alters the tradition of the agony in the garden (12:27ff.). The passion is (part of) the hour of glory for several reasons:
- A. Christ's death is his free choice (e.g., 10:18).
  - B. It demonstrates his love for the Father.
  - C. It demonstrates his (and the Father's) love for the world.
  - D. Of course, it also demonstrates the wickedness of the "world."
  - E. It draws all people to himself and overcomes Satan.
  - F. It enables him to return to the Father.
- IV. Chapters 13-20 consist of two large sections.
- A. The last discourses (& foot washing), chapters 13-17
  - B. The passion and resurrection, chapters 18-20.
- V. Basically, the discourses are a commentary on the significance of the passion and resurrection.
- A. Act and commentary (sign and discourse) are typical of the gospel as a whole.
  - B. The Farewell Discourses look forward to the crucifixion (e.g., 15:13).
  - C. The discourses also look forward to the resurrection and the subsequent state of affairs, including such things as the coming of the Spirit (e.g., 14:25ff.) and the persecution of the community (16:2-3).
  - D. The discourses put all of this in spiritual perspective. For example, the discourses give theological reassurance over the persecution which the Johannine community was experiencing. There is no need to be alarmed because
    - 1. Jesus prophesied these troubles (16:4).
    - 2. The world hates the community because it hated Jesus (15:18ff.).
    - 3. The Holy Spirit will reassure believers that it is the world which is wrong (16:8ff.).
- VI. Because the last discourses are a commentary on the crucifixion and resurrection, we will first deal with John's accounts of the passion and resurrection; then we will return to the discourses.

## John's Account of the Passion

- I. Unlike most of the gospel, John's account of the passion (chs. 18-19) has extensive synoptic parallels.
- II. Despite the overlap, there may not actually be any literary dependence (note the lack of verbal agreement).
- III. John's account contains much that is probably historical.
  - A. The basic sequence of events is similar to the one in the synoptics and is probably accurate.
  - B. John's account even has details that appear to be more reliable than synoptic parallels (especially, that Jesus was crucified on the day before Passover).
- IV. Nevertheless, theological concerns dominate the narrative.
  - A. Historical details are recalled primarily because of their theological significance (note 19:24, 34-37).
  - B. Theology shapes much of the narrative flow (e.g., of the trial before Pilate which leads to Pilate proclaiming that Jesus is king).
  - C. Certain things are historically incredible and can only be understood symbolically (e.g., the use of hyssop in 19:29).
- V. Accordingly, chapters 18-19 are a good example of an inspired interpretation of the past intended to evoke faith.
- VI. The narrative stresses the following:
  - A. Jesus's death is voluntary and providential.
    1. No one else has any control over the course of events. Note, especially, the impossibility of arresting Jesus without his consent (18:3-11) and the inability of Pilate to obtain his release (19:10-16).
    2. Jesus foresees all that is to happen and brings it to pass (e.g., 18:4).
    3. The events repeatedly fulfill scripture (e.g., 19:23-24).
  - B. At the crucifixion Jesus reigns as king over all, and the world inadvertently proclaims his lordship (note, especially, 19:19-22).
  - C. Jesus continues to care for his own (18:7-9, 19:26-27).
  - D. Jesus's death exposes people for who they really are. Note Peter's weakness, Pilate's impotence, and the irony of Jewish leaders proclaiming that Caesar is their only king. Note too that John wrote after a Jewish revolt against Rome had been crushed and, as a result, it was even clearer that the Jews had no king but Caesar (D. Moody Smith).
- VII. Some exegetical comments on the words from the cross.
  - A. "Woman, behold your son," etc. Here Jesus is challenging the two people to whom he has been closest to love one another as he has loved them and take his place in this world now that he is returning to the Father. They meet the challenge, since the Beloved Disciple takes Mary into his own home. Hence, we have a narrative illustration of the theme of the disciples doing Jesus's work after his death. As we will see, we also have in this scene an example of the highest stage in the spiritual life.
  - B. "I thirst."
    1. Jesus speaks to fulfill scripture (Psalm 69:21; this psalm is frequently cited in the New Testament). Note: First century Jews and Christians

tended to assume that much more of the Old Testament/Hebrew Scriptures was prophetic than critical scholars do today.

2. Just as Jesus must die in order that others may have life, he must thirst so that the living water may be given. Almost immediately afterward Jesus hands over the Spirit and then blood and water flow out of his side (cf.

7:37-39).

3. The sour wine is put on hyssop, and here the hyssop is clearly symbolic, since it could not have been functional. Probably we have a reference to the hyssop used to put the blood on the doorposts at the Exodus to turn away death (Exod. 12:21-23).

C. "It is finished." This means both that it is over and is accomplished. Note that immediately after saying this, Jesus hands on the Spirit.

VIII. Chapters 18-19 are the supreme example of how the Spirit led the Beloved Disciple and the editor (and their community) into all truth.

A. As noted above, we have a basically accurate recounting of historical events.

B. Yet, the Holy Spirit subsequently caused the disciples to conclude that the ultimate meaning of those events was the opposite of the seeming meaning at the time. The cross which looked like crushing defeat was in fact God's total victory.

## John's Treatment of the Resurrection

I. (time permitting) The resurrection narratives in John's Gospel have a forest of literary problems. Here are some important illustrations:

A. The story of the coming of Mary Magdalene to the tomb and that of the coming of Peter and the Beloved Disciple do not fit together well. For example, we never learn when Mary gets back to the tomb after going to Peter and the Beloved Disciple.

B. The end of the appearance to Mary Magdalene (20:17-18) ought to preclude subsequent resurrection appearances.

C. So should the end of the appearance to the disciples without Thomas (20:21-23); and the end of the appearance to the disciples with Thomas (20:28-31).

II. (time permitting) These problems may be the result of literary and social history. For example, the material about the Beloved Disciple probably comes from the final editor.

III. In the canonical gospel the resurrection narratives basically make sense if we view the resurrection as a transcendent event that we perceive through sign and altered relationship.

A. The resurrection is primarily Jesus's return to the Father's glory (17:5) and the giving of the Spirit.

B. Yet, it is also an event that leaves observable traces in history (e.g., the grave clothes).

C. Consequently, signs attest it, such as the empty tomb and the testimony of eyewitnesses.

D. Yet, we also have access to it through the inner experience of our relationship to God in Christ.

E. Hence, the resurrection narratives involve both seeing and perceiving in a complex dialogue (note, especially, the appearance to Thomas and the following conclusion).

IV. The resurrection narratives try to describe the spiritual transition from relating to Jesus in his material, earthly state to relating to him in his risen one. Two stories are particularly worth noting.

A. The Beloved Disciple coming to faith (20:3-9).

1. Note that by adopting Mary as his mother the Beloved Disciple has already begun to fulfill Jesus's command to love as he loved.

2. After the Beloved Disciple enters the tomb, he sees and believes.

Through sign and love he comes to faith, even though he does not yet know the scriptural prophecy of the resurrection.

B. Mary Magdalene meets Jesus (20:1-2, 11-18). This is an important text, and we must analyze it in detail. By comparing this account with the synoptic accounts, we can see that John retains the basic content of earlier tradition but adjusts many details to make theological points.

1. When the story opens, Mary is in (spiritual) darkness and shows it by assuming that the body has been stolen and running to Peter and the Beloved Disciple.

2. When she gets back to the tomb, the question she needs to answer is,

"Why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?" Evidently, she seeks only the fleshly Jesus. Note, in John's Gospel Jesus repeatedly asks, "Whom [or "what"] do you seek?" (1:38, 18:4, 18:6, 20:15), and how characters answer the question helps determine what they find. The gospel invites us all to ask ourselves whom we seek.

3. Because she is seeking only the fleshly Jesus, she does not perceive the signs or recognize Jesus in his new form.

4. But Jesus like the good shepherd calls his own by name (10:3), and she turns (i.e., is converted) and perceives. She calls him "teacher," because he is teaching her.

5. "Do not touch me," or, "stop clinging to me." Mary wishes to have him in fleshly presence, but this is no longer appropriate.

6. She can now accept that he is ascending and proclaim this. Note that as a witness to the resurrection whom Jesus commissions to preach, she is an apostle according to the original Christian definition of this term.

7. She now shares in Jesus's relationship with the Father and is one of God's friends: "My Father and your Father, my God and your God."

8. Through her Jesus invites other disciples to share in the same relationship. For the first time he refers to them as "brothers" and sisters (20:17).

V. The resurrection narratives in John should be read on three different levels.

A. As a description of the initial events.

B. As a challenge to a historical community whose witnesses to the resurrection are dying or dead. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe!" (20:29b).

C. As a continuing challenge to make the transition to a higher level of spiritual perception.

VI. Of course, the rest of the gospel must also be read on the same three levels.



## Some Observations on Women in John's Gospel

- I. At least five women play important roles in John's Gospel.
  - A. The mother of Jesus (2:1-11, 19:25-27)
  - B. The woman at the well (4:1-42)
  - C. Mary and Martha of Bethany (11:1-44, 12:1-7)
  - D. Mary Magdalene (19:25, 20:1-18).
- II. A striking pattern in these passages is that the women either proclaim the good news or are one step ahead of Peter (and the 12) or both. Note that whereas various men in John's Gospel (e.g., Judas) play negative roles, all the women play positive ones.
  - A. The gospel associates Mary with the faithful Beloved Disciple.
    1. Like the Beloved Disciple the "mother of Jesus" does not have a name in this gospel. Her only identify comes from her relationship with Jesus.
    2. Like the Beloved Disciple she stands at the foot of the cross after Peter has denied being a disciple of Jesus.
    3. Together Mary and the Beloved Disciple illustrate the highest stage of Christian living, becoming Jesus for others and thereby taking Jesus's place in this world. The Beloved Disciple is now Mary's son.
  - B. The gospel makes the woman at the well a primordial missionary.
    1. She is the first non-Jewish character in the gospel, and her conversion foreshadows the coming of the gospel to the whole world (4:42).
    2. She testifies to the other villagers about Jesus and invites them to come and see for themselves. As a result, many believe in him.
    3. Jesus tells his disciples that they are harvesting what this woman has sown (4:35-38).
  - C. Mary and Martha have a special relationship to Jesus and confess him in dramatic ways.
    1. The gospel explicitly states that Jesus loved them (11:5). Cf. Jesus's love for the Beloved Disciple.
    2. Martha declares that Jesus is the Messiah (11:26-27), and Mary publicly anoints Jesus (12:3-8).
  - D. Mary Magdalene is the first person to whom Jesus appears after his resurrection, and Jesus instructs her to tell the other disciples that he is ascending to the Father, and she passes on the message. (review) She is, therefore, an "apostle" by the original meaning of the word (someone to whom the risen Christ appeared and commanded to proclaim the good news of the resurrection).

## The Handing Over of the Spirit

- I. "Spirit" is not an easy term to define, but basically the "spirit" is the paradoxical presence of something or someone who is elsewhere.
- II. In biblical languages "spirit" is literally "wind" or "breath." In 3:8 John plays on the literal and figurative meanings of the word, and the passage cannot be adequately rendered in English.
- III. In the Old Testament God's "Spirit" is especially a transforming, divine energy which God bestows on selected individuals.
- IV. In Paul, the Spirit seems to be especially the mind of God which believers can share (Donald Gelpi; 1 Cor. 2:10-11).
- V. A theme in the opening chapters of John is that Jesus has received the Spirit from the Father and is, therefore, the one who has the Spirit (e.g., 1:32, 3:34-35).
- VI. As the one who has the Spirit, Jesus is the one through whom the Spirit will come to the world (e.g., 7:38-39).
- VII. The Spirit cannot come until Jesus himself dies and returns to the Father (e.g., 7:38-39, 16:7). There seem to be two reasons why:
  - A. The disciples will not be ready to receive the Spirit until Christ dies for them (cf. 14:17).
  - B. The Spirit is the replacement for Jesus (14:15-16).
- VIII. A note on the word "paraclete" which the last discourses use to label the Spirit. The word is rare in Greek but is related to a common verb. The basic meaning is "a person who is summoned to give aid;" hence, "helper" in the widest sense, and "advocate," "consoler," "exhorter," "adviser," "intercessor," are also possible translations.
- IX. As the replacement for Jesus, the Paraclete has the following characteristics:
  - A. The Spirit reminds the disciples of all that Jesus has told them (14:26).
  - B. The Paraclete also interprets Jesus's words (and life) and leads the disciples into all truth (16:12-13).
  - C. Consequently, the Paraclete glorifies Jesus (16:14).
  - D. The Paraclete even mediates the personal indwelling of Jesus and the Father in the believer (14:17ff.). Two things are to be noted about the relationship of Jesus to the Spirit in John's Gospel:
    1. Contrary to subsequent trinitarian theology, John stresses not the difference between Jesus (or the Eternal Word) and the Spirit but their similarity. The Spirit is another "paraclete" (14:16).
    2. The presence of Jesus after his resurrection is a mediated one, and the mediation is complex involving both memory and indwelling, both canon and living witnesses.
  - E. The Spirit allows Christians to make Jesus present in this world by helping them to bear witness (15:26-27) and giving them the power to forgive and retain sins (20:23).
  - F. The Father sends the Spirit in the Son's name (14:26), and the Son sends the Spirit from the Father (15:26). (Because of the unity of the Father and the Son, the double presentation of the sending is not necessarily a contradiction.)
- X. In John's Gospel Jesus gives the spirit twice.

- A. At the moment of his death Jesus says, "It is finished," and hands over the Spirit (19:30). Note the double meaning; and note that "handing over the Spirit" in not a normal way of saying "died" in the original Greek.
- B. Jesus also gives the Spirit to the disciples on Easter night (20:19-22).
- XI. The presence of two narratives about the giving of the Spirit may be due to editing.
- XII. In the canonical gospel these two accounts make it clear that
  - A. The Holy Spirit's coming is associated with the death and resurrection of Jesus.
  - B. The Spirit allows disciples to make the transition from Jesus being with them in the flesh to being with them in a new way.
- XIII. In John's overall presentation of the Spirit there is a balance between
  - A. Tradition. The Paraclete interprets Jesus's past words and deeds.
  - B. Inspired innovation. The Paraclete leads the disciples into all truth.
  - C. Community. The Spirit is given to the Church as a whole.
  - D. Individuality. The Spirit dwells in the believer.
- XIV. This balance may have been a response to some one-sided radical view, but it remains relevant.
- XV. The theme of replacement/fulfillment in John's Gospel.
  - A. A theme throughout the Fourth Gospel is that Jesus fulfills and in some sense replaces the observances of Judaism.
  - B. This theme is worked out in terms of John's cycle of Jewish festivals (e.g., Tabernacles in chs. 7-8).
  - C. The theme reaches its climax in the final Passover. Having replaced the temple and the bread at previous Passovers, Jesus now replaces the Passover lamb (1:29, 19:36; cf. Exod. 12:46).
  - D. The theme of replacement may be especially addressed to Jewish Christians who
    - 1. Could not make the pilgrimages to the temple, since the building no longer existed.
    - 2. Could not participate in the synagogue liturgies, since (some of?) the synagogues had expelled Christians.
  - E. The theme says that through Jesus Christians possess the realities to which Jewish observances point.
  - F. Nevertheless, the theme of replacement has a wider application for it suggests that Jesus fulfills all true religion.

## **The Final Stage of Christian Growth: Taking Jesus's Place In This World**

- I. (time permitting) It seems probable that the editor made a number of important additions in chapters 13-20, and here are three. Note: These additions may have been taken, at least in part, from other writings of the Beloved Disciple, since they are in his literary style.
- A. 13:12-17; the interpretation of the foot washing as an example of how the disciples should behave seems to conflict with the passion symbolism of some being clean and not others. Note that "afterward" in verse 7 cannot refer to verses 12-17. Verses 20 and 34-35 may also have come from the editor.
  - B. Chapters 15-17; originally the last discourses must have ended with the words, "Rise, let us go from here" (14:31), especially since in the previous verse Jesus declares, "I will no longer talk much with you."
  - C. (review) The passages about the Beloved Disciple.
- II. Of the probable editorial additions, the one which is most certain and most important is 19:26-27.
- A. It is most certain because in the previous verse we have a list of the people standing by the cross, and the Beloved Disciple is not included. Surely, the only explanation is that the editor simply inserted verses 26-27.
  - B. It is most important because immediately thereafter we read, "After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now accomplished . . ." In the edited gospel the previous verses accomplish all that finally needed to be done.
- III. When we look at what the editor probably added and at the material he kept, we can see that the final stage of the Christian's spiritual life is becoming Jesus for one another in this world.
- A. This is what Jesus challenges the Beloved Disciple to do in 19:26-27, a challenge which he meets. Since Jesus is dying, he tells the Beloved Disciple to be Mary's son in place of him, and the Beloved Disciple takes her into his own home.
  - B. In the probably secondary explanation of the foot washing, Jesus says that the disciples must imitate him by washing one another's feet (13:14-16) and then insists that whoever receives his disciples receives him (13:20).
  - C. In chapters 15-16, which probably were inserted by the editor even if the Beloved Disciple wrote them, Jesus insists that his followers are no longer servants but his friends and know all that God told him (15:14-15).
  - D. Note, especially, 13:33-35. Since Jesus is going away, the disciples must love one another as he loved them and so be a sign to all people. The disciples must be Christ for one another and the world.
- IV. The primary way to the ultimate state of being Christ for one another is loving as Christ loved. This love includes both
- A. Being prepared to suffer and die for one another as Christ did when he accepted crucifixion.
  - B. Humbly serving one another as Christ did when he washed feet.
- V. Of course, disciples can only do all of this if they first accept God's love for them as expressed in Christ. John insists that apart from Christ his disciples can do nothing (15:1ff). Hence, Christ can claim that to love is a new commandment.
- A. Disciples must accept that Christ out of love has died for them (13:8). Note

that Peter gets into trouble because he tries to lay down his own life prematurely (13:36-38). (review) Christ's death saves primarily by revealing how great God's love is and how wicked the world is and who people can become through Jesus.

B. Disciples must also accept that Christ's will is to bring them to eternal glory (17:24).

C. To accept the full power of Christ's self-sacrificing love, disciples must recognize who he is, namely God's eternal Son (e.g., 13:1ff.).

D. Excursus: John's implicit criticisms of Christologies that say that Jesus was merely a good human being.

1. Such low Christologies leave open the possibility that his death might be involuntary and, hence, not express love. Note the gospel's insistence that Jesus knows and freely chooses his approaching death.

2. In such low Christologies Jesus's love is not necessarily God's, and what does it even mean to say that someone loved a person who had not yet even been born? When John's Gospel was written around the year 90, Jesus had already died sixty years earlier! In John's Gospel the divine love that Jesus has for his original disciples continues for his subsequent disciples down through the centuries (17:20).

3. Of course, such low Christologies do not explain the miracles and, especially, the physical resurrection of Jesus.

E. Once disciples accept God's love for them in Christ, they must love Jesus and, therefore, God.

F. This love enables disciples to love others as Jesus loved them.

G. Although we should hesitate to define in detail what John means by love, we can underline a few dimensions.

1. For John "love" is a verb; it is something done. We may note in passing that in John "faith" is always a verb. For John "faith" is apparently not something that you have, but something that you do.

2. Love is dwelling in each other and becoming one.

3. It is acts of self-sacrifice like washing someone's feet or laying down one's life.

4. Love leads to joy (e.g., 15:11).

{Note: I think these dimensions are all necessary for genuine love.}

VI. Once disciples love one another as Christ loved them, they enter into a new mystical relationship to Christ and the Father and each other in the Spirit.

A. We should hesitate to define John's vision of the ultimate spiritual state in detail because it is beyond what we have experienced, and our ability to imagine it is probably limited.

B. Nevertheless, here are some dimensions of the experience:

1. Through love disciples have total unity both with God in Christ and with one another.

- a. This unity is the same perfect unity that the Father has with the Son (17:21).

- b. Disciples are caught up in the relationship between the divine persons. Note that in the gospel, the Father gives the disciples to the Son who dies for them in obedience to the Father (e.g., 17:6).

- c. Note too that unity with God and with one another are mutually dependent. Here John's mysticism differs from other varieties and, I believe, is superior.
  - d. The perfect unity does not mean absorption and the loss of personal identity (as in Nirvana). The metaphor is mutual indwelling, and the unity is achieved and maintained by love.
  - 2. With this unity come life, peace, and joy, and this life, peace, and joy are infinitely more satisfying and lasting than physical life and worldly happiness (14:27).
  - 3. With this unity also comes direct, complete knowledge of God and of his eternal plan in Christ. We perceive the unseen God and know the goodness and truth of his revelation through Jesus. We also know Jesus's unity with the Father (14:19-20).
  - 4. Thanks to their unity with Christ, disciples know that they will have eternal life, because his will for them is to see his eternal glory as it is (17:24).
  - 5. Thanks to this unity with God and each other, disciples incarnate the glory of God and are an invitation and challenge to the world (e.g., 17:21). For John the love that his disciples have for one another is their primary missionary statement.
  - 6. Thanks to their unity and mission, disciples can ask for whatever they need to do God's work, and he will give it to them (15:7; here John has adapted traditional material from Jesus [cf. Matt. 7:7]).
  - 7. Hence, the disciples take Jesus's place in this world. They may even do greater works than he did (14:12).
  - 8. Although John does not give us many details, he seems to presuppose a process of divinization, begun in this life and completed in the last day. Disciples are to be no longer Jesus's servants but his friends (15:15) and can rightly be described as "gods" (10:34-35).
- VII. Some implications of this distant goal for John's Christian readers now.
- A. It nourishes hope. There is infinitely more than what they experience now.
  - B. It is a continuing challenge to growth.
  - C. It points toward a particular path, including
    - 1. A spirituality in which love of God and neighbor grow together.
    - 2. A missionary attitude that love is the primary way to convert others.
    - 3. Mutual indwelling as the model for love. (Note that such love is not patronizing or sentimental.)
  - D. It should make John's readers hesitant to dismiss his Christology (which is the foundation for subsequent orthodox Christology). The Christology came out of an experience.

## **The Editor's Answer to How We Can Know John's Gospel Is True (summary and review)**

- I. When the Beloved Disciple was alive, perhaps most of his community had difficulty with his insistence that Jesus was God infleshed.
  - A. Jewish Christians who remained in the synagogues were reluctant to confess Christ's divinity because such confession would lead to expulsion.
  - B. Some of the Beloved Disciple's own community may have thought that the Son of God was too exalted to have a fleshly body.
  - C. Presumably people also realized that the historical evidence did not necessitate the conclusion that Jesus was God infleshed.
- II. After the Beloved Disciple's death, there was even more reason to question the conclusion that Jesus was God infleshed.
  - A. Apparently, there were no more living eyewitnesses who could vouch for this conclusion.
  - B. The other gospels were becoming known, and they differed from that of the Beloved Disciple in fundamental respects.
- III. One way the editor responded to the problem of credibility was to preserve the Beloved Disciple's work and emphasize its authority as the testimony of an eyewitness. Note that the editor included the Beloved Disciple in various crucial scenes in the gospel.
- IV. However, I believe that the fundamental way that the editor responded was to structure the gospel so we readers would be led on a path which starts with conversion and ends by becoming Christ for one another.
- V. This structuring invites readers to come to an ever more certain faith and shows us how to take the next step.
- VI. To achieve an initial faith we must
  - A. Listen to the testimony of another person about Jesus
  - B. Be prepared to come and see. In the period after Jesus's resurrection coming and seeing must involve reading the Gospel and/or visiting a Christian community.
  - C. If we do come and see, then Jesus will tell us something about ourselves and will give us some secret sign.
  - D. At this point real faith can begin. However, we may become too enthusiastic.
- VII. To take the next step, we must receive the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist.
  - A. Such reception will necessitate making a public confession of our new faith.
  - B. We will also have to accept the humbling fact that we must receive the spiritual through material observances. This acceptance will help us realize how elementary our faith is.
  - C. Thanks to the materiality of the sacraments, we will know that God can sanctify matter and, consequently, we can believe that God can become incarnate.
  - D. With the sacraments will come the assurance of final resurrection.
  - E. We will also be able to revere Jesus as the one who has given us the sacraments and is present in them.
- VIII. To enter the following stage, we must become committed disciples.

- A. To become committed, we must recognize that despite our growth so far, we are still enslaved to sin and still do not really know the truth about Jesus.
  - B. We must also be prepared to suffer rejection from the same world that rejected him.
  - C. When we become committed disciples, we will have an inner experience of Jesus which will enable us to begin to know that he is God.
- IX. One possible final step is to die for Jesus. If we do, we join him in heaven and directly experience his divine glory.
- X. An alternative--and, perhaps even better--final step is to become Christ for other people and thereby take his place in this world.
- A. To do this, we must love others as he loved us. Such love includes laying down our lives for one another and humbly serving each other.
  - B. When we show such love, the Father and the Son begin to dwell within us through the Spirit.
  - C. As a result, we know them with the same certainty that we know ourselves.
  - D. Consequently, we have a sure knowledge of Christ's divinity and of God's plan to save us through the incarnation.
  - E. We also participate fully in God's love and joy, and in some sense we become divine ourselves.



## The Formation of the Canon

- I. The Greek word "canon" originally meant a measuring reed and then came to mean "standard" and "list." In the case of the Bible it means the standard collection of sacred books.
- II. The decisions over which books belong in the New Testament "canon" were mostly made in the first four centuries, though there was some debate even later.
- III. In the late first century and throughout the second, the Church struggled with two internal problems:
  - A. The need for institutionalization. As the Church became both larger and more distant from its origins, a structure was needed to preserve its heritage and guarantee unity.
  - B. The crisis produced by the rise of Gnosticism and other "heresies."
- IV. The development of the canon was part of the Church's response to these problems.
  - A. The selection of certain early Christian writings to be part of scripture guaranteed that the origins of Christianity would be preserved and be a unifying force.
  - B. In this selection the church rejected Gnostic works and canonized some anti-gnostic ones (e.g., 1, 2, & 3 John).
- V. In selecting books for the canon, three tests were decisive:
  - A. Apostolicity. Theoretically, this means that the author of a book was an apostle or someone who at least got the information directly from an apostle. In practice, what it meant was the book came from the apostolic era. Note that all the books of the New Testament could have come from the first century, and little other Christian literature survives from this period.
  - B. Inspiration. The book had to be both orthodox and edifying. The New Testament books are, on the whole, much more profound and helpful than the New Testament apocrypha or other early Christian writings.
  - C. Catholicity ("catholic" in Greek means "universal"). The book had to be widely accepted.
- VI. The formation of the canon for the most part occurred slowly and informally and is not well documented.
- VII. Basically we can divide the process into four periods, though these cannot be dated precisely.
  - A. Period 1: The only written works that were canonical were the Jewish scriptures (roughly the Christian Old Testament). The documents that would become the New Testament were not scripture and were used primarily as sources of information about Jesus who was authoritative.
  - B. Period 2: Increasingly, early Christian writings were seen as at least as authoritative as the Old Testament. The four gospels, the Acts, and the major epistles of Paul gained this status especially early and maintained it.
  - C. Period 3: There were attempts to specify precisely which books belonged in the "New Testament" and which did not.
    1. The books which were disputed but finally made it.
      - a. Hebrews had trouble, especially in the West, apparently because of (well justified) doubts concerning its pauline authorship and

perhaps dislike of its theology that there was no forgiveness for apostasy.

b. Revelation had trouble, especially in the East, because of (well justified) doubts concerning apostolic authorship and because its contents were obscure and were sometimes used to defend dubious theology.

c. Some of the shorter books (e.g., 3 John) gained admission only slowly because of their slender theology. These eventually made it because they were deemed apostolic.

2. The books which came the closest to getting in were certain orthodox documents from the late first century and the early second (e.g., 1 Clement, Shepherd of Hermas). These failed to make it because they were obviously not apostolic and (I think) because they were not theologically profound or literarily exciting.

D. Period 4: The Great Church agrees that the New Testament consists of the present 27 books. Perhaps the first document to list the present New Testament was Athanasius's Easter letter in 367. However, especially over Revelation, debate continued for centuries.

VIII. By including diverse early Christian writings in a single "canon" the Church suggested

A. No one document could say all that needed to be said about Jesus and the early church. Note the plurality of the gospels.

B. All these documents despite their diversity were somehow compatible and helped interpret each other.

C. Even though many of the New Testament documents (e.g., 1 Corinthians) were responses to specific situations, they contained perspectives of permanent value.

D. Together these documents constituted a "standard" which defined what Christianity essentially was and could be used to determine the inspiration of later writings and movements.

IX. The history of the canon also implies that the "authority" of the Bible depends at least in part on the authority of the Church, since the Church determined what went into the collection. Hence, an extreme Protestant attempt to disown the history of the Church and return to scripture alone is questionable.

## Reconstructing the Text of the New Testament

- I. None of the original copies of the New Testament books has come down to us.
- II. What has come down to us are thousands of handwritten copies from around 200 C.E. onward. There is a tiny fragment of John's Gospel (referred to above) which may be as early as 125 and a couple of other small fragments from the second century.
- III. These manuscripts differ from each other, since it is difficult to copy a long document by hand without making any changes.
- IV. Textual criticism is the art of determining the original reading from the mass of divergent manuscripts.
- V. There are several general manuscript classifications on the basis of material, writing style, and language:
  - A. Papyrus (pl. papyri). These were written on material produced from a reed which grows in Egypt. All our oldest manuscripts (second and third century), as well as some later ones, are papyri. The scholarly symbol is "p" followed by a number. Unfortunately, relatively little of the New Testament is preserved on papyri.
  - B. Uncials. These were printed in capital letters on vellum (parchment) and (like the papyri) contain no spaces between words and virtually no punctuation. They come from the fourth through the tenth century. The scholarly symbol is a capital letter or a number preceded by zero.
  - C. Minuscules. These were written in small letters on vellum or paper and come from the ninth century through the fifteenth when the invention of the printing press made further manuscripts unnecessary. The scholarly symbol is a number.
  - D. Versions. These are ancient New Testament translations of which the most important are the Latin, the Syriac, and the Coptic. The scholarly symbol is an abbreviation of the language or country (e.g., "it" stands for "Itala" or Old Latin).
- VI. Scholars also classify manuscripts into text types. A text type is those manuscripts which have common readings and, hence, seem to have a common ancestry. The three most important text types are
  - A. The Alexandrian. This is very old and in general is the most reliable. As the name implies, many of these manuscripts came from Egypt. Perhaps the two most important are "B" and "S."
  - B. The Western. This is also very old but contains numerous changes ("errors"). Many of these manuscripts came from Western North Africa or Italy. Some of the most important are "D" and the Old Latin.
  - C. The Byzantine. The vast majority of manuscripts belong to this type. Unfortunately, it is late and unreliable. The King James Version was based primarily on Byzantine manuscripts.
- VII. (time permitting) Reading a textual apparatus--an exercise.
- VIII. Types of textual "errors."
  - A. Unintentional errors
    1. Eye errors: The scribe wrote down something that looked about the same.
    2. Ear errors: The scribe wrote down something that sounded about the same.

3. Mind errors: The scribe wrote what his mind told him rather than what he was actually copying. An illustration is unintentional harmonization. The scribe in copying Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer unintentionally made it more like Matthew's.

B. Intentional alterations. The scribe deliberately changed the text perhaps to improve the style, correct factual mistakes, or make the theology orthodox.

IX. The basic rule of textual criticism is that the reading from which the other readings could most easily have arisen is the original.

X. Additional rules:

A. Rules involving external evidence (i.e., the testimony of the actual manuscripts) and rationales for them.

1. The reading in the oldest manuscripts is to be preferred. Rationale: An alteration may have occurred and spread after our oldest manuscripts were written. Example: 1 John 5:7-8 does not occur in the older manuscripts and was certainly added later.

2. The reading that occurs in the most text types is to be preferred. Rationale: All groups of manuscripts stem from the original, and an original reading stands a better chance of being in more of them.

Example: Luke 22:17-20 occurs in all text types, whereas the passage is omitted or altered only in a few western manuscripts.

3. The reading that occurs in the best overall manuscripts and manuscript types is to be preferred. Rationale: Some manuscripts and manuscript types, perhaps due to more careful copying, are in general more reliable and so are more likely in a specific instance to have a better reading.

Example: "The only God" in John 1:18 is found in the best manuscripts (including p66, p75, B, and S).

B. Rules involving internal evidence (i.e., the inherent plausibility of a reading) and rationales.

1. The shorter reading is to be preferred. Rationale: A scribe would be more hesitant to delete something from a sacred text than to add.

Example: The manuscripts that omit John 5:4 are to be preferred.

2. The more difficult reading is to be preferred. Rationale: A scribe would be more likely to clarify and correct than to obscure and corrupt.

Example: "Isaiah the prophet" in Mark 1:2 is the correct reading, since the immediately following quote is not from Isaiah.

3. The reading that differs most from parallel passages is to be preferred.

Rationale: A scribe would be more likely to harmonize. Example: "With the Holy Spirit" (omit "and fire") is the correct reading in Mark 1:8, since it differs from the corresponding sections in Matthew and Luke which add "and fire."

4. The reading that fits the context is to be preferred. Rationale: Changes made after the completion of a document are more likely to interrupt the unity. Example: John 7:53-8:11 does not fit the literary style or narrative flow of John's Gospel. Hence, the manuscripts that omit this passage are to be preferred.

XI. (time permitting) An exercise in textual criticism: determining the original

conclusion to Mark's Gospel.

XII. The value of original and secondary readings.

A. The original reading is authoritative, since it is the one that most likely gives us reliable information about Jesus and the beginnings of Christianity and is what the Church intended to canonize.

B. Later readings, when so identified, have their value.

1. They do tell us about a later period in Church history.

2. Occasionally they may preserve apparently authentic tradition about Jesus or the early church. Note the Woman Caught in Adultery or D's addition to Luke 6:4.

3. Occasionally, the Church has declared certain additions to be canonical (e.g., the long ending of Mark).

XIII. The relative success of textual criticism.

A. Modern textual criticism has established the bulk of the New Testament text with near certainty.

B. It has also demonstrated that unless there is some dramatic breakthrough we will never be able to settle certain important textual issues.

XIV. The theological implications of textual criticism.

A. We cannot have absolute certainty about what is in the Bible.

B. We cannot have the Bible without scholarship, because scholarship is necessary to reconstruct it.

## **Appendix: The Problem of the “Inspiration” of the New Testament; My Perspective as a Modern Anglican**

- I. The Church has always insisted that the Bible as a whole and, especially, the New Testament are “the Word of God,” and as such, uniquely inspired.
- II. Of course, non-Christians have not agreed.
- III. There are various options for whether the New Testament is inspired and, if so, to what degree. Here are several, listed from the most skeptical to the most credulous.
  - A. An anti-Christian atheistic position: The New Testament is a thoroughly human document from the distant past and makes incredible historical statements (e.g., Jesus rose from the dead) and champions outdated ethical perspectives (e.g., on homosexuality). The claim that this document is inspired has held back progress and facilitated human rights violations.
  - B. A humanistic position. The New Testament is a thoroughly human document from the distant past and makes many untenable theological claims but does contain timeless ethical values (e.g., the importance of loving one’s neighbor). Therefore, the New Testament has in practice often contributed to human wellbeing despite the outdated and misleading theology.
  - C. A non-Christian theistic position: The New Testament comes from human beings who had profound insights into the Divine but erred in insisting on the superiority of their own teacher, Jesus. Therefore, the New Testament has helped countless Christians enter more deeply into the life of God but has also fostered religious intolerance.
  - D. A liberal orthodox Christian position: The New Testament is a human document which uniquely bears witness to the truth that in Jesus God became incarnate. Therefore, the New Testament contains the limitations of any human document, but has a unique authority. Through the New Testament, humans learn that God became one of us, and this knowledge gives our relationship to the divine an additional dimension that otherwise cannot be had.
  - E. A “Fundamentalist” Christian position. God would have wanted for human beings to have an infallible ethical and spiritual guide so that we would not be prey to the uncertainty of human opinions. Therefore, God inspired the New Testament fully, and the New Testament contains no errors.
- IV. My Anglican perspective on inspiration.
  - A. Anglicans are committed to the use of reason and accept the results of sound scholarship.
  - B. Sound scholarship has demonstrated that there are errors and limited perspectives in the New Testament (see above).
  - C. Hence, the Fundamentalist claim that the New Testament contains no errors is untenable.
  - D. Anglicans accept the orthodox claim that in Jesus God became human.
  - E. Therefore, Jesus reveals God as fully as a human life can, and in Jesus God directly experienced the limitations and sufferings that human beings do.
  - F. Since Jesus was fully human, he also had the limited perspectives of a person living in a particular cultural context.

G. Of course, the authors of the New Testament were fully human and had limitations.

H. Nevertheless, the New Testament preserved the indispensable truth of the incarnation and is uniquely inspired.

I. As non-Christians complain (see above), the limitations of the New Testament and even of the fully human Jesus sometimes have inspired intolerance and cruelty.

J. However, the New Testament emphasizes loving everyone (even enemies) and that God's Spirit can lead the Church into all truth.

K. These emphases allow the Church to recognize the problems that the New Testament has caused and move beyond them and be charitable to all.