

PHOTO ESSAY Diverse Portraits of Jesus



Early Christian artists commonly emphasized Jesus' relevance to their lives by portraying him dressed as a contemporary, but they also envisioned him in a variety of ways, ranging from a clean-shaven youth to a mature, bearded figure. A fresco in the Catacomb of Saint Domitilla in Rome (*above*) shows Jesus and the apostles as beardless, with short hair, and wearing white linen tunics in the Greco-Roman fashion. By contrast, the image of Jesus on the famous Shroud of Turin (*detail left*), a burial cloth in which Jesus' crucified body was allegedly wrapped, shows a bearded figure with long hair in what may have been the style of Palestinian-Jewish men of the early first century CE. Although carbon 14 dating of a swath from the shroud in 1988 indicated that it was woven in about the fourteenth century CE, recent chemical tests of other parts of the shroud suggest that it is actually much older. (The cloth sample dated in 1988 reportedly was taken from a medieval-era patch used to repair the shroud after it was damaged by fire.)



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In a mosaic from the mid-third century CE (above), a Christian artist portrays Christ as the sun-god Apollo, thereby expressing the glorified Jesus' cosmic importance. As the "light of the world," Christ replaces Greco-Roman solar deities and now shines "like the sun in full strength" (Rev. 1:16). Sixth-century mosaics in Ravenna depict scenes from Jesus' ministry: (left) A youthful Jesus summons the brothers Peter and Andrew to leave their fishing boat and follow him. (below) A mature, bearded Jesus (with halo) and his disciples are dressed in a style characteristic of the late eastern Roman (Byzantine) period.



Diverse Portraits of Jesus (continued)



(top) As a disciple looks on, Jesus expels demons from a man and casts them into swine at Gergesa. (middle) On his fatal journey to Jerusalem, a beardless Jesus touches the eyes of a blind man to restore his sight. (bottom left) Judas kisses Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, identifying him to the guards who have come to arrest him, as Peter draws his sword to cut off the ear of Malchus, slave of the High Priest (John 18:10, 26). (bottom right) In a post resurrection appearance found only in John's Gospel, the risen Jesus allows a skeptical Thomas to touch his wounds, leading to Thomas's recognition of Jesus as "my Lord and my God." ■





CHAPTER 10

John's Reinterpretation of Jesus

Divine Wisdom Made Flesh

*He who has faith in me will do what I am doing; and he will do greater things still. . . .
Your Advocate [Paraclete], the Holy Spirit . . . will teach you everything,
and will call to mind all that I have told you.* John 14:12, 26

Key Topics/Themes In John's Gospel, the order of events and the portrayal of Jesus and his teaching are strikingly different from those in the Synoptic accounts. Whereas the Synoptics depict Jesus as an eschatological healer-exorcist whose teachings deal primarily with Torah reinterpretation, John describes Jesus as an embodiment of heavenly Wisdom who performs no exorcisms and whose message centers on his own divine nature. In John, Jesus is the human form of God's celestial Word, the cosmic expression of divine Wisdom by which God created the universe. As the Word incarnate (made

flesh), Jesus reveals otherwise unknowable truths about God's being and purpose. To John, Jesus' crucifixion is not a humiliating ordeal (as Mark characterizes it), but a glorification that frees Jesus to return to heaven. Although John's Gospel alludes briefly to Jesus' future return, it contains no prophecies of the Second Coming comparable to those found in the Synoptics. Instead of emphasizing the Parousia, it argues that the risen Christ is eternally present in the invisible form of a surrogate—the Paraclete, or Holy Spirit, which continues to inspire and direct the believing community.

From the moment we read the opening lines of John's Gospel—"When all things began, the Word already was. The Word dwelt with God, and what God was, the Word was" (1:1)—we realize that we have entered a world of thought strikingly different from that of the Synoptic Gospels. "Word," which John uses to denote the state of Jesus' preexistence in heaven before he came to earth, translates the Greek term *Logos*. A philosophical concept with a long pre-Christian history, **Logos** can mean anything from a divine utterance to the principle of cosmic reason that

orders and governs the universe. To John, it is the infinite wisdom of God personified, the ultimate consummation of Israel's long wisdom tradition (see below).

Identifying his hero with the Greek *Logos* concept is only the first of John's many astonishing innovations in retelling Jesus' story. While the three Synoptics give generally similar accounts of their subject's life, John creates a portrait of Jesus that differs in both outline and content from the other Gospels. Ninety percent of John's material appears exclusively in his

The Gospel According to John

Author: Traditionally, John, son of Zebedee and brother of James, one of the Twelve. The writer, who does not identify himself, states that his version of Jesus' life is based on testimony of an unnamed "Beloved Disciple." Scholars classify the work as anonymous.

Date: Between about 95 and 100 CE, after some Christians were expelled from Jewish synagogues. Small fragments of the Gospel found in Egypt, dating from the first half of the second century CE, are the oldest surviving part of the New Testament.

Place of composition: Unknown. The Gospel may have evolved at a number of different sites as the Johannine community moved from a Jewish-Palestinian to a Gentile environment.

Sources: A compilation of Jesus' miraculous acts, the hypothetical Signs Gospel; Greek and Jewish traditions involving heavenly Wisdom; and the oral teachings of an unidentified "Beloved Disciple."

Audience: Communities influenced by a uniquely high Christology, including belief in Jesus' prehuman existence as Cosmic Wisdom (the Logos), as well as a proto-Gnostic group.

account and has no parallel in the Synoptics. The Fourth Gospel offers a different chronology of Jesus' ministry, a different order of events, a different teaching, and a distinctly different teacher. Instead of Mark's humble carpenter-prophet, John presents a divine hero whose supernatural glory radiates through every speech he makes and every miracle he performs. John's Jesus is a being of light even while walking the earth.

Writing perhaps thirty years after Mark had invented the Gospel form, the author of the Fourth Gospel is aware that, even after the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple in 70 CE, the End did not come and Jesus did not return. He is also aware that, despite its disappointment in the delayed Parousia, the Christian movement had not only survived the tribulations of the Jewish wars and government persecutions, but had grown vigorously and expanded throughout the Roman Empire. Inspired by the **Paraclete**—which he defines as "the Spirit of truth" (John 14:16; 15:26)—the fourth Evangelist boldly reinterprets Jesus' theological significance, emphasizing what Jesus accomplished at

his first coming and spotlighting his cosmic stature.

Unlike the Synoptic writers, John gives little indication that Jesus was remembered as an apocalyptic prophet who announced God's dawning kingdom and who expelled demons to show that Satan no longer controlled humanity. In John, Jesus does not predict Jerusalem's fall, prophesy about his return to earth, or perform a single exorcism. Instead, John portrays Jesus as effectively disclosing his "glory" during his earthly ministry. When the divine Logos became human as the man Jesus, his disciples could already see "his glory, such glory as befits the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). For John, the Crucifixion itself reveals Jesus' "hour of glory" and it is Jesus' death and return to heaven, his place of origin, which allows him to reveal the "power and glory" that Mark had ascribed to the Second Coming (Mark 13:26; cf. John 1:14; 12:27–33; 17:5, 22, 24).

In creating a portrait of Jesus so different from those in the Synoptic Gospels, John freely confesses that his purpose is not biographical but theological: His account was written "in order that you may hold the faith that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that through this faith you may possess life by his name" (20:31). This declaration follows the Gospel's climactic scene—a post resurrection appearance in which the reality of Jesus' living presence conquers the doubts of his most skeptical follower, Thomas. Confronted with a sudden manifestation of the risen Jesus, Thomas acknowledges him as "My Lord and my God"—a confession of faith that the reader is intended to echo.



Authorship

Since the late second century CE, the Gospel of John (commonly labeled the Fourth Gospel to distinguish it from the Synoptics) has been attributed to the apostle John, son of Zebedee and brother of James. In the Synoptics, John and James are Galilean fishermen and, along

with Peter, form an inner circle of Jesus' most intimate followers. The most prominent of the Twelve, the three are present when Jesus raises Jairus's daughter (Mark 5:37), at the Transfiguration (Mark 9:2), and in the garden of Gethsemane when Jesus is arrested (Mark 14:33). Jesus nicknames John and his brother "Boanerges," meaning "sons of thunder," perhaps for their aggressive temperaments, as when they ask Jesus to send fire to consume a Samaritan village (Luke 9:54) or demand first place in his kingdom (Mark 10:35–40). Writing in the mid-50s CE, Paul describes John as one of the three "pillars" in the Jerusalem church (Gal. 2:6–10) during its formative period.

According to one church tradition, John eventually settled in Ephesus, where he lived to an exceptionally old age, writing his Gospel, three letters, and the Book of Revelation. These five works are known collectively as the "Johannine literature."

The tradition ascribing authorship to the son of Zebedee is relatively late. Before about 180 CE, church writers do not mention the Gospel's existence. After that date, some leading churchmen accept it as John's composition, although others doubt its authenticity. Some even suggest that it was the work of Cerinthus, a Gnostic teacher.

One church leader, Clement of Alexandria, states what became the official view of John's origin. Clement (c. 200 CE) recognized the salient differences between the Synoptics and John and noted that after the other Evangelists had preserved the "facts of history" John then wrote "a spiritual Gospel." Both traditionalists and modern critics agree with Clement on two counts: that John's Gospel was the last one written and that it profoundly "spiritualizes" Jesus.

Problems with the Traditional Theory

Most contemporary scholars doubt that the apostle John wrote the document bearing his name. Most scholars are also skeptical that the same author wrote all of the Johannine literature (see Chapter 18 for a discussion of the letters of John

and Chapter 19 on the authorship of Revelation). The Gospel itself does not mention the author's identity, stating instead that it is based on the testimony of an anonymous disciple "whom Jesus loved" (21:20–24). Tradition identifies this "Beloved Disciple" with John (whose name does not appear in the Gospel), but scholars can find no evidence to substantiate this claim. Jesus predicted that John would suffer a death similar to his (Mark 10:39), whereas the Gospel implies that its author, unlike Peter, James, and John, did not die a martyr's death (21:20–22). Many historians think it likely that Herod Agrippa executed the apostle John along with his brother James about 41–43 CE (Acts 12:1–3).

Some critics propose that another John, prominent in the church at Ephesus about 100 CE, is the author. Except that he was called "John the Elder" (presbyter), we know nothing that would connect him with the Johannine writings. Lacking definite confirmation of traditional authorship, scholars regard the work as anonymous. For convenience, we refer to the author as John.

The Beloved Disciple

Although the Gospel text does not identify its author, editorial notes added to the final chapter associate him with the unnamed Beloved Disciple, suggesting that at the very least this disciple's teachings are the Gospel's primary source (21:23–24). Whether or not this anonymous personage was a historical character, he is certainly an idealized figure, achieving an intimacy and emotional rapport with Jesus unmatched by that with Peter or the other disciples. In the Gospel, he does not appear (at least as the one "Jesus loved") until the final night of Jesus' life, when we find him at the Last Supper, lying against his friend's chest (13:23). (The Twelve dined in the Greco-Roman fashion, reclining two-by-two on benches set around the table.)

Designed to represent the Johannine community's special knowledge of Christ, the Beloved Disciple is invariably presented in competition

with Peter, who may represent the larger apostolic church from which the disciple's exclusive group is somewhat distanced. At the Last Supper, the Beloved Disciple is Peter's intermediary, transmitting to Jesus Peter's question about Judas's betrayal (13:21–29). Acquainted with the High Priest, he has access to Pilate's court, thus gaining Peter's admittance to the hearing, where Peter denies knowing Jesus (18:15–18). The only male disciple at the cross, he receives Jesus' charge to care for Mary, becoming her "son" and hence Jesus' "brother" as well (19:26–27).

Outrunning Peter to the empty tomb on Easter morning, he arrives there first and is the first to believe that Jesus is risen (20:2–10). In a boat fishing with Peter on the Sea of Galilee, the disciple is the first to recognize the resurrected Jesus standing on the shore, identifying him to Peter (21:4–7). Peter, future "pillar" of the Jerusalem church, is commissioned to "feed" (or spiritually nourish) Jesus' "sheep" (his future followers), but Jesus has a special prophecy for the Beloved Disciple's future: He may live until the Master returns (21:20–22).

This brief allusion to the Beloved Disciple's surviving until Jesus' return is one of only two explicit references to the Parousia in John's Gospel. The single reference to Jesus' coming again in the main body of the Gospel appears in John 14:3, where it is placed in the context of Jesus' receiving the disciples into their everlasting home, perhaps at the hour of their deaths. In John 21, which scholars believe is an epilogue to the Gospel and by a writer or editor different from that of the main narrative, the author states that Jesus' words about the Beloved Disciple had been misunderstood "in the brotherhood," the community that produced the Gospel. "But in fact Jesus did not say that he would not die," the editor points out, "he only said, 'If it should be my will that he wait until I come, what is it to you?'" (21:23). By the time the epilogue was written, the Beloved Disciple had apparently already died, suggesting that even the longest-lived followers who had personally known Jesus had by then passed from the scene. Does the writer mean to imply that expectations of Jesus' return

during the lifetimes of some original followers was a misapprehension, a mistaken interpretation of Jesus' teaching?

Instead of emphasizing Jesus' return to earth, John's Gospel underscores Jesus' return to heaven, his place of origin. At the Last Supper Jesus promises the disciples: "I will not leave you bereft; I am coming back to you," coming not visibly at the Parousia, but in the unseen form of the Paraclete, which Jesus describes as "your Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name" (14:26). Explaining the necessity of his return to heaven, Jesus tells the disciples: "It is for your good that I am leaving you. If I do not go, your Advocate [the Paraclete] will not come, whereas if I go, I will send him to you" (16:7). Not the Parousia, but the Paraclete, the Spirit that assures Jesus' continuing presence among believers, will reveal Jesus' "glory" and invisibly express God's will in human society (16:8–15).

One disciple clearly articulates Jesus' intent in thus revising expectations of his Second Coming: "You mean to disclose yourself to us alone and not to the world?" (14:22). In the Johannine view, Jesus has already returned spiritually to dwell within believers sanctified by love, and perhaps will not manifest himself visibly to "the world" at a Parousia (14:10–29).

Place and Date of Composition

Despite its use of Hellenistic terms and ideas, recent studies indicate that John's Gospel is deeply rooted in Palestinian tradition. It shows a greater familiarity with Palestinian geography than the Synoptics and reveals close connections with first-century Palestinian Judaism, particularly concepts prevailing in the Essene community at Qumran. Study of the Dead Sea Scrolls from Qumran reveals many parallels between Essene ideas and those prevailing in the Johannine community. Essene writers and the author of John use a remarkably similar vocabulary to express the same kind of ethical dualism, dividing the world into two opposing groups of people: those who walk in the *light* (symbolizing truth and goodness) and those

who walk in *darkness* (symbolizing deceit and evil). In comparing John with the Dead Sea Scroll known as the *Rule of the Community*, scholars find not only an almost identical use of distinctive terms but also a comparable worldview according to which the universe is a battleground of polar opposites. In this dualistic cosmos, the devil (synonymous with “liar”) and his “spirit of error” oppose Jesus’ “spirit of truth” (cf. John 8:44; 12:35; 14:17; 15:26 with *Rule of the Community* 1QS 3.13, 17–21).

The Qumran and Johannine communities are also alike in that each is apparently based on the teachings of a spiritually enlightened founder. As the mysterious Teacher of Righteousness had earlier brought the light of true understanding to the Essenes, so the Johannine Jesus—“the light of the world”—came to illuminate humanity’s mental and spiritual darkness.

Although the unidentified Essene teacher receives nothing comparable to the exaltation, the Johannine writer accords Jesus, the two groups display similar attitudes, regarding themselves as specially chosen to fulfill the divine will. Both the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Johannine writings claim exclusive knowledge of God denied to outsiders and both view their respective groups, tiny as they were, as the *only* guardians of light and truth in a fatally benighted world.

Before the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, many scholars believed that John’s Gospel—with its seemingly Platonic dualism and use of Greek philosophical terms such as *Logos*—originated in a Hellenistic environment, perhaps in Ephesus, the traditional home of the apostle John in his old age. A wealthy seaport and capital of the Roman province of Asia (western Turkey), **Ephesus** was a crossroads of Greek and Near Eastern ideas. With a large colony of Jews, it was a center for Paul’s missionary work, as well as the base of a John-the-Baptist sect (Acts 19:1–7). If the Gospel was composed in an area where the Baptist was regarded as Jesus’ superior, it would account for the writer’s severe limitation of the Baptist’s role in the messianic drama, reducing his function to that of a mere “voice” bearing witness to Jesus (1:6–9, 19–28). The many

similarities between Essene and Johannine thought, however, now incline many scholars to fix the Gospel’s place of composition (at least its first edition) in Palestine or Syria.

Some critics once thought that John’s Gospel was composed late in the second century, when Christian authors first mention it. However, tiny manuscript fragments of John discovered in the Egyptian desert have been dated to about 125 to 150 CE, making them the oldest surviving part of a New Testament book. Allowing time for the Gospel to have circulated abroad as far as Egypt, the work could not have originated much later than about 100 CE. The Gospel’s references to believers’ being expelled from Jewish synagogues (9:22, 34–35)—an extended process that began about 85 or 90 CE—suggest that the decisive break between church and synagogue was already in effect when it was written. Hence, the Gospel is usually dated to between about 95 and 100 CE.

Relation to the Synoptic Gospels

Despite some verbal parallels to Mark (cf. John 6:7 and Mark 6:37; John 12:27–28 and Mark 14:34–36), most scholars do not think that the author of John’s Gospel drew on the earlier Gospels. A few scholars, however, such as Thomas Brodie (see “Recommended Reading”), argue that the author created his account by appropriating material from the Synoptics and thoroughly transforming it. After carefully analyzing John’s presumed reworking of his sources (primarily Mark, Matthew, Ephesians, and the Mosaic Torah), Brodie concludes that John’s Gospel is basically a theological reinterpretation of previously existing traditions about Jesus’ life and meaning. Instead of deriving from a marginal Christian group, the supposedly independent Johannine community, John’s narrative actually represents mainstream Christianity.

The enormous differences between the Synoptics and the Fourth Gospel, however, persuade most scholars that John’s vision of Jesus does not derive from the older canonical Gospels



BOX 10.1 Representative Examples of Material Found Only in John

Concept of the Logos: Before coming to earth, Jesus preexisted in heaven, where he was God's mediator in creating the universe (1:1–18).

Miracle at Cana: Jesus changes water into wine (the first "sign") (2:1–12).

Principle of spiritual rebirth: the conversation with Nicodemus (3:1–21; see also 7:50–52; 19:39).

Conversation with the Samaritan woman (4:1–42).

Jesus healing the invalid at Jerusalem's Sheep Pool (5:1–47).

The "I am" sayings: Jesus speaks as divine Wisdom revealed from above, equating himself with objects or concepts of great symbolic value,

such as "the bread of life" (6:22–66) and "the resurrection and the life" (11:25).

Cure of the man born blind: debate between church and synagogue (9:1–41).

The raising of Lazarus (the seventh "sign") (11:1–12:11).

A different tradition of the Last Supper: washing the disciples' feet (13:1–20) and delivering the farewell discourses (13:31–17:26).

Resurrection appearances in or near Jerusalem to Mary Magdalene and the disciples, including Thomas (20:1–29).

Resurrection appearances in Galilee to Peter and to the Beloved Disciple (21:1–23).

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(see Boxes 10.1 and 10.2). Concentrating on Jesus as a heavenly revealer of ultimate truth, John does not present his hero in Synoptic terms. Most of the material that appears in the Synoptics does not appear in John; conversely, most of John's contents are not even alluded to in the Synoptic Gospels.

A dozen representative differences between John and the Synoptics follow, along with brief suggestions about the author's possible reasons for not including characteristic Synoptic material:

1. John has no birth story or reference to Jesus' virginal conception, perhaps because he sees Christ as the eternal Word (Logos) who "became flesh" (1:14) as the man Jesus of Nazareth. John's doctrine of the **Incarnation** (the spiritual Logos becoming physically human) makes the manner of Jesus' human conception irrelevant.
2. John contains no record of Jesus' baptism by John, emphasizing Jesus' independence of and superiority to the Baptist. Besides denying the Baptist an Elijah role, the author shows Jesus conducting his own baptism

campaign, thus competing with the Baptist (3:22–23; 4:1).

3. John includes no period of contemplation in the Judean wilderness or temptation by Satan. His Jesus possesses a vital unity with the Father that makes worldly temptation impossible.
4. John never mentions Jesus' exorcisms, which play so large a role in Mark's and Matthew's reports of his ministry. Instead, Jesus himself is accused of "having a demon" (7:20; 8:46–52; 10:19–20).
5. Although he recounts some friction between Jesus and his brothers (7:1–6), John does not reproduce the Markan tradition that Jesus' family thought he was mentally unbalanced or that his neighbors in Nazareth viewed him as nothing extraordinary (Mark 3:20–21, 31–35; 6:1–6). In John, Jesus meets considerable opposition, but he is always too commanding and powerful a figure to be ignored or devalued.
6. John presents Jesus' teaching in a form radically different from that of the Synoptics. Both Mark and Matthew state that Jesus "never" taught without using parables

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BOX 10.2 Characters Introduced or Given New Emphasis in John

Andrew, Peter's brother, as a speaking character (1:40–42, 44; 6:8–9; 12:20–22)
 Philip, one of the Twelve (1:43–49; 6:5–7; 12:20–22; 14:8–11)
 Nathanael, one of the Twelve (1:45–51)
 Mary as a participant in Jesus' ministry (2:1–5) and at the cross (19:25–27)
 Nicodemus, a leading Pharisee (3:1–12; 7:50–52; 19:39)
 A Samaritan woman (4:7–42)

The woman taken in adultery (8:3–11; an appendix to John in the NEB)
 A man born blind (9:1–38)
 Lazarus, brother of Mary and Martha (11:1–44; 12:1–11)
 An unidentified disciple whom "Jesus loved" (13:23–26; 18:15–16; 19:26–27; 20:2–10; 21:7, 20–24)
 Annas, father-in-law of Caiaphas, the High Priest (18:12–14, 19–24)

(Mark 4:34; Matt. 13:34), but John does not record a single parable of the Synoptic type (involving homely images of agricultural or domestic life). Instead of brief aphorisms, and vivid comparisons, the Johannine Jesus conducts long dialogues with figures like Nicodemus and delivers philosophical speeches in which Jesus' own nature is typically the subject of discussion. In John, he speaks both publicly and privately in this manner, in Galilee as well as in Jerusalem. The Synoptic Jesus almost never speaks as he does everywhere in John; the Johannine Jesus almost never speaks as he does throughout the Synoptics.

John stands alone in his adaptation of Jesus' teaching, decisively outvoted four to one by the other Evangelists and their respective sources. Not only Mark but also Q and the special material in Matthew (M) and Luke (L) agree that Jesus taught chiefly in aphorisms and parables.

7. John includes none of Jesus' reinterpretations of the Mosaic Law, the main topic of Jesus' Synoptic discourses. Instead of the many ethical directives about not divorcing, keeping the Sabbath, ending the law of retaliation, and forgiving enemies that we find in Mark, Matthew, and Luke, John records only one "new commandment"—to

love. In both the Gospel and the Epistles, this is Jesus' single explicit directive; in the Johannine community, mutual love among "friends" is the sole distinguishing mark of true discipleship (13:34–35; 15:9–17).

8. Conspicuously absent from John's Gospel is any prediction of Jerusalem's fall, a concern that dominated the Synoptics' imaginations (Mark 13; Matt. 24–25; Luke 21). Viewing events a full generation after the Jewish Revolt, the Johannine author effectively disassociates Jesus from the apocalyptic hopes that many early Christians had linked to Jerusalem's destruction (see below).
9. Instead of apocalyptic prophecies of Jesus' Second Coming (Mark 13; Matthew 24–25; and Luke 21), John's Gospel focuses on two vital concepts: Jesus has already completed his role as Israel's Messiah and he is already present in the believing community. For John, the Paraclete, the **Holy Spirit** that serves as Christians' Helper, Comforter, or Advocate (14:25–26; 16:7–15) and that inspires the Johannine fellowship, is Jesus' surrogate, marking his invisible presence. To this Evangelist, Jesus' first coming means that believers have life *now* (5:21–26; 11:25–27) and that divine judgment is a current reality, not merely a

future event (3:18; cf. 9:39; 12:31). Scholars find in John a **realized eschatology**, a belief that events usually associated with the *eschaton* (world's End), such as divine judgment and the awarding of eternal life, are even now realized or fulfilled by Jesus' spiritual presence among believers. For John, the earthly career of Jesus, followed by the infusion of his Spirit into the disciples (20:22–23), has already accomplished God's purpose in sending the Messiah. For the Johannine community, in his hour of "glory" (crucifixion), Jesus had essentially finished his work (19:30). Just as John's doctrine of the Incarnation made the concept of a virgin conception theoretically unnecessary, so his view of the Paraclete effectively mutes the expectation of the Parousia.

10. Although he represents the sacramental bread and wine as life-giving symbols, John does not preserve a communion ritual or the institution of a New Covenant between Jesus and his followers at the Last Supper. Stating that the meal took place a day before Passover, John substitutes Jesus' act of humble service—washing the disciples' feet—for the Eucharist (13:1–16).
11. As his Jesus cannot be tempted, so John's Christ undergoes no agony before his arrest in the garden of Gethsemane. Unfailingly poised and confident, Jesus experiences his painful death as a glorification, his raising on the cross symbolizing his imminent ascension to heaven. Instead of Mark's cry of despair, in John, Jesus dies with a declaration that he has "accomplished" his life's purpose (19:30).
12. Finally, it must be emphasized that John's many differences from the Synoptics are not simply the result of the author's trying to "fill in" the gaps in his predecessors' Gospels. By carefully examining John's account, we see that he does not write to supplement earlier narratives about Jesus; rather, both his omissions and his inclusions are determined almost exclusively by

the writer's special theological convictions (20:30–31; 21:25). From his opening hymn praising the eternal Word to Jesus' promised reascension to heaven, every part of the Gospel is calculated to illustrate Jesus' glory as God's fullest revelation of his own ineffable Being.

Differences in the Chronology and Order of Events

Although John's essential story resembles the Synoptic version of Jesus' life—a public ministry featuring healings and other miracles followed by official rejection, arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection—the Fourth Gospel presents important differences in the chronology and order of events. Significant ways in which John's narrative sequence differs from the Synoptic order include the following:

1. The Synoptics show Jesus working mainly in Galilee and coming south to Judea only during his last days. In contrast, John has Jesus traveling back and forth between Galilee and Jerusalem throughout the duration of his ministry.
2. The Synoptics place Jesus' assault on the Temple at the end of his career, making it the incident that consolidates official hostility toward him; John sets it at the beginning (2:13–21).
3. The Synoptics agree that Jesus began his mission after John the Baptist's imprisonment, but John states that their missions overlapped (3:22–4:3).
4. The earlier Gospels mention only one Passover and imply that Jesus' career lasted only about a year; John refers to three Passovers (2:13; 6:4; 11:55), thus giving the ministry a duration of about three years.
5. Unlike the Synoptics, which present the Last Supper as a Passover celebration, John states that Jesus' final meal with the disciples occurred the evening before Passover and that the Crucifixion took place on Nisan 14, the day of preparation when paschal lambs were

being sacrificed (13:1, 29; 18:28; 19:14). Many historians believe that John's chronology is the more accurate, for it is improbable that Jesus' arrest, trial, and execution took place on Nisan 15, the most sacred time of the Passover observance.

Scholars also note, however, that John's probable reason for his dating of the Crucifixion is more theological than historical. Because he identifies Jesus as the "Lamb of God" at the beginning of his Gospel (1:29), it is thematically appropriate for John to coordinate the time of Jesus' death with the ritual slaying of the paschal lambs (prescribed in Exod. 12:3–10; cf. Isa. 53:7–12).

John's Purpose and Method

As an author, John states that his goal is to elicit belief in his community's distinctively **high Christology**, an emphasis on Jesus' divinity (17:3–5; 20:30–31), but other purposes also can be inferred from his text. Like the other Evangelists, John writes partly to defend his community against hostile criticism, particularly from Jewish leaders. Unlike the Synoptic authors, however, John does not generally differentiate among his Jewish opponents; instead of identifying them as scribes, Pharisees, or Sadducees, he generally lumps them all together simply as "the Jews"—as if his fellow countrymen belonged to a group from which he is entirely disassociated. Scholars believe that John's blanket condemnation of "the Jews" echoes the bitterness that developed in the decades following 70 CE, when the church and the synagogue became increasingly divided. Reflecting a social situation comparable to that in Matthew's Gospel, John indicates that his group—perhaps because of their increasingly vocal claims that Jesus is equal to God—has been banished from fellowship in the synagogue. The expulsion was evidently traumatic for John, who responds by retrojecting the event back to the time of Jesus and insisting that his group is spiritually superior to their synagogue critics

(cf. John 3:9–11 and 9:13–35). Nonetheless, the Evangelist states that "salvation comes" "from the Jews" (4:22).

The Work of the Paraclete: Jesus and Believers Are "One"

John's Double Vision Many commentators have noted that John's Gospel portrays Jesus not as a figure of the recent historical past, but as an immortal being who still inhabits the author's community. In John's narrative, Jesus' ministry and the similar activities of his later followers—the Johannine "brotherhood"—merge into an almost seamless whole. To articulate his vision that Christ and the members of his own group are "one" (17:12), John employs a double vision, creating in his Gospel a two-level drama in which Jesus of the past and believers of the present perform the same Spirit-directed work.

John is able to blend past and present in Jesus' biography through the operation of the Paraclete, a distinctively Johannine concept introduced in Jesus' farewell speeches at the Last Supper (chs. 14–17). This long section presents Jesus explaining precisely why he must leave his disciples on earth while he dies and ascends to heaven. His death is not a permanent loss, for he returns to the Father only in order to empower his disciples with the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, which acts as his invisible self among them (14:12–26). Functioning as a manifestation of the post resurrection Jesus, the Paraclete guides the Johannine community to interpret Jesus' teachings as no other group could: "It will teach you everything, and will call to mind all that I have told you" (16:26). This Spirit, Jesus' own double, allows the author to portray Christ in his full theological splendor. It also enables John's group not only to continue Jesus' miraculous works, but even to surpass his deeds. He who has faith, Jesus promises, "will do what I am doing; and he will do greater things still because I am going to the Father. Indeed, anything you ask in my name I will do" (14:12–14). In this vow—found only in

John—the writer finds his key to understanding the continuity between the Master and his later disciples.

John’s singular method of telling Jesus’ story becomes especially clear in chapter 9. In narrating Jesus’ restoration of sight to a man born blind, John skillfully melds traditions of Jesus’ healing miracles with the works that members of his community currently perform. John’s narrative can equate the two parties—Jesus and his later disciples—because the same Paraclete operates through both. An awareness of John’s method, conflating past and present, will help readers understand the historical forces at work in this episode. After Jesus cures the man’s lifelong blindness, a series of confrontations and arguments ensue between the man, his parents, and officials of the local synagogue. The Jewish officials’ interrogation of the man replicates circumstances prevailing not in Jesus’ day but in the writer’s own time. Explicit references to the expulsion of Jesus’ followers from the synagogue (9:22, 34)—a process that began well after Jesus’ death, during the last decades of the first century CE—are sure indicators of John’s two-level approach.

John employs a comparable blending of past and present in Jesus’ dialogue with the Pharisee Nicodemus (3:1–21). Jesus’ pretended astonishment that Nicodemus—depicted as one of Israel’s most famous teachers—does not understand or experience the power of the Holy Spirit motivating the author’s community could not have taken place in Jesus’ lifetime. But it accords well with what we know of much later debates between Jewish authorities and the author’s group, which proclaimed the Paraclete’s role in their lives. Using the first-person plural “we” to signify the whole believing community, John affirms that his brotherhood intimately knows the Spirit’s creative force, whereas “you” (the unbelievers) stubbornly refuse to credit the Johannine testimony (3:9–11). Readers will also note that in this dialogue Jesus speaks as if he has already returned to heaven (3:13), another indicator

that this passage reflects a perspective that developed long after the incident supposedly took place.

Apparent Stages in the Composition of John

Evidence of Editing In his extended meditations on Jesus’ cosmic stature and their Lord’s ongoing relationship with the Johannine group, the author/redactor apparently modified his Gospel text from time to time, not always smoothing over his editorial changes. Recognized “seams” in John’s narrative include passages in chapter 8, where Jesus first addresses “Jews who had believed him” (8:31) but then suddenly accuses his supposedly friendly audience of planning to “kill [him]” (8:37). In chapter 11, the narrator identifies Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, as “the woman who anointed the Lord with ointment” (11:2), but doesn’t actually show her performing this action until the next chapter (12:2–8).

The most obvious disconnections appear during Jesus’ farewell speeches at the Last Supper. Partway through the present form of the discourse, Jesus states that he will “not talk much longer with you [the disciples]” and then orders them to stand “up” and “go forward,” as if he has finished his conversation with them (14:31). Yet his farewell oration continues for another three chapters (15:1–17:26). Only in John 18 does Jesus actually leave the room and “cross the Kedron ravine” to the garden of Gethsemane (18:1).

The editorial expansions of Jesus’ last discourse result in further disjunctions. When Jesus first mentions his imminent departure (for heaven), Peter asks where he is going (13:33–36), a question that Thomas later repeats (14:5). Yet in John 16, Jesus states that “None of you asks me ‘Where are you going?’” (16:5). Thus Jesus seems to have forgotten the disciples’ earlier inquiries. For the Johannine Evangelist, however, the material in these added chapters—featuring the activity of the Paraclete, the necessity of communal love, and the “oneness” of Jesus and his friends—was too significant to leave out. Guided by the Paraclete, John was moved to include

these ongoing communications from the risen Jesus as if his Lord had delivered them on the night before his death.

Relation to Gnostic Ideas In addition to refuting Jewish critics offended by the Johannine community's proclamation of Jesus' divinity (viewed as an attack on Jewish monotheism) and its claim to spiritual superiority, John appears to defend his view of Jesus' nature against incipient Gnostic influences. **Gnosticism** was a complex religious/philosophical movement that developed into Christianity's first major challenge to what later became official church teaching. Whereas the church eventually espoused a doctrine that declared Jesus both fully human and fully divine, many Gnostics tended to focus on Jesus as pure spirit, free of human weakness (see Box 18.3). Although Gnosticism took many forms, it typically held a dualistic view of the cosmos. This dualism saw the universe as two mutually exclusive realms: The invisible world of spirit is eternal, pure, and good, whereas the physical world is inherently evil, the creation of a deeply flawed deity, whom some Gnostics identified with Yahweh. According to Gnostic belief, human beings gain salvation only through special knowledge (*gnosis*), imparted to a chosen elite through communion with spiritual beings. A divine redeemer (presumably Christ) descends from the spirit realm to transmit saving knowledge to persons whose souls are sufficiently disciplined to escape the body's earthly desires. Transcending the material world's false reality, the soul can then perceive the eternal truths of the spirit world.

A sometimes baffling mixture of elements from Greek philosophies and mystery cults, as well as aspects of Judaism and Christianity, Gnosticism embraced a variety of ideas about Christ. One branch of Gnosticism, called **Docetism** (a name taken from the Greek verb "to seem"), argued that Christ, being good, could not also be human; he only *seemed* to have a physical body. The Docetists contended that, as God's true Son, Christ was wholly spiritual, ascending to heaven while leaving another's body on the

cross (see discussion of the Johannine Letters in Chapter 18).

Although he sometimes uses Gnostic terms, John—despite his doctrine of Jesus' heavenly origins and divinity—avoids Gnosticism's extremism by insisting on Jesus' physical humanity (1:14). Even after the Resurrection, Jesus displays fleshly wounds and consumes ordinary food (20:24–29; 21:9–15). To show that Jesus was a mortal man who truly died, John eliminates from his Passion story Mark's tradition that Simon of Cyrene carried Jesus' cross (lest the reader think that Simon might have been substituted for Jesus at the Crucifixion). John also adds an incident in which a Roman soldier pierces Jesus' side with a spear, confirming his physical vulnerability and mortality (19:34–37).

Despite its conviction that the divine Logos "became flesh" (1:14), John's Gospel was popular in many Gnostic circles (which may account for its relatively slow acceptance by the church at large). Besides the metaphysical concepts of Christ's preexistence and his inherent divinity, John contains other statements that accord with Gnostic ideas. To *know* the "true God" and his Son is to gain "eternal life" (17:3); the assertion that "the spirit alone gives life; the flesh is of no avail" (6:63); and the teaching that only spiritual rebirth can grant immortality—all found only in John—are classic Gnostic beliefs. Considering John's emphasis on Jesus' spiritual invincibility and God-like stature, it is not surprising that the first commentaries written on John were by Gnostic Christians—or that some church leaders suspected that the author himself was a Gnostic!

Organization of John's Gospel

John's Gospel is framed by a prologue (1:1–51) and an epilogue (21:1–25). The main narrative (chs. 2–20) divides naturally into two long sections: an account of Jesus' miracles and public teachings (chs. 2–11) and an extended Passion story focusing on Jesus' private speeches to the disciples (chs. 12–20). Because John regards Jesus' miracles as "signs"—direct evidence of his hero's supernatural power—the first section

is commonly known as the **Book of Signs**. Many scholars believe that the author uses a previously compiled collection of Jesus' miraculous works as a primary source (see below). Because it presents Christ's death as a "glorious" fulfillment of the divine will, some commentators call the second part the **Book of Glory**.

The Gospel can be outlined as follows:

1. Prologue: hymn to the Logos; testimony of the Baptist; call of the disciples (1:1–51)
2. The Book of Signs (2:1–11:57)
 - a. The miracle at Cana
 - b. The cleansing of the Temple
 - c. The dialogue with Nicodemus on spiritual rebirth
 - d. The conversation with the Samaritan woman
 - e. Five more miraculous signs in Jerusalem and Galilee; Jesus' discourses witnessing to his divine nature
 - f. The resuscitation of Lazarus (the seventh sign)
3. The Book of Glory (12:1–20:31)
 - a. The plot against Jesus
 - b. The Last Supper and farewell discourses
 - c. The Passion story
 - d. The empty tomb and post resurrection appearances to Mary Magdalene, Peter, and the Beloved Disciple
4. Epilogue: post resurrection appearances in Galilee; parting words to Peter and the Beloved Disciple (21:1–25)



Hymn to the Word (Logos)

John's opening hymn to the Word introduces several concepts vital to his portrait of Christ. The phrase "when all things began" recalls the Genesis creation account when God's word of command—"Let there be light"—illuminated a previously dark universe. In John's view, the pre-human Christ is the creative Word (divine Wisdom, cosmic Reason) whom God uses to bring heaven and earth into existence. "With God at the beginning," the Word is an integral part of the Supreme Being—"what God was, the Word was" (1:1–5).

John's supreme irony is that the very world that the Word created rejects him, preferring spiritual "darkness" to the "light" he imparts. Nonetheless, the Word "became flesh"—the man Jesus—and temporarily lived among humans, allowing them to witness his "glory, such glory as befits the Father's only Son" (1:10–14).

Greek and Jewish Background

As noted previously, *Logos* (Word) is a Greek philosophical term, but John blends it with a parallel Hebrew tradition about divine Wisdom that existed before the world began. According to the Book of Proverbs (8:22–31), Wisdom (depicted as a gracious young woman) was Yahweh's companion when he created the universe, transforming the original dark **chaos** into a realm of order and light. As Yahweh's darling, she not only was his intimate helper in the creative process but also became God's channel of communication with humanity. As Israel's wisdom tradition developed in Hellenistic times, Wisdom was seen as both Yahweh's agent of creation and the being who reveals the divine mind to the faithful (Ecclus. 24; Wisd. of Sol. 6:12–9:18).

In the Greek philosophical tradition, *Logos* is also a divine concept, the principle of cosmic Reason that gives order and coherence to the otherwise chaotic world, making it accessible to human intellect. The *Logos* concept had circulated among Greek thinkers since the time of the philosopher Heraclitus (born c. 540 BCE). In John's day, *Logos* was a popular Stoic term, commonly viewed as synonymous with the divine intelligence that created and sustained the universe.

These analogous Greek and Hebrew ideas converge in the writings of **Philo Judaeus**, a Hellenistic-Jewish scholar living in Alexandria during the first century CE. A pious Jew profoundly influenced by Greek rationality, Philo attempted to reconcile Hellenistic logic with the revelation contained in the Hebrew Bible. Philo used the Hebrew concept of Wisdom as the creative intermediary between the transcendent Creator and the material creation. However, he employed the

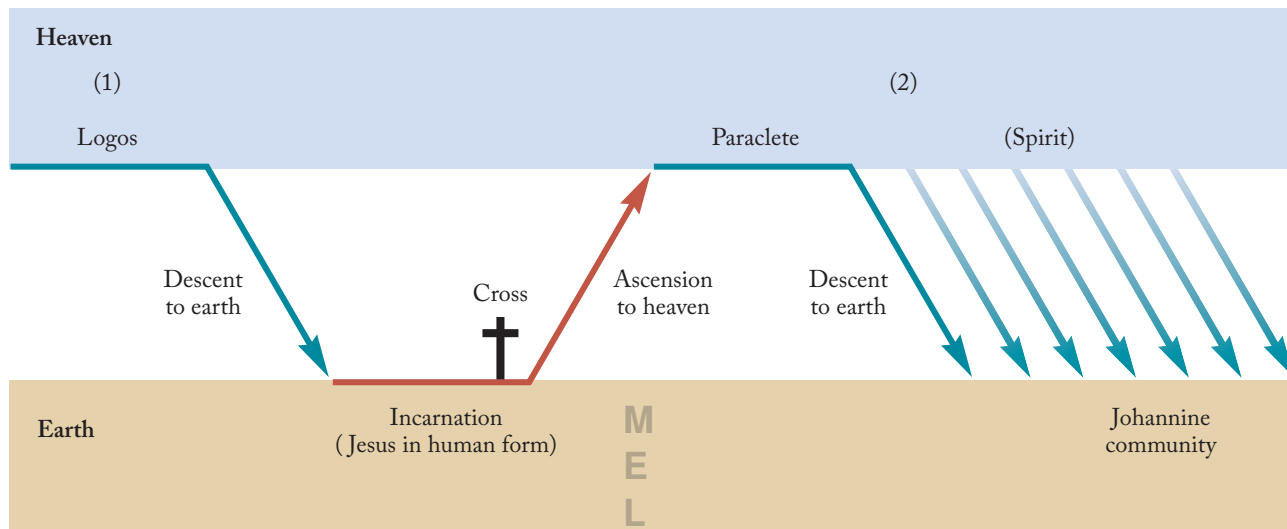


FIGURE 10.1 John's concept of the Incarnation (the Word made flesh). Note that Jesus' ascension to heaven (return to his place of spiritual origin) is followed by a descent of the Paraclete, Jesus' Spirit—an invisible surrogate that inspires the Johannine brotherhood. Whereas Jesus' human presence on earth was brief, John implies that the Paraclete abides permanently within the believing community.

Greek term *Logos* to designate Wisdom's role and function. (Philo may have preferred *Logos* because it is masculine in Greek, whereas Wisdom [*Sophia*] is feminine.) Philo's interpretation can be illustrated by an allegorical reading of Genesis 1, in which God's first act is to speak—to create the Word (*Logos*)—by which power the **cosmos** is born.

In identifying the prehuman Christ with Philo's *Logos*, John equates Jesus with the loftiest philosophical ideal of his age. His Christ is thus superior to every other heavenly or earthly being, all of whom owe their creation to him. John's Jesus not only speaks the word of God but is the Word incarnate. From the author's perspective, Jesus' human career is merely a brief interlude, a temporary descent to earth preceded and followed by eternal life above (3:13). (Compare John's *Logos* doctrine with similar ideas discussed in Phil. 2 and Col. 1–2; see also Figure 10.1.)

Jesus and Divine Wisdom

After the prologue, John does not again refer explicitly to Jesus as the Word. He does, however, repeatedly link his hero to the concept of **divine Wisdom**, a personification of God's creative

intelligence (see Box 10.3). In the Hebrew Bible, Wisdom is both the means by which God creates and the channel through whom he communicates to humankind. Hebrew Bible writers characteristically picture Wisdom speaking in the first person, using the phrase "I am" and then defining her activities as God's agent. John casts many of Jesus' speeches in exactly the same form, beginning with a declaration "I am" and then typically equating himself with a term of great religious significance. Wisdom's speeches clearly anticipate John's concept of Jesus' cosmic stature:

The Lord created me the beginning of his works,
before all else that he made, long ago.
Alone, I was fashioned in times long past,
at the beginning, long before earth itself.
(Prov. 8:22–23)

Identifying Wisdom with God's verbal command to create light (Gen. 1:3), the author of Ecclesiasticus represents her as saying:

I am the word which was spoken by the
Most High; . . .
Before time began he created me,
and I shall remain for ever. . . .
(Eccclus. 24:3, 9)



BOX 10.3 Wisdom Speeches in the Hebrew Bible and the Apocrypha as Models for the Johannine Jesus

Wisdom searches the streets for those willing to receive her:

Hear how Wisdom lifts her voice
and Understanding cries out.
She stands at the cross-roads, . . .
beside the gate, at the entrance to the city. . . .
“Men, it is to you I call,
I appeal to every man: . . .
Listen! For I will speak clearly,
you will have plain speech from me;
for I speak nothing but the truth. . . .
I am Wisdom, I bestow shrewdness
and show the way to knowledge and prudence. . . .

I have force, I also have ability;
understanding and power are mine.
Through me kings are sovereign
and governors make just laws . . .
from me all rulers on earth derive their nobility.
Those who love me I love,
and those who search for me find me.

...

The Lord created me the beginning of his works,
before all else that he made, long ago.
Alone, I was fashioned in times long past,
at the beginning, long before earth itself.
When there was yet no ocean I was born. . . .
When he set the heavens in their place I was there,
when he girdled the ocean with the horizon,
when he fixed the canopy of clouds overhead
and set the springs of ocean firm in their place. . . .
Then I was at his side each day, his darling and delight,
playing in his presence continually,
playing on the earth, when he had finished it,
while my delight was in mankind. . . .
Happy is the man who keeps to my ways,
happy the man who listens to me, . . .
for he who finds me finds life
and wins favor from [Yahweh],
while he who finds me not, hurts himself
and all who hate me are in love with death.”

(Prov. 8:1–7, 12–17, 22–36)

Hear the praise of Wisdom from her own mouth, . . .
in the presence of the heavenly host:

“I am the word [Logos] which was spoken by the Most High:

it was I who covered the earth like a mist.
My dwelling-place was in high heaven;
my throne was in a pillar of cloud. . . .”
Then the Creator decreed where I should dwell.
He said, “Make your home in Jacob;
find your heritage in Israel.” . . .
“Before time began he created me,
and I shall remain for ever. . . .
I took root among the people whom the Lord had
honoured
by choosing to be his special possession. . . .
Come to me, you who desire me,
and eat your fill of my fruit. . . .
Whoever feeds on me will be hungry for more,
and whoever drinks from me will thirst for more.”

(Ecclus. 24:1–12, 18–21)

’ For in wisdom there is a spirit intelligent and holy,
unique in its kind, yet made up of many parts, subtle,
free-moving, lucid, spotless, clear, invulnerable,
loving what is good, . . . kindly towards men, . . . all-
powerful, all-surveying, and permeating all intelligent,
pure, and delicate spirits. . . . She is the brightness
that streams from everlasting light, the flawless mirror
of the active power of God and the image of his good-
ness. She is one, yet can do everything; herself un-
changing, she makes all things new, age after age she
enters into holy souls, and makes them God’s friends
and prophets, for nothing is more acceptable to God
but the man who makes his home with wisdom.

She is initiated into the knowledge that belongs
to God and she decides for him what he shall do. . . .
3 Through her I shall have immortality, and shall
6 leave an undying memory to those who come after
0 me. I shall rule over my peoples, and nations will
become my subjects.

4 Send her forth from the holy heavens, and from
thy glorious throne bid her come down, so that she
B may labour at my side and I may learn what pleases
U thee. For she knows and understands all things, and
will guide me presently in all I do, and guard me in
her glory. So shall my life’s work be acceptable, and
I shall judge thy people justly, and be worthy of my
father’s throne.

(Wisd. of Sol. 7:22–28; 8:4, 13; 9:10–12)



BOX 10.4 Isis and the "I Am" Statements in John

Yahweh's declaration of being as the eternal "I AM" in Exodus 3 and Lady Wisdom's assertion of her cosmic role in Proverbs 8 and the deuterocanonical books of Wisdom and Ecclesiasticus provide a biblical model for John's "I am" speeches. In Hellenistic culture, the closest parallel to these Johannine statements occurs in hymns honoring Isis, an Egyptian mother goddess who, in John's time, was recognized as a universal deity throughout the Greco-Roman world. One text from the first or second century CE pictures **Isis** asserting her divine preeminence:

I am Isis, the mistress of every land . . .
I gave and ordained laws for men, which no one is
able to change . . .
I am she who findeth fruit for men . . .

I divided the earth from the heaven.
I showed the paths of the stars,
I ordered the course of the sun and the moon . . .
I made strong the right . . .
I broke down the governments of tyrants.
I made an end to murders . . .
I ordained that the true should be thought
good . . .
With me the right prevails. . . .

Although the exact form of the Johannine declarations "I am the . . ." does not occur in this hymn, it does appear in another fragmentary Isis text, where she affirms her eternity: "I am the deity that had no beginning . . . I am the truth, I am the creator and the destroyer." (Compare John 14:6, where Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life.")

Sent by God to live among his people, Israel,
Wisdom invites all to seek her favor:

Come to me, you who desire me,
and eat your fill of my fruit; . . .
Whoever feeds on me will be hungry for more,
and whoever drinks from me will thirst for
more.

(Ecclus. 24:19, 21–22;)

Whereas Wisdom stimulates a thirst for knowl-
edge, the Johannine Jesus fully satisfies it:

. . . whoever drinks the water that I shall
give him will never suffer thirst any more.
The water that I shall give him will be an in-
ner spring always welling up for eternal life.
(John 4:14)

Jesus and Yahweh

Jesus' "I Am" Pronouncements Besides associating Jesus with the Hebrew principle of eternal Wisdom, John's "I am" speeches also express an important aspect of his Christology. They echo Yahweh's declaration of being to Moses at the burning bush (Exod. 3:14), in which God reveals his sacred personal name. In the Hebrew

Bible, only Yahweh speaks of himself (the "I AM") in this manner. Hence, Jesus' reiterated "I am . . . the bread of life" (6:35), "the good shepherd" (10:11), "the resurrection and the life" (11:25), or "the way," "the truth," and "the life" (14:6) express his unity with God, the eternal "I AM" (see Box 10.4).

John attributes much of "the Jews'" hostility toward Jesus to their reaction against his apparent claims to divinity. When Jesus refers publicly to his prehuman existence, declaring that "before Abraham was born, I am," his outraged audience in the Temple attempts to stone him for blasphemy (8:56–59). Most scholars doubt that Jesus really made such assertions. In John's double-vision approach, the attempted stoning represents Jewish leaders' response to the preaching of John's group, which made extraordinary claims about Jesus' divine nature.

Role of the Baptist

Readers will notice that John repeatedly interrupts his Logos hymn to compare the Baptist unfavorably to Jesus. Insisting on the Baptist's inferiority, the author has him bear witness

against himself: He is neither a prophet nor the Elijah figure, but only “a voice” whose sole function is to announce Jesus. Thus, the Baptist bears witness to seeing the Holy Spirit descend upon Jesus, a phenomenon that Mark reports as Jesus’ inward or private experience of his calling (Mark 1:10–11) (see Box 8.6).

Contrary to the Markan tradition of a hidden Messiah whose identity is only gradually revealed, John has the Baptist immediately hail Jesus as the “Lamb of God . . . who takes away the sin of the world.” In John, Jesus is recognized as “God’s Chosen One” right from the start (1:6–9, 19–36).



The Book of Signs

John structures his account of Jesus’ public ministry around seven signs—miracles that illustrate Jesus’ supernatural power—to demonstrate his hero’s divinity. The Johannine emphasis on signs contrasts emphatically with the Markan Jesus’ categorical refusal to give *any* miraculous proof of his identity: “no sign shall be given to this generation” (Mark 8:11–12; cf. Matt. 12:38–40).

Many scholars believe that in composing his narrative the Johannine author used an older document, known as the Signs Gospel. According to this theory, the **Signs Gospel** was a straightforward narrative that depicted Jesus’ performing (probably seven) wondrous deeds calculated to show that he was the Messiah (see Box 10.5). Some scholars think that the Signs Gospel was the first written account of Jesus’ public ministry, composed about the same time as Q, the similarly hypothetical collection of Jesus’ sayings. Presumably compiled by a group of Jewish Christians about 50–60 CE, it served as the narrative framework for the present Gospel of John. Advocates of this theory believe that the Johannine author merely inserted his elaborate dialogues and lengthy speeches into the Signs Gospel, usually without deleting or changing much of the original wording. Scholars

therefore were able to attempt a reconstruction of the text of the earlier Gospel that was John’s principal source. Although the Signs Gospel has not survived as an independent account, it seems to be preserved embedded in the canonical Gospel of John (see R. T. Fortna in “Recommended Reading”).

The Miracle at Cana

The first Johannine sign occurs at the Galilean town of Cana (not mentioned in the Synoptics), where Jesus, attending a wedding with his disciples and his mother, changes water into wine. Although the transformation of water into wine has no parallel in any other Gospel, the miracle—reminiscent of festivals honoring Dionysus, the Greco-Roman god of wine—is consistent with Synoptic traditions that depict Jesus’ propensity toward eating and drinking with all kinds of people (Luke 7:33–35, etc.). John’s narrative of the Cana event similarly highlights Jesus’ paradoxical combination of ethical leadership with almost outrageous behavior, acting in a way that seems to invite excess. When informed that the host’s supply of wine has run out, indicating that the wedding guests are probably already intoxicated, Jesus adds to the party’s merriment by providing an additional 180 gallons of a vintage superior to that which the guests have already consumed. In John’s view, Jesus’ offering the means for celebrants to continue imbibing “good wine” reveals “his glory” and causes the disciples to “believe in him” (2:11), as if confirming his qualifications to host the promised messianic banquet. Presented as Jesus’ initial “sign” that God is present in his actions, this joyous celebration of life, symbolized not only by the marriage ceremony but also by the shared enjoyment of a divinely bestowed beverage, foreshadows a more solemn celebration described at the end of John’s narrative—that of Jesus’ “glorious” death on the cross. Using the images of water and wine—and the blood these liquids symbolize—the author thematically links the beginning of Jesus’ ministry at Cana with its culmination at Golgotha, where a Roman soldier



BOX 10.5 The Signs Gospel

Many scholars believe that the author of John's Gospel used as one of his sources an earlier narrative that emphasized Jesus' miracles. Because John's Gospel presents these miracles as "signs" revealing Jesus' glory, scholars have labeled this hypothetical source the Signs Gospel, claiming that it would have contained the following miraculous deeds (listed here in the order found in the Gospel of John):

1. Turning water into wine at Cana (in Galilee, 2:1–11)
2. Healing an official's son (in Galilee, 2:12a; 4:46b–54)
3. Healing a crippled man (in Jerusalem, 5:2–9)
4. Feeding 5,000 people (in Galilee, 6:1–15)
5. Walking on water (in Galilee, 6:16–25)
6. Restoring sight to a blind man (in Jerusalem, 9:1–8)
7. Raising Lazarus from the dead (near Jerusalem, 11:1–45)

Some scholars also think that the disciples' huge catch of fish (21:1–14) was originally a Galilean miracle that the Gospel's final editor incorporated into his appended account of Jesus' post resurrection appearances.

thrusts his spear into Jesus' body, releasing a flow of "blood and water" (19:34). Underscoring the connection between these two framing incidents, John has Jesus' mother present at both Cana and the Crucifixion, the only two occasions on which she appears in his Gospel (cf. 2:1–11; 19:25–27).

Assault on the Temple

Reversing the Synoptic order, John shows Jesus driving moneychangers from the Temple during a Passover at the outset of his ministry. For John, the episode's significance is Jesus' superiority to the Jerusalem sanctuary. The Temple is no longer sacred because the Holy Spirit now dwells in Jesus' person rather than in the shrine King Herod constructed. Jesus' physical body may be destroyed, but unlike the Herodian edifice, he will rise again as proof that God's Spirit imbues him (2:13–25).

Dialogue with Nicodemus

Jesus' conversation with **Nicodemus**, a Pharisee and member of the Jewish Council (Sanhedrin), typifies John's method of presenting Jesus' teaching (3:1–21). In most of the Johannine

dialogues, Jesus uses a figure of speech or metaphor that the person with whom he is speaking almost comically misinterprets, usually taking Jesus' words literally. John then has Jesus explain his figurative meaning, commonly launching a long monologue in which Jesus discourses on his metaphysical nature and unique relationship with the Father.

Thus, when Jesus remarks that unless one is "born over again"—or, in an alternative translation, "born from above"—he cannot "see the kingdom of God," Nicodemus mistakenly thinks he refers to reemerging from the womb. Jesus then explains that he means rebirth "from water and spirit," referring to the spiritual renewal that accompanies Christian baptism. Found only in John, this doctrine of becoming "born again" resembles beliefs characteristic of Gnosticism and Greek mystery religions. In both cults, converts undergo initiation rites, commonly involving purification by water, to achieve the soul's new birth on a higher plane of existence, leading eventually to immortality. In the case of being "born from above," initiates experience the Gnostic truth that their souls (or true selves) are of heavenly origin and hence intrinsically divine and eternal.

Perhaps aware of non-Christian parallels to this teaching, the author stresses that Jesus is

uniquely qualified to reveal spiritual truths. He is intimately acquainted with the unseen world because heaven is his natural environment, the home to which he will return when “lifted up [on the cross]” (3:12–15).

In perhaps the most famous passage of the New Testament, Jesus states his purpose in coming to earth. God so intensely loves the world that he sends his Son, not to condemn it, but to save it, awakening in humanity a faith that gives “eternal life.” Believers pass the test for eternal life through their attraction to Jesus’ “light,” while others judge themselves by preferring the world’s “darkness” (3:16–21). Here, John’s attitude toward the world is positive, although elsewhere he expresses an ambiguous attitude toward its mixed potential for good and evil. Representing Jesus’ ministry and crucifixion as the world’s time of judgment (12:31), he declares that Christians are “strangers in the world” (17:16).

Despite acknowledging the world’s capacity to believe (17:21, 23), the author shows Jesus telling Pontius Pilate that his “kingdom does not belong to this world”—at least not the kind of system that Pilate and the Roman Empire represent (18:36).

Conversation with the Samaritan Woman

Luke emphasizes Jesus’ positive relationships with women, who are numbered among his most faithful disciples. John further explores Jesus’ characteristic openness to women, with whom he converses freely, teaching them on the same level as his male followers. As in Luke, John shows Jesus ignoring the rigid social conventions that segregate the sexes, even to the point of speaking intimately with prostitutes and others of questionable reputation.

Astonishing the disciples with his violation of the social code (4:27), Jesus publicly discusses fine points of theology with a Samaritan woman who gives him water to drink at Jacob’s well. Recalling the deep hostility then existing between Jews and Samaritans, we understand the woman’s surprise at Jesus’ willingness to associate with her (see Chapter 3 for a description of the Samaritans and Chapter 9 for Luke’s parable of the “good Samaritan,” a phrase most Jews would regard as a contradiction in terms). She assumes that he is a prophet and seizes the opportunity to learn from him (see Figure 10.2).

FIGURE 10.2 Ravenna mosaic showing Jesus conversing with a Samaritan woman drawing water from Jacob’s well (John 4). Both Luke and John emphasize Jesus’ characteristic concern for women.



As Jesus later instructs Martha in the mysteries of the Resurrection (11:17–27), so he reveals to the Samaritan woman that he is the “living water” that satisfies humanity’s spiritual thirst. Disclosing that neither the Jerusalem Temple nor the Samaritans’ rival shrine at Mount Gerizim is the only right place to worship, Jesus teaches her that “spirit and truth” transcend the claims of any earthly sanctuary.

John uses this episode to illustrate several provocative ideas. Although the woman’s situation is ambiguous (she has had five husbands and now lives with a man to whom she is not married), Jesus selects her to fill an important role. She is not only the first non-Jew to whom he reveals that he is the Christ (4:25–26) but also the means by which “many Samaritans” become believers (4:39). The woman’s rush to inform her fellow villagers about Jesus anticipates Mary Magdalene’s later role as prophet to the male disciples when she brings the news that their crucified Lord still lives, (20:1–2, 10–18) (see Box 10.6).

The Woman Taken in Adultery

Because it does not appear in the oldest New Testament manuscripts, editors of the New English Bible relegate the story of the adulterous woman (8:1–11) to an appendix following chapter 21. In some manuscripts, the incident shows up in Luke, where it well suits the Lukan theme of forgiveness. The episode in which Pharisees demand that Jesus judge a woman “caught in the very act” of illicit sex was apparently a well-known tradition that had difficulty finding a home in the canonical Gospels, perhaps because many early Christians found it shocking.

Asked to endorse the Torah rule that prescribed death by stoning for adulterers (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:20–21), Jesus turns the responsibility for deciding the woman’s fate back on her accusers. Only the person who is “faultless” (without sin) is qualified to enforce the legal penalty. Forcing those who would judge her to examine their own consciences, Jesus finds that the assembled crowd melts away, leaving him alone with the accused. He neither condemns nor imposes

penance on the woman, merely instructing her not to “sin again.” Neither blamed nor lectured, she is left to ponder the meaning of her rescue. Whether this episode belongs in John or not, it is consistent with Jesus’ nonjudgmental attitude toward individual “sinners” in all four Gospels.

Further Signs and Miracles

Jesus’ second sign is his curing a nobleman’s dying son in Cana (4:46–54). His third is his healing a crippled man at the Sheep Pool in Jerusalem, a controversial act because it occurs on the Sabbath (5:1–15; see Figure 10.3). Criticism directed at Jesus’ alleged Sabbath breaking provides the opportunity for an extended discourse on his special relation to the Father. In John’s view, God’s work (sustaining the universe) continues unceasingly and provides a model that the Son imitates in ministering to God’s human creation (5:16–17).

When accused of claiming “equality with God,” Jesus clarifies the nature of his authority. The Son initiates “nothing” on his own; he can only imitate the Father. As God creates life, so the Son grants “eternal life” to those trusting him. In Jesus’ ministry, the long-hoped-for resurrection to immortality is already a reality (5:18–26). Emphasizing his dependence on the Father who sent him, Jesus states that he acts as he is told, dutifully obeying a superior intelligence (5:30). Those who reject him also misread the Hebrew Bible that anticipated God’s ministry through him. If his critics really understood the Torah (including the Sabbath’s true meaning), they would believe him (5:31–47).

John’s presentation of the next two signs parallels the Synoptic tradition, but they are followed by a typically Johannine speech in which the author significantly reinterprets their meaning. The miraculous feeding of 5,000 people (the fourth sign) is the only miracle that appears in all four Gospels (6:1–12; Mark 6:30–44; Matt. 14:13–21; Luke 9:10–17). As in Mark, the miracle is immediately followed by Jesus’ walking on water (John’s fifth sign) (6:16–21; Mark 6:47–51).



BOX 10.6 The Role of Women in John's Gospel

Most striking in John's Gospel is the way he employs women characters to advance crucial theological ideas. In Jesus' conversation with a Samaritan woman—the longest dialogue between Jesus and a single individual in any canonical Gospel (4:7–26)—the Evangelist shows Jesus relating to the woman at Jacob's well on both a religious and a personal level. When Jesus mentions that she has had five husbands and is not married to her present male companion, he does not necessarily imply that the woman has misbehaved; she may have been widowed repeatedly or legally divorced through no fault of her own. After perceiving that Jesus is an authentic “prophet,” the woman asks about the correct place to worship God, a major controversy then dividing Jews and Samaritans. Her question elicits Jesus' reply that geographical location is no longer significant, for now people “must worship in spirit and in truth,” a spiritualized form of honoring God that can be accomplished anywhere. The woman's eager response is to affirm the Messiah's future coming and his promised revelation of “everything,” which in turn is the catalyst for Jesus' statement that he is the Christ, the Johannine account's first such admission to a non-Jew.

Immediately, the woman abandons her water jar and dashes back to town, her testimony inspiring neighbors to invite Jesus to stay with them. As a result of the woman's speech, many Samaritans listen to Jesus and become believers, declaring him “the Savior of the world.” Although most villagers believe because of their direct experience of Jesus, it is the woman's initial perception of Jesus' identity that makes possible their faith (4:3–42).

In the story of Lazarus, the Evangelist uses Jesus' conversations with Lazarus's sister Martha to move from a general expectation that resurrection will occur “on the last day” to a realization that in Jesus' presence people rise from the dead *now*. When

Martha learns that Jesus is “on his way” to their town of Bethany, she seizes the initiative by traveling alone to meet him. Still on the road to Bethany, Jesus and Martha discuss the concept of resurrection, leading to his climactic revelation: “I am the resurrection and I am life . . . no one who is alive and has faith shall ever die.” Even before the resuscitation of her brother, Martha professes her absolute trust in Jesus, whom she recognizes as “the Son of God” (11:20–27). Even so, the practical Martha later reminds Jesus that if he removes the stone blocking the entrance to Lazarus's tomb, “there will be a stench” from her brother's decaying corpse (11:38–41).

At a dinner party celebrating Lazarus's return to life, his sister Mary demonstrates a faith that equals that of Martha when she anoints Jesus' feet with an expensive perfume, symbolically preparing him for burial and, with the perfume's fragrance filling her house, banishing memories of physical decay. She alone of Jesus' friends seems to understand the fact of his imminent death. When she tenderly dries Jesus' feet “with her hair,” Mary's humility anticipates Jesus' later action in washing and drying the disciples' feet at the Last Supper (12:1–8; cf. 13:3–17).

In the Johannine vision, women continue to play indispensable roles to the Gospel's conclusion. As if to emphasize her importance as the first witness of Jesus' resurrection, John shows Mary Magdalene acting alone when she visits Jesus' tomb the first Easter morning. (The Synoptic tradition has Mary accompanied by other Galilean women.) After informing Peter and the Beloved Disciple that Jesus' tomb is empty, she remains alone at the crypt, conversing first with angels and then with the risen Jesus, who instructs her to convey his message to the disciples. Mary Magdalene thus precedes the male disciples in proclaiming that Christ is risen, an appointed prophet who bears the original “good news” to Peter and the others (20:1–16).



FIGURE 10.3 Excavations at the Sheep Pool in Jerusalem. John's Gospel mentions two bathing pools, sites that pilgrims to Jerusalem possibly used for ritual washing before they approached the Temple precincts. The Sheep Pool, where Jesus healed a paralyzed man (John 5:2–15), was discovered in the late nineteenth century, but the Siloam Pool to which Jesus directed a man born blind (9:11) was not found until 2002. Both archaeological discoveries show that the author was intimately familiar with the Jerusalem of pre-70 CE.

The scene in which Jesus identifies himself with life-giving bread probably reflects the situation in John's day, when his community argued bitterly with other Jews about the Christian communion ritual. Jesus asserts that the only way to gain eternal life is to eat his flesh and drink his blood. Many persons, including some of his disciples, take offense at what seems to them an absurd recommendation of cannibalism. John's church apparently taught that the sacramental bread and communion wine literally became Jesus' body and blood (6:25–65), in a process of **transubstantiation**. Even centuries after John's time, numerous outsiders

charged that Christians practiced bloodthirsty rites, including cannibalism, during their secret meetings.

Jesus' sixth sign—bestowing sight to a blind man (9:1–41)—illustrates John's theme that Christ is “the light of the world” (8:12). His gift of sight dispels the darkness that afflicted the man and reflects Jesus' identity as the Word that originally brought light out of dark chaos at the world's creation (Gen. 1:1–5). As mentioned previously, this lengthy episode probably mingles traditions about Jesus' healings with similar miraculous cures performed by Christian prophets in John's church. The dialogue in the synagogue that follows the miracle illustrates the tension that prevailed between church and synagogue in John's day.

The Raising of Lazarus

The seventh and most spectacular miracle—raising Lazarus from the dead (11:1–44)—demonstrates another Johannine conviction, that Jesus literally possesses power over life and death. Concluding the Book of Signs, the narrative of Lazarus's miraculous resuscitation also functions to connect Jesus' good works with his arrest and crucifixion. As John relates it, Jesus' ability to revive a man who has been dead for four days is the act that consolidates Jewish opposition to him and leads directly to his death (11:45–53).

Although no other canonical Gospel mentions the Lazarus episode, some scholars suggest that John may have drawn upon the oral traditions behind Luke's parable of Lazarus and the rich man, which illustrates the starkly differing fates of two newly deceased men in the afterlife (Luke 16:19–31; see Chapter 9). Luke is also the only other Gospel author to mention Jesus' friends Mary and Martha, although unlike John he gives no indication that they had a brother named Lazarus (Luke 10:38–42).

Whatever the historical foundation of the Lazarus incident, John uses it to prove that Jesus is Lord of the Resurrection. In a climactic “I am” speech, Jesus declares, “I am the resurrection and I am life. If a man has faith in me, even

though he die, he shall come to life; and no one who is alive and has faith shall ever die” (11:25). In dramatic fulfillment of his claims, Jesus orders Lazarus to rise from his tomb, showing all witnesses that the eschatological hope of life comes through Jesus now (11:1–44).

In John’s account, the raising of Lazarus serves multiple literary and theological purposes. As a turning point in the Gospel narrative, it has the same function as the assault on the Temple in the Synoptics: The incident provokes hostility toward Jesus and ignites a fatal conspiracy leading to his execution. As the episode linking the Book of Signs with the Book of Glory (the story of Jesus’ Passion), the Lazarus account operates as a preview of Jesus’ own death and resurrection. Like Lazarus, Jesus will be entombed in a cave from which a great stone—signifying death’s finality—will be rolled away as he rises to immortal life. In the Johannine narrative, Martha’s confession of faith in Jesus’ divine Sonship—made just before Lazarus’s resuscitation—anticipates Thomas’s more complete recognition of the risen Jesus’ true divinity (11:27; 20:28).

The raising of Lazarus is also a perfect demonstration of John’s realized eschatology. Events traditionally assigned to the *eschaton*, such as the dead obeying a divine summons to exit from their graves, now occur during Jesus’ ministry. “As the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so the Son gives life to men,” Jesus had earlier declared (5:21), adding that those who trust him *already* possess “eternal life, and [do] not come up for judgment, but [have] already passed from death to life” (5:24). For the Johannine writer, “the time is already here, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God, and all who hear shall come to life” (5:25). In John’s view, the life-imparting final resurrection is currently taking place among believers: “No one,” Jesus assures Martha, “who is alive and has faith shall ever die” (11:26). In thus reinterpreting the timing and nature of resurrection, the author transfers fulfillment of eschatological prophecies about eternal life from the indefinite future—the End of the world—to the concrete here and now.

In grim contrast to the joyous belief that greets Jesus’ life-giving miracle, John shows some Jerusalem leaders plotting Jesus’ death. Jesus’ opponents fear that if the Jewish people accept his messiahship (making him “king of the Jews”) their response will incite the Romans to destroy their state and place of worship. (This passage refers to the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE.) Caiaphas, the High Priest, proposes that eliminating Jesus will spare the nation that ordeal. Caiaphas’s remark—that “it is more to your interest that one man should die for the people, than that the whole nation should be destroyed”—is deeply ironic. While justifying the plot to kill Jesus, the High Priest unwittingly expresses the Christian belief that Jesus’ death redeems the world (11:47–53).

John’s Book of Signs is bracketed by miracles that Jesus performs at two of life’s milestone events—a wedding and a funeral. In his first public “sign” of divine power, at Cana, Jesus transforms water into a beverage of intoxicating joy, extending and intensifying a marriage celebration. In his culminating miracle, at Bethany, Jesus brings life to a dead man, transmuting grief into gladness, an eschatological triumph that he and his friends then celebrate at yet another dinner party (12:1–2).



The Book of Glory

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The second section of John’s Gospel—commonly labeled the Book of Glory (chs. 12–20)—may be based on a Passion narrative that had already been added to the primitive Signs Gospel when John incorporated the older work into his expanded account. If scholars are correct in assuming John’s use of an earlier document, the Johannine author thoroughly transformed his source, radically reinterpreting the meaning of Jesus’ last days. Connecting the Book of Glory with the miraculous signs previously reported, John opens this section by showing Jesus at dinner with friends, celebrating

Lazarus's return to life. The festive scene features several important themes, looking back to Jesus' feeding of the multitudes and the resurrection of Lazarus and looking forward to the Last Supper and Jesus' own death. Even while rejoicing in one man's escape from the tomb, the dinner guests are forewarned of their leader's imminent death when Lazarus's sister Mary anoints Jesus' feet with expensive perfume. Christ approves her prophetic action as preparing his body for burial, for his hour of "glory" is near at hand.

Whether following different sources or reworking the older Synoptic tradition, John pictures Jesus' final days in a way that transforms the Messiah's betrayal and suffering into a glorious triumph. After his messianic entry into Jerusalem (John adds the detail of the crowds' waving palm branches that gives Palm Sunday its name) (12:12–19), Jesus foretells his death in terms resembling Mark's description of the agony in Gethsemane (14:32–36) but reinterpreted to highlight the Crucifixion's saving purpose: "Now my soul is in turmoil, and what am I to say? Father, save me from this hour. No, it was for this that I came to this hour. Father, glorify thy name" (12:27–28). When a celestial voice affirms that God is glorified in Christ's actions, Jesus interprets his "lifting up" (crucifixion) as God's predestined means of drawing all people to him, a process of human salvation that cannot occur without his death (12:28–33).

The Last Supper and Farewell Discourses

Perhaps because he has already presented his view of Jesus as the "heavenly bread" that gives life to those who partake of it (6:26–58), John's account of the Last Supper contains no reference to Jesus' distributing the ceremonial bread and wine (the Eucharist). Instead, John's narrative dramatizes a concept found also in Luke's Gospel—that Jesus comes "like a servant" (Luke 22:27). Given the author's view that Christ shares the nature of the omnipotent Creator (1:1), Jesus' taking the role of a domestic slave, washing his disciples' travel-stained feet, is

extremely significant. The Master's humility both demonstrates God's loving care for the faithful and sets an example of humble service for the Johannine community (13:3–17).

After Judas Iscariot leaves the group to betray his Master (a treachery that John believes is predestined), Jesus delivers a series of farewell speeches intended to make clear the way in which his ministry reveals the Father and to place Jesus' inevitable death in proper perspective. Summarizing the divine purpose fulfilled in his life, Jesus gives the "new commandment" of love that distinguishes his people from the rest of the world (13:34–35). Christ's ultimate "act of love" is surrendering his life for his friends' benefit (15:11–14). The Johannine Jesus' directive to love fellow believers, however, contrasts with the Synoptic Jesus' command to love even "enemies" and other outsiders (cf. Matt. 5:44; Luke 6:27).

With his example of love opening the true "way" to the Father, the Johannine Jesus faces death as a transfiguring experience. In John's view, Jesus' death and return to heaven will permit believers to experience life with God (14:1–6) and simultaneously will allow God to live with them (14:23). Because the divine Parent dwells in him, Christ can reveal God fully—to see Jesus in his true meaning is to see the Father (14:7–11). John insists on Jesus' unique relationship to God—he and the Father "are one," but it is a unity of spirit and purpose that also characterizes the disciples (17:12, 20–21). Despite his close identification with the Deity, John's Jesus does not claim unequivocal equality with God. He simply states that "the Father is greater than I" (14:28).

The Paraclete (Holy Spirit)

With John's emphasis on the disciples' mystic union with Christ (15:5–10; 17:12, 20–22) and the superiority of the unseen spirit to mere physical existence (6:63), it is not surprising that he presents a view of Jesus' return that differs strikingly from that in the Synoptics. Instead of an eager anticipation of the Second Coming (as in

Mark 13, Matt. 24–25, or Luke 21), John teaches that Jesus is already present, inspiring the faithful. Brief allusions to Christ’s reappearance after death (14:3) are fulfilled when he sends the disciples the Paraclete. The Paraclete, variously translated as “Advocate,” “Helper,” “Counselor,” or “Comforter,” is synonymous with “the Spirit of Truth” (14:17) and “the Holy Spirit” (14:26). Although unbelieving humanity will see Jesus no more, he remains eternally with the faithful (14:16–26). An invisible counterpart to Jesus, the Paraclete enables the disciples to understand the true significance of Jesus’ teaching (16:1–15). By implication, the Paraclete also empowers the author to create a Gospel that fully portrays the glory of Jesus’ first advent.

By its presence in the Johannine community’s preaching, the Paraclete serves to judge the world’s unbelief. Affirming that Jesus is present simultaneously with the Father and with believers, the Paraclete also witnesses to the invincibility of good, resisting the spiritual darkness that claimed Jesus’ physical life and now threatens his followers.

In John’s view, Jesus imparts the promised Advocate (Paraclete) at his resurrection, merely by breathing on the disciples and saying, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (20:21–23). The risen Lord’s action recalls the creation scene in Genesis 2 when Yahweh breathes into Adam’s nostrils “the breath of life,” making him an animate being or “living creature.” As John’s Gospel begins with the Word creating the universe (1:1–5), so it closes with the Word breathing the pure spirit of life into his renewed human creation.



John’s Interpretation of the Passion

Crucifixion as Glorification

John’s Passion narrative is pervasively shaped by the author’s high Christology and his wish to shift responsibility for Jesus’ death to his Jewish opponents. The author of Mark’s Gospel

had already wrestled with the problem of reconciling his portrait of Jesus as a powerful miracle worker in Galilee with the fact of Jesus’ apparent helplessness before his enemies in Jerusalem (see Chapter 7). After depicting Jesus as a figure of virtually irresistible force throughout his Gospel, John faces an even greater problem in explaining how this incarnation of divine Wisdom became his adversaries’ mortal victim. John resolves the potential dilemma by affirming the paradox inherent in Jesus’ circumstance: Even in Jerusalem, Jesus retains his superhuman power but voluntarily declines to use it in order to fulfill scriptural predictions that God’s Son must die to save others.

No Agony in Gethsemane John’s description of events in Gethsemane differs sharply from the Synoptic tradition. Whereas Mark’s Jesus throws himself on the ground in an agony of dread, begging to be spared a painful and public humiliation (Mark 14:32–36), John’s Jesus remains calmly standing while the soldiers who come to arrest him are hurled to the ground. When the Temple police ask Jesus to identify himself, he replies, “I am he,” a revelation of divinity that causes them to collapse in a heap (18:4–8). The last of Jesus’ “I am” statements, this declaration echoes John’s earlier association of Jesus and Yahweh, the divine “I AM” (John 8:58; cf. Exod. 3:8–16), a claim to equality with God that incites an attempt to stone Jesus for blasphemy. For John, enemies plotting Jesus’ downfall only *seem* to be in charge: As Jesus had explained, he alone makes the decision to give up his life (10:17–18). Pilate, the representative of Roman imperial power, is explicitly informed that his role as judge is only illusory (19:9–10).

Instead of fleeing in terror as they do in the Synoptics, the Johannine disciples are simply dismissed by their Master, who prevents their arrest to fulfill Scripture—the Messiah will lose no one entrusted to him. The author then interweaves the story of Peter’s denial with his unique account of Jesus’ interrogation

before **Annas**, father-in-law of the High Priest Caiaphas (18:8–17). Unlike the Synoptics, John does not show Jesus being formally tried before the full Sanhedrin, but only having an informal hearing at the High Priest's private residence.

An Innocent Pilate It is in his version of Jesus' appearance before Pontius Pilate that John most explicitly mirrors his community's estrangement from the Jewish community. Only John states that Pharisees, as well as Temple priests, are involved in Jesus' indictment before the Roman governor. Presenting events in a strangely implausible way, John shows a frightened and harried Pilate dashing back and forth between a Jewish crowd outside his palace and the accused prisoner inside. (John states that Jewish priests could not enter a Gentile's quarters because such contact would make them ritually unclean for the upcoming, Passover.) In his desire to foster good relations with Rome, Luke had depicted a Pilate technically innocent of arranging Jesus' death (Luke 23:1–25), but John goes even further. His Pilate is literally run ragged shuttling between accommodation of the priests who demand Jesus' execution and his sympathetic support of the "king" whom they wish to kill (18:28–19:16). In John's account, Pilate makes no fewer than *eight* attempts to persuade Jesus' priestly accusers (John inaccurately labels them collectively as "Jews") that Jesus is guilty of no crime (cf. 18:31, 38–39; 19:4–6, 12, 14–16). Only after the crowd threatens to accuse Pilate himself of sedition against Rome for championing Jesus' cause (19:12) and insists that their nation has no ruler but the Roman emperor (19:15–16) does Pilate reluctantly submit and turn Jesus over for execution. John also has Pilate symbolically vindicate Jesus' claim to be the rightful Jewish king by refusing to revise a public notice of the crime for which Jesus was crucified (19:19–22).

The Crucifixion: Water and Blood John's picture of the **Crucifixion** includes a number of

his distinctive concerns. The Johannine Jesus carries his crossbeam all the way to Golgotha, thus precluding any Gnostic or other claim that someone else, such as Simon of Cyrene or even Judas, died in his stead (19:17). In an incident recounted nowhere else, John has a Roman soldier thrust his lance into Jesus' side, initiating a torrent of blood and water. This wounding not only confirms Jesus' physical death (lest one think that he only seemed to perish) but also provides typical Johannine symbols of sacramental wine (blood) and truth (water and spirit), emblems that nourish the community of faith (cf. 4:10–14; 6:53–58; 7:37–39).

Besides the small group of Galilean women who witness the Crucifixion in the Synoptic tradition, John adds the figures of Jesus' mother and the Beloved Disciple. Mary (who is never named in this Gospel) apparently fills a symbolic function: Appearing only twice—at the joyous wedding in Cana, where water is turned into wine, and at the cross, where water and blood flow from Jesus—Mary may signify the believing community that benefits from the sacramental emblems of shed blood and crucified body. Only in John's account does Jesus place her (the church) under the care of the Beloved Disciple, the one who personally testifies to the significance of Jesus' sacrificial death (19:25–27). (See Box 10.7 for a comparison of Gospel accounts of Jesus' last words.) By designating the Beloved Disciple as Mary's honorary son, John also makes him Jesus' brother, in effect Jesus' successor as leader of the Johannine community (see Figure 10.4).

Post Resurrection Appearances in Jerusalem

Although John apparently follows the same tradition that Luke used, placing Jesus' post resurrection appearances in and around Jerusalem (instead of Galilee as in Mark and Matthew), he modifies the story to illustrate his characteristic themes. On the first Easter Sunday, Mary



BOX 10.7 Jesus' Last Words: A Summary of the Evangelists' Beliefs About Him

Jesus' final utterances, compiled from the four different Gospel accounts of his crucifixion, are traditionally known as the "seven last words on the cross." Whereas Mark and Matthew agree that Jesus is almost entirely silent during his agony, crying out only once—in Aramaic—to ask why God

MARK (15:34)

Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?

(My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?)

LUKE (23:34, 43, 46)

Father, forgive them [Roman executioners]; they do not know what they are doing.

Truly I tell you: today you [the sympathetic felon next to him] will be with me in Paradise.

Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.

Writing to a vulnerable group then undergoing hardship and suffering, Mark devotes much of his Gospel to a bleak description of Jesus' Passion, emphasizing that, if God permitted his son to endure pain and humiliation, the disciples may expect no better fate. Jesus' cry of despair anticipates his persecuted followers' sense of similarly being abandoned by God. Although Matthew modifies the Passion story to underscore its fulfillment of biblical prophecy, he retains Mark's emphasis on Jesus' solitary and extreme anguish.

Luke, who presents Jesus as a model of self-sacrificing service to others, thoroughly edits the Passion narrative to highlight Jesus' innocence of any crime against Rome and to illustrate the themes of forgiveness and spirituality that color his portrait of Jesus. Contrary to Mark's account, in which Jesus appears almost numb with shock at his brutal treatment, Luke's Jesus is neither silent nor despairing: He speaks repeatedly and confidently, as if he were already enthroned as eschatological judge. He pardons his Roman tormentors, absolving them of responsibility for his execution, and comforts the felon crucified next to him, granting him a posthumous

has deserted him, Luke and John ascribe several short speeches to their dying hero, showing him in full control of his final hours. The particular statements that each Evangelist has Jesus voice represent that author's individual understanding of Jesus' nature and the meaning of his death.

MATTHEW (27:46)

Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?

(My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?)

JOHN (19:26–27, 28, 30)

Mother, there is your son. . . . There is your mother [placing Mary (the church) in the future care of the Beloved Disciple (the Johannine community)].

I am thirsty [to fulfill Scripture].

It is accomplished!

reward in paradise. Because Luke presents Jesus as led by the Holy Spirit throughout his earthly ministry, it is thematically appropriate for him to show, at the end, Jesus calmly relinquishing his own spirit to God.

Consistent with his picture of Jesus as fully aware of his divine nature, including his prehuman existence in heaven, John paints a Jesus absolutely untroubled by doubt or dejection. Acting out the purpose for which he descended to earth, John's Jesus remains in complete charge of his destiny, allowing soldiers to capture him only to fulfill the divine will (John 18:4–9). The Johannine Jesus thus undergoes no agony in Gethsemane or despair on the cross. In contrast to Mark's picture of lonely abandonment, John shows Jesus accompanied by his mother and his favorite disciple, whose future lives together he arranges. When he says he thirsts, it is not because he experiences ordinary human suffering, but only to fulfill prophecy. His moment of death is simultaneously his "hour of glory," when he can announce that he has accomplished all the Father sent him to do. In his serene omniscience, the Johannine Jesus seems altogether a different being from Mark's disconsolate Son of Man.



FIGURE 10.4 *Crucifixion*. A modern Japanese artist offers a highly stylized interpretation of Jesus' crucifixion. Two figures, possibly representing Jesus' mother and the Beloved Disciple, kneel in adoration of the incarnate Word of God.

Magdalene is alone when she discovers that Jesus' corpse has vanished from Joseph of Arimathea's garden tomb where it had been placed late the previous Friday. Prophet of her Lord's resurrection, she is the first to report the empty tomb and the first to see the risen Jesus, announcing these glad tidings to the male disciples (20:1–2, 10–18).

Following Jesus' Sunday evening appearance to the disciples, infusing them with the Holy Spirit, he appears again to "doubting Thomas," vanquishing his skepticism. (The Beloved Disciple, an example to others, believes that Jesus lives even before physical proof is offered, illustrating the Johannine community's cultivation of faith [20:8–9, 26–29].) His "light" having "overcome" the world's spiritual darkness, Jesus also conquers death. His resurrection is the final victorious "sign" toward which all his earlier miracles pointed.



Epilogue: Post Resurrection Appearances in Galilee

Most scholars believe that the Fourth Gospel originally ended at 20:31 with the author's stated purpose of inspiring faith. Chapter 21, which records traditions about Jesus' posthumous appearances in Galilee, seems to be the work of an editor, who may have prepared the Gospel manuscript for publication. This redactor also emphasizes the complementary roles of Peter, leader of the Twelve, and the unidentified "disciple whom Jesus loved."

When Jesus appears to share an early-morning breakfast of bread and fish (again demonstrating that the risen Christ is not a ghost or other disembodied spirit), he questions Peter about the depth of his love. Using three different Greek verbs for "love," Jesus emphasizes that love for him means feeding his "lambs." Thus, Peter and the church are to provide spiritual and other care for future believers, the "other sheep" (10:16), including Gentiles, who will soon join the apostolic fold (21:4–17).

After Peter has been given the opportunity to redeem his relationship with Christ—three times asserting his love to counterbalance his three previous denials of Jesus (18:16–18, 27)—Peter asks about the future of the Beloved Disciple (21:20–21). When Jesus indicates that this disciple, unlike Peter, will not suffer martyrdom but may remain alive "until I come," the editor states that the Johannine "brotherhood" mistakenly took Jesus' statement "to mean that the disciple would not die." By the time the epilogue was written, however, it is evident that the disciple had died, contrary to the expectations of the community founded on that disciple's "testimony" (21:22–24). In this brief dialogue—in which the passage of time has clarified the meaning of Jesus' words—the redactor seems to abandon the earlier notion that the Parousia would occur during the lifetimes of at least some original followers.

The epilogue concludes with the editor's musing on the large number of oral traditions

surrounding Jesus. If his entire career were to be recorded in detail, the “whole world” could not contain “the vast number of books that would be produced” (21:25).

The Letters of John

Several years after John’s Gospel was published, another member of the Johannine community wrote three documents—1, 2, and 3 John—that describe later developments within the Johannine group. Because these documents address problems troubling the later church, they are discussed in their canonical order, among the **catholic** (general) **epistles** (see Chapter 18).



Summary

Although John’s Gospel may have originated on the fringes of the Christian community (it shows traces of an Essene-like sectarianism and proto-Gnostic influences), it eventually provided mainstream Christianity with concepts crucial to its theological development. Doctrines of Christ’s prehuman existence as God’s eternal Word (the Logos), his descent from heaven, his incarnation as the man Jesus, his apparent equality with God, and his continuing presence among believers in the form of the Paraclete, the Spirit of Truth—all absent from the Synoptic Gospels—profoundly influenced the church’s later declaration that Jesus and God are one.

Writing perhaps thirty years after Mark, John also offers believers a plausible means to cope with disappointment in Jesus’ failure to return during the lifetimes of his original followers. The Synoptic writers, in effect, had divided Jesus’ messiahship into two contrasting parts: a ministry in the recent past as a sacrificial servant and a future Second Coming (the Parousia) as the glorious Son of Man. With his doctrine of realized eschatology, John effectively addresses this troubling issue: The Johannine Jesus accomplishes everything for the Messiah’s success in a single earthly coming. Whereas Mark vividly anticipated the “Son of Man coming in the

clouds with great power and glory” (Mark 13:16), John testifies that Jesus’ “glory” has already appeared: “we [members of the Johannine community] saw his glory, such glory as befits the Father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14; cf. 13:31–32).

When the Johannine Jesus speaks his last words on the cross—“It is accomplished” (John 19:30)—the implications are hugely significant. In his ministry and crucifixion, Jesus has completed his messianic tasks, including those traditionally assigned to the *eschaton*—divine judgment, spiritual regeneration, resurrection, and the giving of full knowledge to the faithful.

John’s vision does not emphasize Jesus’ imminent return because the Johannine Christ had already achieved his disciples’ redemption and, in the guise of the Paraclete, is eternally present with them. Believers, Jesus insisted, have already experienced a favorable judgment, passing “from death to life” (John 5:24–25); they will never die (John 11:26).

Matthew’s Gospel concludes with Jesus’ promise that he will be with his disciples “to the end of time” (Matt. 28:20). Luke also frames his resurrection accounts to suggest that Jesus remains present in such Christian practices as Bible study and communal meals (Luke 24). But only John portrays the advent of the Paraclete as if “he” were Jesus’ double (15:26–27), fulfilling believers’ desire for a continuing presence. At the Last Supper, the Johannine Jesus emphasizes the importance of his return to heaven, not his return to earth: “If I do not go [back to heaven] your Advocate [the Paraclete] will not come, whereas if I go, I will send him to you. When he comes, he will confute the world and show where wrong and right and judgment lie. He will convict them [unbelievers] of wrong, by their refusal to believe in me; he will convince them that right is on my side, by showing that I go to the Father when I pass from your sight; and he will convince them of divine judgment, by showing that the Prince of this world [the devil] stands condemned” (16:7–11; cf. 14:10–26). That Spirit is given when the risen Jesus “breathes” it into his disciples (20:22). Basking in the presence of the Paraclete, Jesus’ surrogate self, the Johannine community directly experiences the eschatological judgment that vindicates their faith and defeats evil.

Besides helping resolve the problem of a delayed Second Coming, John's Gospel also succeeds in giving Jesus cosmic stature, portraying a figure so exalted that he reigns with God: No prophet, lawgiver, angel, or other heavenly being possesses his relationship to (or equality with) God (8:58; 14:09). More than any single book in the New Testament, this Gospel lays the foundations for later theological interpretations of Christ's nature and function. In post-New Testament times, theologians came to see Christ as the Second Person in the **Trinity** (a term that does not appear in canonical Scripture), co-equal, consubstantial, and co-eternal with the Father. Although the Johannine writings do not articulate so formal a dogma, historically John's high Christology profoundly influenced official Christianity's eventual understanding of its Master.

Questions for Review

1. Evaluate the arguments for and against the apostle John's responsibility for the Gospel traditionally attributed to him. Describe the role of the Beloved Disciple and his relationship to the Fourth Gospel.
2. Describe some of the major differences between the Gospel of John and the Synoptic Gospels. Compare Jesus' manner of speaking and use of parables in Mark with his long philosophical discourses in John. In Jesus' Johannine speeches, how was the author influenced by the form of Wisdom's speeches in Proverbs, Ecclesiasticus, and the Wisdom of Solomon?
3. In presenting Jesus as a spiritual redeemer descended from heaven, John reflects or parallels some ideas later expressed in Gnosticism. In what specific ways does John's Gospel resemble—or differ from—Gnostic teachings? How does the author's presentation "rescue" Jesus from the Gnostic claims? How does John indicate that Jesus is *both* divine and human?
4. John's Gospel contains almost no traditional apocalyptic teaching and has no prediction of Jesus' Second Coming comparable to that in the Synoptics. How does John's teaching about the Advocate, or Paraclete, deal with the problem of Jesus' delayed return? Remember that John was written almost seventy years after Jesus' death.
5. Name several of the seven "signs" or miracles that Jesus performs to demonstrate his divinity. How does the raising of Lazarus lead to Jesus' death?
6. What is the purpose of Jesus' "I am" speeches? What do they reveal about him?

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. The "brotherhood," or Christian community, that produced John's Gospel preserved traditions about Jesus that roughly paralleled but significantly differed from those on which the Synoptic Gospels are based. Why do you suppose the Johannine community so strongly identified Jesus with the divine Wisdom that God used to create the universe (Prov. 8)? How does John's introductory hymn to the Logos (Word) express the author's view of Jesus' prehuman existence and divine nature?
2. More than any other New Testament book, the Gospel of John has influenced subsequent Christian thought about Jesus' divinity. What specific Johannine teachings do you think most contributed to the conception of the Trinity—the doctrine that defines the Christian God as embodying the triune Being: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?
3. In discussing the idea that the heavenly being (Logos) who became the human Jesus had no beginning but dwelt in eternity with the Father, interpret such diverse Johannine statements as "the Father and I are one" and "the Father is greater than I am."
4. Explain Jesus' meaning when he says, "He who has seen me has seen the Father." Is Jesus like God or is God like Jesus? Describe the specific qualities, traits, and behavior patterns by which the Johannine Jesus reveals the heavenly Father. Discuss the role of divine/human love in John's portrait of divinity. Why does John emphasize the practice of showing love only among members of his Christian community (John 13:34–35) and not among strangers and enemies as Jesus commands in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:43–48)?
5. The idea that Jesus is divine—to be identified with the God of the Hebrew Bible—is perhaps the chief source of division between monotheistic Jews and orthodox Christians. Is Jesus'

“full divinity” a major preoccupation of the Synoptic writers? How does John’s claim of Jesus’ virtual godhood work to separate today’s Jews and Christians?

Terms and Concepts to Remember

Annas	Incarnation
Book of Glory	Isis
Book of Signs	Logos (Word)
catholic epistles	Nicodemus
chaos	Paraclete (the Advocate)
cosmos	Philo Judaeus
Crucifixion	realized eschatology
Docetism	Signs Gospel
Ephesus	transubstantiation
Gnosticism	Trinity
high Christology	Wisdom (Prov. 8)
Holy Spirit	

Recommended Reading

- Anderson, Paul. *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel: Its Unity and Disunity in the Light of John 6. (With a New Introduction, Outlines, and Epilogue)*. Eugene, Ore.; Cascade Books, 2010. Interprets John’s Christology not as a Gnostic-redeemer myth, but as based on Deuteronomy 18, with Jesus as the prophet greater than Moses.
- . *The Riddles of the Fourth Gospel: An Introduction to John*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011. Argues for the potential historicity of many distinctly Johannine themes and events, and explores the Gospel’s relationship to the Synoptic traditions.
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- Brown, R. E. *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*. New York: Paulist Press, 1979. A readable and insightful study of the Christian group that produced the Gospel and the Letters of John.
- Conway, Colleen M. “John, Gospel of.” In K. D. Sakenfeld, ed., *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 3, pp. 356–370. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008. Surveys distinctive qualities of the Gospel’s portrait of Jesus, including its socioeconomic setting and unique emphasis on Jesus’ divinity.
- Dodd, C. H. *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963.
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- Hedrick, Pamela. “John, Gospel According to.” In M. D. Coogan, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Books of the Bible*, Vol. 1, pp. 457–472. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Highlights John’s distinctive theology and later influence on church doctrine.
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- Kysar, Robert. “John, the Gospel of.” In D. N. Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 3, pp. 912–931. New York: Doubleday, 1992. A thoughtful review of Johannine literature and scholarship.
- . *John, the Maverick Gospel*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1976. An influential study of the Fourth Gospel.
- . *Voyages with John: Charting the Fourth Gospel*. Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2006. An effort by major Johannine scholars to trace evolving academic interpretations of John through the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.
- Martyn, J. L. *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, 2nd ed. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979. A brilliant interpretation of John’s method of composition that focuses on John 9.
- Perkins, Pheme. “The Gospel According to John.” In R. E. Brown et al., eds., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, pp. 942–985. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1990. An insightful commentary on the Gospel.
- Sloyan, Gerard S. *What Are They Saying About John?*, rev. ed. New York: Paulist Press, 2006. An accessible introduction to contemporary scholarship on John’s Gospel.

PART FOUR

An Account of the Early Church

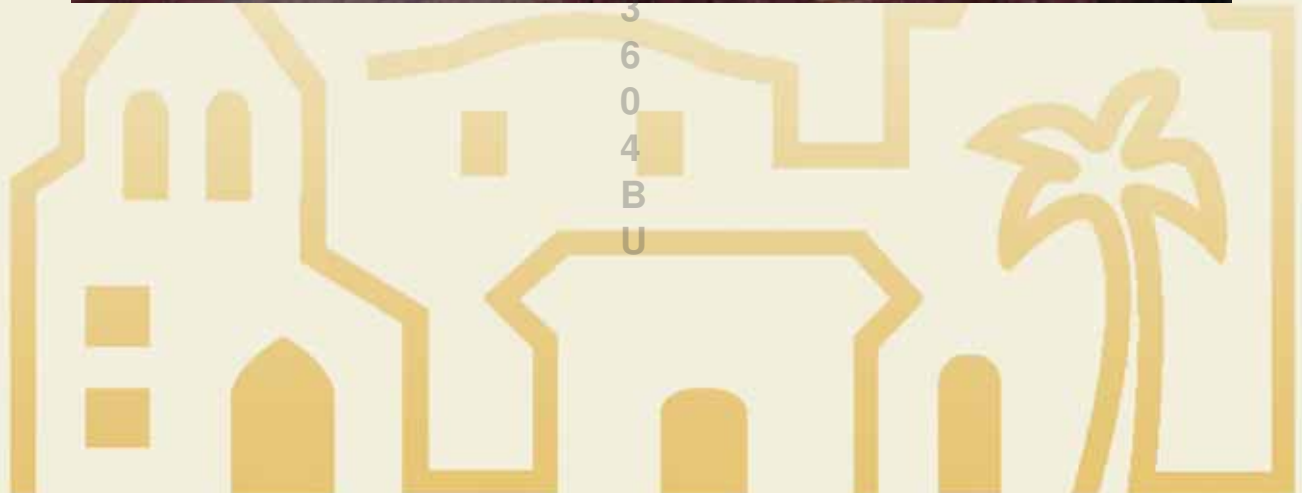


PHOTO ESSAY Themes and Settings in the Book of Acts



The two scenes painted on this early-sixth-century codex illustrate themes prominent in the two-volume work of Luke-Acts (*left*). The upper scene shows Jesus' trial before Pilate, the Roman prefect of Judea; similar encounters with Roman magistrates occur throughout Acts, presenting court hearings in which the author repeatedly demonstrates that Christians pose no legal threat to governmental authorities. In the lower scene, Judas Iscariot first returns the thirty pieces of silver he received for betraying Jesus and then hangs himself; two different versions of Judas's death appear in Acts 1 and Matthew 27.

On his travels through the urban centers of Greece and Asia Minor, Paul and his missionary companions met a wide range of ethnic and cultural groups. These two Roman portrait busts (*below*), both depicting citizens of Ephesus, where Paul stayed at least two years, illustrate some of the diverse expressions that Paul's Gospel may have evoked in his Ephesian audience.

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The partly reconstructed facade of this Ephesus library was erected in honor of Tiberius Julius Celsus (*right*), governor of the province of Asia after 117 CE. Although built after Paul's day, this elegant structure typifies the kind of sophisticated architecture that characterized the city of Ephesus.

Crowning the Athenian Acropolis, the Parthenon (*below*), a marble temple dedicated to Athene Parthenos (the Virgin), dominates the city's skyline today as it did when Paul debated Stoic philosophers in its shadow almost 2,000 years ago. Completed in 438 BCE, in Christian times the edifice was rededicated to Mary the Virgin (Maria Parthenos). ■



Themes and Settings in the Book of Acts (continued)



Designed to bring spring water from Mount Carmel to Caesarea Maritima, this aqueduct (*left*), with its massive stone arches, is typical of the city's monumental architecture. A thriving Mediterranean seaport that served as the headquarters for Roman administration of Judea (*middle*), Caesarea figures prominently in Acts: Here Peter baptized Cornelius, a Roman centurion, who became the first Gentile Christian (10:1–48), and here Paul was imprisoned for two years under the governors Felix and Festus (23:33–27:1).



When sent from Caesarea to Rome to stand trial in the emperor Nero's court, Paul would have seen many brick buildings similar to this modern reconstruction of a large house and apartments in Ostia (second century CE) (*below*). ■



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CHAPTER 12

Luke's Account of the Early Church: The Book of Acts

You will bear witness for me in Jerusalem, and all over Judaea and Samaria, and away to the ends of the earth. Jesus to the Jerusalem disciples, Acts 1:8

Key Topics/Themes In the Book of Acts, Luke continues his two-part narrative of Christian origins, depicting characters who, like Jesus, are models of Christian behavior and service. This theologically shaped account of the early church emphasizes many of the same themes that dominated Luke's Gospel. First, God's ancient promises to Israel through Abraham and Moses are fulfilled in the life and work of Jesus and his successors, who constitute a Spirit-blessed community, the true Israel. Second, emphasizing that "the new way (Christianity)" is a universal means of salvation encompassing all nations, Jewish and Gentile alike, Luke then shows biblical promises being fulfilled when the Jewish disciples are empowered by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (2:1–47). Third, the author illustrates the step-by-step process by which divine

promises were extended to non-Jewish peoples, beginning with campaigns in Samaria and Syria (8:1–12:25). The climactic events of this first section are the conversions of Paul, a Pharisee (ch. 9), and Cornelius, a Roman soldier, the first Gentile anointed by the Holy Spirit (chs. 10–11).

In the second part of Acts (chs. 13–28), Luke focuses almost exclusively on the travels of Paul, who leads a successful mission to Gentiles in Asia Minor and then carries the new religion into Europe, arriving in Rome about 60 CE. Arguing that Christianity is a natural extension of Judaism that offers no threat to the Roman state, Luke designs his narrative to demonstrate that the church's task is to create an international and ethnically diverse community, a work that extends indefinitely into the future (28:28).

The author of Luke-Acts clearly conceived of his two-volume work, a narrative of Jesus' ministry followed by an account of the early church, as integrally linked. Not only does Luke dedicate both volumes to the same patron, Theophilus, he also makes the final event in his Gospel, Jesus' **Ascension** to heaven, the first event described

in the Book of Acts (cf. Luke 1:1; 24:50–53 and Acts 1:1–5, 10–11). In fact, one of Luke's major goals in Acts is to demonstrate a strong connection between what Jesus said and did and what his disciples later accomplish in his name. Directed by the same Holy Spirit that had empowered Jesus, his followers loyally carry on their

The Book of Acts

Author: Traditionally Luke, companion of Paul (see Chapter 9). The same person who wrote the Gospel ascribed to Luke, name unknown.

Date: About 90 CE.

Place of composition: Unknown, perhaps Antioch or Ephesus.

Audience: Addressed, like Luke's Gospel, to Theophilus, representing Gentile Christians scattered throughout the Roman Empire.

Master's work, performing similar healing miracles and giving humble service to others. Operating as part of God's plan to redeem humanity, both Jew and Gentile, the disciples now serve on a world stage, bearing their message about Jesus from Jerusalem to the heart of the Roman Empire.

The author (whom we call Luke) structures the Acts narrative to parallel what happened in his Gospel, emphasizing many of the same themes. As Jesus received God's Spirit while at prayer (Luke 3:21–22), so the Spirit descends on his praying followers (Acts 2:1–13). Jesus' healing of a lame man (Luke 5:17–26) is mirrored by Peter's almost identical miracle (Acts 3:1–10), as is Jesus' resuscitation of a widow's son (Luke 7:11–17) reflected in Peter's resuscitation of a deceased widow named Dorcas (Acts 9:36–43). Similarly, Peter's healing of Aeneas, a "man who had been bedridden with paralysis for eight years" (Acts 9:32–35), echoes Jesus' curing "a paralyzed man on a bed" (Luke 5:18–20).

Luke's emphasis on Jerusalem and the Temple, so prevalent in his Gospel (see the discussion of Lukan themes in Chapter 9), also dominates Acts, in which Paul and other characters repeatedly travel to and from Jerusalem. After receiving the Holy Spirit, the disciples frequently gather at the Jerusalem Temple, where Peter proclaims that "Israel's God has given the highest honor to his servant Jesus" by "[raising] him from the dead" (Acts 3:1–4:4), a program that closely parallels the Lukan Jesus' extensive teaching at the Temple (Luke 19:45–21:38, especially 19:47–48; 21:1–5, and 37–38).

Most important, Acts also underscores the Gospel theme that both Jesus and his followers are totally innocent of sedition against Rome. In Luke's account of Jesus' trials before Pilate and Herod Antipas, both the Roman governor and the Roman-appointed local ruler conclude that the accused has committed no crime (Luke 23:1–25), as do the brigand crucified next to Jesus (23:40–43) and the Roman centurion who witnesses his death, judging him "innocent" (23:47). As noted below, Acts reinforces Luke's argument that Christians are guiltless of breaking Roman law, a theme of blamelessness highlighted in the accounts of Paul's parallel trials before Roman governors and Herodian rulers (Acts 23:1–26:32).

While emphasizing that Christians are not political revolutionaries determined to overthrow the Roman government, Luke's narrative also shows that their "new way" in fact undermines many accepted standards of Greco-Roman life. In examining Luke's presentation of Christianity's effect on established social customs, scholars have recently pointed to its disruptive and destabilizing consequences. To cite only one example, most inhabitants of the Roman Empire were polytheists who worshiped a multitude of gods, gods whose patronage and state-supported worship were widely recognized as essential to the public welfare. When Christians declared that only Israel's God—of whom no statue or other image could be made—was worthy of worship, their message often sparked mass rioting. Particularly in describing Paul's visits to Ephesus and other Greek cities, Luke shows that Christian missionaries, while innocent of political sedition, demanded changes in their converts' way of life that subverted many traditional civic and social values (19:1–41). To defenders of social and civil convention, they were guilty of "turning the world upside down" (16:6, NRSV).

In composing his idealized account of Christian beginnings, Luke is highly selective in his use of the oral "traditions" and "eyewitness" reports on which Acts presumably is based (cf. Luke 1:1–4). Although he lists the names of

the original eleven apostles (1:13), Luke tells us almost nothing about most of them. Instead, he concentrates on only a few figures, using them to represent crucial stages in early Christianity's swift transition from a Jewish to a Gentile movement. The apostle Peter, representing Palestinian Jewish Christianity and the original Jerusalem church, presides over the first half of Acts (chs. 1–12). Paul, exemplifying Hellenistic Christianity's mission to the Gentiles, dominates the second half (chs. 13–28). Except for brief references to James and John, the sons of Zebedee (3:1–4:22; 12:1–3; cf. Gal. 2:6–10), Luke rarely mentions Jesus' Galilean disciples or their activities. Whatever anecdotes about other apostles the author may have heard, he does not include them in his narrative; nor does he explain how some major churches, such as that at Rome, were founded. More significantly, although Paul is Luke's heroic exemplar of true Christianity, the author does not actually portray Paul as he reveals himself in his letters, omitting controversial Pauline ideas and even contradicting some of Paul's own versions of events (see Box 13.1).

In looking at maps depicting Paul's journeys (see Figures 12.2, 12.3, and 12.6), we see immediately that Luke is interested in only one trajectory of Christianity's geographical expansion—that which resulted in the founding of Pauline churches in Asia Minor and Greece and in Paul's preaching in Rome. Focusing exclusively on the northeastern Mediterranean region, Luke says nothing about other large areas where churches were concurrently being established, such as those in Egypt, Cyrene, and other locations in North Africa. According to tradition, the author of Mark's Gospel founded a church in Alexandria (Eusebius, *History* 2.16), where a major Christian center developed. Although we cannot be sure why Luke ignores the southern Mediterranean churches, his silence may result from a strong preference for Pauline Christianity, a branch of the faith that historically came to dominate the Western church.

In reading Acts, we must remember that Luke's account of early Christianity is as theologically oriented as his Gospel. Luke believes that the apostles and missionaries who brought "the new way" (9:2) to Greece and Rome were led by the same divine force that inspired Jesus. For Luke, the church preserves and maintains the same ethical and spiritual qualities that distinguished Jesus' career, making the "acts of the apostles" a continuation of the Gospel story.



The Divine Plan of Humanity's Salvation

The incidents from early Christianity that Luke chooses to include in Acts are arranged to express the author's overarching concern: the Spirit-directed growth of the church and its expansion westward from Palestine to Italy. In general, the narrative advances chronologically, showing the religion's incremental expansion into new geographical areas. Luke's organizing principle is stated in Acts 1:8, in which the risen Jesus gives the disciples his final command: They are to "bear witness" to him "in Jerusalem, and all over Judaea and Samaria, and away to the ends of the earth."

Acts thus begins in Jerusalem (chs. 1–7), records a mission to Samaria (ch. 8), gives a detailed account of Paul's three missionary journeys throughout Asia Minor and Greece, and concludes with Paul's arrival in Rome, the center of imperial power and perhaps representing "the ends of the earth" (chs. 13–28).

Luke's Major Theme: God's Spirit Operating in Human History

In tracing Christianity's course from its Palestinian roots to Gentile flowering, Luke illustrates the manner in which God has kept his biblical promises to Israel. Jesus and his Jewish followers are the fulfillment of Israel's prophetic goals, a

demonstration of God's faithfulness that will reassure Theophilus and other Gentiles who join their ranks. At the end of his Gospel and the beginning of Acts, Luke takes pains to remind readers of Israel's hopes for a Davidic king. The disciples approaching Jerusalem wonder if the kingdom is at last about to materialize (Luke 19:11), a question they reformulate to Jesus immediately before his ascension to heaven: "Lord, is this the time when you are to establish once again the sovereignty of Israel?" (Acts 1:6). Jesus' answer—that they must remain in Jerusalem to "receive power" from above and then evangelize the earth—implies a positive response to their question. In Luke's view, God indeed reestablishes his rule over true citizens of Israel, the Jewish disciples of Jesus who represent the covenant people. Although most people do not perceive it, God has accomplished the restoration of true Israel through the faithfulness of Jesus' Jewish followers.

Luke further highlights the theme of Israel's restoration when the Eleven elect a replacement for Judas Iscariot (who dies soon after betraying Jesus), thus re-creating a leadership of Twelve, symbolic of Israel's twelve tribes (1:23–26). Once this continuity between Israel and the Christian community has been affirmed, however, Luke never again refers to the replacement (Matthias) or to any of the Twelve except for Peter and (briefly) John. (James, John's brother, is mentioned only to record his beheading by Herod Agrippa I [12:2].) In Luke's thematic purpose, the Twelve are the Israelite foundation of the Christian church, a cornerstone on which Gentiles will build the superstructure.

At Pentecost, when the Lukan Peter states that God's eschatological promise of Israel's Spirit-anointing is fulfilled (2:14–36), 3,000 Jews join the Galilean disciples (2:37–41). Throughout both his Gospel and Acts, Luke is careful to distinguish the Jewish people, many of whom accept Jesus as the national Messiah, from the small group of their priestly leaders who had advocated Jesus' execution. Not only had the Jews as a whole—including their "rulers"—acted

in ignorance of Jesus' identity, but it was also God's foreordained will that the Messiah *had* to suffer—no human action could have prevented it (3:17–24).

Peter's second Jerusalem speech emphasizes the Lukan theme that Jews remain "the heirs of the prophets" and "within the covenant" that God made with Abraham. Hence, God sent his "servant" and offered his "blessing" to them first, keeping the vow he had sworn to Israel's patriarchs and prophets (3:25–26). As Luke presents his history of salvation, Jerusalem and its Temple—where Pharisees and Jewish Christians worship side by side—are the focal point of God's redemptive acts for all humanity.

Even when traveling in Gentile territories, the Lukan Paul consistently offers his message first to members of the local synagogue, before proselytizing Syrians or Greeks. Although Paul repeatedly threatens to devote himself entirely to recruiting Gentile believers, he continues to minister to fellow Jews. At the end of Acts, however, Paul cites a portentous verse from Isaiah 6 about God's people being deaf and blind to his prophetic word. (This is the same passage that Mark had used to explain why Jesus spoke in parables—to *prevent* his hearers from understanding him [cf. Mark 4:10–12; Acts 28:23–27].) When an exasperated Paul declares that henceforth he will concentrate all his efforts on "the Gentiles" because "the Gentiles will listen" (28:28), he expresses an unforeseen twist of history. By the time Luke wrote the sequel to his Gospel, Christianity, originally a Jewish phenomenon, had become a faith dominated by Gentiles. In this paradoxical event, Luke saw God's will accomplished: the gathering of every ethnic and national group into a universal worshiping community.

Luke's Use of Speeches

Like other historians of his day, Luke ascribes long, elaborate speeches to his leading characters, such as Peter, Stephen, James, and Paul. But whoever the speaker, most of the speeches

sound much alike in both style and thought. This similarity among Acts' many discourses, as well as the fact that they seem to reflect attitudes prevalent in the author's time rather than those of the historical figures he describes, suggests to most scholars that they are largely Luke's own compositions. In the absence of exact transcriptions of apostolic speeches, many of which were delivered amid noisy and unruly crowds, Luke apparently follows the standard practice of Greco-Roman authors by supplementing what was remembered with material of his own creation. Ancient historians and biographers like Thucydides, Livy, Tacitus, and Plutarch commonly enlivened their narratives with speeches put in the mouths of historical characters. The classical writer composed such discourses based on his conception of the speaker's character and major concerns at the time the speech was given. He was not expected to reproduce a particular speech exactly as it was delivered. Thucydides explains the historian's method clearly and briefly:

I have found it difficult to remember the precise words used in the speeches which I listened to myself and my various informants have experienced the same difficulty; so my method has been, while keeping as closely as possible to the general sense of the words that were actually used, to make the speaker say what, in my opinion, was called for by each occasion.

(The Peloponnesian War I.22)

In short, while attempting to reproduce the "general sense" of what people said, Thucydides created their speeches according to his understanding of what "was called for by the occasion." We cannot know the extent to which Luke's speeches reflect ideas expressed in generations before his time.

Organization of the Book of Acts

Luke arranges his narrative in ten major sections:

1. Prologue and account of the ascension (1:1–11)
2. Founding of the Jerusalem church (1:12–2:47)

3. The work of Peter and the apostles (3:1–5:42)
4. Persecution of the Hellenistic-Jewish Christians: the first missions (6:1–8:40)
5. Preparation for the Gentile mission: the conversions of Paul and Cornelius (9:1–12:25)
6. The first missionary journey of Barnabas and Paul: the Jerusalem conference (13:1–15:35)
7. Paul's second missionary journey: evangelizing Greece (16:1–18:21)
8. Paul's third missionary journey: revisiting Asia Minor and Greece (18:22–20:38)
9. Paul's arrest in Jerusalem and imprisonment in Caesarea (21:1–26:32)
10. Paul's journey to Rome and his preaching to Roman Jews (27:1–28:31)



Prologue and Account of the Ascension

In his introduction to Acts (1:1–11), Luke refers to the "first part" of his work (the Gospel) and then picks up where his earlier story of Jesus left off. Before ascending to heaven, the resurrected Jesus remains on earth for "forty days," a number that symbolizes the period of time required to accomplish a major religious undertaking. (Moses remained on Mount Sinai for forty days while receiving the Torah, and Jesus' wilderness temptation was of similar duration.)

Although his report of Jesus' post resurrection instruction is tantalizingly brief, Luke makes some major points. The risen Jesus offers fresh insights into the nature of his kingdom, which is not the political restoration of the Jewish state that the disciples had anticipated (Luke 19:11; Acts 1:3, 6–7). Contrary to apocalyptic expectations, God's rule expands gradually as the Christian message slowly permeates Greco-Roman society. The historical process must begin in Jerusalem, but the Spirit will empower believers to carry their faith throughout the earth (1:1–8).

Luke is the only New Testament writer to describe Jesus' ascent to the spirit world. He presents it as a quasi-physical movement skyward, culminating in Jesus' disappearance into the clouds (symbolic of the divine presence [Exod. 40:34–35; 1 Kings 8:10; Dan. 7:13]). Luke thus makes the peaceful ascension a prophetic model of Jesus' quiet return (the Parousia) (1:9–11).



Founding the Jerusalem Church

The Apostles

After describing **Matthias**'s election to replace Judas Iscariot as one of the Twelve—Luke's version of Judas's death differs sharply from Matthew's report (Matt. 27:5)—Luke outlines the qualifications for apostleship. According to Luke, an apostle must be a person who had physically accompanied Jesus during his entire ministry and had also witnessed his resurrection (1:21–22). Perhaps because Paul had not personally known Jesus, Luke almost never calls him an apostle, although Paul himself passionately fought to make others acknowledge his right to that title (Gal. 1). (See Box 12.1 for a list of Acts' "major milestones.")

The Holy Spirit at Pentecost

Luke presents the disciples' experience at **Pentecost** (a Jewish harvest festival held fifty days after Passover) in terms of prophetic fulfillment (2:1–47). The **Holy Spirit**'s descent upon a group of 120 disciples (a multiple of the Twelve) vindicates Jesus' promise to equip them with supernatural power (1:8; Luke 24:29), and it fulfills the prophet Joel's ancient prediction that God would someday infuse all kinds of people with his Spirit (Joel 2:28–32) (see Figure 12.1). Its presence symbolically rendered as wind and flame, the Spirit empowers the disciples to speak in tongues. This

phenomenon of religious ecstasy, in which believers emit an outpouring of strange sounds (called *glossolalia*), came to characterize the early church and was generally regarded as a sign of God's presence (11:14–18; cf. Paul's discussion of "ecstatic speech" in 1 Cor. 14). According to Luke, the pentecostal miracle enabled recipients of the Spirit to converse in foreign languages they had previously been unable to speak, although some onlookers accuse the inspired disciples of being "drunk," implying they spoke unintelligibly (2:1–13; cf. 1 Cor. 14:2–25).

Peter, chief of the apostles, delivers Acts' first major speech to interpret the pentecostal experience (2:14–20). Peter's discourse illustrates several Lukan themes. The pentecostal Spirit is the phenomenon that Joel had foreseen as a sign of the last days. It is bestowed upon all believers, regardless of age or gender—women prophesy equally with men.

The Lukan Peter says that the Spirit-giving event is linked to "portents in the sky" and other astronomical displays foretold in Joel's prophecy. Interestingly, Luke represents Peter as equating the disciples' religious ecstasy with Joel's vision of cosmic upheaval, such as the sun's being darkened and the moon's turning to blood. (This interpretation of the astronomical "portents" as purely metaphorical suggests that the author's references to identical phenomena in Luke 21:25–28 may also be seen as symbolic language rather than as forecasts of literal events in future history.) Luke's main point, however, is that God has anointed his church, giving it the power to preach in every known tongue, the many languages of Pentecost representing the universality of the Christian mission.

Peter's long speech expresses another important Lukan theme: Jesus' death occurred "by the deliberate will and plan of God"—and was thus a theological necessity (2:23). God has vindicated his "servant" by raising him from the dead and placing him at God's "right hand" (the position of favor and power) in heaven. Linking this exaltation of Jesus with Davidic



BOX 12.1 Major Milestones in the Book of Acts

According to Acts' version of Christian origins, the new faith began at a particular moment in time—at the Jewish Feast of Pentecost, in Jerusalem, when the Holy Spirit descended upon a gathering of Jesus' Galilean disciples (Acts 2). In Luke's carefully structured presentation, Christianity's growth in adherents and geographical expansion is marked by significant milestones, crucial events at which Christianity enters into a new stage of development. Each step along the evolutionary path from a Palestinian Jewish sect to a largely Gentile faith preached throughout the Greco-Roman world is indicated by a representative episode, headlining the author's "good news" bulletins.

1. The Christian church is born in Jerusalem—the Holy Spirit anoints 120 disciples at Pentecost, followed by mass conversions to the new Jesus movement (2:1–47).
2. Peter performs the first miraculous cure "in Jesus' name" (3:1–10), continuing Jesus' work.
3. Stephen, a "Hellenist" Jew, becomes the first Christian martyr (6:8–7:60).
4. Another Hellenist, Philip, makes the first non-Jewish converts—a Samaritan sorcerer and an African eunuch (8:4–40).
5. Saul (Paul) of Tarsus, while fiercely persecuting "the way," is suddenly converted by a vision of the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus (9:1–30; cf. 22:6–11; 26:12–19).
6. Peter converts the Roman centurion Cornelius, who becomes the first non-Jew to receive the Holy Spirit (10:1–42).
7. Believers in Jesus are first called "Christians" in Antioch, Syria, which becomes the second major center of Christianity (11:19–26).
8. James, the son of Zebedee and brother of John, becomes the first member of the Twelve to suffer martyrdom (12:1–3).
9. Paul, following Barnabas, makes his first missionary journey from Antioch to Asia Minor (modern Turkey) (13:1–14:28), carrying Pauline Christianity to the Greek-speaking world.
10. The first church council, held at Jerusalem to discuss whether Gentile converts must observe Mosaic Law, decides in favor of admitting uncircumcised males, opening "the way" to all nationalities (15:1–35).
11. Carrying the faith from western Asia to Europe, Paul makes his first missionary tour of Greece, founding churches at Philippi, Thessalonica, and Corinth (16:9–18:23).
12. In Jerusalem, Paul is arrested by a Roman officer (21:15–22:29). After two years in a Caesarean prison, Paul appears before Governor Festus and Herod Agrippa II (25:6–32), fulfilling the risen Jesus' prediction that Paul will testify "before kings" (9:15).
13. Exercising his right as a Roman citizen, Paul is sent to Rome for trial. Under house arrest in Rome, Paul vows to focus exclusively on recruiting Gentiles (28:16–30).

themes from the Psalms, Peter declares that by resurrecting Jesus, God has made him "both Lord and Messiah." Because Luke believes that Jesus was Messiah during his lifetime, the author may here preserve a very early Christian belief that Jesus—the "man singled out by God"—became confirmed as Messiah only on his ascension to heavenly glory (2:22, 36; see Box 11.2).

The Jerusalem Commune

Repeating a theme prominent in his Gospel, the author connects the Spirit's presence with its recipients' subsequent way of life, particularly their social and economic arrangements. The overwhelming "sense of awe" that believers feel is translated into the work of creating an ideal community without rich or poor.



FIGURE 12.1 *The Descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.* In this painting by El Greco (1541–1614), like a rushing wind and hovering tongues of flame, the Holy Spirit anoints disciples gathered in an “upper room” in Jerusalem. For the author of Acts, this event parallels the Spirit’s descent at Jesus’ baptism, empowering the early church to carry on Jesus’ work.

Luke reports that the faithful sold their possessions so that money and goods could be distributed according to individual members’ needs. Holding “everything” “in common” (2:43–45; 4:32–35), the Jerusalem community meets Jesus’ challenge to sacrifice material possessions to attain true discipleship (Luke 18:18–30). As a result of establishing the kingdom’s economic ethic as its standard, however, the Jerusalem church apparently depended on financial help from Gentile churches to sustain its ideal (Gal. 2:10; Rom. 15:25–28).

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The Work of Peter and the Apostles

In the next section (3:1–5:42), Luke describes the activities of Peter and some of his Jerusalem associates. Peter’s healing a crippled man by invoking Jesus’ authority (3:1–10) demonstrates that the disciples continue their leader’s work. Presenting a second Petrine speech (3:11–26), delivered in the Temple precincts, Luke interprets the miracle’s significance. God wishes to reconcile Judaism with its infant daughter, the church. Jesus’ resurrection, to which Peter and his associates are living witnesses (2:32; 3:15), proves the validity of the disciples’ faith and provides an opportunity for official Judaism to unite with the followers of Jesus. Luke insists that the persons who condemned Jesus did so “in ignorance.” The Jerusalem leaders acted blindly because God, for his own mysterious reasons, had already determined that his “servant” must die (3:13–18). Perhaps because the Deity is the ultimate cause of Jesus’ death, he now offers forgiveness to those who unwittingly carried out his will (3:17–19; Luke 23:24). As Luke portrays the situation, at this critical moment in Jewish–Christian relations, union of the two parties is possible.

Part of Israel does unite with the Christian fold. Luke rekindles the excitement of these

early days as he records large numbers of Jews flocking to join the disciples (4:4). In contrast to the people's enthusiastic response, Luke also shows the Jerusalem leadership hardening its position and attempting to halt the new movement.

In chapters 3–5, Luke heightens the sense of dramatic tension by presenting several direct confrontations between the apostles and the Jerusalem authorities. The author attributes much of the church's trouble to the Sadducees, whose priests control the Temple (4:1–6; 5:17–18). In contrast, many Pharisees tend to tolerate or even champion some Christian activities (5:34–40; 23:6–9). During Peter's second hearing before the Sanhedrin, the Pharisee **Gamaliel**, a famous first-century rabbinical scholar, is represented as a protector of the infant church.

Seeing “the new way” (9:2) as divinely supported, Luke shows that its growth cannot be stopped. After the High Priest (identified as Annas in 4:6) imprisons the apostles, celestial forces intervene to release them (5:17–26). Whether employing human agents like Gamaliel or angels from heaven, the Deity acts decisively to ensure the Jesus movement's survival and expansion.



Persecution of the Hellenistic-Jewish Christians: The First Missions

Even as the Sadducees attack it from without, the Christian community simultaneously experiences internal trouble (6:1–8:40). Strife breaks out between two different groups within the Jerusalem church. Although Luke only hints at the cause of this disagreement, he makes it clear that two distinct parties emerge: the **Hellenists**, who are Greek-speaking Jews of the Diaspora, and the “Hebrews,” who are Aramaic-speaking Jews apparently native to Palestine.

Some historians believe that this division reflects first-century Judaism's prevailing social and religious distinction between Palestinian Jews and Jews from foreign countries who had more thoroughly adopted Greek ideas and customs.

Because he wishes to present the Jerusalem church as a model for later Christianity, Luke portrays the incipient conflict as being resolved by an orderly administrative process. Accordingly, the Twelve act unanimously to elect seven Greek-speaking disciples to represent the Hellenists (6:1–6).

Stephen: The First Christian Martyr

Although he implies that the seven leaders were elected to supervise the church's communal meals, Luke soon reveals that the seven were mainly proclaimers of the gospel. Because of his public preaching, the chief Hellenist, **Stephen**, becomes the focus of Sadducean hostility. The priestly opposition accuses Stephen of attacking the Temple cult and subverting the Mosaic Torah, charges that also had been leveled against Jesus (6:8–15).

The account of Stephen's trial and public stoning effectively links the first part of Luke's history, centered in Jerusalem, with the second part, which records Christianity's expansion into non-Jewish territory. The author fashions Stephen's speech (7:2–53) as a Hellenist's severely critical indictment of Jerusalem's religious institutions. Stephen accuses the Temple leadership of “fighting against the Holy Spirit” (to Luke, the supreme offense), murdering the Messiah, and failing to keep the Torah (7:2–53). The episode concludes with typically Lukan themes: In prayer, the dying Stephen—the first Christian **martyr**—experiences a vision of heaven and, echoing Jesus' words on the cross, asks God to forgive his executioners (7:54–60).

The author juxtaposes Stephen's ecstatic vision with the introduction of “a young man named Saul” who guards the cloaks of those stoning the victim. Luke's contrast of the

two men, each zealous in his faith, is deeply ironic. The young Saul will become Paul the apostle, Christianity's most famous missionary, and eventually suffer martyrdom himself. His appearance at this point in Luke's narrative connects the episode about Stephen, a Greek-educated Christian Jew, with Paul's mission to Greek-speaking Gentile nations, a development recorded in the second half of Acts.

Demonstrating that the church's enemies cannot seriously interfere with its progress, Luke states that the Sadducean priests' efforts to block "the new way" have the opposite effect. The persecution that follows Stephen's execution drives the Greek-speaking Jewish Christians from Jerusalem, but this event only serves to spread the faith into receptive new areas. (Although the Hellenists are expelled from the holy city, the Aramaic-speaking disciples evidently are permitted to remain.) Contrary to their expectations, the priests' hostile action becomes the means by which Jesus' order to plant the faith in Judea and Samaria (1:8) is obeyed.

The Samaritan Mission

In his parable of the humane Samaritan, Luke (10:29–37) indicates Jesus' goodwill toward that despised group and anticipates Christianity's later growth in Samaria. In Acts, Luke portrays the Samaritan mission mainly through the work of a single figure, **Philip**, one of Stephen's fellow Hellenists. Focusing on two of Philip's new converts, the author illustrates the increasing ethnic (and ethical) diversity of the church as it takes in the mixed population living outside Judea. The first convert is **Simon Magus**, a notorious magician who later tries to buy Peter's gift of imparting the Holy Spirit, an attempt the apostle severely rebukes (8:4–24). In legends that developed after New Testament times, Simon became a sinister figure involved in black magic and the occult. According to some historians, he is the prototype of Faust, the medieval scholar

who—to gain forbidden knowledge—sells his soul to the devil.

The Simon Magus episode suggests the moral risks taken as the church absorbed potential troublemakers from the Hellenistic world; Philip's second major convert represents a significant breakthrough for the new religion. Occurring south of Jerusalem rather than in Samaria, Philip's conversion of an Ethiopian eunuch forms the climax of his career. According to the Mosaic Torah, a eunuch (a sexually mutilated male) was excluded from full Israelite citizenship. Despite the prejudice against him, however, this eunuch is a "God-fearer," a term Luke uses to denote a class of Gentiles who have adopted the Jewish religion without undergoing circumcision or observing all the dietary requirements.

Luke sets up the scene to illustrate several characteristic themes. The author shows Philip encountering the Ethiopian while he is reading a singularly appropriate passage from a Greek edition of the Hebrew Bible—Isaiah 53. This poem describes an anonymous servant of God who suffers unjustly and offers Philip the perfect opportunity to identify Isaiah's mysterious servant with Jesus, who, though innocent, endured comparable suffering. Throughout this section of Acts, Luke repeatedly refers to Jesus as a "servant" (3:13, 26; 4:27, 30), the only New Testament writer to do so (cf. Luke 22:26–27). Interestingly, Luke omits Isaiah's allusions to the "servant" bearing punishment for others' sins, probably because the author does not interpret Jesus' death as a ransom or vicarious atonement for sinful humanity (see Box 9.1).

In depicting the early church's missionary efforts, Luke emphasizes the Spirit's directing role. Evangelists like Philip (and later Paul) go exactly where and to whom the Holy Spirit guides them, moving almost erratically from place to place. After Philip baptizes the eunuch, we are told that "the Spirit snatched Philip away, and the eunuch saw no more of him . . ." (8:39).



Preparation for the Gentile Mission: The Recruitment of Paul and Cornelius

Paul's Vision of Jesus

As a literary artist, Luke skillfully prepares his readers for the historic transformation of Christianity from a movement within Judaism to an independent world religion. He does this by recording the recruitment of two different men whose acceptance of the new faith foreshadows the Gentile mission (9:1–12:25). The most dramatic event is the encounter of **Saul (Paul)** with the risen Lord on the road to **Damascus**. The author regards Paul's experience as crucial and gives no fewer than three separate accounts of the incident (9:3–8; 22:6–11; 26:12–19). Luke clothes the event in supernatural images—a blinding light and heavenly voice—although, Paul's only surviving reports of what happened are much more subdued (cf. Gal. 1:12, 15–16; 1 Cor. 15:8–9).

In Luke's historical scheme, Paul becomes God's agent (9:15), explicitly chosen to bring "the new way" (as Greek-speaking Christians first called their faith) to non-Jewish nations. As a result of the mystical experience that transformed his view of Jesus, Paul now suffers the same kind of persecution he had inflicted on others. Luke recounts two separate plots on Paul's life, which he foils by escaping first from Damascus and then from Caesarea (9:24–30).

Peter's Call to Baptize a Gentile

Luke devotes two full chapters (10–11) to the episode involving **Cornelius**, a Roman military officer and the first Gentile Christian. To Luke, admitting uncircumcised Gentiles into the Christian fold represents one of the most important developments in religious history. The author's manner of telling the story reveals how crucial he believes the event to be. By this

point in Luke-Acts, readers have probably realized that whenever Luke wishes to emphasize the significance of an event, he describes it in terms of supernatural phenomena. At both Jesus' birth (Luke 1–2) and that of the church at Pentecost (Acts 2), the invisible spirit realm directly impinges on the human world. (The Resurrection and the apostles' escape from death in prison are two other examples.) Thus, God sends visions and dreams to both Cornelius and Peter, instructing the apostle to baptize his first Gentile convert, an act symbolizing God's intent to make both Gentiles and Jews his own people.

Underscoring his view that the Spirit's presence validates a religious decision, Luke shows Cornelius and his entire household speaking in tongues exactly as the Jewish Christians had at Pentecost. As he had at the church's spiritual baptism, Peter again interprets the incident's religious meaning—the equal worth of Jews and Gentiles in God's sight (10:35–48). Peter's statement also clarifies the meaning of his dream: God declares all animal foods "clean" and acceptable, as well as the Gentiles who eat them. Dietary restrictions are no longer a barrier between Jew and non-Jew.

Typically Lukan concerns dominate the Cornelius–Peter narration. Both men receive their respective visions while at prayer. The Spirit arranges and guides the human participants in this momentous event, guiding Jew and Gentile alike. Readers will also note that Luke injects into his narrative words of the resurrected Jesus directing believers how to behave at moments crucial to the growing church. Speaking through trances or visions to Paul (9:4–6), Ananias (9:10–16), Cornelius (10:3–6), and Peter (10:10–16), the risen Lord continues to instruct his disciples (cf. Luke 24:25–27, 44–50). The intimate communication prevailing between the heavenly Lord and his people on earth expresses Luke's belief in the unbroken continuity between Jesus and his later followers.

Herod Agrippa

Luke concludes this section by describing the attack on the Jerusalem church’s leadership by Herod Agrippa I. A grandson of Herod the Great, Herod Agrippa reigned briefly (41–44 CE) over a reunited Jewish state. Although the emperor Claudius, who had appointed him king, supported Herod’s rule, the puppet ruler was unpopular among his Jewish subjects. Herod apparently cultivated support from the Sadducees by persecuting their opponents, including Christians. Luke states that he beheaded James, brother of John, and also imprisoned Peter. After recording Peter’s miraculous escape from prison, the author dramatizes Herod’s punishment. Hailed publicly as “a god” by a fawning crowd, the king is instantly afflicted with a loathsome and fatal disease “because he had usurped the honour due to God” (12:1–24). Herod’s miserable death, like that of Judas, illustrates the fate of persons who oppose the Spirit.



The First Missionary Journey of Barnabas and Paul: The Jerusalem Conference

According to Acts 11, the initial persecution and scattering of Hellenistic-Jewish Christians eventually led to the formation of a mixed Jewish-Gentile church in Antioch, Syria. A prosperous city situated on the main trade and travel routes of the eastern Mediterranean, Antioch rapidly became the center for a hugely successful mission to the Gentiles (13:1–15:35). Paul and **Barnabas**, a Greek-speaking Jewish Christian from Cyprus, made the city their headquarters. It was here that followers of “the way” first were called Christians (11:22–26).

In Acts 13, Luke shows Barnabas and Paul leaving Antioch to begin their first missionary tour of Asia Minor (see Figure 12.2). According



FIGURE 12.2 Paul’s first missionary journey. According to Acts, Paul made three major tours through the northeastern Mediterranean region. Although the account in Acts may oversimplify Paul’s complex travel itineraries, it correctly shows him focusing his efforts on major urban centers in Asia Minor (modern Turkey).

to this account, the two made it their practice to preach first in Jewish synagogues and, when rejected there, to turn then to a Gentile audience (13:46–48; 18:6; 28:28). Luke’s version of Paul’s speech in Pisidian **Antioch** (in Asia Minor) shows little sensitivity to Paul’s characteristic teaching on the saving power of Christ or his anticipation of an early Parousia. (Compare Acts’ account with Paul’s letters to the Thessalonians and Corinthians, discussed in Chapter 14.) Many scholars believe that the speeches in Acts reflect the Hellenistic preaching style typical of the author’s own time, late in the first century CE.

Luke announces that Barnabas and Paul opened “the gates of faith to the Gentiles”

(14:27), but he is not above remarking on the religious gullibility of some Gentiles. When Paul and Barnabas are evangelizing in **Lystra**, a Roman colony in Asia Minor, they are mistaken for gods in human form. After Paul miraculously heals a crippled man, the populace decides that he must be **Mercury** (Hermes), messenger of the Olympian gods, and that Barnabas is Jupiter (Zeus), king of the immortals. The crowd's fickleness, however, matches its credulity. At one moment, the Lystrans are ready to offer sacrifices to Barnabas and Paul, but at the next—persuaded by some visiting Jews—they stone Paul and leave him for dead (14:8–30). Apparently indestructible, Paul recovers quickly and completes his missionary tour, returning to Syrian Antioch, his home base.

The First Church Conference

The great success that Barnabas and Paul have, in converting large numbers of Gentiles brings the church to its first major crisis (15:1–25). In Antioch, many Jewish Christians insist that unless the new converts become circumcised they “[can] not be saved” (15:1). In Jerusalem, Christian Pharisees argue that Gentile converts “must be circumcised and told to keep the Law of Moses” (15:5). According to Genesis, circumcision is required of all Israelite males if they are to be part of the covenant community (Gen. 17:9–14). Because this ritual mark on the organ of procreation distinguishes Jews as heirs to Yahweh's promises to Abraham, Jewish Christians naturally see it as a prerequisite to entering the kingdom. In their opinion, foreigners must become Jews before they can be Christians. Paul and Barnabas oppose this notion with “fierce dissension and controversy” (15:2) (see Box 12.2).

The battle between advocates of the Mosaic Torah and Hellenistic-Jewish Christians like Barnabas and Paul gives Luke an opportunity to create a model, or paradigm, for dealing with such controversies in the church. By the time he wrote Acts, the issue had long been decided in favor of the Gentiles. Paul's advocacy

of “freedom” from the “bondage” of the Mosaic Torah had triumphed over the “circumcision party.” Thus, Luke presents the controversy as considerably less intense than it actually was and simplifies the historical situation by picturing a peaceful and unanimous resolution of the problem.

The first church conference, held in Jerusalem about 49 CE to decide the circumcision issue, provides Luke's model of orderly procedure. Initiating the conference, Antioch sends delegates, including Barnabas and Paul, to Jerusalem, and the Jerusalem “apostles and elders” investigate the problem, permitting an extended debate between the two sides. Peter, representing Palestinian apostolic authority, delivers a speech reminding his fellow Jews that the Spirit had been given to the Gentile Cornelius just as it had been to Jewish Christians. Peter advises against laying the Torah “yoke” upon converts. The entire congregation then listens to Barnabas and Paul plead their case for the Gentiles.

According to Luke, James (Jesus' “brother” or kinsman), the person who later succeeds Peter as head of the Jerusalem church, essentially decides the issue. (See Box 12.3 for a history of the leadership in the early Jerusalem church.) Although Acts pictures James as a “moderate,” accepting of Gentiles who do not observe Torah rules, Paul's letters paint him as a strongly conservative Jew advocating circumcision for all (Gal. 2). Luke presents James as using his prestige to influence the Jerusalem church to accept Gentiles without imposing Torah restrictions.

The Lukan James, however, does insist upon the observation of some Jewish dietary laws by Gentiles. James's stipulations seem based largely on Torah rules from Leviticus, according to which both Jews and foreigners living in Israel are forbidden to eat blood or meat that has not been drained of blood (Lev. 17–18). Recognizing that Gentiles are accustomed to a more sexually permissive culture than are Jews, James also forbids “fornication” or sexual misconduct (15:13–21). In James's



BOX 12.2 Circumcision, the Consumption of Blood, and the Inclusion of Gentiles

According to Acts 15, the first church conference was held in Jerusalem to decide what parts of the Mosaic Law Gentile converts had to obey to become members of the Christian community, which was then primarily Jewish. In Luke's account, Paul's argument that Gentile males did not need to become circumcised prevailed, with Peter and James, leaders of the Jerusalem church, agreeing. In order to enjoy full fellowship with Jewish Christians, however, it was stipulated, all converts had to observe four provisions of the Torah, which were addressed to both Israelites and foreign residents (15:19–21). Besides abstaining from sexual misconduct (such as various forms of incest listed in Lev. 18), Gentile Christians were also required to obey specified Mosaic dietary prohibitions, such as consuming blood or eating animals that had not been properly drained of blood (a kosher process described in Lev. 17). In addition, converts were not to consume the flesh of animals sacrificed to alien gods. Whereas Acts shows Paul accepting these restrictions, in his own version of the meeting, Paul declares that he yielded to no Torah demands (Gal. 1–2).

Although both Acts and Paul's letters agree that circumcision is not to be required of Gentile males, many Jewish Christians in Palestine and elsewhere probably thought that they had good scriptural reasons to insist on the requirement. According to the Book of Exodus, any foreigner or alien resident—whether enslaved or free—who wished to participate in the Passover feast had first to be circumcised (Exod. 12:43–45, 48–49). Because Exodus specifically states that “the same law shall apply to both the native born and to the alien who is living with you,” Jewish Christians, believing that God's law is universal and unchanging, could argue that persons desiring to partake of the Lord's supper (communion), which derived from Jesus' final Passover meal (Mark 14:12–26; Matt. 26:17–30; Luke 22:14–38), must be circumcised in order to qualify for full participation. After all, God's decree that circumcision is the distinguishing mark of membership in the covenant community predates the giving of the Mosaic Law and is the physical expression of Yahweh's original promises to Abraham (Gen. 17).

speech, Luke shows a basic victory for one party (the Gentile side), accompanied by a compromise that is sensitive to the consciences of the losing sides.

The author completes his example of model church procedures by illustrating the manner in which James's recommendation is carried out. Themes of unity and cooperation dominate Luke's account: The “whole church” agrees to send “unanimously” elected delegates back to Antioch with a letter containing the Jerusalem church's directive. Characteristically, Luke notes that the decision of this precedent-setting conference is also “the decision of the Holy Spirit” (15:22–29). To the author, the church's deliberations reflect the divine will.

Paul's Independence of the Apostolic Church

Luke's description of Paul's cooperative relationship with the apostolic leadership in Jerusalem differs significantly from the account in Paul's letters. According to Luke, shortly after his conversion Paul went to Jerusalem, where he “tried to join the body of disciples there” but was rebuffed. After Barnabas took this zealous convert under his wing, however, Luke implies, Paul became an accepted member of Jerusalem's Christian community (9:26–30). In his own version of events, Paul categorically denies that he had early contact with the Jerusalem church or that his teaching about



BOX 12.3 Jesus' Family and the Jerusalem Church

In describing Jesus' return to Nazareth, Mark lists four of Jesus' "brothers" (or close kinsmen) by name: James, Joseph, Judas, and Simon, as well as at least two unidentified "sisters" (6:3). Mark's report that Jesus' "mother and his brothers" attempted to interfere with Jesus' ministry (3:21, 31–35) is consistent with the New Testament tradition that none of Jesus' family members followed him until after his resurrection. Paul cites James as one of the prominent individuals to whom Jesus made a post resurrection appearance (1 Cor. 15:7), which was undoubtedly the experience that made James a disciple. (Acts 1:14 states that Mary, Jesus' mother, and "his brothers" assembled with the Twelve in Jerusalem shortly after the Ascension; they were presumably also present at the community's Spirit-anointing at Pentecost.)

When Paul made his postconversion visit to Jerusalem (probably c. 35 CE), he found that "James the Lord's brother" was already an acknowledged leader of the Jerusalem church (Gal. 1:18–19). At the time of Paul's second Jerusalem visit (c. 49 CE), James was recognized as one of three "reputed pillars of our society" (along with the apostles Cephas [Peter] and John) (Gal. 2:6–10). After Peter and John had left Jerusalem, James assumed undisputed leadership of the mother church (Acts 15:13–21; 21:18–26).

The author of Acts does not record the executions of any of his leading missionary characters, including Peter and Paul (who were probably martyred in Rome under Nero). But the Jewish historian Josephus reports that James, "the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ," was illegally brought to trial by some Sadducees and stoned to death (c. 62 CE) (Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.9.1).

In *The History of the Church*, Eusebius reports that James, who "was called Christ's brother," was the first **bishop** (overseer) of Jerusalem and known to his fellow Jewish Christians as James the Righteous. He also records a version of James's death, but different from that given in Josephus. Quoting Clement,

a late-first-century writer, Eusebius states that James was hurled down from "the parapet [Temple walls?] and beaten to death with a fuller's club" (*History* 2.1, 23; 3.5, 11; 4.5, 22; 7.19).

According to another (unverifiable) tradition preserved in Eusebius, even after James's death, Jesus' relatives continued to play influential roles in the Jerusalem church. Shortly after the Romans destroyed Jerusalem (c. 70 CE), Eusebius says, "apostles and disciples of the Lord who were still alive" gathered together from different parts of the country, along with "kinsmen of the Lord, for most of them were still living." Their purpose was to appoint a successor to James who would preside over Christians in postwar Jerusalem. Eusebius states that Jesus' disciples and family members, forty years after his death, voted "unanimously" for Jesus' cousin, Symeon, to "occupy the throne" of the Jerusalem church. (Because Eusebius does not ordinarily refer to a bishop's "throne," the Jerusalem congregation may have accorded royal or Davidic status to Jesus' heirs.) Eusebius adds that Symeon was a son of Clopas (John 19:25), who was supposedly a brother of Joseph, Jesus' putative father (*History* 3.11).

According to Eusebius's source, an early church historian named Hegesippus, Symeon remained head of the Jerusalem church until persecutions under the emperor Trajan (ruled 98–117 CE), when, at age 120, he was tortured and crucified for being both a Davidic descendant and a Christian. Symeon was then succeeded by another Jewish Christian, Justus; Eusebius does not mention whether he, Jerusalem's third bishop, was also a member of Jesus' family (*History* 3.32, 35).

To his testimony about members of Jesus' family taking leadership roles in the early church, Eusebius adds an anecdote about the grandsons of Jude (Judas)—"the brother, humanly speaking, of the Savior." Again citing Hegesippus as his source, Eusebius states that the emperor Domitian (ruled 81–96 CE) ordered a search made for royal

descendants of David who might push messianic claims to restore the Jewish throne. According to Hegesippus's account, when Jude's grandsons were brought before Domitian, the emperor dismissed them contemptuously when he found that they were poor peasants with work-worn, callused hands. After this close call with Roman authority

(they were more fortunate than Symeon in Trajan's reign), the two apparently took a more active part in the Christian community, becoming church leaders (*History* 3.19–20). The lingering influence of James and Jude in the Christian tradition is evident in the two New Testament books ascribed to them (see Chapter 18).

Jesus owed anything to his apostolic predecessors. After describing his private "revelation" of the risen Jesus, Paul states, "without consulting any human being, without going up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before me, I went off at once to Arabia, and afterwards returned to Damascus" (Gal. 1:17). Three years later, Paul notes, he did make a trip to Jerusalem "to get to know Cephas [Peter]," but he did not confer "with any other of the apostles, except James, the Lord's brother" (Gal. 1:18–19). When Paul immediately adds, "What I write is plain truth; before God I am not lying" (Gal. 1:20), it is clear that he rejects any suggestion that he was ever under the influence or jurisdiction of the Jerusalem leadership.

Given Luke's policy of depicting Paul as an obedient churchman, willingly subject to apostolic decrees, it is not surprising that Acts' portrayal of the Jerusalem conference contrasts markedly with Paul's eyewitness report (Gal. 2:1–10). Whereas Acts shows the Gentile–Torah issue peacefully and unanimously settled, Paul declares that "not for one moment" did he compromise his position that Gentile Christians should live absolutely free of Torah "bondage." According to Galatians, Paul accepted no restrictions, whereas Acts states that he unhesitatingly agreed to James's four Torah prohibitions. In addition, Paul reveals an attitude toward eating meat sacrificed to Greco-Roman gods that differs from that ascribed to him in Acts (1 Cor. 8:8; 10:27).

Some historians believe that the apostolic decree involving dietary matters may have been

Missed at a later Jerusalem conference, one that Paul did not attend. In this view, Luke has combined the results of two separate meetings and reported them as a single event. Later in Acts, the author seems aware that Paul did not know about the Jerusalem church's decision regarding Torah-prohibited meats. During Paul's final Jerusalem visit, James is shown speaking about the dietary restrictions as if they were news to Paul (21:25).

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Paul's Second Missionary Journey: Evangelizing Greece

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E Luke devotes the remainder of Acts to recounting Paul's missionary journeys and confrontations with Jewish and Roman authorities (see Figure 12.3). Emphasizing Christianity's acceptability to the Greco-Roman world, the author structures the book's second half to illustrate three basic themes: (1) The Spirit controls the church's growth, precisely instructing missionaries on where they may or may not travel (16:6–10); (2) when Christian preachers are not interfered with, Gentiles respond favorably to the "new way," which flourishes throughout Asia Minor and Greece; and (3) from its beginnings, Christianity is familiar to Roman officials, who invariably see it as no threat to the imperial government. As Luke tells the story, only ignorant mobs or envious Jewish leaders oppose the faith and incite Roman authorities to suppress it.



FIGURE 12.3 Paul's second missionary journey. As Acts depicts it, this journey brought Christianity to Europe, with new cells of Christians established in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Corinth. Note that Antioch in Syria is Paul's missionary headquarters.

At the same time, the narrator is candid about “the way’s” potential disruptiveness, asking converts to abandon their worship of Greco-Roman gods and to cease their former participation in cults intimately associated with civic life. In his account of Christianity’s expansion from Asia into Greece (16:1–18:2), Luke repeatedly describes the riots and other social upheavals that result from the missionaries’ preaching. After quarreling with Barnabas (15: 36–40; cf. Gal. 2:13) and recruiting new companions, **Silas** and **Timothy**, Paul has a vision in

which Macedonian Greeks appeal to him for help (16: 9–10). Accepting the vision as a divine command, Paul and his new partners cross into Macedonia, a Roman province in northern Greece. (At this point, the author begins to speak in the first-person plural; his use of “we” and “us” suggests either that he was an eyewitness to this part of Paul’s journey or that he has incorporated another party’s travel journal into his narrative.) In **Philippi**, where Paul establishes the first Christian church in Europe, an irate slaveholder accuses the missionaries of illegally



BOX 12.4 The Christian Message's Disruptive Effect on Greco-Roman Society

According to Paul's critics in Thessalonica, he and his fellow missionaries disturb the Roman peace: "They flout the Emperor's laws, and assert that there is a rival king, Jesus" (Acts 17:7). In the critics' view, the Christian message subverts both Roman custom and the legitimate authority of the emperor, promoting a ruler superior to Caesar. Although most scholars traditionally have emphasized the Book of Acts' conciliatory attitudes toward Rome, recent commentators have pointed out that the author presents Christianity as so radically different a way of life that it profoundly disrupts the ordinary norms of Greco-Roman society. Paul's accusers in Philippi, for example, complain that his group is "advocating customs which it is illegal for us Romans to adopt and follow" (16:21).

In Ephesus, "the Christian movement gave rise to a serious disturbance" when Paul's monotheistic preaching threatens the livelihood of artisans who manufacture replicas of the goddess Artemis (Diana) and of her temple. As the silver-smith Demetrius correctly observes, "our high standard of living depends on this industry." If the general population accepts Paul's message, both the Ephesian tourist trade and the workers

who depend on it will collapse (19:23–20:1). In addition, Paul's activities put several Ephesian exorcists out of work, inspiring many citizens to burn publicly their books of magic, a sacrifice worth "fifty thousand pieces of silver" (19:13–20). The narrative makes clear that accepting the Christian view may have negative economic consequences.

In Athens, Paul reproaches the inhabitants for their idolatry, implicitly condemning the entire pantheon of Greco-Roman gods and the civic order that supports them. If the Athenians turn to the invisible God of Israel and to the risen Lord who will soon judge the whole world, they must change not only their individual lives but also their entire social behavior. For the ancient world did not separate religion from the rest of life; the gods' worship was intimately interwoven with social ties and economic associations, with participation in civic and national festivals, rites, and offices. To become a Christian was to withdraw from what most people in the Roman Empire regarded as praiseworthy activities, manifestations of loyalty to the public order (see C. Kavin Rowe in "Recommended Reading").

trying to convert Romans to Judaism. Wrongfully flogged and imprisoned, Paul and Silas assert their legal rights as Roman citizens, who are protected from punishment without a trial. Luke uses this incident to show that (1) only personal malice causes Paul's arrest; (2) God protects his agents, in this case sending an earthquake to open their prison doors; and (3) Philippi's legal authorities have no case against Paul or his associates (see Box 12.4).

After establishing another church at Thessalonica, Paul moves southward to **Athens**, famous for its magnificent artwork and schools of philosophy (see Figures 12.4 and 12.5). A university city noteworthy for its celebration of

free speech and tolerance of diverse ideas, Athens is the only place on Paul's itinerary where he is neither mobbed nor arrested. Instead, he is politely invited to speak at the **Areopagus**, an open-air court where speakers can express their views. In a celebrated speech, Paul identifies the Athenians' "unknown god" as the biblical Creator. Representing Paul as quoting two ancient Greek poets on the unity of humankind, Luke incorporates their insights into the Christian message. Upon Paul's allusion to Jesus' physical resurrection, however, the Athenians lose interest, perhaps because their philosophers commonly taught that the body has no part in a future immortal state. Only a few



FIGURE 12.4 A reconstruction of the Athenian Acropolis. According to Acts 17, Athenian philosophers invited Paul to explain his new religion at the Areopagus (Hill of Ares), a public forum located on a spur of the Acropolis. Named for Athene, goddess of wisdom, Athens was celebrated for encouraging freedom of thought and speech.

among Paul's audience are converted or baptized (17:16–34).

Paul enjoys much greater success in **Corinth**, a prosperous Greek seaport notorious for its materialism and houses of prostitution.³ Luke enables his readers to fix the approximate time of Paul's arrival—the early 50s CE—by his reference to two secular events that coincided with the apostle's visit. Luke notes that two Jewish Christians, **Aquila** and **Priscilla**, were in Corinth following the emperor Claudius's decree expelling all Jews from the capital. Claudius issued this edict about 49 CE. The author also mentions that **Gallio** was then **proconsul** (governor) of Achaia, the Greek province in which Corinth is located. Archaeologists excavating the Greek sanctuary of Delphi found

an inscription there that enables them to place Gallio's term between about 51 and 53 CE. This find is extremely important because it gives us one of the few relatively precise dates in Paul's career.

As in the episode at Philippi, Luke presents Paul's Corinthian visit as another illustration of his major themes—the new religion is both Spirit-directed and lawful, albeit disruptive of many social norms. In a night vision, the Lord directs Paul to remain in Corinth despite persecution. When Paul is arrested and brought before Gallio, the governor dismisses Jewish charges against the missionary as irrelevant to Roman law. Legally exonerated, Paul and his companions continue their work unhindered (18:1–17).



FIGURE 12.5 The Stoa of Attalus in Athens. A roofed colonnade donated to the city of Athens by King Attalus II of Pergamum in the second century BCE, the Stoa (rebuilt in the twentieth century) originally offered shelter for meetings and discussions, such as the debates with Athenian philosophers that Paul is said to have held when he first visited Athens (Acts 17). The Acropolis rises in the background.



Paul's Third Missionary Journey: Revisiting Asia Minor and Greece

In depicting Paul's third missionary journey (18:21–20:38), in which the apostle revisits churches he had founded in Asia Minor and Greece (see Figure 12.6), Luke concentrates on Paul's activities in Ephesus (see Figure 12.7). A thriving port city on the west coast of Asia Minor (modern Turkey), Ephesus had an ethnically mixed population and a great variety of religious cults. Luke demonstrates the social and religious complexity of this cosmopolitan center by having his hero encounter a wide diversity of religionists there, both Jewish and Gentile.

The author hints that even Christianity in Ephesus differs from that found elsewhere, being influenced by Jewish followers of John the Baptist. Luke records two separate incidents in which members of a Baptist-Christian group are apparently brought into line with Pauline doctrine. The first involves the eloquent **Apollos**, an educated Jew from Alexandria, who delivers persuasive sermons about Jesus—but knows “only John's baptism.” Hearing him in the Ephesus synagogue, Priscilla and Aquila “take him in hand,” presumably bringing his ideas into harmony with Paul's teaching. After Apollos departs for Corinth (see 1 Cor. 1), Paul finds another group of Ephesian Christians observing “John's baptism.” On their being rebaptized in Jesus' name, the converts receive the Holy



FIGURE 12.6 Paul's third missionary journey. According to Acts, this journey ended with his arrest in Jerusalem and two-year imprisonment in Caesarea. The bottom line shows the route of Paul's sea voyage to Rome, where he was taken to be tried in the imperial courts.



FIGURE 12.7 The amphitheater at Ephesus. A wealthy Greco-Roman seaport in Asia Minor (western Turkey), Ephesus was the site of one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, the lavish marble Temple of Artemis (the Roman Diana). According to Acts 19, Ephesian silversmiths staged a riot in the amphitheater when Paul's Christian message threatened to subvert the worship of Artemis—and the prosperity of the silversmiths, who profited from selling miniature silver replicas of the goddess's statue and shrine to tourists.

Spirit, confirming the superiority of Jesus to his forerunner.

Luke further illustrates Christianity's superiority by contrasting Paul's astonishing ability to heal with the inability of some Jewish competitors. The apostle's spiritual power is so great that articles of clothing that had touched his skin are used to heal the sick and cast out "evil spirits." In contrast, seven Jewish exorcists trying to expel demons by invoking Jesus' authority fail ignominiously. Defying the exorcists, the possessed man strips all seven and throws them naked from his house (19:11–17).

Ephesus's greatest pride was its enormous temple dedicated to **Artemis** (the Roman Diana), one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World (see Figure 12.8). Although bearing a Greek name, the Ephesian Artemis was a mother goddess closely related to other Near Eastern fertility

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deities such as Cybele and Ashtoreth. Paul's success in converting Ephesians brings him into conflict with the goddess's worshipers. Jewish-Christian monotheism, proclaiming the existence of only one God, threatens to hurt the business of Ephesian silversmiths who make their living selling replicas of Artemis and her shrine. (See Box 12.4).

Duplicating the trial scene at Corinth, Luke states that Ephesian officials find the missionary innocent of disturbing the city's peace. Once again, attempts to harm the disciples backfire against the persecutors (19:23–41).

Luke frames Paul's adventures in Ephesus with intimations of the apostle's final journey—to Rome. As Luke had pictured Jesus turning his face resolutely toward Jerusalem and the death that awaited him there (Luke 9:51), so the author shows Paul determined to complete



FIGURE 12.8 The cult statue of Artemis (Diana) at Ephesus. Although the Greeks honored Artemis as the virgin patron of wildlife and the hunt, Ephesian sculptors depicted her as a Near Eastern fertility goddess, decorating her torso with images of breasts, eggs, or perhaps the testicles of bulls that were sacrificed on her altar. The Roman Diana was also identified with the feminine symbol of the moon.

his last tour and head for the imperial capital (19:21–22). After revisiting Greece (20:1–16), Paul calls for the Ephesian church leaders to meet him in Miletus, an ancient Greek city on the west coast of Asia Minor. There, Paul delivers a farewell speech, predicting his imminent imprisonment and implying a coming martyrdom. In this speech, Luke emphasizes holding to the apostolic teaching that Paul represents and resisting heresy (20:17–38).



Paul's Arrest in Jerusalem and Imprisonment in Caesarea

In this section, Luke foreshadows Paul's death, although he never explicitly refers to it (21:1–26:32). On his way to Jerusalem, presumably to deliver the money collected from the Pauline churches for the “poor” of Jerusalem's Christian commune, Paul encounters a prophet who foretells the apostle's fatal “binding” (arrest) there. Highlighting the resemblance between Jesus and his later followers, Luke shows Paul expressing his willingness to die in Jerusalem. (Compare Paul's misgivings about the fatal return to Jerusalem in Romans 15:22–33.)

Ironically, the apostle to the Gentiles seals his fate by cooperating with the Palestinian-Jewish Christians of Jerusalem. When Paul bows to James's influence and agrees to undergo purification rites in the Temple to prove his faithfulness to Torah regulations, his presence in the sanctuary incites a riot. (Jews allegedly familiar with his preaching accuse Paul of bringing uncircumcised Gentiles into the Temple.) The Roman soldiers who intervene in the fray save Paul's life but also place him in protective custody (21:18–36). From this time until the end of his story, Luke's hero is a prisoner of Roman authorities.

Christianity and the State

Luke's intense focus on Paul's legal troubles, particularly his appearances before Roman

magistrates, illustrates the author's overarching concern for Christianity's legal position in the Roman Empire. Devoting the last section of his narrative (21:27–28:31) to explaining the process by which Paul was brought to Rome for trial in the emperor's tribunal, Luke consistently shows Roman officials as favoring Paul and his innovative religion. A Roman army officer (later identified as Lysias) permits Paul to explain his mission to a Jerusalem crowd (21:37–22:21), in a speech where he gives a second version of his mystical experience on the road to Damascus. When Lysias discovers that Paul is a Roman citizen, a legal status that entitles him to protection from punishment without a trial, the commander personally escorts his prisoner to the Sanhedrin to answer charges Jewish leaders have brought against him.

In describing the Sanhedrin appearance, Luke again insists that Paul is a devout adherent of the Mosaic Law who does not hesitate to identify his cause with the Pharisee party. As in Peter's two hearings before the same council (4:1–22; 5:17–42), Paul's religious judges divide along party lines, with the Sadducees condemning him and the Pharisees lending their support (22:30–23:10).

Christians' Political Innocence

Paul's first formal hearing before a high Roman official, the governor **Antonius Felix**, takes place in Caesarea Maritima, a busy port city on the Mediterranean coast that served as headquarters for Roman governors of Judea. Paul's prosecutors are emissaries from the High Priest who accuse him of profaning the Jerusalem sanctuary and being a "ringleader of the sect of the **Nazarenes**," an early name for Jesus of Nazareth's followers (24:1–9). In his defense, Paul insists that he observes "the written Law" (an assertion contradicted in his letters), that he has done nothing to desecrate the Temple, and that the "real issue" is whether God actually raised Jesus from the dead, thereby validating him as the Jewish Messiah (24:10–21). For two years, Paul then languishes in captivity while

the corrupt Felix vainly awaits an expected bribe (24:26–27). (It appears that none of the Christian leaders in either Jerusalem or Antioch attempt to secure Paul's release.)

After **Porcius Festus** succeeds Felix as Roman governor, Paul is granted a second hearing, at which the new magistrate also absolves him of any illegal activity (25:25; 26:30–32). In one of Hellenistic literature's most dramatic courtroom scenes, Luke shows Paul facing not only Festus, the Roman emperor's personal representative, but also rulers of Herod's line. King Julius Agrippa II, son of Herod Agrippa I, who had beheaded the apostle James (12:1–2), attends the session with his sister (and mistress) Bernice. Because Festus is married to Drusilla, another of King Agrippa's sisters, the apostle confronts a ruling family in which the might of Rome and the prestige of Jewish royalty are combined. Luke thus shows Paul fulfilling Jesus' earlier prophecy that Paul would testify "before kings" and the "people of Israel" (9:15).

Paul's long speech before Festus (26:1–29) is a vivid summary of his career as depicted in Acts, including a third account describing his "heavenly" vision of the risen Jesus. This discourse corresponds more closely to Paul's own account of his conversion (Gal. 1:1, 15–17) than do Acts' two earlier versions. But the author still represents Paul as operating under Mosaic Law—asserting "nothing beyond what was foretold by the prophets and by Moses." In the author's view, Christianity is in full agreement and continuity with true Judaism: Jews have no cause to condemn it as a perversion of their Mosaic heritage.

Luke's main emphasis, however, is on his hero's complete innocence. Echoing Pilate's opinion of Jesus, Festus admits that Paul is guilty of "nothing that deserves death or imprisonment." Agrippa drives home the point: Paul could have been released a free man if "he had not appealed to the Emperor" (26:30–32). In Luke's presentation of the early church to Greco-Roman readers, the author makes clear that missionaries like Paul are prosecuted in Roman courts only because of

officials' misunderstanding or the malice of their false accusers.

Simultaneously, however, Luke also makes clear that the Christian proclamation is a potentially destabilizing force in Greco-Roman society. The author must maintain a precarious balance between his argument that Christianity is no political threat to the empire and his frank admission of Jesus' spiritual superiority to the emperor (17:7). Luke's many examples of socioreligious and legal challenges to the faith lead to an unavoidable conclusion: the profound changes that "the way" brings cause "trouble all over the world" (17:6), a headache to even the best-intentioned Roman officials.



Paul's Journey to Rome and His Preaching to Roman Jews

Luke begins his final section—Paul's sea journey to Rome—with an exciting account of a shipwreck (27:1–28:31). Told in the first person, this description of a Roman cargo ship disintegrating amid high winds and pounding waves reads like an eyewitness experience. (We do not know whether the author uses the diary of a participant in this passage or simply employs the first-person "we" as a literary device to heighten the immediacy of his narrative.) As always in Acts, the incident is included for its theological meaning. Although Paul is a prisoner perhaps destined for conviction and death, he comforts his Roman captors during the storm, assuring them that Jesus destines him (and them) to arrive safely in Rome. As Paul had prophesied, all aboard—crew, military officers, and prisoner—survive the ordeal unscathed, swimming ashore at the island of Malta (27:6–44).

Luke concludes his selective account of the early church with Paul's arrival in Rome, where the apostle, although under house arrest, enjoys considerable freedom, receiving visitors

and preaching openly. The author does not reveal Paul's ultimate fate. One tradition states that, after remaining in the capital for two years, Paul was released and carried out his planned missionary trip to Spain (Rom. 15:24). Many historians, however, believe that Paul's first Roman imprisonment led to his execution, perhaps about 62 CE, following the emperor Nero's order to impose the death penalty on anyone who spoke or behaved in a way that appeared to undermine his supreme authority. Other scholars date Paul's death at about 64 or 65 CE, when Nero first persecuted Christians as a group. According to a brief reference in 1 Clement (c. 96 CE), both Peter and Paul were martyred during Nero's persecution.

Some critics suggest that Luke, deeply concerned with Christianity's legal status in the Roman Empire, deliberately omits any mention that Paul and Peter, like Jesus, were tried and executed for treason against Rome. This unfortunate outcome for the religion's two leading proponents runs counter to the author's insistence that Christianity is a lawful faith innocent of any sedition against the state, despite its problematic social consequences.

Many scholars contend that Acts ends abruptly, not because Luke wants to avoid political facts that do not fit his theme, but because he regards Paul's evangelizing in Rome as the fulfillment of his purpose in writing. Luke's conclusion well illustrates his principal historical-theological interest: Paul resolves to focus his message on receptive Gentiles, shifting his primary attention from Jews to a Greco-Roman audience. Luke sees the church's future in the teeming millions of Gentiles throughout Rome's vast empire, a vision confirmed by later history.

As a believer who infers religious meaning from historical events, Luke completes his picture of early Christianity with a sketch of Paul—representing the church's mission to all nations—vigorously proclaiming his vision of God ruling through Jesus. To Luke, Paul's activity symbolizes the divinely commanded business of the church that must continue into the

distant future. Rather than end his account with a reaffirmation of Jesus' eschatological return (the Parousia), Luke looks to a future in which the "kingdom" can be preached "openly and without hindrance," attaining a recognized legal position in the world. In sharp contrast to the historical Paul's belief in an imminent Parousia (so different from Acts' portrayal of him), Luke sees the world, not as a wicked place to be destroyed, but as the arena in which God effects humanity's salvation.

Acts' ending thus echoes Jesus' departing words to the disciples recorded at the book's beginning. Believers are not "to know about dates or times" (eschatological speculations about the world's End) because such knowledge belongs exclusively to "the Father" and has been "set within his own control." Instead, Christians are to carry the "good news" of Jesus "to the ends of the earth" (1:7–8). With Paul's arrival in Rome, the work is well begun. Its completion Luke entrusts to his readers.



Summary

A continuation of Luke's Gospel, Acts is a theologically oriented account of the early Christian church. Focusing principally on two representative leaders of the faith, Peter and Paul, it traces the church's growth from exclusively Jewish origins in Jerusalem to its dissemination throughout the northeastern Roman Empire. The church's rapid expansion from a Jewish nucleus to an international community composed of many different ethnic groups brings major problems of adjustment, particularly the issue of requiring Gentiles to observe the Jewish Torah.

In many respects, the Book of Acts is an apology (an explanation or defense) for Christianity. Luke's interpretation of Christian origins defends the "new way" as the legitimate outgrowth of Judaism and a lawful faith intended for citizens of the Roman Empire. Luke emphasizes that there is no necessary or inherent conflict between Christianity and the Jewish religion that gave it birth or the Roman state in which it finds

its natural environment. As in his Gospel, he minimizes early expectations of an imminent Parousia and emphasizes the church's objective to expand indefinitely into the distant future. Eager to find accommodation with the imperial government, the author offers no criticism of Roman officials but invariably depicts them as fair-minded and competent. He attributes Roman suspicion of the faith to the ill will of envious opponents. While placing Roman magistrates in a favorable light, however, Luke also describes socially disruptive responses to the Christian message, which include riots in Greek cities such as Ephesus, Philippi, and Thessalonica, where preaching of the Christian message is correctly interpreted as a threat not only to Judaism but also to Greco-Roman customs and religious practices. As if walking a tightrope between an implicit appeal for Roman officialdom to tolerate the Jesus movement and an admission that the Christian proclamation is inherently destabilizing to Greco-Roman society, the author nonetheless insists that "the new way" can coexist with the imperial government. Historically, Luke's argument of coexistence helped pave the way for Rome's eventual adoption of Christianity as the empire's official religion, a triumph foreshadowed by Paul's preaching in the capital "without [legal] hindrance."

Questions for Review

1. A sequel to Luke's Gospel, the Book of Acts continues the story of Christian origins. Which of the same themes that appear in the Gospel are also found in Acts? Compare the account of Jesus' trial before Pilate with that of Paul before Pilate's successors, Felix and Festus.
2. How does Luke organize his account of Christianity's birth and growth? Identify the leaders of the Jerusalem church and the missionaries who first helped carry "the new way" into the larger world beyond the Jewish capital.
3. In recording the events of Pentecost, how does Luke emphasize his theme that Christianity is a universal religion—led by the Holy Spirit and destined for peoples of all nations? In the author's view, what ancient Hebrew prophecy is fulfilled by the Spirit's descent upon the first disciples?

4. In what ways does the Jerusalem commune put into operation the social and economic principles enunciated in Luke's Gospel? How does the early church "equalize" wealth and poverty?
5. Summarize the events that led to the expansion of "the way" from Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria. Describe the roles of Stephen and Philip in this process.
6. The conversions of an Ethiopian eunuch and a Roman centurion are milestones in Christianity's transformation from a Jewish sect into an international religion in which Gentiles dominate. Explain how this process of ethnic change led to problems in the early church. According to Acts 15, how is the problem resolved at the first church conference in Jerusalem?
7. Describe the roles played by Barnabas and his partner, Paul (formerly Saul) of Tarsus. Summarize the results of Paul's three missionary journeys into Gentile territories. What sequence of events leads to Paul's arrest and imprisonment in Caesarea and Rome?

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. By adding a history of nascent Christianity to his Gospel narrative, how does Luke deemphasize apocalyptic hopes of Jesus' early return? What future does Paul's arrival in Rome forecast for church-state relations? In what ways does Luke-Acts show early Christians cultivating a positive relationship with Roman officials? Why does Luke not narrate the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul?
2. In contrast to the author of Revelation, Luke includes no denunciations of the Roman Empire or predictions of its cataclysmic fall. Given Luke's universalism and concern for social justice, how do you think he envisions Christianity's goals and obligations in its ongoing role in secular society? Does Luke see God's kingdom manifested in the application of Christian principles to social and political institutions? Explain why or why not.

Terms and Concepts to Remember

Antioch	Aquila
Antonius Felix	Areopagus
Apollos	Artemis

Ascension	Matthias
Athens	Mercury
Barnabas	Nazarenes
bishop	Paul
Corinth	Pentecost
Cornelius	Philip
Damascus	Philippi
Gallio	Porcius Festus
Gamaliel	proconsul
<i>glossolalia</i>	Silas
Hellenists	Simon Magus
Holy Spirit	Stephen
Lystra	Timothy
martyr	

Recommended Reading*

- Arlandson, James M. *Women, Class, and Society in Early Christianity: Models from Luke-Acts*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1997. Applies social theory to the role of women in ancient society and the church.
- Dillon, Richard J. "Acts of the Apostles." In R. E. Brown et al., eds., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, pp. 722–767. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1990. A thorough introductory study.
- Dunn, James D. G. *The Acts of the Apostles*. Narrative Commentary Series. Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1997. Examines the nature of history writing in the first century CE and Acts' narrative structure.
- Gaventa, Beverly R. "Acts of the Apostles." In *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 1, pp. 33–47. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006. A helpful survey of current critical approaches to interpreting Acts, including theological concerns.
- Levine, Amy-Jill, and Blickenstaff, Marianne, eds. *A Feminist Companion to the Acts of the Apostles*. Feminist Companion to the New Testament and Early Christian Writings. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005. Essays exploring women's roles in Acts and the early church.
- Matthews, Christopher R. "Acts of the Apostles," in M.D. Coogan, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Books of the Bible*, Vol. 1, pp. 11–26. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Describes the book's narrative structure and the author's theological purpose.

*See also the "Recommended Reading" for Luke's Gospel (Chapter 9).

- Powell, M. A. *What Are They Saying About Acts?* New York: Paulist Press, 1991. A helpful review of influential scholarship on Acts.
- Rowe, C. Kavin. *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Greco-Roman Age*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. Offers a close analysis of Acts' presentation of Christianity's disruptive effect on Greco-Roman society.
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- Wall, Robert W. "The Acts of the Apostles." In *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 10, pp. 3–368. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002. Offers extensive historical and literary analysis.
- Wilken, R. L. *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1984. A careful analysis of the social, religious, and political conflicts between early Christians and their Roman critics.

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Paul and the Pauline Tradition



PHOTO ESSAY Paul and His World



In this ancient Christian mosaic portrait of Paul (*left*), the apostle stares directly at the viewer, the intensity of his gaze suggesting a passionate commitment to his mission. Although no one knows what any New Testament figure looked like, later Christian artists commonly depicted Paul as physically unimpressive.

This street scene in Herculaneum (*below*), an excavated Roman town on the Bay of Naples buried by an eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE, features modest structures with small apartments above shops on the ground floor. Such buildings probably resemble the kind in which Paul set up the tent-making or leather goods business by which he supported himself while on his missionary tours.





Like most Roman dwellings, Herculaneum's stone houses (*above*) have few windows facing the street but enclose an inner courtyard (atrium), open to the sky, around which Roman family life centered.

Although some scholars disagree, many think that this wooden cabinet (*right*), with the imprint of a cross on a white stucco panel above, was a Christian shrine or place of prayer, indicating a Christian presence in Herculaneum well before 79 CE. En route to Rome in the early 60s CE, Paul came ashore at nearby Puteoli, where there was already a group of believers to greet him (Acts 28:13–15). ■



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CHAPTER 13

Paul

Apostle to the Nations

I am a free man . . . but I have made myself every man's servant. . . . To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win Jews. . . . To win Gentiles . . . I made myself like one of them. Indeed, I have become everything in turn to men of every sort, so that in one way or another I may save some.

Paul to the church at Corinth, 1 Corinthians 9:19–22

Key Topics/Themes Paul is second only to Jesus in his contribution to the development of Christianity. Although Paul apparently never knew the living Jesus and once persecuted his disciples, he experienced an *apokalypsis* (revelation) of the risen Christ that transformed his life. Becoming a missionary to the Gentiles, Paul created and disseminated a view

of Jesus' cosmic significance that profoundly shaped the future course of Christian thought. A former Pharisee rigorously educated in Torah interpretation, Paul reinterprets selected parts of the Hebrew Bible to defend his thesis that faith in Jesus' saving power replaced Torah obedience as the means of reconciling human beings to God.

Paul, former Pharisee and persecutor of the church who later spearheaded Christianity's mission to the Gentiles, dominates the second half of Acts. To an incalculable degree, he also dominates the later history of Christian thought. His letters, which form the third unit of the New Testament, represent the new religion's first—and in important ways most lasting—attempt to interpret the meaning of Jesus' "scandalous" death and its significance to human salvation. Paul's startling view is that Jesus' crucifixion introduced a radically different relationship between God and all humanity—Gentiles as well as Jews. Paul's declaration that faith in Christ made all believers heirs to God's covenant promises transformed the Jesus movement from

a purely Jewish phenomenon into, ultimately, a new world religion. In his letters to the Romans and Galatians, Paul outlined a theology of redemption through faith that has become central to Christianity's self-understanding. Later theologians as diverse as the Roman church father Augustine (354–430) and Martin Luther (1483–1546), the German monk who sparked the Protestant Reformation, derived many of their doctrines from Paul's letters.

Many historians have remarked that there is perhaps more of Paul than Jesus in official Christianity. Even Mark, the earliest story of Jesus' life, bears the imprint of Pauline ideas in its bias toward Gentile believers, account of the Last Supper, and theology of the cross. Some

commentators accuse Paul, who did not know the historical Jesus, of largely ignoring Christ's original proclamation—God's active role in individual human lives—in favor of promulgating a mystery cult *about* Jesus. Certainly, Paul almost never cites Jesus' kingdom teaching and instead emphasizes his own personal experience of the risen Christ, which he interprets in cosmic and mystical terms.

In contrast to Jesus, who apparently wrote nothing, Paul speaks directly to us through his letters, permitting us to compare what he says about himself with what later writers, such as Luke, say about him. Paul's position in the canon is unique: He is the only historical personage who is both a major character in a New Testament book and the author of New Testament books himself. Church tradition ascribes no fewer than thirteen canonical letters to Paul, in total length nearly one-third of the New Testament. Most scholars regard only seven as genuinely Pauline, but the presence of other works attributed to him shows in what high esteem he was held. His ideas and personality so captured the imagination of later Christian writers that they paid tribute to the great apostle by writing in his name and perpetuating his teachings.



Seeking the Historical Paul

As a Christian thinker, Paul never forgets his Jewishness. Although he fights to free Christianity from the “bondage” of Torah observance, Paul consistently stresses the continuity between Judaism and the new religion. For him, as for Matthew, Christianity is revealed through Jesus' ministry but shaped and largely defined by the Hebrew Bible. Throughout his letters, Paul quotes selected parts of the Hebrew Scriptures (primarily from the Greek Septuagint edition) to support the validity of his particular gospel. Despite Paul's ambivalent attitude toward the Mosaic Torah, much of the Hebrew biblical tradition retains its teaching authority for him.

Although our most reliable source for Paul's life is his letters, they do not offer enough information to compile a viable biography. The letters are silent on such matters as his birthplace, parentage, education, and other essentials of his preconversion history, as well as on the later sequence of his travels as a Christian missionary. Because it relates directly to his post-conversion battles with his fellow Jews, however, Paul does provide some data about his Jewish heritage. Describing himself as a circumcised “Hebrew born and bred” from the Israelite tribe of Benjamin (Phil. 3:5–6), Paul states that as a “practicing Jew” he outstripped his Jewish contemporaries in strict observance of “the traditions of [his] ancestors” (Gal. 1:13–14). A member of the Pharisee party, he obeyed the Torah completely. “In legal rectitude”—keeping the Torah commandments—Paul judges himself “faultless” (Phil. 3:6).



The Historical Reliability of Acts

Acts supplies much information about Paul not contained in his letters, but most scholars urge great caution about accepting Acts at face value. A great deal of the material in the letters is difficult to reconcile with Acts' narrative sequence. Where discrepancies occur, scholars prefer Paul's first-hand version of events. The author of Acts investigated various sources to compile his account of Christianity's beginnings (Luke 1:1–4), but he appears to have worked with inadequate documentation in recording Paul's career. As noted in Chapters 9 and 12, the author seems unaware of Paul's voluminous correspondence, his insistent claims to apostleship, and his distinctive teaching. Acts says virtually nothing about Paul's essential gospel—that people are saved, not by obedience to Torah commands, but by faith in Christ. More to the point, the writer of Acts is concerned primarily with outlining a precise scheme of history into which he fits his characters as it seems appropriate.



BOX 13.1 Some Differences Between Acts and Paul's Letters

ACTS

Is named Saul and raised in Tarsus

Studies under Rabbi Gamaliel

Belongs to the Pharisee party

Persecutes Christians

Experiences a vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus

Following his call, goes immediately to Damascus, where he preaches in synagogues

Is initially shunned by the Jerusalem disciples but is later introduced to the apostles (9:26–30)

Receives the Holy Spirit after **Ananias** baptizes and lays hands upon him

Attends an apostolic conference on his third Jerusalem visit

Agrees to impose Torah dietary restrictions on Gentile converts

Agrees to forbid eating meat sacrificed to idols

PAUL'S LETTERS

Is not mentioned (but was born to the tribe of Benjamin, whose first king was Saul [Phil. 3:5])

Is not mentioned

Is confirmed in Philippians 3:6

Is mentioned several times

Receives a “revelation” of Jesus (Gal. 1:12, 16)

Goes to “Arabia” for an unspecified period (Gal. 1:17)

Does not go to Jerusalem until three years after his return from “Arabia,” and meets only Peter and James (Gal. 1:17–20)

Asserts that he owes his apostolic gospel and commission to no one; never refers to his baptism (Gal. 1:11–12, 16–17)

Attends the conference on his second Jerusalem visit (Gal. 2:1–10)

Refuses to accept any legal restrictions (Gal. 2:5)

Regards eating such meat as nondefiling (1 Cor. 8:10:27; Rom. 14:13–15:6)

In some cases, Acts provides biographical details that Paul never mentions, such as his birth in Tarsus, capital city of Cilicia (in modern southeastern Turkey), and the claim that Paul's family possessed Roman citizenship. These and similar traditions—such as Paul's originally being named Saul, his studying at the feet of Rabbi Gamaliel (the leading Pharisee scholar of his day), and his supporting himself by tent making—are never referred to in the Pauline letters, so we have no way of verifying their historical accuracy.

Other statements in Acts seem to contradict Paul's direct testimony (see Box 13.1), particularly the chronological order of events following his decisive confrontation with the risen Jesus. With Acts' reliability in question and Paul's biographical disclosures so few, scholars are unable to reconstruct anything resembling a satisfactory

life of Christianity's Apostle to the Gentiles. We do not know when he was born, how his family gained Roman citizenship (if Acts is correct on this point), whether he was once married, where or when he wrote many of his letters, and under what precise circumstances he died. These and other missing facts are partly compensated for, however, in the brilliant revelation of thought and personality that his letters impart.



Paul's Radical Change

In both Acts and the letters, Paul's life can be divided into two contrasting parts. During his early career, Paul was a devout Pharisee who “savagely” persecuted the first Christians. During his later

years, he was a Christian missionary who successfully implanted the new religion in non-Jewish territories and established the first churches of Europe. The event that changed Paul from a persecutor of Christians into a tireless promoter of the faith was, in his words, a “revelation [*apokalypsis*] of Jesus Christ” (Gal. 1:12). Acts depicts the “revelation” as a blinding vision of the risen Messiah on the road to Damascus, emphasizing its importance by narrating it fully three times (Acts 9:1–9; 22:3–11; 26:12–19). Paul’s briefer allusions to the experience speak simply of being called by God’s “grace” (Gal. 1:15) to an “abnormal birth” and of witnessing a post resurrection appearance of Jesus (1 Cor. 9:1; 15:8–9).

Many scholars prefer to speak of Paul’s encounter with Christ as a “call,” rather than a religious “conversion.” Some recent commentators, however, suggest that Paul’s sudden change from a zealous opponent to a devoted champion of the Jesus movement is best understood as a change in his relationship with his divine patron, the God of Israel. Carefully analyzing Paul’s accounts of his experience, Zeba Crook argues persuasively that they reflect the pervasive patron–client structure of Roman society and that Paul saw himself as the loyal client of his divine benefactor. The model on which most Roman social and political relationships were based, the Roman patronage system created a social network that was virtually all-encompassing. In this arrangement, a wealthy or politically powerful patron conferred “benefactions” or benefits on his social dependent, the client. This process commonly involved a patron’s representative, an intermediary who acted as broker to the client (cf. Luke 22:25 and the discussion of Roman patronage in Chapter 5). In the religious sphere, the same arrangement prevailed, with a particular god bestowing blessings, both material and spiritual, on his client, the god’s worshiper. For Paul, the “revelation [*apokalypsis*]” he received from Jesus was an unexpected recognition that henceforth all divine benefactions came through Christ, God’s son and intermediary.

Subscribing to universally recognized Roman custom, Paul displayed gratitude to his divine patron through loyal service, thereby increasing his

patron’s honor and public reputation. Obligated to his all-powerful benefactor, Paul redirected his abundant energies to proclaiming God’s gracious gifts through Christ. As he explained to the Corinthians, Paul feels compelled to preach the gospel because he is “discharging a trust,” his public obligation to the God who commissioned him (1 Cor. 9:16–18). Like other converts in the ancient world, Paul regards his preconversion state as deeply inferior to his present status; he dismisses his previous religious “assets” as “so much garbage” because in the glorified Jesus he has gained benefits of incomparable value (Phil. 3:7–9; see Crook in “Recommended Reading”).

If Paul saw his calling in terms of the Roman patron–client relationship, he also drew on other contemporary Roman practices to express his central message about Jesus. In choosing the word *evangelion* (good news) to summarize the content of his preaching, Paul adopted a term that the imperial government was already using to praise the emperor’s policies and accomplishments, such as his establishment of empirewide peace. By appropriating “gospel” or “good news” for the proclamation of Jesus’ lordship, Paul and the Gospel authors who came after him presented the Greco-Roman world with a new option for supreme ruler. (*Evangelion* also appears in the Greek edition of Isaiah 61:1, where the prophet states he has been sent to “bring good news to the oppressed,” a passage that would affirm Paul’s use of the term.)

In an even more targeted reference to imperial customs, Paul uses the word *parousia* (presence, coming, or arrival) to denote Jesus’ anticipated return to earth, when he would visibly subject all nations and peoples to his rule. When the emperor made a *parousia* or public appearance at some city, it was a major social and political event that was expected to involve virtually the entire population of that city. Hailing the emperor as *soter* (deliverer or savior), the whole populace typically acclaimed his god-like persona. For Paul, these imperial displays were mere shadows of future realities, when *the Parousia* occurred (see the discussion of 1 Thessalonians in Chapter 14).



FIGURE 13.1 The earliest known portrait of Paul. Recently discovered in the Catacomb of Saint Thecla in the Vatican, this image of Paul probably dates from the early fourth century CE. Following the era’s artistic conventions in depicting the Apostle to the Gentiles, the painter gives him a distinctively thin face, small eyes, furrowed brow, and pointed beard. Paul’s legendary mentorship of Saint Thecla is discussed in Chapter 20.

Eager to honor his divine patron and spread the word of Jesus’ imminent reappearance (see below), Paul did not spare himself either discomfort or danger. His physical stamina—even today duplicating his travel itinerary would exhaust most people—is matched by the strength of his loyalty. Paul’s letters reveal their author’s rhetorical intensity, ranging from paternal tenderness to biting sarcasm. In one letter, he insults his readers’ intelligence and suggests that some of their advisers castrate themselves (Gal. 3:1; 5:12). In other letters, he reacts to criticism with threats, wild boasting, and wounding anger (2 Cor. 10–13). In still others, he expresses profound affection and gentle tact (1 Cor. 13; Phil. 1:3–9; 2:1–4; 4:2–3) (see Figure 13.1).

Paul’s conviction that Jesus had privately revealed to him the one true gospel (Gal. 1–2) isolated the apostle from many fellow believers. Acts and the letters agree that Paul quarreled with many of his intimate companions (Acts 15:37–39; Gal. 2:11–14), as well as with entire groups (Gal.; 2 Cor. 10–13). This sense of a unique vision, one not shared by most other Christians, may have shaped Paul’s admitted preference for preaching in territories where no Christian had preceded him. The more distant his missionary field from competing missionaries, the better it suited him. Paul’s desire to impress his individual gospel on new converts may have influenced his ambition to work in areas as far removed from established churches as possible (Rom. 15:20–23).

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Dating Paul’s Career

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul briefly summarizes his career up to the time of writing, giving us a few clues on which to base a rough chronology of his life. After the decisive “revelation” of Jesus, “without going up to Jerusalem” to consult the Twelve, Paul went immediately to “Arabia” (probably an area east of the Jordan River), staying there for an unspecified time before returning to Damascus. Only after “three years” had passed did he travel to Jerusalem “to get to know Cephas” (Peter’s Aramaic name). Staying precisely two weeks with Peter (Paul evidently counted the days), he visited no other “Apostle” except “James the Lord’s brother.” Paul insists on this point because he wants to emphasize his complete independence of the Jerusalem leadership: “What I write is plain truth; before God I am not lying” (Gal. 1:16–20).

After making Peter’s acquaintance, Paul went north to Syria, allowing another fourteen years to elapse before he again visited Jerusalem. The occasion for this second visit was almost certainly the church conference described in Acts 15, a meeting of delegates from Antioch with the Jerusalem congregation to discuss whether Gentile Christians must become circumcised or



FIGURE 13.2 *The Apostle Paul*. This somber portrait by Rembrandt (1606–1669) shows Paul in a deeply reflective mood and evokes the apostle’s consciousness of the enormous burden he bears—the task of serving his divine patron by communicating his unique vision of Christ to the Gentiles. In his letters, Paul expresses a wide variety of moods—joy, anger, bitter sarcasm—but Rembrandt captures here the sense of melancholy and isolation that typically characterizes this great missionary.

follow other provisions of the Mosaic Law. Paul remembers the gathering as less formal than Acts depicts it, emphasizing his private conversations with the three “pillars” of the Jerusalem leadership—Peter, John, and Jesus’ kinsman James (see Box 12.3). Observing that **Titus**, a Greek youth accompanying him, was not required to become

circumcised, Paul declares that the three Jerusalem “pillars” recognized the legitimacy of his peculiar “gospel” proclaiming freedom from the Torah’s “bondage.” The Jerusalem leaders shake hands on this agreement and endorse Paul as the recognized missionary to the Gentiles, as Peter is to the Jews (Gal. 2:1–10) (see Figure 13.2).

Paul's account indicates that approximately seventeen years (or about fifteen when calculated by the Hebrew method) passed between the time of his initial vision and the conference held in Jerusalem. If the Jerusalem conference took place about 49 CE, as many historians believe, then Paul must have become a Christian about 32 or (possibly) 34 CE, shortly after Jesus' crucifixion.

Two allusions to historical figures help us fix other dates in Paul's life. The first is a reference to King Aretas, whose commissioner forced Paul to escape from Damascus by being lowered down the city wall in a basket (2 Cor. 11:32–33). Aretas IV ruled the powerful Arab kingdom of Nabatea (located south and east of Palestine) between about 9 and 39 CE. Fixing the time of Aretas's reign confirms the assumption that Paul was already an active Christian missionary during the same decade that witnessed Jesus' death.

According to the second historical reference (Acts 18:11), Gallio was the Roman governor of Greece during the period of Paul's Corinthian visit. Because Gallio's administration took place between about 51 and 53 CE and because Paul had been in Corinth for about eighteen months when he was brought before the governor, Paul probably arrived in that city about 49 or 50 CE. Additional evidence tends to confirm that date. Acts refers to the emperor Claudius's expulsion of Jews from Rome, a decree enacted about 49 CE. Two Jewish Christians, Aquila and Prisca (Priscilla), had recently moved from Rome to Corinth when Paul arrived in the city (Acts 18:1–2).



Paul's Letters

The Genuine Letters

New Testament historians generally agree that Paul became a Christian in the mid-30s CE and that he traveled extensively as a missionary during the 40s and 50s CE, arriving in Rome about the year 60. Scholarly agreement disappears,

however, in attempting to date Paul's letters or even establish the exact order in which he wrote them.

The majority of scholars accept seven letters as authentically Pauline. Virtually all scholars regard Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon as Paul's own writing. Some also accept 2 Thessalonians and Colossians. But the majority doubt that Ephesians is genuine and are certain that three—Titus and 1 and 2 Timothy—were composed by a Pauline disciple after the apostle's death. Almost no reputable scholar believes that Hebrews, which is a sermon rather than a letter, is a Pauline composition (see Box 13.2).

The Order of Composition

Although scholars debate the exact order in which Paul composed his letters, they generally agree that 1 Thessalonians was written first (c. 50 CE) and is thus the oldest known Christian writing. If Paul also wrote 2 Thessalonians, it dates from about 50 CE as well. The two Corinthian letters are usually placed in the mid-50s, and the more theologically mature letters, such as Romans and Philippians, are dated later. Four letters—Colossians, Philemon, Philippians, and possibly Ephesians—were reputedly composed while Paul was imprisoned and thus are known as the “captivity letters.” Unfortunately, Paul does not reveal in the letters where he was jailed, so we do not know whether he wrote them from Ephesus, Caesarea, or Rome, all cities in which he presumably suffered imprisonment. The canonical letters (others have been lost) were probably all written during a relatively brief span of time, the decade between about 50 and 60 CE.

Paul's Use of the Letter Form

Paul is aware that his letters are persuasive documents. He consciously uses letters as substitutes for his own presence, making them an effective means of influencing people and



BOX 13.2 Paul's Letters: Authentic, Disputed, and Pseudonymous

Paul's genuine letters, composed between about 50 and 62 CE, form the oldest surviving Christian literature. In the decades after Paul's death, his influence became so great that different Christian groups apparently competed for the role of authoritative interpreter of his teaching. Following the Hellenistic-Jewish practice of pseudonymity (writing in the name of an honored religious authority of the past, such as Moses or one of the prophets), some Christian authors composed letters in Paul's

name, using their understanding of the Pauline heritage to address problems of their own day. Whereas Paul's genuine letters invariably deal with specific problems besetting individual congregations (and presume a relatively informal church structure), pseudonymous letters such as 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus (the pastoral epistles) typically deal with such issues as maintaining the doctrinal purity of apostolic traditions and presume a much more structured church administration (see Chapter 17).

LETTERS BY PAUL	LETTERS POSSIBLY NOT BY PAUL	LETTERS DEFINITELY NOT BY PAUL
1 Thessalonians (c. 50 CE) 1 and 2 Corinthians Galatians Romans Philemon Philippians	2 Thessalonians Colossians	Ephesians 1 and 2 Timothy Titus Hebrews (Even in early Christianity, most churchmen did not believe that Hebrews was Paul's work.)

events from a distance. Although he gives directions on a wide variety of matters, his primary object is to correct his recipients' beliefs and to discipline their behavior. His letters are also potent weapons for shooting down opposition to his teaching.

Writing to the Corinthians, Paul states that his critics contrast his "weighty and powerful" letters with his unimpressive physical appearance and ineffectiveness as a speaker (2 Cor. 10:9–11). The apostle may exaggerate his defects for rhetorical effect, but he is right about his letters. From the time they were first written, they have exerted enormous influence on Christian thought and conduct.

Paul writes letters so effectively that he makes this literary category the standard medium of communication for many later Christian writers. The large majority of New Testament authors imitate Paul by conveying their ideas in letter form. Twenty-one of the

twenty-seven canonical books are (at least theoretically) letters. Even the writer of Revelation uses this form to transmit Jesus' message to the seven churches of Asia Minor (Rev. 2–3).

Hellenistic Letters

In general, Paul follows the accepted Hellenistic literary form in his correspondence, modifying it somewhat to express his peculiarly Christian interests. Much Greco-Roman correspondence, both personal and business, has survived from early Christian times, allowing us to compare Paul's letters with those of other Hellenistic writers.

The Hellenistic letter writer typically begins with a prescript, identifying the writer and the reader, and a greeting, wishing good fortune to the reader and commonly invoking the blessing of a god. Paul varies this formula by mentioning the Christian allegiance of the

writer and recipients, substituting “grace” and “peace” for the customary greetings, and frequently including an associate’s name in the salutation. He also elaborates on the Hellenistic custom by giving praise, thanks, or prayers for the welfare of his recipients. A typical example of Paul’s modification of the Hellenistic greeting appears in the opening of 1 Thessalonians:

From Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy to the congregation of Thessalonians who belong to God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace to you and peace.

(1 Thess. 1:1)

Paul also modifies his letters’ prescripts according to his attitude toward the church he is addressing. His letter to his trusted friends at Philippi opens with an effusive outpouring of affection and praise for the Philippians (Phil. 1:1–11). In contrast, when he writes to the churches in Galatia, he is furious with the recipients and includes no warm or approving salutation (Gal. 1:1–5).

After stating the letter’s principal message, the Hellenistic writer closes with additional acknowledgments, typically including greetings from other people and sometimes adding a request that the recipient(s) convey the sender’s greetings to mutual acquaintances. Paul often expands this custom to include a summary statement of faith and a benediction, as well as a list of fellow Christians to be greeted (Rom. 16; 1 Cor. 16:10–21; Col. 4:7–18).

The Role of Dictation

As was customary in Greco-Roman correspondence, Paul apparently dictated all his letters to a secretary or scribe, occasionally adding a signature or a few other words in his own hand. In antiquity, secretaries ordinarily did not record the precise words of those dictating but, instead, paraphrased the gist of what was said (Rom. 16:21–22; Gal. 6:11; Col. 4:18; Philem. 19; 2 Thess. 3:17), a practice that helps explain the spontaneous quality of Pauline letters.

The Circumstances of Writing

Most of Paul’s letters were composed under the pressure of dealing with an emergency in a given church. With the exception of Romans, which is addressed to a congregation that he had not yet visited, every Pauline letter is directed to a particular group, and most of the groups are personally known by the writer. In virtually every case, the recipients are experiencing some form of crisis, of either belief or behavior, which the author tries to resolve.

Paul’s main concern is always pastoral; he deals with individual problems caused by church members’ teaching or conduct. In counseling these small groups of infant Christians, Paul typically invokes theological arguments or examples to reinforce his advice. Because Paul’s letters are *occasional*—dealing with a specific occasion, issue, or crisis—scholars caution that they do not represent a complete or systematic exposition of Paul’s beliefs. Paul’s theological statements appear primarily to support the counsel he applies to particular situations at a given congregation. In his first letter to the Thessalonians, he outlines his beliefs about the future resurrection of persons who die before the Parousia takes place only because some believers at Thessalonica were worried that the Christian dead would miss out on their reward (1 Thess. 4:13–5:11). When writing to the church at Corinth, he passes on the traditions he had received about the Last Supper primarily because some Corinthians were behaving improperly at the celebration (1 Cor. 11:17–34). If there had been no misconduct, Paul would have had no occasion to mention the tradition, and we would have been deprived of one of the few passages in which Paul cites a teaching from Jesus. In no letter, with the partial exception of Romans, does Paul set out a comprehensive statement of his theology. The occasional nature of his correspondence means that we have only partial glimpses of Pauline doctrines.



Paul's Characteristic Theology

As the author of 2 Peter cautioned, Paul's letters "contain some obscure passages" that are easy to misinterpret (2 Pet. 3:16). Pauline thought can be subtle and complex, making it difficult even for scholars familiar with his language and historical-social context to achieve a consensus about his views on many important topics. In studying Paul's letters, it helps to keep in mind that his theology was not static but grew and developed over time. Although Paul states that he received his distinctive gospel from a revelation of Christ (Gal. 1:11–12), he does not claim that it arrived complete and unchanging. In fact, Paul's ideas and approaches to different topics seem to change from letter to letter as he wrestles with new problems that beset his congregations. Because his letters deal with ever-changing situations, as well as his recipients' sometimes unanticipated reactions to his statements, we cannot expect them to be entirely consistent. His negative judgment of the Mosaic Torah in Galatians, for example, contrasts markedly with his more positive pronouncements on the law in Romans (see Chapter 15).

Paul's relationship to God, Christ, and the unseen spirit world was dynamic and creative. Because he had experienced divine intervention in his personal life and afterward continued to receive mystical visions (2 Cor. 12:1–10), Paul could speak progressively about God's intentions for humanity and the imminent transformation of believers at the End of history. In surveying some characteristic Pauline theological assumptions or principles, it is important to recognize that the following summations represent a composite view of the apostle's teachings. He did not arrive at them all at once, nor does he usually expound his characteristic beliefs in a single letter.

Mysticism and Eschatology

Understanding Paul's writings means recognizing his sense of the spiritual power that inspired his apostolic career. Paul bases his authority as a Christian leader and the validity of his distinctive gospel on an *apokalypsis*, a private revelation of the post resurrection Jesus (Gal. 1:11–12, 15–17). His personal knowledge of Christ, which he insists he received as a direct heavenly communication and not from any apostolic predecessor, informs Paul that the glorified Jesus now exists in two separate but related dimensions: the macrocosm (great world) of God's spiritual domain and the microcosm (little world) of human consciousness. This **dualism**, characteristic of apocalyptic thought (see Chapter 19), expresses Paul's conviction that Christ possesses both an objective and a subjective reality. Christ is at once a cosmic figure who will soon return to judge the world and a being who also mysteriously dwells within the individual believer. The tension between the transcendent and the immanent Christ, one who is simultaneously universal and yet intimately experienced by the faithful, appears in almost every letter Paul wrote.

Paul's mysticism—his powerful sense of union with an invisible spiritual reality—is an important component of his worldview. Indeed, some scholars suggest that, even before his ecstatic encounter with Christ, Paul may have belonged to an apocalyptic brand of Pharisaism that included mystical beliefs and practices. In 2 Corinthians, he writes of being "caught up as far as the third heaven . . . into paradise," where he "heard words so secret that human lips may not repeat them" (2 Cor. 12:1–4) (see Box 14.2). These "visions and revelations granted by the Lord," which undoubtedly played their part in sustaining Paul through the many dangers and hardships he endured, may not have occurred as often as he would have liked. He adds that to prevent him "from being unduly elated by the magnificence of such revelations" he was given "a sharp physical pain," perhaps to remind

him that even sporadic experiences of the infinite could not allow him to escape his finite humanity (2 Cor. 12:7–8).

Paul may have been familiar with the noncanonical Book of 1 Enoch, which describes **Enoch's** vision of God's heavenly throne—or at least the tradition surrounding it—for he clearly shares its aspiration for mystical oneness with the divine. Paul also shares Enoch's apocalyptic viewpoint. His conviction that the Messiah's appearance has inaugurated the End of time permeates his thought and underlies much of his ethical teaching. Paul's advice on marriage, divorce, slavery, celibacy, and human behavior in general is largely shaped by his expectation of an imminent Final Judgment. In his oldest surviving letter, he states that he expects to witness the Parousia: "We who are left alive until the Lord comes . . . [will be] caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air" (1 Thess. 4:15–17).

In 1 Corinthians, his expectation to live until the End is equally certain; hence, he advises his correspondents that "the time we live in will not last long. While it lasts, married men should be as if they had no wives; . . . buyers must not count on keeping what they buy, nor those who use the world's wealth. . . . For the whole frame of this world is passing away" (1 Cor. 7:29–31). Eagerly anticipating the *eschaton*, he also tells the Corinthians, "Listen! I will unfold a mystery: we shall not all die, but we shall all be changed in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet-call. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will rise immortal, and we [the living] shall be changed" (1 Cor. 15:51–52).

Like many Jewish apocalyptists of the first century, Paul sees human history as divided into two qualitatively different ages, or periods of time. The present evil age will soon be replaced by a New Age, a new creation, in which God will reign completely (Gal. 6:14; 1 Cor. 15:20–28; 2 Cor. 5:17). Because the Messiah has not only arrived but also died and risen from the dead—his resurrection a guarantee that the End has already begun—Paul believes that the eschatological consummation of history is at hand. Paul's letters thus burn with special urgency

because he believes that his day marks the crucial transition period between the two ages. "For upon us," he wrote, "the fulfillment [end] of the ages [the present age and that to come] has come" (1 Cor. 10:11). God will soon "rescue us [believers] from this present age of wickedness" and establish his direct rule over a renewed creation (Gal. 1:4). Those about to be judged, especially members of his infant churches, must therefore prepare for the impending visitation, pursuing lives of unblemished virtue. The following summaries of Paul's principal ideas offer a brief survey of his thought; his distinctive concepts are developed more fully in discussions of the individual letters (Chapters 14–16).

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The Centrality and Preeminence of Jesus

Absolutely central to Paul's thought is his conviction that, in Jesus, God achieves the world's salvation. Although Paul rarely refers to Jesus' earthly ministry or teachings, he may have known more of Jesus' life than he reveals in his letters. He quotes or cites Jesus' sayings only when they are directly pertinent to regulating his correspondents' behavior (cf. 1 Cor. 11 and 15). Paul's chief concern is with the heavenly Christ whom he sees in three roles: (1) as God's revealed Wisdom (1 Cor. 1–4), (2) as the divine Lord through whom God rules (Phil. 2:11; Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 15:24–28), and (3) as the means by whom God's Spirit dwells in believers (Rom. 8; 14:17). The operation of the Spirit, God's active force denoting his presence and effecting his will in the world, characterizes all of Paul's churches.

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Christ and Humanity

In contrasting Christ with the symbol of earthly humanity, **Adam** (in Genesis, God's first human creation), Paul emphasizes the vast change Jesus' activity has effected for the human race. Prior to Jesus' coming, humans existed in Adam's perishable image, victims of sin and death (Rom. 5:12–21). In contrast, believers now

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“in Christ” (imbued with his spirit) will also share in the glorified Christ’s life-giving nature (1 Cor. 15:21–24, 45–49): “As in Adam all men die, so in Christ all will be brought to life.”

The Faithful as Christ’s Body

Using a corporate image to identify the believing community as the earthly manifestation of the exalted Christ, Paul states that the faithful collectively are Christ’s “body” (1 Cor. 10:16–18; 12:12–30; Rom. 12). As a people defined and influenced by the Spirit, the church functions in union with Christ so fully that it reveals his visible form. Because Paul’s concept of the body is so central to his thought, we will discuss it more fully in Chapter 14.

Christ as Liberator from Sin, Torah, and Death

In Paul’s view, all human beings are negatively influenced by sin’s power and hence are alienated from the perfect God (Rom. 7). Sin’s invariable consequence is death, a condition of the defective humanity we share with Adam (Rom. 5:12–21). By defining both the nature of and the punishment for sin, the Torah increased its power, revealing the universality of sin and condemning all sinners—the entire human race (Rom. 1–3).

Christ’s total obedience to the Father and his selfless death on the cross, taking unto himself the Torah’s penalty for sin, liberates those persons accepting him (living fully under his power) from sin, death, and the Torah’s curses (Gal. 3–5; Rom. 3–7). For Paul, “freedom in Christ” means deliverance from the old order of sin and punishment, including the Torah’s power to condemn. (For a fuller discussion of sin and of Christ’s role in conquering it, see Chapter 15.)

Christ’s Universal Sufficiency

To Paul, Jesus’ sacrificial death and God’s exaltation of Christ as the agent by whom God rules and imparts his Spirit constitute a total change

in the relationship between God and humanity. Christ is the final and complete means of canceling the powers of sin and destruction. Because Christ is now all-sufficient in reconciling humanity to God, neither “angelic powers” nor the Torah any longer play a decisive role in achieving human salvation.

Justification by Faith

Historically, one of Paul’s most influential concepts was his understanding of the moral logic by which a perfectly righteous God can accept or “justify” human beings whose unrighteous behavior makes them veritable “slaves” to sin. Does God, who sits as Judge over the universe, compromise his ethical standards by granting salvation to sinful humans? Paul’s personal experience of divine mercy, expressed through an *apokalypsis* (revelation) of Jesus, convinced him that in Christ he has been justified or “made right” before God. His divine patron or benefactor had revealed that he henceforth related to humankind exclusively through Jesus. Jesus, moreover, while living under Mosaic Law, had demonstrated perfect faith in God, making him the exemplar and intermediary for all who have faith. This conviction—that faith in Christ delivered him from sin more effectively than had obedience to the Mosaic Law—placed Paul on a collision course with his native Judaism, as well as with many Jewish Christians who saw no reason to abandon their Mosaic heritage. For Jewish Christians of the first century CE (probably including Jesus’ “brother” James), to accept Jesus as Israel’s Messiah (Christ) was to follow the same Torah obligations that Jesus had.

For observant Jews, the Law provided a God-given—and fully adequate—means of atoning for sin and maintaining a right relationship with the Deity. Mosaic Law prescribes detailed rituals by which genuinely repentant sinners can express their desire to make peace with God. (As many scholars have noted, Torah statutes involving “sin offerings” and other sacrifices to effect forgiveness presuppose that petitioners have already experienced appropriate

sorrow and remorse for their errors.) Both personal contrition and sacrificial rites were part of the biblical arrangement for restoring harmony between Israel's God and his worshipers.

Although Paul claims that “by the law’s standard of righteousness [he had been] without fault” (Phil. 3:6), at some point after his encounter with the risen Jesus he came to believe that the Mosaic Covenant was no longer the means by which God reconciled sinful humanity to himself. In two of his most theologically important letters, Galatians and Romans, Paul argues that the Law serves only to expose the universal reality of human sin, which it justly condemns. By his sacrificial death on the cross, however, Jesus paid for *everyone* the Law’s penalty for human sin, effectively canceling the Law’s authority. Through spiritual union with Christ, who is now God’s sole instrument of human redemption, believers share in the benefits of Jesus’ self-sacrifice and freely receive the divine favor that grants them eternal life. For Paul, the Law can no longer confer forgiveness, a function that in God’s new arrangement belongs exclusively to Christ. In Paul’s view, it is God’s *grace*—his undeserved kindness and mercy—that opens the way to salvation for Jews and Gentiles alike, graciously assigning them the capacity to accept and believe in Jesus. Believers are thus justified before God only through their faith—complete trust—in Jesus’ power to save those with whom he is spiritually united. (For further discussion of Paul’s ideas about faith in Christ replacing works of Torah, see Chapter 15.)

During the sixteenth century CE, European Christians were bitterly divided over the interpretation of Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith. Martin Luther, the Protestant reformer, held that it is through faith alone that believers are saved, whereas the Catholic Church maintained that salvation also comes through deeds, particularly observance of such sacraments as baptism, confession, and absolution. It was not until the close of the twentieth century that Catholics and Protestants reached an accord on Paul’s teaching. In 1999, on the

482nd anniversary of Luther’s posting his protests against church practices on the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany—an act that ignited the Protestant Reformation—leaders of the Catholic and Lutheran churches signed a historic agreement stating that faith is essential to salvation. According to this joint Catholic–Lutheran declaration, “By grace alone, in faith in Christ’s saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are adopted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works.”

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The Importance of Women in Early Christianity

Did the Historical Paul Judge Women Negatively?

More than any other New Testament writer, in recent decades, Paul has drawn scathing criticism for his apparent inconsistency regarding the role of women in the Christian community. Given that both Jewish and Greco-Roman society of his day typically relegated women to subservient positions in which their lives were rigidly controlled by fathers, husbands, or other male kinsmen, some of Paul’s pronouncements appear surprisingly positive. In Galatians, he sweeps away both class and gender distinctions, declaring that for people baptized “into union” with Christ, “There is no such thing as Jew and Greek, slave and freeman, male and female; for you are all one person in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). Writing to the Corinthians, he recognizes that women, like men, serve the congregation by offering prayers and delivering prophecies (1 Cor. 11:4–5). He also notes that some women, such as his friend Phoebe, hold responsible office in the church (Rom. 16:1–5). Besides describing two women in Philippi, Euodia and Syntyche, as his “fellow workers” in spreading the gospel (Phil. 4:2–3), Paul also refers to a Roman woman, Junia (Junias), as “eminent among the apostles”

(Rom. 16:7). Writing to the congregation at Rome, Paul sends individual greetings to twice as many men as women, but he singles out for special commendation twice as many women, such as Junia and Mary (otherwise unknown), as men (Rom. 16).

Throughout most of Christian history, however, it is Paul's seemingly negative attitude toward women's roles that church leaders have traditionally accepted as the norm. Later in the same letter in which he affirms women as prophets, Paul apparently forbids them to "address the meeting":

They have no license to speak, but should keep their place as the law directs. If there is something they want to know, they can ask their own husbands at home. It is a shocking thing that a woman should address the congregation. (1 Cor. 14:34–35)

In 1 Timothy, the writer appears to relegate women to perpetual passivity, silence, and submission:

A woman must be a learner, listening quietly and with due submission. I do not permit a woman to be a teacher, nor must woman domineer over man; she should be quiet. (1 Tim. 2:11–12)

The author's scriptural justification for denying all women the authority to teach others derives from his interpretation of the second of two different accounts in Genesis about humanity's creation. Whereas the first version states that "male and female" came into being simultaneously, both in the divine "image" (Gen. 1:26–27), the second, which the writer selects to support his argument, awards Adam (the first male) priority in time and importance. In the author's view, Eve (the first female) is implicitly inferior to Adam because she was formed "afterwards" (1 Tim. 2:13; cf. Gen. 2: 18–25). However, 1 Timothy's most damaging charge against Eve (and, hence, all her daughters) is her alleged susceptibility to deceit: "It was not Adam who[m] [the serpent] deceived; it was the woman, who, yielding to

deception, fell into sin" (1 Tim. 2:14; cf. Gen. 3). In a stroke, the ultimate responsibility for humanity's disobedience of and alienation from God is thus placed on Eve, whose credulity and irresponsibility manifestly exclude her entire sex from positions of trust in the Christian fellowship. Yet, as the writer concedes, nature accords women one clear means of redemption: They can be "saved through motherhood"—bearing children.

The insulting estimate of women's innate character found in 1 Timothy is but one reason a large majority of scholars agree that this document—along with 2 Timothy and Titus (known as the pastoral epistles)—did not originate with Paul (see the discussion of pseudonymous authorship in Chapter 17). Many scholars also suspect that the passage in 1 Corinthians 14 denying women the right to speak before the congregation was not originally part of Paul's letter, but that later copyists inserted it into the manuscript to make it harmonize with the (non-Pauline) restrictions that the author of 1 Timothy imposed. The verses forbidding women's public participation in church services (1 Cor. 14:34–35), in fact, interrupt Paul's general train of thought and may be taken as scribal interpolations.

Some scholars who accept Pauline authorship of these controversial passages, however, also urge readers not to view them as universal prescriptions permanently limiting women's roles. C. S. Keener, for example, emphasizes the occasional nature of Paul's letters, noting that most of Paul's directives concern particular crises then affecting his churches and that his recommendations may be limited to resolving specific situations then troubling individual congregations. First Timothy's restrictions on women's public speaking may apply primarily to women who have not yet been fully instructed in the Christian message and who must learn quietly at home before they can legitimately contribute to congregational discussions (see Keener in "Recommended Reading"). (Many women in the early church took vows of perpetual

virginity, leading lives of celibacy that allowed them relative freedom from patriarchal oppression; see the Acts of Paul and Thecla, a celibate woman disciple whom Paul authorized to teach others [see Chapter 20].)

The Gospel Traditions

In considering the legitimate participation of women in church leadership, many scholars recommend viewing Paul's letters in the larger context of the entire New Testament canon. Virtually all components of the Jesus tradition—from Mark, to John, to Luke's special material—highlight the crucial role that women play in Jesus' ministry. Both Mark and Luke state that women accompanied Jesus throughout his Galilean campaign, some supporting his work by acting as patrons who contributed financially (Mark 15:40–41; Luke 8:1–3). Mark and John also show Jesus, contrary to prevailing custom, engaging in public conversations with “foreign” women (unaccompanied by male protectors) who assert their right to benefit from his healing gifts and his spiritual insights, including a Syro-Phoenician woman (Mark 7:24–30) and a frequently married Samaritan woman with whom he discusses the fine points of acceptable worship (John 4:1–42). In Luke's special tradition, Jesus also commends Mary, the sister of Martha, for abandoning her traditional household duties to gather with his male disciples, noting that what she learns “shall not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:38–42).

Whereas all of Jesus' twelve principal male disciples precipitately abandon him at his arrest, a group of Galilean women loyally follow him to the cross, where they witness his death and then observe the location of his burial. In all four Gospels, it is these Galilean women (in John, Mary Magdalene alone) who discover the empty tomb; in three of the four accounts (Mark's narrative concludes at the vacant sepulcher), it is also the female disciples who first proclaim Jesus' resurrection,

although the male followers initially discount their testimony (Matt. 28:1–10; Luke 23:55–24:11; John 20:1–3, 10–18).

Following Jesus' resurrection and ascension, as Christianity spread through the Greco-Roman world, women continued to assume important functions that helped the new faith grow. According to Acts, when Paul traveled through Macedonia to the town of Philippi, he met there a wealthy woman, Lydia, “a dealer in purple fabric from the city of Thyatira,” who not only responded enthusiastically to his preaching but also “insisted” that he and his fellow missionaries stay at her house. Possessing a house large enough to accommodate meetings of local Christians, Lydia in effect became the patron of the Philippian congregation, with which Paul had an exceptionally warm and affectionate relationship (Acts 16:12–16, 40; cf. Phil. 1). Prisca (Priscilla) and her husband, Aquila—in both Acts and Paul's letters, she is usually mentioned first, perhaps indicating her prominence in the Christian movement—serve as Paul's co-workers in Corinth, and Ephesus, where the two instruct Apollos, an “eloquent” Jewish Christian from Alexandria, in correct Christian teaching (Acts 18:2, 18, 26; Rom. 16:3; 1 Cor. 16:19; cf. 2 Tim. 4:19).

Although the New Testament evidence does not suggest that the mid-first-century CE witnessed a “golden age” of gender equality and mutuality in the Christian community, it does confirm that some women, in some locations, assumed leading roles as teachers, prophets, and missionary workers. The question then arises: If Jesus included women among his closest disciples, and Paul endorsed several women, such as Phoebe and Prisca, as Christian “co-workers,” how did the later church eventually come to reject the leadership of all women—no matter how intellectually gifted, well versed in Scripture, or prominent in charitable works—in favor of exclusively male domination?

Several scholars suggest that the gradual shrinking of women's roles in the church may

have corresponded to a historical change in the kinds of places in which believers assembled. During Paul's career, Christians gathered only in private houses—no separate church buildings then existed. Because only comparatively well-to-do homeowners had dwellings large enough to hold even a few dozen people, the host and/or hostess probably took a leading role in presiding over meetings in his or her home. If a congregation met at the home of a wealthy widow—one no longer under a husband's control—it is likely that she participated actively in worship services, praying, prophesying, and instructing others (1 Cor. 11:5), as Lydia presumably did when believers assembled at her home (Acts 16:13–15, 40).

As congregations grew, attracting larger numbers of qualified men, however, the prominence of women householders who hosted gatherings gradually declined. The shift from meeting in private accommodations, traditionally run by women, to assembling in larger edifices in the public sphere, where men dominated, had an inevitable effect on the composition of church leadership. The change in meeting place from the domestic to the public arena was reinforced by two other concurrent trends: By the second and third centuries CE, the Christian community was no longer living in the fervent apocalyptic hope that had characterized its beginnings. As expectations that God would soon bring history to an end diminished, Jesus' kingdom ethic—in which “many who are first will be last and the last first” (Mark 10:31)—also had less impact. Early believers, eagerly awaiting the Parousia, could form a subculture in which the kingdom values prevailed, incorporating the least and “last” of society's members, including women, slaves, and other socially marginalized people, into full community participation (Gal. 3:28). But after belief in an imminent divine intervention waned and the church accepted an indefinitely delayed Parousia, the church increasingly adapted itself to the customs and assumptions of the larger Greco-Roman world.

The adaptation seems to have included almost wholesale acceptance of Roman society's view of male–female relationships, a patriarchal view that the author of 1 Timothy seems uncritically to endorse.

In the Roman social structure, men achieved status—and positions of public honor—by exercising power over other men, whether economic, political, social, or military. While men universally controlled all public activities and institutions, women, regarded as physically weaker and less capable, were confined to the domestic realm. Given Roman society's universal approval of masculine dominance, if a free man had joined a Christian congregation supervised by a woman, it seems likely that he would have been publicly shamed, forfeiting his claim to honor. In light of Roman mores, it is not surprising that the church, desiring as many converts as possible, chose to model its leadership structure in a way that Roman males would find acceptable. As many feminist scholars have observed, however, Western society has experienced such radical changes since the Enlightenment that the Christian community is now free to construct more inclusive models of leadership, creating an environment of humane mutuality that does not depend on the social and gender assumptions of antiquity.



The Supremacy of Love

In writing the Corinthian church about the “spiritual gifts” bestowed upon Christians, both men and women, Paul ranks the practice of **love** (Greek, *agapē*) as chief among them (1 Cor. 13:1–14:1).

As scholars have recently observed, however, we should not assume that Paul's use of *agapē* (which occurs 116 times as a noun and 143 times as a verb in the New Testament) necessarily corresponds to our twenty-first-century ideas about love. Shaped by contemporary

psychology, we tend to regard love as a subjective emotion, a feeling of warm affection for someone. By contrast, Paul describes *agapē* not as an emotional state but as a loyal commitment to others' welfare, which is expressed in *action* that benefits others. For Paul, *agapē* is probably equivalent to the Hebrew Bible's use of *hesed*, a term commonly translated as "loving kindness" or "steadfast love." *Hesed* is expressed in terms of unwavering loyalty to God and to fellow members of the covenant community, a concept that Jesus emphasizes when he cites the Bible's two most important commandments: love of God (Deut. 6:4–5) and love of neighbor (Lev. 19:18). In this declaration, Jesus implicitly invokes biblical love as the basis of the divine–human relationship (Mark 12:28–34). On the divine level, God expresses covenant loyalty through faithfulness to his promises; in the human sphere, love and loyalty are inseparable from active service. As Paul informs the Galatians: "The only thing that counts is faith active in love," faith that reveals itself through compassionate deeds (Gal. 5:6).

In judging *agapē* as the supreme spiritual gift, Paul underscores the fact that love shows itself primarily through right behavior, the kinds of actions that help others and please God. In the world of human interactions, love can also mean avoiding hurtful behaviors: "love is never selfish, not quick to take offense"; above all, it "keeps no score of wrongs" (1 Cor. 13:4–6). Like God, its source, love is eternal: It has "no limit" and "will never come to an end" (13:7–8). The single divinely acceptable motivator of human conduct, its absence robs all other virtues of ethical meaning: Even the "faith strong enough to move mountains" and the knowledge of "every hidden truth" are love's inferiors. "If I have no love," Paul declares, "I am nothing" (1 Cor. 13:2–3). Without *agapē*, all Paul's labors are in vain.

Paul does not echo Jesus' radical directive to "love your enemies" (Matt. 5:44), but generally

concentrates on cultivating love within the Christian fold: "let us work for the good of all, especially members of the household of the faith" (Gal. 6:10). In this near-exclusive emphasis on the Christian fellowship, Paul anticipates the Johannine tradition, where the identifying quality of Jesus' followers is their expression of love for one another, without a comparable statement of concern for persons outside their group (John 13:34–35). Nonetheless, in formulating the New Testament's most compelling articulation of human love in action, Paul bequeathed a legacy to the Christian church—and the world—that retains a potential to transform human lives.

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Summary

' In the New Testament canon, Paul's letters are listed roughly according to their length. Letters to churches, such as Romans, appear first, and those to individuals, such as Philemon, appear last. In this text, we discuss the letters in the general order of their composition, beginning with 1 Thessalonians and concluding with later works like Philippians and Philemon.

A sensitivity to Paul's eschatological hope and his mystical experience of Christ may make it easier for readers to appreciate Paul's ideas. Despite the difficulty of understanding some passages (2 Pet. 3:15–16), the rewards of entering the brilliant world of Pauline thought are well worth the effort.

Questions for Review

1. Summarize Paul's biography, from his career as a zealous Pharisee to his work as a missionary among Gentile populations in Macedonia and Greece. In what respects does the biographical information contained in Acts differ from that found in Paul's letters?
2. How did Paul's experience of a revelation (*apokalypsis*) of the risen Jesus change his life and affect his religious outlook?

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Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Discuss some of the topics and themes that dominate Paul's letters, including his apocalyptic outlook and his views on faith, righteousness, justification, and the saving power of Christ.
2. In the twenty-first-century church, Paul's attitude toward women arouses considerable debate. Briefly outline the historic roles women played in early Christianity, including the Gospel narratives about Jesus' women disciples and Paul's recognition of Phoebe, Prisca, and other "co-workers." How did meeting in house churches facilitate women's leadership positions and how did the church eventually adopt typically Greco-Roman restrictions on women's participation in church affairs? Do the social assumptions of antiquity necessarily determine women's position today?

Terms and Concepts to Remember

Adam	faith
Ananias	love (<i>agapē</i>)
dualism	Titus
Enoch	Torah

Recommended Reading

- Crook, Zeba A. *Reconceptualizing Conversion: Patronage, Loyalty, and Conversion in the Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean*. New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004. A detailed analysis of Paul's use of the Roman patron–client system to express his relationship to God and Christ.
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- Engberg-Pedersen, Troels. *Cosmology and Self in the Apostle Paul: The Material Spirit*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- . *Paul and the Stoics*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2000. Both works minutely dissect the letters to infer Paul's worldview, the latter to reveal the extent of Stoic influence on Paul's thought and rhetoric.
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- Hawthorne, Gerald F.; Martin, Ralph P.; and Reid, D. G., eds. *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993. Argues for authenticity of all letters traditionally ascribed to Paul, including the pastorals.
- Holmberg, B. *Paul and Power*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980. An incisive study of the social forces at work in the Pauline communities and of Paul's difficult relationships with other apostolic leaders.
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- . *Paul: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991. A remarkably concise and incisive survey of Paul's thought and theology.
- Segal, Alan F. *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee*. New Haven, Conn., and London: Yale University Press, 1990. Examines Paul's views of the Christ event in the light of his Jewish heritage.
- Soards, Marion L. *The Apostle Paul: An Introduction to His Writings and Teaching*. Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1987. A clearly written introduction to Paul's thought, emphasizing his eschatology.

Theissen, Gerd. *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982. A study of the social dynamics operating in the church at Corinth; one of the most illuminating studies of primitive Christianity.

Witherup, Ronald D. *101 Questions and Answers of Paul*. New York: Paulist Press, 2003. A good introduction to Paul's life and theological preoccupations.

Zetterholm, Magnus. "Paul, Letters of." In M. D. Coogan, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Books of the Bible*, Vol. 2, pp. 127–138. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Surveys first Paul's authentic letters and then the disputed and pseudonymous works, emphasizing his evolving theology.

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