CHAPTER 17

Continuing the Pauline Tradition

2 Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians, and the Pastoral Epistles

Stand firm . . . and hold fast to the traditions which you have learned from us by word or letter. 2 Thessalonians 2:15

Keep before you an outline of the sound teaching which you heard from me. . . . Guard the treasure [apostolic tradition] put into our charge. 2 Timothy 1:13–14

SANFORD, BETHANY 13 STS

Key Topics/Themes Paul's continuing influence on the church was so great after his death that various Pauline disciples composed letters in his name and spirit, claiming his authority to settle new issues besetting the Christian community. Whereas a minority of scholars defend Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians and Colossians, a large majority are certain that he did not write Ephesians, 1 or 2 Timothy, or Titus.

Repeating themes from Paul's genuine letter to the Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians reinterprets Paul's original eschatology, asserting that a number of traditional apocalyptic "signs" must precede the *eschaton*.

In Colossians, a close Pauline disciple emphasizes Jesus' identification with the cosmic power and wisdom by and for which the universe was created. The divine "secret" is revealed as Christ's Spirit dwelling in the believer. A deutero-Pauline composition, Ephesians contains ideas similar to those in Colossians, revising and updating Pauline concepts about God's universal plan of salvation for both Jews and Gentiles and about believers' spiritual warfare with supernatural evil.

Writing to Timothy and Titus as symbols of a new generation of Christians, an anonymous disciple (known as the Pastor) warns his readers against false teachings (heresy). He urges them to adhere strictly to the original apostolic traditions, supported by the Hebrew Bible and the church.

Six canonical letters in which the author explicitly identifies himself as Paul, Apostle to the Gentiles, contain discrepancies that cause scholars to question their Pauline authorship. Two of the letters—2 Thessalonians and Colossians—are still vigorously disputed, with a large minority championing their authenticity. But an overwhelming scholarly majority deny that Paul wrote the four others—Ephesians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus. The latter three are called the **pastoral epistles** because the writer—as a pastor or shepherd—offers guidance and advice to his flock, the church.

According to tradition, Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians shortly after his first letter to believers at Thessalonica, and Ephesians and Colossians while imprisoned in Rome. After being released, he traveled to Crete, only to be thrown again in prison a second time (2 Tim.). During this second and final incarceration, the apostle supposedly composed these farewell letters to his trusted associates, Timothy and Titus, young men who represent a new generation of Christian leadership.

Since the eighteenth century, however, scholars have increasingly doubted Paul's responsibility for either Ephesians or the pastorals. More recently, they have also suspected that both 2 Thessalonians and Colossians are the work of later authors who adopted Paul's persona. Detailed analyses of four of the six documents—Ephesians and the pastorals—strongly indicate that they were composed significantly after Paul's time.

Disputed and Pseudonymous Letters

Authorship, date, and place of composition of the disputed and pseudonymous letters are unknown. If 2 Thessalonians and Colossians are by Paul, the former was written about 50 CE and the latter perhaps a decade later. Ephesians, which incorporates ideas from some genuine Pauline letters, may have originated about 90 CE. The pastoral epistles were probably composed during the early decades of the second century CE by a Pauline disciple eager to use the apostle's legacy to enforce church tradition and organizational structure.

The Problem of Pseudonymity

The author of 2 Thessalonians tells his readers not to become overly excited if they receive a letter falsely bearing Paul's name, indicating that the practice of circulating forged documents purportedly by apostolic writers had already begun (2 Thess. 2:1–3). Known as **pseudonymity,** the practice of creating new works in the name of a famous deceased author was widespread in both Hellenistic Judaism and early Christianity. From about 200 BCE to 200 CE, Jewish writers produced a host of books ascribed to such revered biblical figures as Daniel, Enoch, Noah, David, Solomon, Isaiah, Ezra, and Moses. Some pseudonymous works, such as the Book of Daniel, were accepted into the Hebrew Bible canon; others, such as 1 Enoch (quoted as scripture in the canonical letter of Jude), were not. Still others, including the Wisdom of Solomon, Baruch, and the apocalyptic 2 Esdras, were regarded as deuterocanonical, part of the Old Testament's "second canon."

Most scholars today view several books in the New Testament as pseudonymous, the productions of unknown Christians who adopted the Jewish literary convention of writing under an assumed identity. Scholars question the authenticity of not only six of the Pauline letters but also of the seven **catholic epistles,** documents ascribed to the "pillars" of the Jerusalem church whom Paul mentions in Galatians: James, John, and Peter, as well as the letter of Jude, James's putative brother (Gal. 2:9; see Chapter 18). In wrestling with the problem of pseudonymity in the early church, many scholars assume that pseudonymous authors wrote not to deceive but to perpetuate the thoughts of an apostle, to address later situations in the Christian community as they believed Peter or Paul would have if he were still alive. According to a common view, twenty-first century principles about the integrity of authorship were irrelevant in the Jewish and Greco-Roman worlds. In this view, ancient society tended to tolerate the practice of pseudonymity, a custom in which disciples of great thinkers were free to compose works in their respective masters' names.

Other scholars strongly disagree, pointing out that what little evidence we have of the early church's recorded attitude toward pseudonymous writing does not support the notion that it was tolerated. When a short missive purporting to be Paul's third letter to the Corinthians appeared, probably in the latter half of the second century CE, a few Christian groups apparently

accepted it. By insisting that the resurrection was a bodily phenomenon, 3 Corinthians was useful in combating the Gnostics, who denigrated all forms of material existence. The church as a whole, however, denounced the work as a forgery and removed from office the bishop who confessed to writing it. Tertullian, a church leader of the late second and early third centuries CE, claimed that the author of the spurious Acts of Paul and Thecla, when discovered, was similarly stripped of his position. (See the discussion of the Paul and Thecla narrative in Chapter 20.) Whereas some scholars believe that no work suspected of being pseudonymous would have been admitted to the canon, others argue that in the late first century and early decades of the second, documents attributed to Paul or other apostles—provided that they were theologically consistent with a celebrated leader's known ideas—could be assimilated into Christian Scripture.

How believers react to the claim that a number of books in the New Testament were written by someone other than their ostensible authors typically depends on a reader's concept of biblical authority. For some people, the proposal that unknown Christians falsely assumed Paul's identity is ethically unacceptable on the grounds that such forgeries could not become part of the Bible. Other believers may ask if the value of a disputed or pseudonymous book is based on its traditional link to the "apostolic" generation. Is it "apostolic" authorship only that justifies a document's place in the New Testament canon? Or is it a book's ethical and theological content that makes it valuable, regardless of who wrote it? Perhaps most important, if a particular writing is a forgery—a work falsely claiming Paul, Peter, or James as its author—does that authorial deception invalidate its message, especially if its contents are useful to the Christian life? (See Bart Ehrman in "Recommended Reading.")

We can only speculate about the motives that inspired pseudonymous Christian writers, but some may have wished to obtain a respectful hearing for their views that only a letter by Paul, Peter, or James could command. Some Pauline disciples, perhaps even some who were listed as coauthors in the genuine letters, may have wished, after Paul's death, to address problems as they believed Paul would have. The fact that the historical Paul usually employed a secretary or amanuensis to whom he dictated his thoughts—and that in the ancient world an amanuensis supposedly rephrased dictation in his own style—further complicates the problem of authorship. Scholars defending the authenticity of disputed letters, such as 2 Thessalonians, Colossians, or 1 Peter, tend to emphasize the roles that different secretaries played in shaping these documents. Other critics suggest that pseudonymous authors may have incorporated fragments of otherwise unknown letters that Paul or Peter actually composed. As the readings for this chapter and the next indicate, scholarly speculation about plausible theories of authorship, genuine and pseudonymous, abounds. In studying the literature dubiously attributed to Paul or fellow leaders of the early church, readers will exercise their own judgments about authenticity. Whatever their degree of skepticism, they may conclude that Colossians is worthy of the apostle or that, if Paul wrote the Pastorals, they are a disappointing end to a brilliant writing career.

Second Letter to the Thessalonians

An increasing number of scholars are skeptical about the genuineness of 2 Thessalonians. If Paul actually composed it, why does he repeat—almost verbatim—so much of what he had already just written to the same recipients? More seriously, why does the author present an eschatology so different from that presented in the first letter? In 1 Thessalonians, the Parousia will occur stealthily, "like a thief in the night." In 2 Thessalonians, a number of apocalyptic "signs" will first advertise its arrival. The interposing of

these mysterious events between the writer's time and that of the Parousia has the effect of placing the *eschaton* further into the future—unlike in 1 Thessalonians, where the End is extremely close.

Scholars defending Pauline authorship advance several theories to explain the writer's apparent change of attitude toward the Parousia. In the first letter, Paul underscores the tension between the shortness of time the world has left and the necessity of believers' vigilance and ethical purity as they await the Second Coming. In the second missive, Paul writes to correct the Thessalonians' misconceptions about or misuses of his earlier emphasis on the nearness of End time.

If Paul is in fact the author, he probably wrote 2 Thessalonians within a few months of his earlier letter. Some converts, claiming that "the Day of the Lord is already here" (2:2), were upsetting others with their otherworldly enthusiasms. In their state of apocalyptic fervor, some even scorned everyday occupations and refused to work or support themselves. It is possible that the visionary Spirit of prophecy that Paul encouraged the Thessalonians to cultivate (1 Thess. 5:19–22) had come back to haunt him. Empowered by private revelations, a few Christian prophets may have interpreted the Spirit's presence—made possible by Jesus' resurrection and ascension to heaven—as a mystical fulfillment of the Parousia. According to this belief in presently realized eschatology, the Lord's Day is now. Paul, however, consistently emphasizes that Jesus' resurrection and the Spirit's coming are only the first stage in God's plan of cosmic renewal. God's purpose can be completed only at the apocalyptic End of history.

Placing the Second Coming in Perspective

In 2 Thessalonians, Paul (or some other writer building on his thought) takes on the difficult task of urging Christians to be ever alert and prepared for the Lord's return and at the same time to remember that certain events must take place before the Second Coming can occur. The writer achieves this delicate balance partly by insisting on a rational and practical approach to life during the unknown interim between his writing and the Parousia.

In introducing his apocalyptic theme, the author invokes a vivid image of the Final Judgment to imprint its imminent reality on his readers' consciousness. He paraphrases images from the Hebrew prophets to imply that persons now persecuting Christians will soon suffer God's wrath. Christ will be revealed from heaven amid blazing fire, overthrowing those who disobey Jesus' gospel or fail to honor the one God (1:1–12).

Having assured the Thessalonians that their present opponents will be punished at Jesus' return, Paul (or a disciple) now admonishes them not to assume that the punishment will happen immediately. Believers are not to run wild over some visionary's claim that the End is already here. Individual prophetic revelations declaring that Jesus is now invisibly present were apparently strengthened when a letter—supposedly from Paul—conveyed the same or a similar message. (This pseudo-Pauline letter reveals that the practice of composing letters in Paul's name began very early in Christian history.) Speculations founded on private revelations or forged letters, the apostle points out, are doomed to disappoint those who fall for them (2:1–3).

Traditional (Non-Pauline?) Signs of the End

As mentioned previously, one of the strongest arguments against Paul's authorship of 2 Thessalonians is the letter's presentation of eschatological events that presage the End. Although the writer argues for the Parousia's imminence (1:6–10), he also insists that the final day cannot arrive until certain developments characteristic of Jewish apocalyptic thought have occurred. At this point, 2 Thessalonians reverts to the cryptic and veiled language of apocalyptic discourse, referring to mysterious personages and events that may have been

understood by the letter's recipients but that are largely incomprehensible to contemporary readers. The End cannot come before the final rebellion against God's rule, when evil is revealed in human form as a demonic enemy who desecrates the Temple and claims divinity for himself. In this passage, Paul's terminology resembles that contained in the Book of Daniel, an apocalyptic work denouncing Antiochus IV, a Greek-Syrian king who polluted the Jerusalem Temple and tried to destroy the Jewish religion (see Chapter 5).

Some commentators suggest that Paul regards the Roman emperor, whose near-absolute power gave him virtually unlimited potential for inflicting evil on humankind, as a latter-day counterpart of Antiochus. Paul's explicitly stated view of the Roman government, however, is positive (Rom. 13), so readers must look elsewhere to identify the doomed figure.

Reminding the Thessalonians that he had previously informed them orally of these apocalyptic developments, Paul states that the mysterious enemy's identity will not be disclosed until the appointed time. This is an allusion to the typically apocalyptic belief that all history is predestined: Events cannot occur before their divinely predetermined hour. Evil forces are already at work, however, secretly gathering strength until the unidentified "Restrainer" disappears, allowing the evil personage to reveal himself.

Apocalyptic Dualism In this passage, the writer paints a typically apocalyptic worldview, a moral dualism in which the opposing powers of good and evil have their respective agents at work on earth. The enemy figure is Satan's agent; his opposite is Christ. As Jesus is God's representative working in human history, so the wicked rebel is the devil's tool. Operating on a cosmic scope, the conflict between good and evil culminates in Christ's victory over his enemy, who has deceived the mass of humanity into believing the "lie." (This is, perhaps, the false belief that any being other than God is the source of humanity's ultimate welfare.) An evil parody of the Messiah, the unnamed satanic dupe functions as an **anti-Christ** (2:3–12).

The writer's language is specific enough to arouse speculation about the identities of the enigmatic "wicked man" and the "Restrainer" who at the time of writing kept the anti-Christ in check. It is also vague enough to preclude connecting any known historical figures with these eschatological roles. In typical apocalyptic fashion, the figures are mythic archetypes that belong to a realm beyond the reach of historical investigation.

SANDBOX

A Disputed Letter to the Colossians

If Paul is the author of Colossians, as a large minority of scholars believe, he had not yet visited the city when he wrote this theologically important letter. A small town in the Roman province of Asia, **Colossae** was located about 100 miles east of Ephesus, the provincial capital (see Figure 16.1). **Epaphras,** one of Paul's missionary associates, had apparently founded the church a short time prior to Paul's writing (1:7).

If genuine, Colossians was probably composed at about the same time as Philemon, to which it is closely related. In both letters, Paul writes from prison, including his friend Timothy in the salutation (1:1) and adding greetings from many of the same persons—such as Onesimus, Archippus, Aristarchus, Epaphras, Mark, and Luke—cited in the earlier missive (4:9–18). If Philemon's was the house church at Colossae, it is strange that Paul does not mention him, but his absence from the letter does not discredit Pauline authorship.

Purpose and Organization

Although it was not one of his churches, Paul (or one of his later disciples) writes to the Colossae congregation to correct some false teachings prevalent there. These beliefs apparently involved cults that gave undue honor to

angels or other invisible spirits inhabiting the universe. Some Colossians may have attempted to worship beings that the angels themselves worshiped. Paul refutes these "hollow and delusive" notions by emphasizing Christ's uniqueness and supremacy. Christ alone is the channel to spiritual reality; lesser spirit beings are merely his "captives."

The author's purpose is to make sure that the Colossians clearly recognize who Christ really is. He emphasizes two principal themes: (1) Christ is supreme because God's power now manifested in him was the same power that created the entire universe, including those invisible entities the false teachers mistakenly worship; and (2) when they realize Christ's supremacy and experience his indwelling Spirit, the Colossians are initiated into his mystery cult, voluntarily harmonizing their lives with the cosmic unity he embodies.

Christ—The Source of Cosmic Unity

In the opinion of some analysts, both the complex nature of the false teachings, which seem to blend Greco-Roman and marginally Jewish ideas into a Gnostic synthesis, and the **Christology** of Colossians seem too "advanced" for the letter to have originated in Paul's day. Other critics point out that, if the letter was written late in Paul's career to meet a situation significantly different from others he had earlier encountered, it could well have stimulated the apostle to produce a more fully developed expression of his views about Christ's nature and function.

Jesus as the Mediator of Creation As in the second chapter of Philippians, the author seems to adapt an older Christian hymn to illustrate his vision of the exalted Jesus' cosmic role:

> He is the image of the invisible god, the first-born of all creation;
> for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities,
> all things were created through him and for him.
>
> He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.
> He is the head of the body, the church;
> He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.
>
> For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,
> and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven,
> making peace by the blood of his cross.
> (1:15–20, Revised Standard Version)

Like the prologue to John's Gospel, this beautiful poem is modeled on biblical and Hellenistic-Jewish concepts of divine Wisdom (Prov. 8:22–31; Ecclus. 24:1–22; see also the discussion of John's usage of Logos [Word] in Chapter 10). Hellenistic Jews had created a rich lore of speculative thought in which God's chief attribute, his infinite Wisdom, is the source of all creation and the means by which he communicates his purpose to humanity. Many historians believe that early Christian thinkers adopted these ready-made wisdom traditions and applied them to Jesus.

Like Philippians 2, the Colossians hymn is traditionally seen as proclaiming Jesus' heavenly preexistence and his personal role as mediator in creation. More recently, many scholars—recognizing the hymn's use of wisdom language—view it as a declaration that the same divine Presence and Power that created the Cosmos now operates in the glorified Christ. The personified Wisdom whom God employed as his agent in fashioning the universe is now fully revealed in Christ, the agent through whom God redeems his human creation.

The phrase "image [*eikon*] of the invisible God" (1:15) may correspond to the phrase "form [*morphes*] of God" that Paul used in Philippians (2:6). In both cases, the term echoes the words of Genesis 1, in which God creates the first human beings in his own "image" (Gen. 1:26–27). (The writer describes the Colossians

as also bearing the divine "image" [3:10].) Rather than asserting that the prehuman Jesus was literally present at creation, the hymn may affirm that he is the ultimate goal toward which God's world trends.

Whatever Christology he advances, the writer's main purpose is to demonstrate Christ's present superiority to all rival cosmic beings. The "thrones, sovereignties, authorities and powers" mentioned (1:16) probably represent the Jewish hierarchy of angels. Christ's perfect obedience, vindicating God's image in humanity, and his ascension to heaven have rendered these lesser beings irrelevant and powerless. By his triumph, Christ leads them captive as a Roman emperor leads a public procession of conquered enemies (2:9–15).

Moving from Christ's supremacy to his own role in the divine plan, Paul states that his task is to deliver God's message of reconciliation. He is the agent chosen to reveal the divine "secret hidden for long ages"—the glorified Christ dwelling in the believer, spiritually reuniting the Christian with God. Christians thus form Christ's visible body, here identified with the church (1:21–2:8).

The Mystical Initiation into Christ Employing the rather obscure language of Greek mystery religions (see Chapter 4), Paul compares the Christian's baptism to a vicarious experience of Christ's death and resurrection (2:12, 20; 3:1). It is also the Christian equivalent of circumcision, the ritual sign that identifies one as belonging to God's people, and the rite of initiation into Christ's "body" (2:12–14). Raised to new life, initiated believers are liberated from religious obligations sponsored by those lesser spirits who transmitted the Torah revelation to Moses.

Empowered by Christ's Spirit, the Colossians should not be intimidated by self-styled authorities who mortify the body and piously forbid partaking of certain food and drink, for Christ's death ended all such legal discriminations. Although the author declares the equality of all believers, regardless of nationality or social class, he omits the unity of the sexes that Paul included in Galatians 3:28 (2:20–3:11). As with many Greco-Roman mystery cults, initiation into Christ is a union of social and religious equality.

Obligations of Initiation Consistent with Paul's custom, the author concludes by underlining the ethical implications of his theology. Because Christians experience the indwelling Christ, they must live exceptionally pure and upright lives. The list of vices (3:5–9) and virtues (3:12–25) is typical of other Hellenistic teachers of ethics, but the writer adds a distinctively Christian note: Believers behave well because they are being re-created in Christ's nature and "image" (3:10).

Letter to the Ephesians

The Case of Ephesians

Whereas Paul's authorship of Colossians is seriously doubted, the claim that he wrote Ephesians is widely denied. Although it closely resembles Colossians (the style and theology of which also seem untypical of Paul), Ephesians differs from the undisputed Pauline letters in (1) vocabulary (containing over ninety words not found elsewhere in Paul's writings), (2) literary style (written in extremely long, convoluted sentences, in contrast to Paul's usually direct, forceful statements), and (3) theology (lacking typically Pauline doctrines such as justification by faith and the nearness of Christ's return).

Despite its similarity to Colossians (75 of Ephesians' 155 verses parallel passages in Colossians), it presents a different view of the sacred "secret" or "mystery" revealed in Christ. In Colossians, God's long-kept secret is Christ's mystical union with his followers (Col. 1:27), but in Ephesians, it is the union of Jew and Gentile in one church (Eph. 3:6).

More than any other disputed letter (except those to Timothy and Titus), Ephesians

seems to reflect a time in church history significantly later than Paul's day. References to "Apostles and prophets" as the church's foundation imply that these figures belong to the past, not the author's generation (2:20; 3:5). The Gentiles' equality in Christian fellowship is no longer a controversial issue but an accomplished fact; this strongly suggests that the letter originated after the church membership had become largely non-Jewish (2:11–22). Judaizing interlopers no longer question Paul's stand on circumcision, again indicating that the work was composed after Jerusalem's destruction had largely eliminated the influence of the Jewish parent church.

When Paul uses the term "church" (*ekklesia*), he always refers to a single congregation (Gal. 1:2; 1 Cor. 11:16; 16:19, etc.). In contrast, Ephesians' author speaks of the "church" collectively, a universal institution encompassing all individual groups. This view of the church as a worldwide entity also points to a time after the apostolic period.

The cumulative evidence convinces most scholars that Ephesians is a deutero-Pauline document, a secondary work composed in Paul's name by an admirer thoroughly steeped in the apostle's thought and theology. The close parallels to Colossians, as well as phrases taken from Romans, Philemon, and other letters, indicate that unlike the author of Acts, this unknown writer was familiar with the Pauline correspondence. Some scholars propose that Ephesians was written as a kind of "cover letter" or essay to accompany an early collection of Paul's letters. Ephesians, then, can be seen as a tribute to Paul, summarizing some of his ideas and updating others to fit the changing needs of a largely Gentile and cosmopolitan church.

The phrase "in Ephesus" (1:1), identifying the recipients, does not appear in any of the oldest manuscripts. That fact, plus the absence of any specific issue or problem being addressed, reinforces the notion that Ephesians was intended to circulate among several churches in Asia Minor.

Date and Organization

If the letter to the Ephesians is by Paul, it probably originated from his Roman prison (60–64 CE). But if it is by a later Pauline disciple, as almost all scholars believe, Ephesians likely was written about the time Paul's letters first circulated as a unit, perhaps about 90 CE.

Ephesians' diverse contents can be subsumed under two major headings:

1. God's plan of salvation through the unified body of the church (1:3–3:21)
2. Instructions for living in the world while united to Christ (4:1–6:20)

Despite its long and sometimes awkward sentence structures (rephrased into shorter units in most English translations), Ephesians is a masterpiece of devotional literature. Unlike Paul's undisputed letters, it has a quiet and meditative tone, with no temperamental outbursts or attacks on the writer's enemies. Although it imitates the letter form by including a brief salutation (1:1–2) and a final greeting (6:21–24), Ephesians is really a highly sophisticated tract.

God's Plan of Salvation Through the United Body of Christ

Ephesians' main theme is the union of all creation with Christ, manifested on earth by the church's international unity (1:10–14). Echoing Romans' concept of predestination, the author states that before the world's foundation God selected Christ's future "children" (composing the church) to be redeemed by Jesus' blood, a sacrifice through which the chosen ones' sins are forgiven.

According to his preordained plan, God has placed Christ as head of the church, which is his body. The Spirit of Christ now fills the church as fully as God dwells in Christ (1:22–23). This mystical union of the human and divine is God's unforeseen gift, his grace that saves those who trust him (2:1–10).

BOX 17.1 Have Believers Already Experienced Resurrection to New Life?

Two of the letters whose Pauline authorship is disputed—Colossians and Ephesians—seem to accord believers a higher spiritual status than Paul gives them. In writing to the Corinthians, Paul had chastised those recipients—presumably, those who claimed superior "wisdom" (1 Cor. 1:18–3:23; 4:6–5:20)—who boasted that they had already "come into [their] kingdom" (1 Cor. 4:8–9). In repudiating those who behaved as if they had already attained guarantees of immortal life, Paul makes clear that Christians' attainment of spiritual validation and resurrection to immortality is still to come; it is tantalizingly near, but not yet (1 Cor. 15; cf. Rom. 6:4).

In Colossians, however, the writer appears to have adopted the "wise" Corinthians' viewpoint: "For in baptism also you were raised to life with him through your faith in the active power of God who raised him from the dead" (2:12). Believers are now "alive with Christ" (2:13). Ephesians makes an even more startling claim about believers' state of being: "God . . . brought us to life with Christ even when we were dead in our sins; . . . and in union with Christ Jesus he raised us up and enthroned us with him in the heavenly realm" (Eph. 2:4–7). In such passages affirming believers' present spiritual exaltation—a celestial enthronement in which they already rule with Christ—these (post-Pauline?) writers approach the realized eschatology of John's Gospel. Muting Paul's apocalyptic hope for an imminent Parousia, Colossians and Ephesians resemble John's nonapocalyptic conviction: "anyone who . . . puts his trust in him who sent me has hold of eternal life . . . [and] has already passed from death to life." In fact, that "time" of transformation "is already here" (John 5:24–25; cf. 11:24–26).

Few New Testament writers can rival the author of Ephesians in his enthusiastic portrayal of the spiritual bounty that Christians enjoy. The "Father" not only "gives [us] the spiritual powers of wisdom and vision" by which we can come to know the divine nature but also provides believers with "the entire fullness of God" (2:17–18, 22–23). Those trusting in God can therefore draw upon the sustaining forces of the entire universe, the "vast . . . resources of [God's] power" (2:19). (For a discussion of believers' spiritually exalted status, see Box 17.1.)

The Sacred Secret—the Union of Jews and Gentiles in One Church God's long-hidden secret is that Gentiles, previously under divine condemnation, can now share in the biblical promises made to Israel. This divine purpose to unite Jew and Gentile in equal grace is the special message that Paul is commissioned to preach (3:1–21). (It is significant that the writer assumes a general acceptance of the Gentile-dominated church, a condition that did not exist in Paul's day.)

Instructions for Living in the World

Ephesians' last three chapters are devoted to instructions on living properly in the world while remaining united to Christ. Combining ideas from Philippians 2 and Colossians 1, the author reinterprets the concept of Jesus' descent from and reascension to the spirit realm whereby he made lesser spirits his prisoners and filled the universe with his presence. The author may also allude to Jesus' descent into the Underworld, a mythical exploit that appears in 1 Peter (3:19–20) (see Box 18.2).

Advancing Paul's conviction that the Christian revelation requires the highest ethical conduct, Ephesians contrasts Greco-Roman

FIGURE 17.1 Bas-relief of Roman soldiers. The Book of Ephesians' famous description of a Christian's spiritual defenses against evil is based on the armor and other military equipment used by Roman soldiers (Eph. 6:13–17).

vices with Christian virtues and urges believers to transform their personalities to fit God's new creation (4:17–5:20). Home life is to be as reverent and orderly as behavior in church. Although he insists on a domestic hierarchy—"man is the head of the woman, just as Christ . . . is head of the church"—the writer reminds husbands to love their wives and thus to honor them as a treasured equivalent of the self (5:21–6:9). Ephesians endorses the rigid social and domestic hierarchy of Greco-Roman society but makes the system more humane by insisting that Christian love apply to all public and private relationships.

Heavenly Armor In Ephesians' most famous passage, the Pauline analogy of Christians armed like Roman soldiers is vividly elaborated (see Figure 17.1). In 1 Thessalonians (5:8), Paul urges believers to imitate armed sentries who stay awake on guard duty, for Christians must remain similarly alert for Christ's sudden reappearance. Ephesians discards the eschatological context of Paul's metaphor, however, and instead presents an ongoing battle between good and evil with no end in sight. In the genuine Pauline letters, the apostle foresees evil demolished at Christ's Second Coming. The Ephesian writer, in contrast, paints a picture of cosmic conflict reminiscent of Zoroastrianism—the Persian religion in which the world is viewed as a battlefield between invisible forces of light and dark, good and evil.

In Zoroastrian terms, the Ephesian Paul describes two levels of "cosmic powers"—the earthly rulers of the present dark age and the invisible forces of evil in heaven (6:10–12). Like Mark, the author apparently senses the reality of an evil so powerful that mere human wickedness cannot explain it. (For an insightful interpretation of the "powers" as entrenched social attitudes and practices that resist God's Spirit, see Wink in "Recommended Reading.") Instead of despairing, however, he rejoices that God provides ammunition with which successfully to defeat even supernatural evil. According to the author, each article of God's armor is a Christian virtue; cultivated together, qualities like truth and faith offer full protection from the devil's worst attacks (6:13–19).

Rich in spiritual insight, Ephesians is a creative summary of some major Pauline concepts. Even if not by Paul, it is nevertheless a significant celebration of Christian ideals, an achievement worthy of the great apostle himself.

The Pastorals: Letters to Timothy and Titus

In the opinion of most scholars, the case against Paul's connection with the pastorals is overwhelming. Besides the fact that they do not appear in early lists of Paul's canonical works, the pastorals seem to reflect conditions that prevailed long after Paul's day, perhaps as late as

the first half of the second century CE. Lacking Paul's characteristic ideas about faith and the Spirit, they are also un-Pauline in their flat prose style and different vocabulary (containing 306 words not found in Paul's unquestioned letters). Furthermore, the pastorals assume a church organization far more developed than that current in the apostle's time.

Known for convenience as "the **Pastor,**" the same Pauline disciple is the author of all three pastoral letters. He views Paul's teaching as the norm or standard for all Christians and writes primarily to combat false teachings, urging the church to reject any deviations from the apostolic heritage. An examination of the Pastor's interpretation of Pauline thought shows that he does not always use terms in the same way as his master, nor is he as vigorous and creative a thinker. Writing to preserve an inherited tradition and bolster the authority of an increasingly well-organized church, he tends to view Christian faith as a set of static doctrines rather than as the ecstatic experience of Christ that Paul knew.

Letters to Timothy

The first two pastorals are addressed to Timothy, the son of a Jewish mother and a Greek father (Acts 16:1), who served as Paul's missionary companion and trusted friend (1 Cor. 4:17; 16:10). According to Acts and Paul's authentic letters, Timothy was an important contributor to Paul's missionary campaigns in Greece and Asia Minor, a cofounder of churches in Macedonia, and later a diplomatic emissary to Philippi, Thessalonica, and Corinth. In listing him as coauthor of as many as six different letters, Paul (and perhaps also disciples who followed him) affirms Timothy's vital role in the expansion of Pauline Christianity (1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1; 2 Cor. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Philem. 1:1; Col. 1:1).

In the pastorals, however, Timothy is less a historical character than a literary symbol, representative of a new generation of believers to whom the task of preserving apostolic truths is entrusted. Youthful (postapostolic) Christians must take on the job of defending "wholesome doctrine" against devilish heresies (1 Tim. 4:2, 11–12).

1 Timothy

Organization The first letter to Timothy does not present us with a smooth progression of thought, so it makes sense to examine it in terms of topics rather than the somewhat haphazard sequence in which the author presents his material:

1. Timothy's duty to repress false teachings
2. Church order: the qualifications of bishops, deacons, and elders
3. The roles of women and slaves

Attacks on False Teachings (Heresies) As inheritor of the true faith, Timothy is to combat church members' wrong ideas (1:3). Because the Pastor, unlike Paul, does not offer a rational criticism of his opponents' errors, we do not know the exact nature of the beliefs being attacked. Some commentators suggest that the false teachers practiced an early form of Gnosticism, a cult of secret "knowledge" mentioned in 6:20, but the letter reveals too little about the heresies involved to confirm this theory.

Because the author describes the deviants as teaching "the moral law" and being wrongly preoccupied with "interminable myths and genealogies" (1:3–4, 7–9), many critics suppose that some form of Hellenistic Judaism is under attack. Practicing an extreme asceticism (severe self-discipline of the physical appetites), these persons forbid marriage and abstain from various foods (4:1–3). Gnostic practices took diverse forms, ranging from the kind of self-denial mentioned here to the libertine behavior Paul rebuked in Corinth, Galatia, and elsewhere. Timothy (and the pastorship he represents) must correct such misguided austerity by transmitting the correct Pauline teachings (4:11), thereby saving both himself and those who obey his orders (4:16).

Qualifications for Church Offices Invoking Paul's authority, the Pastor is eager to preserve sound doctrine through a stable church organization. His list of qualifications for **bishops** (overseers), **deacons** (assistants), and elders (the religiously mature leadership) implies a hierarchy of church offices much more rigidly stratified than was the case in Paul's day. Paul once used the terms "bishop" and "deacon" (Phil. 1:1), but presumably as designating areas of service rather than the specific ecclesiastical offices enumerated here. Although the author says that church officials must demonstrate all the virtues typical of Hellenistic ethical philosophy (3:2–23), he says nothing about their intellectual qualifications or possession of the Spirit. Rather than the spiritual gifts that Paul advocates, the Pastor's standards for church offices are merely hallmarks of social respectability. The Pastor's list of requirements for leadership in an increasingly institutionalized community indicates the distance his church has moved from early Christian origins. The historical Jesus, an unmarried itinerant prophet who stirred controversy and public criticism even in his hometown, would seem to be excluded from holding an official position in the Pastor's church. Nor would Paul himself—by choice unmarried and a lightning rod for in-church dissension, a catalyst for public riots, and a frequently arrested and imprisoned disturber of the peace—qualify as the Pastor's version of a responsible church leader (cf. 2 Cor. 10–13).

The Pastor regards the institution of the church—rather than the Spirit of Christ dwelling in believers—as "the pillar and bulwark of the truth" (3:15). In the writer's time, an organization administered by right-thinking leaders replaces the dynamic and charismatic fellowship of the Pauline congregations.

The Church Hierarchy In 1 Timothy, the church membership reflects the social order of the larger Greco-Roman society external to it. Bishops, deacons, and elders govern a mixed group composed of different social classes, including heads of households, masters, slaves, wives, widows, and children, all of whom are commanded to submit to their respective superiors.

Women Whereas Paul recognizes women as prophets and speakers (1 Cor. 11:5), the Pastor does not permit women to teach because the first woman, Eve, was weak-minded and tempted her husband to sin (2:8–15) (see Chapter 13). The detailed instruction on women's dress and conduct in 1 Timothy probably applies to public worship and parallels the restricted position assigned women in Greco-Roman society. A reflection of then-current social customs, it is not logically defensible or a timeless prescription limiting women's participation in Christian life.

In his discussion of the church's treatment of widows, the Pastor distinguishes between "true" widows who demonstrate their worth by good deeds and women who are unqualified for that status because of their youth or inappropriate conduct. Following Jewish law (Exod. 22:22; Deut. 24: 17–24), the church early assumed responsibilities for supporting destitute widows (Acts 6:1), but the author stipulates that widows must be sixty years old before they can qualify for financial assistance. Relatives must support underage widows (5:3–16). The author seems uninterested in the fate of young widows who have no family to help them.

As Christians are to pray for government rulers (2:1–3), so slaves are to recognize their duties to masters and obey them (6:1–2). Yet the rich and powerful are reminded to share their wealth (6: 17–19). Those ambitious to acquire riches are told that a passion for money is the cause of much evil, a source of grief and lost faith (6:9–10).

The letter ends with an admonishment to Timothy to guard the apostolic legacy given him. Anyone who disagrees with the Pastor's updated interpretation of Paul's doctrine is "a pompous ignoramus" (6:3).

2 Timothy

Of the three pastorals, 2 Timothy most closely resembles Paul's genuine letters. Although the letter is similarly concerned with refuting false teachings, its tone is more intimate and personal. Especially poignant are several passages in which the author depicts himself as abandoned by former associates and languishing alone in prison except for the companionship of Luke (1:15; 4:9–11, 16). Although these and other flashes of Paul's characteristic vigor and emotional fire (see 4:6–8, 17–18) lead some scholars to speculate that the work contains fragments of otherwise lost Pauline letters, such theories are not widely accepted.

The part of 2 Timothy with the best claim to Pauline authorship is the section ending the letter (4:6–22), in which the writer emulates the fluctuations between lofty thoughts and mundane practicalities so typical of the apostle. In the first part, he compares himself to a runner winning the athlete's coveted prize—not the Greek competitor's laurel crown, but a "garland of righteousness" justifying him on God's Judgment Day (4:6–8). Switching abruptly to practical matters, the author asks the recipient to remember to bring his books when he comes. In another quick change of subject, he complains that during his court hearing nobody appeared in his defense and that the testimony of one "Alexander the coppersmith" seriously damaged his case. Then, in a seemingly contradictory about face, the writer states that he has (metaphorically) escaped the "lion's jaws" and expects to be kept safe until the Parousia (4:13–18).

Although such rapid changes of subject and shifts from gloom to optimism characterize Paul's genuine correspondence, most scholars believe that the entire document is the Pastor's work. The more vivid passages are simply the writer's most successful homage to the apostle's memory.

In describing the false teachings within the church that he identifies as signs of the last days, the Pastor reveals that he is using Paul to predict conditions that characterize the writer's own time. During the world's last days (3:1), hypocrites insinuate their way into Christians' homes, corrupting their occupants. These pretenders typically prey upon women because, in the Pastor's insulting opinion, even when eager to learn, women lack the ability to understand true doctrine (3:6–8). Instead of the false teachings' being punished at the Second Coming, the Pastor implies, the mere passage of time will expose their errors (3:9).

As in 1 Timothy, the Pastor does not refute the heretics with logical argument but merely calls them names and lists their vices (3:1–6, 13; 4:3–4), duplicating the catalogues of misbehavior common in Hellenistic philosophical schools. Even believers do not adhere to healthy beliefs but, instead, tolerate leaders who flatter them with what they want to hear.

Whereas the church is the stronghold of faith in 1 Timothy, in 2 Timothy the Hebrew Bible is the standard of religious orthodoxy (correct teaching), confounding error and directing believers to salvation. Scripture also provides the mental discipline necessary to equip the believer for right action (3:15–17).

Concluding with his memorable picture of the apostle courageously facing martyrdom, the Pastor graciously includes all the faithful in Christ's promised deliverance. Not only Paul but all who trust in Jesus' imminent return will win the victor's crown at the Parousia (4:6–8).

Letter to Titus

Although it is the shortest of the pastorals, Titus has the longest salutation, a fulsome recapitulation of Paul's credentials and the recipient's significance (1:1–4). This highly formal introduction would be inappropriate in a personal letter from Paul to his friend, but it is understandable as the Pastor's way of officially transmitting Paul's authoritative instruction to an apostolic successor.

Titus The historical Titus, a Greek youth whom Paul refused to have circumcised (Gal. 2), accompanied the apostle on his missionary

tours of Greece, acting as Paul's emissary to reconcile the rebellious Corinthians (Gal. 2:1, 3, 10; 2 Cor. 8:6, 16–23). Like the "Timothy" of the other pastorals, however, "Titus" also represents the postapostolic church leadership, the prototype of those preserving the Pauline traditions. Consequently, the commission of "Titus" is to establish an orthodox and qualified ministry. The letter's chief purpose is to outline the requirements and some of the duties of church elders and bishops.

Organization Titus can be divided into two main sections:

1. Qualifications for the Christian ministry
2. Christian behavior in an ungodly world

Qualifications for the Christian Ministry The writer states that he left "Titus" in Crete, an ancient island center of Greek civilization, to install church assistants (elders) in every town (1:5). Such persons must be eminently respectable married men who keep their children under strict parental control (1:6). Besides possessing these domestic credentials, bishops (church supervisors) must also have a reputation for devotion, self-control, and hospitality (1:7–8). Again, the writer says nothing about the leaders' mental or charismatic gifts, so highly valued in the Pauline churches (2 Cor. 11–14).

One of the bishop's primary functions is to guard the received religion, adhering to established beliefs and correcting dissenters (1:7–9). Titus is the only book in the New Testament that uses the term **heretic** (3:10), which at the time of writing (early to mid-second century) probably meant a person who held opinions contrary to those of emerging church authority. Such dissenters are to be warned twice and then ignored (excluded from the church?) if they fail to change their ways (3:10–11).

Christian Behavior in an Ungodly World The Pastor reminds his readers that because they are Christians in a nonbelieving world they must live exemplary lives of obedience and submission to governmental authorities (3:1). Men and women, old and young, slaves and masters—all are to behave in a way that publicly reflects well on their religion (2:1–10). Christians must preserve an ethically pure community while awaiting Christ's return (2:13–14).

In a moving passage, the author contrasts the negative personality traits that many believers had before their conversion with the grace and hope for eternal life that they now possess (3:3–8). In counsel similar to that in the letter of James, he urges believers to show their faith in admirable and useful deeds and to refrain from "foolish speculations, genealogies, quarrels, and controversies over the Law" (3:9–10).

The Pastor's Contribution

Although compared to Paul's the Pastor's style is generally weak and colorless (except for some passages in 2 Tim.), the Pastor successfully promotes Paul's continuing authority in the church. His insistence that Paul's teaching, as he understood it, be followed and that church leaders actively employ apostolic doctrines to refute false teachers helped to ensure that the international Christian community would build its future on an apostolic foundation.

Although the Pastor values continuity, he does not seem to show an equal regard for continuing the individual revelations and ecstatic experiences of Christ's Spirit that characterized the Pauline churches. Regarding the "laying on of hands" as the correct means of conferring authority (2 Tim. 1:6), he would probably not welcome another like Paul who insisted that his private experience of Jesus—not ordination by his predecessors—validated his calling. Using Scripture, inherited doctrines, and the institutional church as guarantors of orthodoxy, the Pastor sees the Christian revelation as already complete, a static legacy from the past. He ignores Paul's injunction not to "stifle inspiration" or prophetic speech

(1 Thess. 5:19–20); his intense conservatism allows little room for future enlightenment.

Summary

Although it may shock modern sensibilities, innumerable ancient writers—Jewish, Greco-Roman, and Christian—practiced pseudonymity, composing books under the names of famous dead authors. In the decades following Paul's demise, several groups of Christians apparently contended for the right to claim the Pauline legacy and to use his posthumous authority to settle later church problems. Two letters, 2 Thessalonians and Colossians—seem to be much closer to genuine Pauline thought than Ephesians or the Pastorals, which emphasize the kind of church offices and institutional structure that evolved after his day.

Questions for Review

1. Define the term *pseudonymity* and explain its practice among Hellenistic-Jewish and early Christian writers. Which books of the New Testament do many scholars think are pseudonymous?
2. In what specific ways concerning Jesus' return does 2 Thessalonians differ from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians? What elements in the second letter make scholars suspect that it was written after Paul's day? Describe the conventional apocalyptic "signs" that the writer says must occur before the End.
3. Summarize the arguments for and against Paul's authorship of Colossians.
4. What factors cause scholars to doubt Paul's authorship of Ephesians? In this document, how are Christ and the church related? What does their union imply for believers? What is the significance of the author's emphasizing warfare with unseen spirits rather than the Parousia?
5. Describe the evidence that persuades most scholars that the pastorals were written by a later churchman. In what specific concerns do the pastorals reflect church organization and administration that are different from those existing in Paul's time? Why are these letters so concerned about holding to tradition and combating "heresy"?

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Analyze the similarities between the two Christian hymns quoted respectively in Philippians 2 and Colossians 1. Compare the view that humanity bears God's image (Gen. 1:27) with the similar language applied to Jesus (Col. 1:15). In what ways does the Colossians hymn apply the concepts of Israel's Wisdom tradition to Jesus?
2. Discuss the Pastor's views on women, children, and slaves. How does his prescription for internal church order reflect the hierarchical organization of the contemporary Greco-Roman society? What similarities and differences do you see between the character and behavior of Jesus and the Pastor's list of qualifications for church leaders? Would the historical Jesus, an unmarried itinerant prophet, have met the Pastor's standards for qualifying for church leadership? Would Paul himself ?
3. The pastoral epistles show the extent to which the dynamic and spirit-led fellowship of early Christian communities (30s–50s CE) has developed into a more rigidly structured church organization with an administrative hierarchy of offices and leaders (c. 90 CE and later). In your opinion, what advantages did the church gain by adopting the hierarchical structures of Roman society? What losses came with this organizational shift?

Terms and Concepts to Remember

anti-Christ
bishop
catholic epistles
Christology
Colossae
deacon
Epaphras
heresy
pastoral epistles
pseudonymity
Timothy
Titus

Recommended Reading

2 Thessalonians

Ascough, Richard S. "Thessalonians, Second Letter to." In K. D. Sakenfeld, ed., *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible,* Vol. 5, pp. 574–579. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009. Surveys arguments for and against the letter's authenticity.

Malherbe, Abraham J. *The Letters to the Thessalonians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary.*

Anchor Bible, Vol. 32b. New York: Doubleday, 2000. Defends Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians.

Von Dehsen, Christian D. "2 Thessalonians." In M. D. Coogan, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Books of the Bible,* Vol. 2, pp. 410–414. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Reviews arguments for and against authenticity, concluding that there is no scholarly consensus.

Colossians

Barth, Markus, and Blanke, Helmut. *Colossians.* Anchor Bible. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1995. A scholarly translation and analysis.

Dunn, James D. G. "Colossians, Letter to." In K. D. Sakenfeld, ed., *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible,* Vol. 1, pp. 702–706. Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 2006. A concise analysis of the work, suggesting the possibility of Pauline authorship.

———. *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text.* Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996. For advanced students.

O'Brien, P. T. *Colossians, Philemon.* Word Biblical Commentary 44. Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1982. Defends Pauline authorship of Colossians; includes the author's translation.

Schweizer, Eduard. *The Letter to the Colossians: A Commentary.* Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982. Less technical than the work by O'Brien; suggests that Timothy played a role in writing Colossians.

Ephesians

Barth, Markus, ed. and trans. *Ephesians.* Vols. 34 and 34a of the Anchor Bible. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1974. An extensive commentary that defends Pauline authorship.

Bruce, F. F. *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians.* New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1984.

Furnish, V. P. "Ephesians, Epistle to the." In D. N. Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary,* Vol. 2, pp. 535–542. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

Goodspeed, E. J. *The Meaning of Ephesians.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1933. An older but perceptive study arguing that Ephesians was written as a cover letter for the first collected edition of Paul's correspondence.

O'Brien, P. T. *The Letter to the Ephesians.* Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999. An insightful analysis of the letter's spiritual significance.

Turner, Max. "Ephesians, Letter to the." In K. D. Sakenfeld, ed., *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible,* Vol. 2, pp. 269–276. Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 2007. An informative survey of the book's major themes.

Wink, Walter. *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium.* New York: Galilee Doubleday, 1998. Interprets traditional biblical imagery about supernatural forces—angels and demons—as social/cultural assumptions and practices that inhibit God's rule in human society.

The Pastorals

D'Angelo, Mary Rose. "Timothy, First and Second Letters to." In K. D. Sakenfeld, ed., *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible,* Vol. 5, pp. 602–605. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009. Takes no stand on authorship, emphasizing instead the letters' contents, including their misogyny and attitude toward slavery.

Fiore, Benjamin. "1 Timothy," "2 Timothy," and "Titus." In M. D. Coogan, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Books of the Bible,* Vol. 2, pp. 422–430. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Offers a survey of the letters' contents, concluding that all three are pseudonymous.

Johnson, L. T. *The First and Second Letters to Timothy: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary.* Anchor Bible. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 2001. A strongly traditionalist interpretation, advocating Pauline authorship of the pastorals.

Levine, Amy-Jill, and Blickenstaff, Marianne, eds. *Feminist Companion to Paul: Deutero-Pauline Writings.* Feminist Companion to the New Testament and Early Christian Writings. Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2004.

Quinn, J. D., ed., and trans. *1 and 2 Timothy and Titus.* Vol. 35 of the Anchor Bible. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976. A translation with commentary.

———. "Timothy and Titus, Epistles to." In D. N. Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary,* Vol. 6, pp. 560–571. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

Pseudonymity

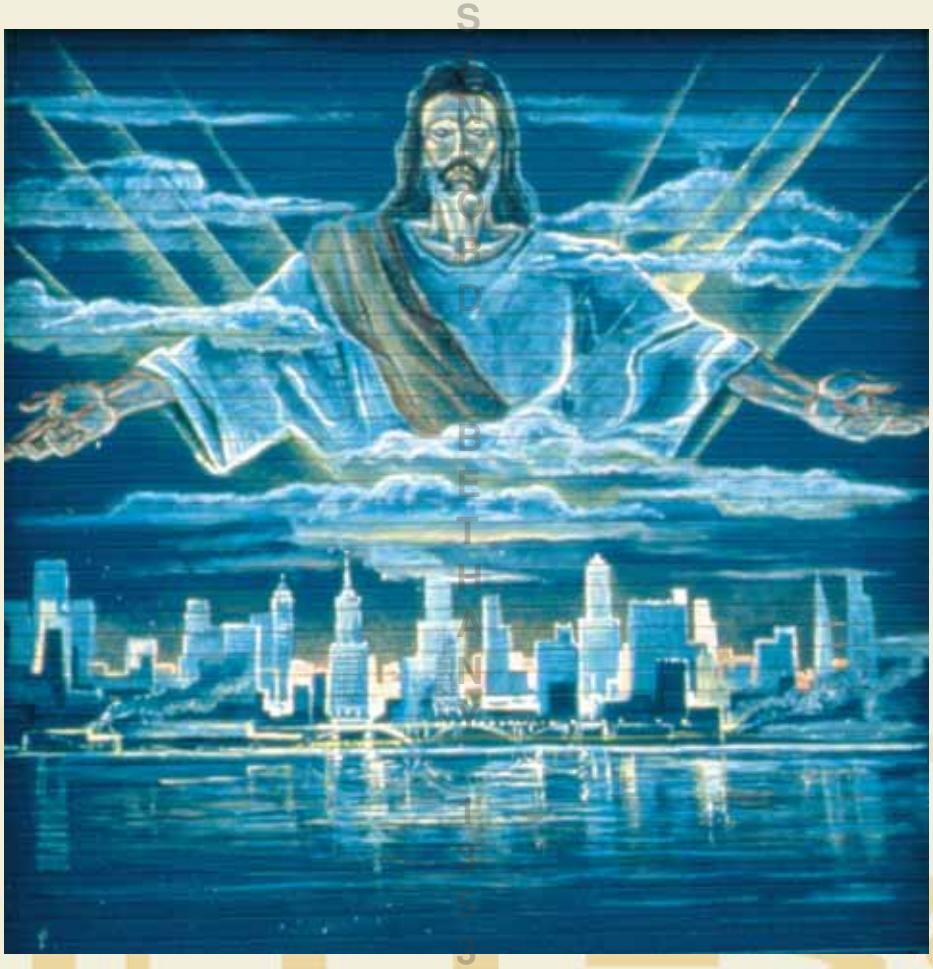
Ehrman, Bart. *Forged: Writing in the Name of God—Why the Bible's Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are.* San Francisco: HarperOne, 2011. Argues forcefully that many New Testament books are deliberate forgeries that successfully deceived the Christian community.

———. *Forgery and Counter forgery: The Use of Literary Deceit in Early Christian Polemics.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. Marshals detailed evidence to support the thesis that "the most distinctive feature of early Christian literature is the degree to which it was forged."

SANFORD, BETHANY 1353TS

PART SIX

General Letters and Some Visions of End Time



CHAPTER 18

General Letters on Faith and Behavior

Hebrews and the Catholic Epistles

The kind of religion which is without stain or fault . . . is this: to go to the help of orphans and widows in their distress and keep oneself untarnished by the world. James 1:27

Love cancels innumerable sins. 1 Peter 4:8 (cf. James 5:20)

Key Topics/Themes Addressed to believers scattered throughout the world, Hebrews and the other general epistles make the point that God's revelation through Jesus is final and complete. The very image of God's nature, Jesus now serves in heaven as an eternal High Priest and mediator for humanity (Hebrews). Believers must therefore adhere to a high standard of conduct, maintaining a true understanding of Jesus' Incarnation (1 John), practicing charitable acts (James), setting examples of ethical behavior for the world (1 Peter), and keeping alive their hope of the Second Coming (2 Peter).

Sandwiched between the theologically powerful Pauline letters and the mystifying symbolism of the Book of Revelation is a second collection of New Testament letters or letterlike documents—the Book of Hebrews and the seven **catholic** (general) **epistles.** Although commonly less emphasized in many contemporary church services, these eight documents provide an important counterweight to the historical dominance of Paul's thought, demonstrating that other voices in the early Christian community offered somewhat different but equally acceptable interpretations of Jesus' theological significance and of instruction in the Christian way of life. The fact that most documents in this section contain some element of the letter form—though few are true letters—suggests that their authors consciously imitated the literary genre that Paul had so effectively employed. The widespread influence of Paul's "weighty and powerful" correspondence (2 Cor. 10:10) apparently inspired the authors of Hebrews and the catholic epistles (or perhaps later editors) to frame their messages with letterlike greetings and/or a complimentary close (cf. Heb. 13:17–25). Unlike Paul's genuine letters, however, those in this unit of the canon are not addressed to individual congregations but are directed to the believing community as a whole.

Hebrews and the Catholic Epistles

Although some scholars argue that 1 Peter was written by the historical Peter, and James and Jude by Jesus' kinsmen, most scholars believe that this entire section of the New Testament is pseudonymous. In general, we do not know when or where these documents originated or, in most cases, to whom they were sent. A possible exception to this rule, the Teaching (Didache) of the Twelve Apostles (see Chapter 20) may have been compiled in Syria about 100 CE and is thus probably older than the documents ascribed to Peter or Jude.

Paul is also indirectly responsible for the canonical order in which editors eventually arranged the seven catholic epistles. In Galatians 2:9, he had briefly referred to the three "pillars" of the Jerusalem church as James (whom he identifies as "the Lord's brother"); Jesus' chief apostle "Cephas," also called Peter; and John, who with his brother, another James, was part of Jesus' inner circle (cf. Mark 3:16–17; 9:2). Hence, the epistles appear in this sequence: James; 1 and 2 Peter; 1, 2, and 3 John; and Jude (who identifies himself as "the brother of James"). Although called "epistles" (another term for letters), these short works encompass a wide variety of literary categories, ranging from wisdom literature (James) to theological essays (1 John).

Authors and Dates

Most of the catholic writings are linked not only by their attribution to leaders of the original Jerusalem church but also by the fact that collectively they are the last writings to be accepted into the New Testament canon. As late as the fourth century, Eusebius classified several as "doubtful" and noted that many churches did not accept them (*History* 3.3; 3.24.1; 3.24.18; 3.25.4; 3.39.6). Church writers do not even mention most of these epistles until almost 200 CE, and Jude, James, 2 Peter, and 3 John are typically absent from early lists of canonical books (see Chapter 2).

Near the end of the second century, the church began to associate many previously anonymous works with Jesus' apostles and their companions. This seems to have been the case with the catholic epistles, which scholars believe to include the latest-written documents in the New Testament.

Primary Concerns of the Late Canonical Authors

Writing in the late first century CE or early decades of the second, the authors of Hebrews and the catholic epistles address concerns that troubled the church in the generations following Paul's martyrdom. Whereas Paul's authentic letters, like the Gospel of Mark, glowed with eschatological urgency and warned of the imminent Parousia, the writers of this later period had to deal with diminishing hopes that Jesus would return soon. Roman imperial power had not—as the first generations of Christians so fervently hoped—come to an end. Virtually all the documents in this part of the canon repeatedly remind believers that Jesus' reappearance to judge the world—and them—is certain, but only one tackles the issue of the delayed Parousia head-on. The author of 2 Peter, which may be the last-written work to enter the New Testament canon, frankly acknowledges the problem, voicing the skeptics' complaints: "Where now is the promise of his coming? Our fathers have been laid to their rest, but still everything continues exactly as it has always been since the world began" (2 Pet. 3:4).

As generations of early Christians passed away, criticism of the core belief that Jesus would return to establish his kingdom during his original disciples' lifetime (cf. Mark 9:1; Matt. 24:34–35) may have perplexed many believers. Second Peter's response to such attacks asks us to remember the disparity between human sense of time and that of God, who dwells in eternity (3:1–15). Perhaps more important for the church's survival, virtually all the epistles' authors, including those of 1 and 2 Peter, affirm that the Parousia will indeed occur—and

that Christians must behave as if Jesus will appear tomorrow to judge their conduct. Encouraging believers to practice a strict ethical code, the author of 1 John points to contemporary developments in his own community—the appearance of supposed "antichrists"—as proof that "the last hour" has already arrived (1 John 2:18). (This tendency to interpret events that affected their congregations as evidence of fulfilled eschatological prophecy characterizes most New Testament writers from Matthew to the author of 2 Peter.)

Because they lived in the indefinitely prolonged interim between Jesus' ascension to heaven and his return to earth, the authors of Hebrews and the epistles struggle to provide guidance that will enable their audiences to overcome a host of trials and temptations. Among the many problems that disturbed the churches' peace were issues that involved both secular and doctrinal difficulties. Living as monotheists who could not participate in the Greco-Roman world's numerous religious festivals or social associations, Christians frequently endured harsh criticism from their neighbors and even sporadic persecution by local magistrates. Although at this time persecution was more commonly social than governmental, the oppression and public disapproval were real and a source of ongoing concern (see the discussion of 1 Peter below).

While they faced hostility from the outside world, the geographically separated churches simultaneously wrestled with internal dissension. The Johannine communities were wracked with disputes over doctrine and behavior, as were the churches that Jude and 2 Peter addressed. Spirits of prophecy and interpretation that had characterized Paul's congregations now apparently inspired ideas that church leaders condemned as "false teachings," resulting in admonition similar to that in the pastorals (see Chapter 17). Even members' apathy threatened the churches' health, as Hebrews' author reveals when he urges believers not to "stay away from our meetings, as some do" (Heb. 10:25). In perusing the books of this unit, readers will discover that many of the perplexities that beset Christians at the turn of the first and second centuries remain with us today.

The Book of Hebrews

The Book of Hebrews was written by an early Christian scholar who was equally well acquainted with the Hebrew Bible and with Greek philosophy. Combining scriptural interpretation with philosophical concepts, the work challenges readers as does no other New Testament book except Revelation. With the warning that he offers "much that is difficult to explain" (5:11), the writer—who does not identify himself—presents a dualistic view of the universe in which earthly events and human institutions are seen as reflections of invisible heavenly realities. Employing a popular form of Platonic thought, he assumes the existence of two parallel worlds: the eternal and perfect realm of spirit above and the inferior, constantly changing world below. Alone among New Testament authors, he attempts to show how Christ's sacrificial death links the two opposing realms of perishable matter and eternal spirit. He is the only biblical writer to present Jesus as a heavenly priest who serves as an everlasting mediator between God and humanity.

Authorship and Date

Hebrews is an elaborate sermon—or series of interlocking sermons—rather than a letter, but it ends with a postscript recalling one of Paul's missives (13:17–25). Although some early Christians attributed the work to Paul, many others recognized that the theology, language, and style of Hebrews were distinctly un-Pauline. (The ending comments and reference to Timothy [13:23] do not fit the rest of the work and may have been appended by a later copyist or editor.) Various commentators have speculated that the author may have been Barnabas, Priscilla, or Paul's eloquent co-worker Apollos of Alexandria.

Such attempts to link Hebrews with some well-known figure associated with first-generation Pauline Christianity have proven futile. Most scholars agree with Origen, a church scholar prominent during the early third century, who remarked that the writer's identity is known only to God. The book's date and place of composition are also unknown. Various critics suggest Alexandria, Rome, Antioch, Corinth, or some equally cosmopolitan center as the city of origin, with the time of writing estimated as between about 80 and 110 CE.

The Writer's Methods of Interpretation

Whoever he was, the anonymous author was a master of rhetoric (the art of speaking or writing persuasively). He uses excellent Greek and also shows familiarity with Hellenistic-Jewish methods of scriptural analysis and interpretation. This suggests to many scholars that the writer may have lived in Alexandria, a metropolis where Greek-educated Jews like Philo Judaeus developed highly sophisticated ways of making ancient biblical texts relevant to Greco-Roman culture. As expounded by Philo and other Alexandrine scholars, the Hebrew Bible became much more than a mere repository of legal commandments or a record of past events. To Philo and the author of Hebrews, it is an allegory in which earthly events symbolize heavenly realities.

Hebrews' thesis is that, through Jesus, God gives his ultimate revelation of spiritual reality and that Jesus offers the sole means by which humans can find salvation. The author examines selected passages from the Hebrew Bible—principally Genesis 14:18–20 and Psalm 110:4—to demonstrate Christ's unique role in the universe. In his view, the biblical texts can be understood only in the light of Christ's death and ascension into heaven. He thus gives the Hebrew Bible a strictly Christological interpretation **(typology),** explaining biblical characters and Torah regulations as prophetic "types," or models that foreshadow Jesus' theological significance.

Of special importance to the author is the Genesis figure of **Melchizedek,** a mysterious king-priest of Canaanite Salem to whom the patriarch Abraham gave a tenth of the goods he had captured in war (Gen. 14:18–20). Melchizedek becomes a prototype or prophetic symbol of Jesus, whom the author regards as both a king (Davidic Messiah) and a priest (like Melchizedek). In the author's interpretation, Melchizedek's story serves to prefigure Jesus' priesthood.

Purpose and Organization

The book's title—"To the Hebrews"—is not part of the original text; it may have been added by an editor who assumed that the writer's interest in Jewish ritual implied that he wrote for Jewish Christians. The term may apply equally well to Gentile recipients, however, and probably refers to "spiritual Israel," the Christian church at large. Whatever the intended audience, Hebrews' purpose is to urge believers to hold fast to their faith, remembering their former loyalty during persecution (10:32–34) and avoiding the pitfalls of apathy or indifference.

After an introduction (1:1–4), Hebrews is arranged in three main sections:

1. Christ, the image of God, superior to all other human or heavenly beings (1:5–4:16)
2. The Torah's priestly regulations foreshadowing Jesus' role as a priest like Melchizedek (5:1–10:39)
3. Believers exhorted to emulate biblical examples and act on faith in Jesus' supremacy (11:1–13:16)

Christ's Superiority to All Other Beings

Emphasizing his theme of Christ's superiority to all others, the author begins Hebrews by contrasting earlier biblical revelations with that made in the last days through the person of Jesus. Whereas God formerly conveyed his message in fragmentary form through the Hebrew prophets, in Jesus he discloses a complete revelation of his essential nature and purpose. As in Colossians and John's Gospel, Jesus is the agent

(or goal) of God's creative purpose and a perfect reflection of the divine being (1:1–4).

Echoing Paul's assertion that Jesus attained heavenly glory through obedient humility (Phil. 2), the author states that Jesus was perfected through suffering. As a perfectly obedient Son, he is greater than Moses, leading his followers, not to an earthly destination, but to God's celestial throne (3:1–4:16). Through him, God makes his complete and final revelation.

Christ—A Priest like Melchizedek

Asking his hearers to move beyond basic ideas and to advance in understanding (5:11–6:3), the author introduces his unparalleled interpretation of Jesus as an eternal High Priest, one foreshadowed by Melchizedek. To show that Christ's priesthood is superior to that of **Aaron,** Israel's first High Priest, and the Levites who assisted him at the **Tabernacle,** Hebrews cites the narrative about Abraham paying **tithes** to Melchizedek (14:18–20). Because Melchizedek blessed Abraham and accepted offerings from him, the writer argues, the king-priest of Salem was Abraham's superior. Furthermore, Abraham's descendants, the Levitical and Aaronic priests, also shared in the patriarch's homage to Melchizedek. Present in his ancestor's "loins" when Abraham honored Melchizedek, Aaron and all his priestly offspring also confessed their inferiority to Melchizedek (7:1–10). Melchizedek is thus acknowledged as the superior of Israel's Levitical priests by virtue of his priority in time.

The author now adds Psalm 110 to his explication of Genesis 14. He notes that Yahweh swore that his king, or "messiah," is both his son and an everlasting priest like Melchizedek (Ps. 110:4). Hebrews further argues that, because Genesis does not mention either ancestors or descendants for Melchizedek, the absence of human roots or connections implies that the king-priest is without either beginning or end—an eternal priest. The symbolic everlastingness of Melchizedek's priesthood is thus the prototype of Christ, who similarly remains a priest for all time (7:3, 21–24).

In biblical times, a priest's main function was to offer animal sacrifices to atone for the people's sins and to elicit God's forgiveness, a rite of **expiation** (appeasement of divine wrath). According to Hebrews, Jesus is both the priest and the sacrifice. His offering fulfills the reality of the Torah's required sacrifices, but it is superior to the old system because his life was perfected through suffering (5:8–9). Unlike the sacrifices offered at Israel's Tabernacle or Temple, which must be repeated endlessly to ensure divine approval, Jesus' sacrifice is made only once. It remains eternally effective and brings forgiveness and salvation to those accepting its efficacy (7:26–28).

Earthly Copy and Heavenly Reality

Hebrews employs the view that the universe is composed of two levels: a lower physical realm and a higher, unseen spirit world. The author envisions Israel's earthly ceremonies of sacrifice and worship as reflections, or copies, that parallel or correspond to invisible realities in heaven (8:5) (see Figure 18.1). He then cites the solemn ritual of the Day of Atonement, the one time of the year that the High Priest was permitted to enter the Tabernacle's innermost room, the Holy of Holies, where God's glory was believed to dwell. Interpreting the atonement ritual allegorically, the author states that the priest's annual entry into God's presence prophetically signified Christ's ascension to heaven itself. There, his life stands as an eternally powerful sacrifice, making humanity forever "at one" with God (8:1–6; 9:1–14).

Because his sacrifice surpasses those decreed under the old Mosaic Covenant, Jesus inaugurates a New Covenant with his shed blood. He acts as a permanent mediator, always pleading for humanity's forgiveness (7:24–25; 9:15–22). The writer repeatedly emphasizes that neither the Mosaic Tabernacle nor Herod's Temple in Jerusalem was intended to be permanent. Both sanctuaries are only copies of heavenly realities (9:23), mere "shadows, and no true image" of Christ's supreme priestly sacrifice (10:1).

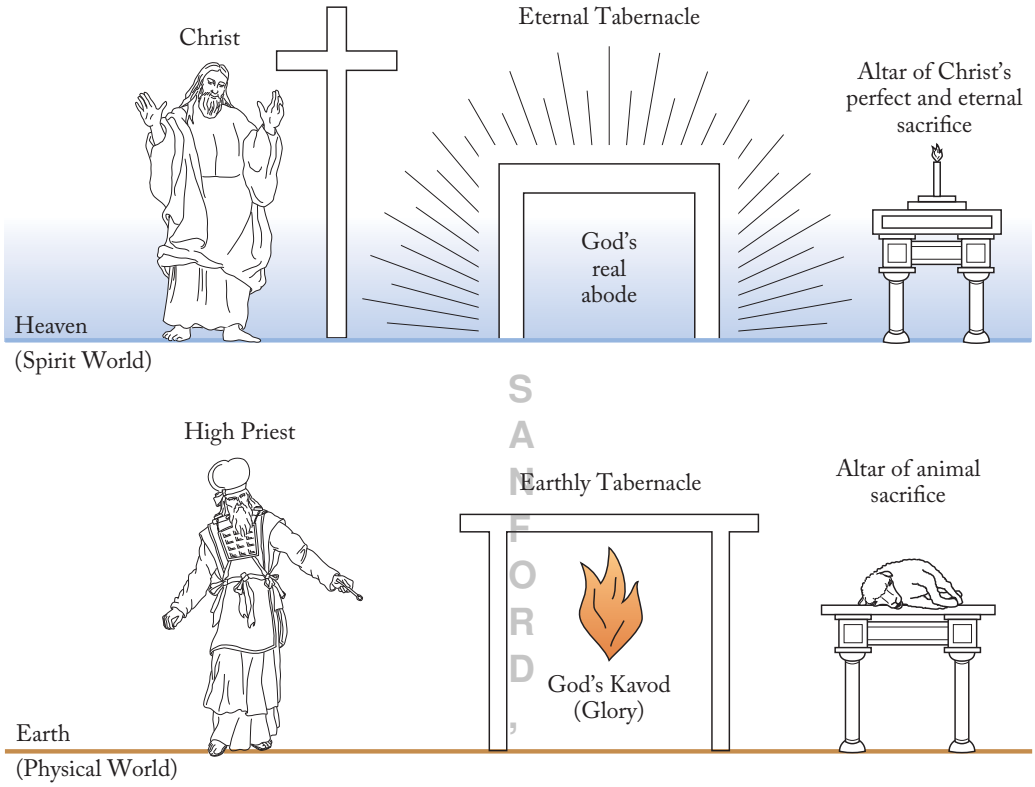


FIGURE 18.1 The Book of Hebrews' theory of correspondences. According to this theory, reality exists in two separate but parallel dimensions—the spirit world (heaven) and the physical world (earth). Material objects and customs on earth are temporary replicas, or shadows, of eternal realities in heaven. The author's notion that Jesus' "perfect" sacrifice has rendered Jewish worship obsolete is clearly partisan and represents a claim that many scholars find highly unacceptable.

An Exhortation to Remain Faithful

In Hebrews' tenth chapter, the author narrows his focus to address directly a group within his community about whom he is particularly anxious. This group apparently included people who had formerly endured severe persecution but who now were tempted to abandon the Christian faith (10:32–34). For the author, leaving "the [revealed] truth" was tantamount to repudiating Christ's sacrifice and thus condemning oneself to face a "terrifying expectation of judgment and a fierce fire which will consume God's enemies" (10:26–30). "It is a terrible thing," he reminds his audience, "to fall into the hands of the living God" (10:31). The fact that he immediately follows this dire threat by assuring his readers that the Parousia will occur imminently suggests that the potential deserters were persons disappointed in their apocalyptic hopes: "For 'soon, very soon' [in the words of Scripture], 'he who is to come will come; he will not delay'" (an unusual interpretation of Habakkuk 2:3, a text that does not involve either the first or second advent of a messiah) (10:27). In this and similar passages, the writer apparently fears that some members of his audience are suffering such a painful disillusionment about Christ's failure to return that they are prepared to forsake the church. The author's insistence that the Christian revelation is utterly final and his repeated warnings that persons who give up their faith also relinquish forever their hope of eternal life suggest that his purpose is to prevent **apostasy,** the renunciation of their previously held beliefs.

At this crucial point in his argument, the author offers the New Testament's only definition

of faith, which he renders in Platonic terms as the "certain[ty] of realities that we do not see." This belief in God's invisible world, the existence of which he has argued for throughout his sermon, "gives substance to our hopes" (11:1). (Unlike Paul, who always associates faith with a living trust in Jesus' saving power, Hebrews' author defines faith with no explicit reference to Christ.) He then unfolds a panorama of prominent figures from the Hebrew Bible, from Abel and Enoch to Sarah, wife of Abraham, and Rahab, the Canaanite prostitute who hospitably sheltered Israelite spies. According to the writer, all of these ancient characters expressed their loyalty to God in a distant era when they had only a dim preview of heavenly realities. By contrast, today's believers now possess a complete understanding of God's plan: that the ancient faithful could not receive their reward except "in company with [present Christians]." The latter must therefore demonstrate an even higher level of trust in God and his promises (11:2–40). Christian faith must now include not only a recognition that Jesus invisibly reigns as everlasting king, priest, and intercessor but also total confidence in his eventual return in glory.

Evoking the metaphor of athletic competition, the author urges believers to compete the race they had previously entered, fixing their sights on Jesus' example of endurance, a loyal persistence that won him a position "at the right hand" of God's throne (12:1–2). Observing that none in his community had yet been required to shed their blood for Jesus' sake, the author encourages them not to fear future persecution, for, as legitimate children of God, the Father "disciplines" them (12:3–13).

As if to stiffen the resolve of would-be apostates, defectors from the church, the writer again reminds them of the contrast between the two covenants that God concluded with humankind. In the first, Moses mediated the agreement amid blazing fire, earthquakes, and other terrifying phenomena. Whereas inauguration of the first covenant took place on earthly Mount Sinai, the "new covenant" that Jesus mediates is established in the ultimate reality of heaven itself, where God is manifest in infinitely more awe-inspiring wonders. If God, who "is a devouring fire," levied the death penalty on disobedient Israelites at Sinai, how much more severely will he punish those who fail to keep faith in his supreme self-revelation (12:18–29).

Several scholars propose that Hebrews' target audience included Jewish Christians who may have considered returning to their ancestral religion, perhaps as a result of the unexpectedly long delay in the Parousia. The author's repeated declarations of Jesus' superiority to all biblical figures, both human leaders like Moses and the angelic beings who populate the heavenly court, would serve to remind this group that God now relates to humanity exclusively through Israel's Messiah, Jesus. His assertion that all the great heroes and heroines of faith in the Hebrew Bible looked forward to the reality now embodied in Christ similarly encourages believers, both Jewish and Gentile, to carry on the same great tradition as Israel's faithful leaders.

Urging believers to lead blameless lives of active good deeds, the author reminds them that Jesus Christ is "the same yesterday, today, and for ever." This is another powerful reason to regard this world, with its temptations and troubles, as a temporary trial resolved in the light of eternity (13:1–9). Christians have no permanent abode on earth but seek the unseen and perfect city above as their life's goal (13:14).

Judaism and Christianity

With its declaration that Jesus' sacrifice has rendered Israel's older system of sacrificial offerings unnecessary, Hebrews consistently argues for the superiority of Jesus as God's ultimate High Priest who now acts as sole intermediary between God and humanity. Some contemporary Christians have interpreted Hebrews' thesis to mean that the New Covenant that Christ initiated has *superseded* or replaced God's Old Covenant with Israel. In its extreme form, this notion of *supersessionism* claims that God,

angry with Israel for rejecting his Messiah, has in turn repudiated his original covenant people and established the Christian church in their place, making it the New Israel. Historically, this notion of a rejected Israel and triumphant church has led to widespread Christian discrimination against and persecution of Jews, culminating in the Holocaust of the 1940s.

As we have seen, however, Hebrews' author does not advocate so irrevocable a disconnection between Judaism and Christianity. Although he, like Matthew, regards the Jewish Scriptures as a Christological resource, citing biblical texts that he believes foreshadow Christ's role as both holy priest and royal messiah, he also emphasizes the unbroken continuity between the Mosaic dispensation and that which Jesus concluded. In Romans, Paul had made clear that the New Covenant is God's extension of his special partnership with Israel to include Gentiles (Rom. 9–11). In Hebrews, the writer focuses instead on Jesus' fulfillment of biblical promises, arguing that even the priestly rituals of the Tabernacle were prophetic of Christ's cosmic significance. Regarding Jesus as the climax of God's purpose for Israel, the author sees not replacement but culmination.

James

Authorship

Addressing his work to "the Twelve Tribes dispersed throughout the world" (presumably "spiritual Israel," the international church), the author calls himself "James, a servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ." He does not claim apostolic rank or mention a kinship with Jesus, but church tradition identifies him as the person whom Paul calls "James the Lord's brother" (Gal. 1:19), the principal leader of Palestinian Jewish Christianity between about 50 and 62 CE. He was a devout respecter of the Mosaic Torah and was known to his fellow Israelites as "James the Righteous." Despite his high reputation among both Jews and Christians, however, he was illegally executed about 62 CE.

If the author is Jesus' brother (or close relative), it is strange that he rarely mentions Jesus and almost never refers to his teachings. As a man who had known Jesus all his life (Mark 6:3) and had seen the risen Lord (1 Cor. 15:7), he might be expected to use his personal acquaintance with Jesus to lend authority to his instructions. The fact that his writing contains virtually nothing about Jesus suggests that the author did not personally know him and consequently could not have been a member of Jesus' family (see Box 12.3). (For a defense of the author's relationship to Jesus, see Johnson in "Recommended Reading.")

Two qualities of this document offer general clues to its author's background. Besides being written in excellent Greek (not something a Galilean native was likely to be capable of), it repeatedly echoes Greek editions of the Hebrew Bible, especially the Book of Proverbs and later Hellenistic wisdom books like Ecclesiasticus and the Wisdom of Solomon. Both James's subject matter and his language reflect a deep interest in Greek-Jewish wisdom literature. This fact suggests that the author is a Hellenistic-Jewish Christian concerned about applying the principles of Israel's later sages to problems in his Christian circle. The writer may have lived in any Greek-speaking Jewish community in Syria, Palestine, Egypt, or Italy.

Form and Organization

Except for the brief opening salutation, the work bears no similarity to a letter. It is instead a collection of proverbs, commentaries, scriptural paraphrases, and moral advice. As a literary genre, James is the only New Testament document resembling the compilations of wise counsel found in the Hebrew Bible.

Lacking any principle of coherence, James leaps from topic to topic and then back again. The only unifying theme is the author's view of the purpose and function of religion (1:26–27),

which he defines as typically Jewish good works, charitable practices that will save the soul and cancel a multitude of sins (5:19–20). Following the author's order, we examine several of his main interests:

1. The nature of trials and temptations (1:2–27)
2. Respect for the poor (2:1–13)
3. "Works," or good deeds, as the only measure of faith (2:14–26)
4. Control of speech (3:1–12)
5. Warnings against violent ambition and exploitation of the poor (4:1–5:6)

Recipients and Date

From the topics covered, this book seems directed at Jewish-Christian groups that had existed long enough to have developed a sense of class distinction within the church. Wealthy Christians snub poorer ones (2:1–9), fail to share their material possessions (2:14–26), engage in worldly competition (4:1–10), and exploit fellow believers of the laboring class (4:13–5:6). These socially stratified and economically divided communities suggest a time long after that of the impoverished Jerusalem commune described in Acts 2. Most scholars date the work in the late first century, considerably after the historical James's martyrdom in the early 60s.

Trials and Temptations

In this introductory section (1:2–27), James articulates a philosophy of human experience that puts his ethical advice in perspective. Dealing with the twin problems of external suffering and internal temptations to do wrong, the author offers insight into God's reasons for permitting evil to afflict even the faithful. "Trials" (presumably including persecutions) are potentially beneficial experiences because they allow the believer the opportunity to demonstrate faith and fortitude under pressure, thus strengthening character. To help Christians endure such trials, God grants insight to persons who pray for it single-mindedly and never doubt that God will provide the understanding necessary to maintain faith.

Arguing that the Creator is not responsible for tests of faith or private temptations to sin, James declares that God, "untouched by evil," does not tempt anyone. Human temptation arises from within through the secret cultivation of forbidden desire that eventually inspires the act of "sin," which in turn breeds death (1:12–15). In contrast, God is the source of perfection (1:17) and the origin of life (1:12). In this miniature theodicy (defense of God's goodness despite the world's evil), the writer insists that God is not responsible for injustice or undeserved suffering. Society's evils result from purely human selfishness. If believers resist evil, God grants them the power to drive away even the devil (4:7–8).

The only New Testament writer to define religion, James describes it as the active practice of good works, an imitation of the divine benefactor who sets the example of generosity (1:16). The religion God approves is practical: helping "orphans and widows" and keeping "oneself untarnished by the world" (1:27). In James's two-part definition, the "orphans and widows" are Judaism's classic symbols of the defenseless who are God's special care, and "the world" represents a society that repudiates God. Thoroughly Jewish in its emphasis on merciful deeds, James's "true religion" cannot be formalized by doctrine, creed, or ritual (cf. Matt. 25:31–46).

Respect for the Poor

Addressing a social problem that plagues virtually every community, whether religious or secular, James denounces all social snobbery. Christians must make the poor feel as welcome in their midst as the rich and powerful (2:1–13). Noting that it is the wealthy who typically oppress the church, James reminds his audience that the poor will inherit "the kingdom" and that insulting them is an offense against God. Interestingly, the author does not use Jesus' teaching to emphasize God's gracious

intent to reward those now poor but instead quotes from the Hebrew Bible. If believers do not love their fellow human beings (Lev. 19:18), they break all of God's laws, for to fail to keep one precept is to disobey the entire Torah (2:10).

Good Works as the Only Measure of Faith

In James's most famous passage (2:14–26), the author exposes the futility of persons who claim they have faith but do not follow the practical religion of good works. To James, belief that fails to inspire right action is "dead." Only "deeds"—serving the "orphans and widows" and others suffering comparable need—can demonstrate the reality of faith.

Many interpreters see this section as an attack on Paul's doctrine of salvation through faith (the apostle's rejection of "works" of Torah obedience in favor of trust in God's saving purpose in Christ; see the discussions of Galatians and Romans in Chapter 15). Like Paul, James cites the Genesis example of Abraham to prove his point, but he gives it a strikingly different interpretation. James asserts that it was Abraham's action—his willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac—that justified him. The writer's conclusion is distinctly un-Pauline: "a man is justified by deeds and not by faith in itself" (2:24). With its implication that one earns divine approval through hard work and service to others, this conclusion seems to contradict Paul's assertion that salvation comes only through God's grace, accepted on trust (faith) (see Gal. and Rom. 1–8).

James's conclusion that faith without action is as dead as a corpse without breath (2:26) may appear to repudiate Paul's primary teaching. Many scholars, however, regard it as a necessary corrective to a common misapplication of Pauline doctrine. It must be remembered that although Paul labored to the point of exhaustion serving others he did not see his "works" as the means God provided for his "justification." Martin Luther doubted the validity of James's argument, describing the work as "strawlike" for its failure to recognize the primacy of divine grace. In its canonical function, however, James serves as a reminder to Christians that faith—which he apparently regards as a set of beliefs—must be expressed through diligent service to the poor and aid to the downtrodden.

Controlling the Tongue

Like earlier writers in the Hebrew wisdom tradition, James underscores the importance of self-control in speech (3:1–12; cf. Prov. 15:1–4, 26, 28; Ecclus. 5:11–6:1; 28:13–26). The tongue is a fire fed by the flames of hell (3:6), paradoxically both the instrument of divine praise and the organ of destructive gossip. Contrasting its abuses with spiritual wisdom, James emphasizes the constructive, peace-enhancing quality of the latter (3:13–18).

Warnings Against Ambition and Exploitation

True wisdom produces peace and harmony; James's recipients, in contrast, are divided by envy, ambition, and conflict. Their ambitious pursuit of unworthy goals makes them God's enemy (4:3–4). Boastful of their financial successes, they forget that their continued existence depends on God's patience and mercy. Christian merchants and landowners are the author's prime target in the New Testament's most incisive attack on the rich (4:13–5:4). Those whose wealth gives them power over their economic inferiors have exploited it shamelessly. Without conscience, wealthy employers have defrauded their workers, delaying payment of wages on which the laboring poor depend to live. Such injustice outrages the Creator, who views the luxury-loving exploiters as overfed animals ripe for slaughter (see Box 18.1).

Reminding his audience that the Lord will return (5:7), presumably to judge those who economically murder the defenseless (5:6), James ends his sermon on a positive note for any who have strayed from the right path. Sinners and others who are "sick," perhaps spiritually as

BOX 18.1 Biblical Views on Wealth

James's tirade against wealthy Christians may shock some readers, but it is consistent both with Jesus' pronouncements on riches in the Synoptic Gospels and with prophetic denunciations of economic greed in the Hebrew Bible. Part of the Bible's (sometimes) negative attitude toward wealth stems from a widespread belief in the ancient world that the supply of wealth was limited and that one person's acquisition of material goods must necessarily be at the expense of others. Thus the prophet Isaiah violently condemned entrepreneurs who ruthlessly acquired other people's property, perhaps foreclosing on loans during times of drought or famine:

> Shame on you! you who add house to house
> and join field to field,
> until not an acre remains,
> and you are left to dwell alone in the land.
> (Isa. 5:8)

Jesus' parables of the greedy "fool" who obsessively acquires possessions (Luke 12:16–20) and of the "rich man" who apparently ignores the starving poor (Luke 16:19–31) make the same point: Wealth that is unshared with the needy brings divine condemnation because "you cannot serve God and Money" (Luke 16:13). Specifically, James excoriates the rich who fail to pay living wages to their hired laborers. He also offers the eschatological key to interpreting the New Testament writers' attitude toward amassing wealth: "you have piled up wealth in an age that is near its close" (James 5:4). With the End at hand, the pursuit of riches is not only pointless but offensive to God. (For a contrasting view that presents material affluence as evidence of divine favor, see the list of secular blessings promised a faithful Israel in Deuteronomy 28:1–14; compare Proverbs 3:16; 10:22.)

well as physically, can hope for recovery. God's healing grace operates through congregational prayer for the afflicted. A good person's prayer has the power to rescue a sinner from death and to erase countless sins (5:13–20).

1 Peter

Like James, 1 Peter is ascribed to one of the three Jerusalem "pillars." The two works have other points in common as well, including similar convictions about proper Christian behavior and a shared belief that spiritual gifts like love and prayer can wipe out sin (James 5:20; 1 Pet. 4:8). Both also refer to social discrimination, and even persecution, against believers (James 1:2–8; 5:7–11; 1 Pet. 1:6–7; 4:12–19). A philosophy of peaceful submission and patience during trials and tests of faith characterizes both documents.

Authorship and Date

The majority of scholars also agree that 1 Peter resembles James in being pseudonymous, the work of a later Christian writing in Peter's name. This scholarly consensus is based on several factors, ranging from the elegant Greek style in which the epistle is composed to the particular social circumstances to which it alludes. As an Aramaic-speaking Galilean fisherman who had little formal education (Acts 4:13), the historical Peter seems unlikely to have produced the work's exceptionally fine Greek. Critics defending Peter's authorship note that the epistle was written "through Sylvanus [Silas]" (5:12), perhaps the same Sylvanus who accompanied Paul on some of his missionary journeys (Acts 15:22) and who presumably was skilled at preaching to Hellenistic audiences. According to the minority theory, Sylvanus acted as Peter's secretary, transforming his Aramaic dictation into sophisticated Greek.

Regarding the argument that Peter used an amanuensis as unverifiable, most scholars conclude that too many other factors combine to militate against a Petrine origin. If Peter—a member of Jesus' inner circle—was the author, why does he not reveal personal knowledge of Jesus' teachings, as an apostle would be expected to do? If Peter wrote the work shortly before he became a victim of Nero's persecution in Rome (mid-60s CE), as defenders of the work's genuineness maintain, why does he address the letter to churches in Asia Minor (1:1)? Historians can find no evidence that Nero's campaign against Christians extended into the provinces.

According to some interpreters, the epistle's references to believers' troubles (1:6) may mean nothing more than the social discrimination and hostility Roman society accorded many early Christians. Other commentators explain the "fiery ordeals" (4:12–13) as the public ill treatment of some Asia Minor believers under the emperor Domitian (c. 95 CE) or the more severe persecution under Trajan (c. 112 CE). According to 1 Peter, believers are punished merely for bearing Christ's name (4:14–16), a situation that does not seem to have characterized Nero's era but that does accord with the policies of his successors. Letters exchanged between the emperor Trajan and Pliny the Younger, his appointed governor of Bithynia, one of the provinces of Asia Minor to which 1 Peter is addressed, seem to reflect the same conditions the epistle describes (Pliny, *Letters* 97) (see Figure 18.2). For that reason, many scholars favor a date in the early second century for the epistle, though scholars do not yet fully agree.

A date after 70 CE is indicated by the author's greetings from "her who dwells in Babylon" (5:13). "Her" refers to the writer's church (2 John 1), and "Babylon" became the Christian code name for Rome after Titus destroyed Jerusalem, thus duplicating the Babylonian Empire's infamous desecration of the holy city (587 BCE). As an archetype of the ungodly nation, "Babylon" is also Revelation's symbol of Rome (Rev. 14:8; 18:2). Most critics assume that 1 Peter originated in the capital, the traditional site of Peter's martyrdom.

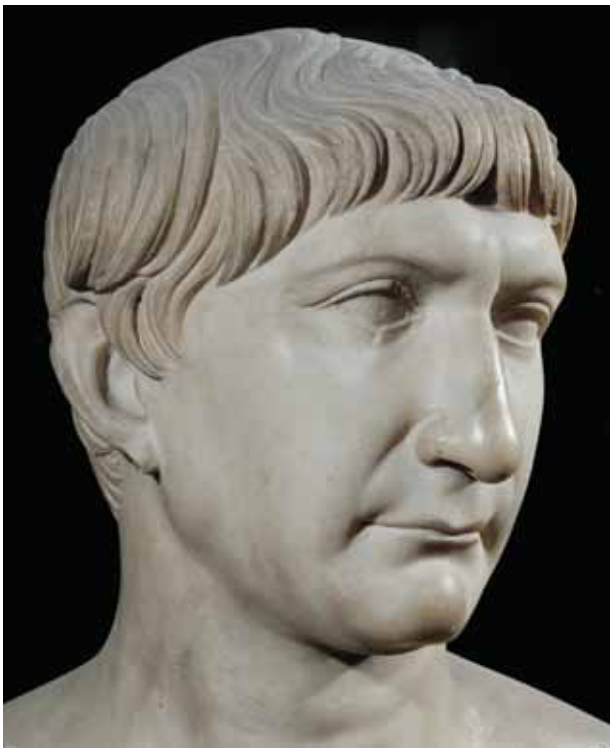


FIGURE 18.2 Bust of Trajan (98–117 CE). Under Trajan, the Roman Empire reached its greatest geographical extent, stretching from Britain in the northwest to Mesopotamia (Iraq) in the east. Pliny the Younger wrote to Trajan about the proper method of handling Christians. The emperor replied that he opposed anonymous accusations and ordered that accused persons who demonstrated their loyalty to the state by making traditional sacrifices should not be prosecuted.

Purpose and Organization

Although Peter probably did not write this epistle, the early church recognized its ethical value by adopting it into the canon. The author's purpose is to encourage believers to hold fast to their integrity, as Christians like Peter did in Nero's time, and to promote Christian ethics. He urges the faithful to live so blamelessly that outsiders can never accuse them of anything illegal or morally reprehensible. If one endures legal prosecution, it should be only "as a Christian" (4:14–16).

Although many scholars formerly regarded 1 Peter as a baptismal sermon, to which editors later attached an opening (1:1–2) and conclusion (4:12–5:14) to give it the formal appearance of a letter, this interpretation has been generally abandoned. The writer does allude to his recipients as "new born infants" (2:2) whom God has granted a "new birth" (1:3; cf 1:23), as if they had been only recently baptized, but the significance of baptism is not his main theme. Some commentators regard the trials and sufferings inherent in leading a Christian life in a generally hostile society as the author's principal concern (see below). Still others emphasize the importance of hope (cf. 1:13). Taken as a whole, the epistle seems to posit an intimate parallel between the life and sufferings of Christ and the present experience of his followers, who endure similar hardship and persecution but who can also look forward to sharing in Christ's post resurrection "splendor" (1:6–12). As recipients of what Israel's prophets only dimly foresaw, the faithful, through the Holy Spirit, now enjoy an understanding of God's purpose that even angels may envy (1:12).

As a basic summary of Christian ideals and ethics, 1 Peter can be divided into three sections:

1. The privileges and values of the Christian calling (1:3–2:10)
2. The obligations and responsibilities of Christian life (2:11–4:11)
3. The ethical meaning of suffering as a Christian (4:12–5:11)

The Privileges and Values of the Christian Calling

Addressing believers who had not known the historical Jesus, Peter stresses the rarity and inestimable value of the faith recently transmitted to them. They must regard their present trials and difficulties as opportunities to display the depth of their commitment and the quality of their love (1:3–7). By remaining faithful, they will attain the salvation of which the Hebrew prophets spoke (1:9–12). Proper appreciation for Christ's sacrifice, which makes him the "living stone" of the heavenly temple, will also make believers a living part of the eternal sanctuary (2:4–8). Christians, including Gentiles, are the new "chosen race"—"a royal priesthood, a dedicated nation, and a people claimed by God for his own" (2:9–10).

The Obligations and Responsibilities of Christian Life

Scholars have noted that 1 Peter contains many Pauline ideas, particularly on matters of Christian behavior and obedience to the Roman state. In the second section (2:11–4:11), the author focuses on the responsibilities and moral conduct of God's people, who should act in a way that even nonbelievers admire (2:12). Echoing Romans 13, 1 Peter advises peaceful submission to governmental authorities (3:13–15). In the writer's social and political hierarchy, slaves and servants are subject to their masters (2:18), and wives to their husbands (3:1–2). Those who suffer unjustly must bear it as Jesus bore his sufferings (1:19–25; 3:13–18; 4:1–5).

In alluding to Christ's crucifixion, the author includes two fascinating references to Jesus' descent into the Underworld (Hades), presumably during the interval between his death and his resurrection (3:18–20; 4:6). Suggesting the existence of a rich early Christian lore surrounding Jesus' posthumous experiences, Peter's brief allusions inspired a later tradition that after his death Jesus entered hell and rescued the souls of faithful Israelites who had been imprisoned there before the way to heaven was open (see Box 18.2).

The Ethical Meaning of Suffering as a Christian

References to suffering occur throughout 1 Peter, but the author does not directly address the meaning of suffering as a Christian until the third part of his epistle (4:12–5:11). In his introduction, he notes that his audience

BOX 18.2 Jesus' Descent into the Underworld

Only the author of Luke-Acts describes Jesus' post resurrection ascent to heaven (Acts 1:10–11), and only the Petrine epistles* explicitly refer to a tradition about Jesus' postmortem descent into the Underworld:

> In the body he was put to death; in the spirit he was brought to life. And in the spirit he went and made his proclamation to the imprisoned spirits. They had refused obedience long ago while God waited patiently in the days of Noah . . .
> (1 Pet. 3:19–20)

According to a common interpretation, the "imprisoned spirits" are the "sons of the gods" (presumably angels) who "fell" from heaven when they trespassed divinely set boundaries by mating with the fair "daughters of men," thus producing "the heroes of old, men of renown" (Gen. 6:1–4). Although Genesis says nothing about the divine "sons'" subsequent fate, extrabiblical tradition states that God had confined these rebels in a dark and fiery prison, where they awaited the final judgment (1 Enoch 6–10). The author of 2 Peter apparently adopts that tradition, declaring that "God did not spare the angels who sinned, but consigned them to the dark pit of hell" (2:4). (The word here translated as "hell" is *Tartarus,* in Greek myth the subterranean dungeon housing fallen gods; see Box 4.1, "The Three-Story Universe.") In some views, 1 Peter's cryptic allusion to preaching "the Gospel" to "the dead" (4:6) refers to Jesus' "harrowing of Hell," when he descended into the Underworld to offer a message of redemption to persons who had perished before his death and resurrection had made salvation possible. (For a discussion of pre-Christian gods and heroes, such as Dionysus and Orpheus, who died, descended into Hades' realm, and then ascended to immortal life in heaven, see Chapter 4.)

*Ephesians may indirectly allude to the descent tradition (Eph. 4:10).

presently endures "trials of many kinds," tests of character that he compares to the process by which a refiner's fire separates pure gold from dross (1:6–7). In chapter 4, he reminds believers that because they are Christ's disciples they must expect to suffer as he did—and to acquire a mental attitude like his, voluntarily submitting to the divine will. Because "the end of all things" is near, Christians must lead "an ordered and sober life," ready for "the fiery ordeal" that lies before them (4:7, 12). Whatever form such persecution takes, they must accept it with "joy," for sharing Christ's pain also means sharing in his imminent "glory" (4:13–14). "If anyone suffers as a Christian," it should be welcomed as an opportunity to "confess [Jesus'] name" and thus honor God (4:16).

The author interprets Christians' present afflictions as evidence that "the [final] judgment" has already begun, starting with the church, "God's own household." If the righteous are but narrowly saved, what will happen to the wicked (4:17–19)? In this crisis, elders must shepherd the flock with loving care; younger people must submit humbly to their rule (5:1–7). Everyone must remain alert because the devil, "like a roaring lion, prowls round looking for someone to devour." The faithful who resist him will partake of Christ's reward (5:8–11).

Jude

Placed last among the general epistles, Jude is less a letter than a tract denouncing an unidentified group of heretics. Its primary intent is to persuade the (also unidentified) recipients

to join the writer in defending orthodox Christian traditions (v. 3). Rather than specify his opponents' doctrinal errors or refute their arguments, the writer instead threatens the heretics with apocalyptic punishment drawn from both biblical and nonbiblical sources.

Authorship and Date

The author refers to himself as Jude (Judas), a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James (v. 1)—and presumably also a kinsman of Jesus (Matt. 13:55; Mark 6:3). According to Eusebius, Jude, whom he describes as "the brother, humanly speaking, of the Savior," left descendants who played an important role in the Jerusalem church even after the Romans destroyed the city in 70 CE. Eusebius quotes an older historian, Hegesippus, who reported that during Domitian's reign the emperor ordered Jude's two grandsons to appear before him. Worried that their Davidic ancestry might make them potential leaders of another Jewish uprising, Domitian released the two when they demonstrated that they were only hardworking peasants with no pretensions to royalty (*History* 3.20) (see Box 12.3).

Scholars believe that Jude is not the work of Jesus' "brother" but rather is a pseudonymous work that entered the canon because of its presumed association with the Lord's family. Like James, the author shows no personal familiarity with Jesus and cites none of his characteristic teachings. He refers to Christianity as a fixed body of beliefs that the faithful already possess (v. 3) and to the apostles as prophets of a former age (vv. 17–18). This indicates that the book was composed significantly after the historical Jude's time. Most scholars suggest a date between about 100 and 125 CE.

Style and Content

The letter of Jude represents a kind of rhetoric known as **invective**—an argument characterized by verbal abuse and insults. Without describing their teachings, Jude calls the heretics "brute beasts" (v. 10), "enemies of religion" who have wormed their way into the church to pervert it with their "licentiousness" (v. 4). A "blot on [Christian] love feasts" (v. 12), they are doomed to suffer divine wrath as did Cain, Balaam, Korah, and other villains of the Hebrew Bible. Because the author does not try to explain his reasons for disagreeing with his opponents, but merely calls them names, accuses them of immorality, and predicts their future destruction, Jude has been called the least theologically creative book in the New Testament.

Apocalyptic Judgment

Jude views the heretics' misbehavior as fulfilling the apostles' predictions about End time (v. 18). Because their **apostasy** proves the nearness of the Last Judgment (an idea also expressed in 1 John 2:18), Jude reminds his audience of earlier punishments of the wicked, citing the plagues in Egypt (v. 5), the fallen angels of Genesis (v. 6), and the fiery destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (vv. 6–7).

Use of Noncanonical Writings Jude is the only New Testament writer to go beyond the Hebrew Bible and quote directly from the **Pseudepigrapha,** Jewish religious works not included in the biblical canon. Citing the Book of 1 Enoch (1:9) verbatim, Jude reproduces a passage describing the Lord's negative judgment on "the ungodly" (v. 15). From copies of Enoch preserved among the Dead Sea Scrolls, we know that the Essenes studied the work. Jude's quotation, as well as several other allusions to the work (1 Enoch 1:1–9; 5:4; 18:12, 14–16; 27:2; 60:8; 93:2), suggests that some early Christian groups also regarded Enoch as authoritative.

In addition, Jude's allusion to a postbiblical legend about the archangel Michael contending with the devil for Moses' body (v. 9) may be taken from the incompletely preserved Assumption of Moses, another late noncanonical work. (When a later writer incorporated much of Jude into chapter 2 of 2 Peter, he deleted all references to the noncanonical writings.)

Exhortation to the Faithful Jude's advice to his orthodox recipients is as general as his denunciation of the false teachers. Counseling them to pray and live anticipating Jesus' return (vv. 20–21), he concedes that some involved with the heretics deserve pity and can be helped. Others are pitiable but corrupted by sensuality. The author's opinion that the clothing (or bodies) of such persons must be despised (v. 23) suggests that Jude advocates a strict asceticism—a self-discipline that denies physical appetites or comforts.

To balance its largely vindictive tone, the work closes with a particularly lyric doxology praising "the only God our Savior" (vv. 24–25).

2 Peter

Like Jude, 2 Peter was written for the double purpose of condemning false teachers and warning of the imminent world judgment. Theologically, its importance lies in the author's attempt to explain why God allows evil to continue and to reassert the early Christian belief that Jesus' Second Coming is near (3:1–15). Offering a theory that human history is divided into three distinct chronological epochs, or "worlds," 2 Peter is the only New Testament book to argue that the present world will be entirely consumed by fire.

Authorship and Date

Whereas many scholars defend Petrine authorship of 1 Peter, virtually none believe that 2 Peter was written by Jesus' chief disciple. The pseudonymous author, however, takes pains to claim Peter's identity (1:1), asserting that he was present at Christ's transfiguration (1:17–18) and that he wrote an earlier letter, presumably 1 Peter (3:1). Under the great fisherman's name, he writes to reaffirm his concept of the true apostolic teaching in the face of heretical misinterpretation of it. Portraying the church leader as about to face death, the writer offers this epistle as Peter's last will and testament, a final exposition of the apostolic faith (1:14–15).

The pseudonymous author's claims are not persuasive, however, because 2 Peter contains too many indications that it was written long after Peter's martyrdom in about 64 or 65 CE. The letter's main intent—to reestablish the apostolic view of the Parousia—shows that the writer is addressing a group that lived long enough after the original apostles' day to have given up believing that Christ would return soon. The author's opponents deny the Parousia doctrine because the promised Second Coming has not materialized even though the "fathers" (first-generation disciples) have long since passed away. In addition, the writer makes use of Jude, itself an early-second-century document, incorporating most of it into his work.

The work also refers to Paul's letters as Scripture (3:16), a status they did not achieve until well into the second century. A late date is also indicated by the author's insistence on divinely inspired Scripture as the principal teaching authority (1:20–21). This tendency to substitute a fixed written text for the Spirit's operation or the "living voice" of the gospel also appears in the Pastor's letters (2 Tim. 3:15–16), which are similarly products of the second century.

Finally, many leaders of the early church doubted 2 Peter's apostolic origins, resulting in the epistle's absence from numerous lists of "approved" books. Not only was 2 Peter one of the last works to gain entrance into the New Testament, but scholars believe that it was also the last canonical book written. Composed at some point after 100 CE, it may not have appeared until as late as about 140 CE.

Organization and Purpose

A brief work, 2 Peter can be divided into three main sections:

1. The writer's apostolic authority and eschatological purpose (1:1–32)
2. Condemnations of false teachers (based on Jude) (2:1–22)

3. Defense of the Parousia doctrine, including a theodicy, and exhortation to behavior appropriate to End time (3:1–18)

The Delayed Parousia

Chapter 2 is devoted to invective. It is a brutal attack on false teachers whom the author describes as "slaves of corruption" and compares to dogs that eat their own vomit (2:1–22). Like the authors of Jude and 1 John, the writer seems unaware of any incongruity between the teaching of Christian love on the one hand and the savage abuse of fellow believers who disagree with him on the other. To him, dissenters have no more claim to respect than wild animals that are born only to be trapped and slaughtered (2:12).

It is not clear whether the opponents castigated in chapter 2 are the same skeptics who deny the Parousia in 3:3–4. In any case, the author's primary goal is to reinstate the early Christian apocalyptic hope. To convince his hearers, he reminds them that one world has already perished under a divine judgment—the world destroyed in Noah's flood (3:5–6). The present "heavens and earth" are reserved for burning, a divine act that will destroy unbelieving persons, presumably including the writer's opponents.

In his prediction of this world's coming incineration, the author apparently borrows the Stoic philosophers' theory that the cosmos undergoes cycles of destruction and renewal. Employing Stoic images and vocabulary, 2 Peter foretells a cosmic conflagration in which heaven will be swept away in a roaring fire and the earth will disintegrate, exposing all its secrets (3:10).

Because the entire universe is destined to fall apart in a cosmic catastrophe, the author advises his recipients to prepare for an imminent judgment. They should work hard to hurry it along, the implication being that correct human behavior will influence God to accelerate his schedule for the End (3:11–12).

Citing either Revelation's vision (21:1–3) or the Isaiah passages on which it is based (Isa. 65:17; 66:22), the author states that a third world will replace the previous two destroyed, respectively, by water and fire. "New heavens and a new earth" will host true justice (3:13), the eschatological kingdom of God.

Peter's Theodicy The author is aware that some Christians who doubt the Parousia may do so because God, despite the arrival, death, and ascension to heaven of the Messiah, has not acted to conquer evil. God's seeming delay, however, has a saving purpose. Holding back judgment, the Deity allows time for more people to repent and be spared the coming holocaust (3:9, 15). Although exercising his kindly patience in the realm of human time, God himself dwells in eternity, where "a thousand years is like one day." From his vantage point, the Parousia is not delayed; his apparent slowness to act is really a manifestation of his will to save all people (3:8–9).

Paul's Letters The author returns to criticizing his opponents in a famous reference to Paul's letters. Admitting that the Pauline correspondence contains unclear passages, he accuses immature Christians of twisting their meaning. Although he refers to Paul as a friend and brother, he clearly does not approve of the way in which some groups interpret Paul's teachings (3:15–16). Some critics suggest that if 2 Peter originated in Rome the writer may be referring to Marcion or other teachers who based their doctrines on a collection of Paul's letters. As in the case of Jude, the author does not give us enough information to identify his opponents with any certainty.

As the last-written New Testament book, 2 Peter affirms the primitive Christian hope that Jesus would soon return to establish his kingdom and eliminate evil from the universe. Although predicting that our world will disappear in a fiery cataclysm, 2 Peter foresees a renewed creation in which righteousness

prevails. While they await the Lord's return to bring about the promised New Age, Christians must cling to the apostles' original teachings, avoiding heretical misinterpretations and by their good works shortening the time before the final day arrives (3:10–15). Although 2 Peter adopts the Stoic view that the present universe must perish in flames (an extreme belief that even Revelation does not advocate), it also shares Revelation's ultimately optimistic vision of the final and complete triumph of absolute good.

Letters from the Johannine Community

Three documents from a leader of the Johannine community reveal problems that beset his group perhaps a decade or two after the Gospel of John was first published. The Gospel author is concerned about believers' expulsion from the synagogue (cf. John 9:22; 12:42) and about the threat of external violence—people who seek to kill believers imagine they are "performing a religious duty" (John 16:1–3)—but the author of the letters of 1, 2, and 3 John is concerned only about conditions *within* the group. Instead of persecutions from the outside world, the letter writer, whose community has perhaps moved to a new geographical location, deals with internal dissensions and what he regards as the false teachings of some fellow Christians.

Authorship

Like the Fourth Gospel, the Johannine epistles are traditionally ascribed to the apostle John. Whereas 1 John, which is actually a treatise outlining standards of belief and behavior, is anonymous, 2 and 3 John, which are genuine letters, are attributed merely to "the elder [Greek, *presbyteros*]." Most scholars believe that neither the apostle John nor the Evangelist responsible for the Gospel wrote the epistles. Because of similarities in style, vocabulary, and theology, however, most agree that the same unidentified "elder" wrote all three documents. In these writings we see unfolded one the great ironies of religious history: the community of the Beloved Disciple, which was to be distinguished by the mutual love of its members (John 13:34–35), splintered and divided amid bitter controversy.

1 John

The longest epistle, 1 John contains the elder's defense of his community's most characteristic teachings: the historical Jesus' physical humanity, his **Incarnation** "in the flesh," and the necessity of showing love for fellow believers. Echoing the Gospel's opening hymn to the Word (*Logos*), the writer emphasizes his community's sensory experience of "the word of life . . . made visible." Using the plural "we," the author insists that Johannine believers have "seen it with our own eyes" and "felt it with our own hands," presumably referring to the corporal presence of the incarnate Christ among them (1 John 1:1–4). By identifying his intended audience as persons who "give their allegiance to the Son of God" (5:13), the **elder** probably addresses a core group whom he wishes to join him in opposing the alleged false teachers who were then breaking up the "brotherhood" (John 21:23). While summarizing his group's essential teachings—about Jesus' dual nature and the love connecting believers—the writer illustrates how John's Gospel traditions should be understood, interpreting them in a way that made the Fourth Gospel acceptable to the emerging doctrines of Christian orthodoxy (see the discussion of Gnosticism below).

The author's task was difficult because, like Paul's early charismatic churches, the Johannine communities took seriously the operation of the Holy Spirit among them. Paul asks Christians to

"test the spirits," the unseen forces inspiring individual revelations, but offers no specific instructions for doing so (1 Thess. 5:19–21). Writing perhaps sixty or more years later, the elder similarly advises his group not to "trust any and every spirit" but to "test the spirits, to see whether they are from God" (4:1). In urging believers to "distinguish the spirit of truth from the spirit of error" (4:6), however, the elder goes further than Paul by giving his audience a set of standards, both doctrinal and ethical, by which to separate religious truth from falsehood. He is the first Christian known to provide such criteria.

The elder explains that his message is essentially the familiar foundation upon which the Johannine church is built: He gives believers "no new command," but only "the old command which you always had before you . . . the message which you heard in the beginning" (2:7). Evoking the same moral **dualism** that pervades the Gospel, the elder first affirms his community's basic teaching: "Here is the message we heard from him and pass on to you: that God is light" (1:5). Whereas his people now walk in light, the dissenters—who have demonstrated their unworthiness by leaving the elder's congregation—walk in darkness, a declaration reflecting the Gospel's pervasive light-dark dichotomy (compare 1 John 1:5–7; 2:9–11 with John 1:5; 3:19; 8:12; 12:46). Persons who left the community betray their mental darkness by rejecting the unique Johannine doctrine of incarnation. The secessionists fail to pass the doctrinal test when they do not "acknowledge that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" (4:1–2). For thus denying Jesus' material humanity, the elder labels the secessionists "Antichrist," literally "opponents of Christ," adding that there are now many such "antichrists" abroad (2:18–19; 4:3).

The proliferation of these "false prophets," whom the elder also calls "[children] of the devil" (3:8), "proves to us that this is indeed the last hour," an indication that in his group the Gospel's concept of realized eschatology may have coexisted with more traditional ideas about the End (cf. 2:28). Besides failing the doctrinal test, the secessionists also flunk behavioral ethics. They do not "live as Christ himself lived," showing love for others (2:6). The writer's exposition of his community's cardinal rule, to "love one another as he [Jesus] commanded" (3:23), is one of the New Testament's most celebrated insights. Perceiving that "love is from God" and that "everyone who loves is a child of God," the elder offers the Bible's singular definition of God: "God is love" (4:9, 17). Although the writer implores his audience seven times to love their fellow Christians and asserts that believers "are bound to lay down [their] lives for our brothers" (3:16; cf. John 15:12–14), he cites only one concrete example of how love is expressed, by rescuing people from dire poverty (3:17).

A Response to Gnosticism?

Many commentators suggest that the secessionists whom John denounced were proto-Gnostics, forerunners of the **Gnosticism** that competed with other forms of Christianity from the second through the fifth centuries CE. Although some scholars object that full-blown Gnosticism had not yet developed at the time the Johannine letters were composed, others point out that the seeds of Gnostic ideas probably existed well before Gnosticism evolved into a distinct movement (see Box 18.3). Extremely varied in its myths about creation and the spirit realm, Gnosticism nonetheless consistently took a dualistic view of the cosmos, typically insisting that only the spirit was pure and good and that the physical world, the creation of an inferior god, was inherently corrupt. Imprisoned in physical bodies, humans could escape the world of decaying matter only through precious knowledge (Greek, *gnosis*) of the higher realm. As a revealer of divine truth who descended from

BOX 18.3 Gnosticism

Although often lumped together as an undifferentiated movement, Gnosticism was extremely complex and took many different forms. Most Gnostic groups, however, held in common a belief that *gnosis* (knowledge) of spiritual truths opened the way to personal salvation. Knowledge or conscious awareness that one's true nature did not consist of the physical body but of an immortal spirit was a first step in ultimately returning to one's original home, the invisible dimension of pure spirit.

Many Gnostics reinterpreted Genesis to explain the origin of the inferior material world, the production of a limited creator god. This deity's ignorance of the higher spirit realm results in the cosmic defects of sin, suffering, death, and decay. Some Gnostic teachers developed elaborate mythologies to illustrate the evolutionary process by which entities from the spirit world—such as Sophia or Wisdom—inadvertently helped to generate the deeply flawed material world, in which divine souls are trapped in dying bodies. To Christian Gnostics, Jesus had descended from the highest heaven to reveal the true nature of being and to help others escape from fleshly bondage. Because Jesus was an immortal spirit uncontaminated by physical qualities, some Gnostics theorized that he only seemed to be a mortal human. Instead of dying on the cross, he simply re-ascended to heaven, his place of origin. Many scholars think it likely that former members of the Johannine community who withdrew from the elder's group were proto-Gnostics who denied Jesus' physical humanity. Certainly the Johannine assertion that Jesus had preexisted as the eternal Word of God before descending to earth made this work extremely popular in Gnostic circles, which produced the first known commentary on John's Gospel.

heaven, Jesus was pure spirit; he merely *appeared* to be human.

In this line of thought, members of the Johannine church who denied that Jesus came "in the flesh" espoused a brand of Gnosticism known as **Docetism.** Derived from a Greek term meaning "to seem," Docetism held that Jesus did not suffer physically and die, but simply returned to heaven, his spiritual home. When the elder insists that "Jesus Christ came *in the flesh* (4:2, emphasis added), he asserts that the preexistent Word was also fully human, that the man who died on the cross and the exalted heavenly Christ are one. By placing this theological limit on interpreting Jesus spiritually, the author of 1 John demonstrated that the Gospel of John—with its unique emphasis on Jesus' divinity—was consistent with teachings of the mainstream church.

The Issue of Sin Considering the secessionists and other promulgators of false doctrine as sinners, the elder devotes considerable space to the problem of sin, which he defines as "lawlessness," the willful breaking of divine commands (3:4). In his initial discussion of sin, he categorically states that anyone who claims to be "sinless" is "self-deceived" because all people sin. He then reassures believers that Jesus, who functions as "the remedy for the defilement" of all sin, can be trusted to forgive the sinner (1:4–2:2). Later in his essay, however, the writer apparently contradicts himself when he declares that "a child of God does not commit sin"; the Christian "cannot be a sinner because he is God's child" (3:9–10). Conversely, "the man who sins is a child of the devil" (3:8). In his essay's conclusion, the elder further complicates his argument when he remarks that "a brother" may "commit sin" but not be guilty of "deadly

[mortal] sin," and then somewhat illogically repeats that "no child of God is a sinner" (5:16–18). The writer may be trying to distinguish between different degrees of error, but most readers find his statements confusing.

2 John

Although containing only thirteen verses, 2 John is a true letter; some scholars regard it as a cover letter intended to accompany 1 John, though this is uncertain. It is addressed to "the Lady chosen by God" (v. 1), probably a house church belonging to the Johannine network of congregations. As in 1 John, the writer's purpose is to warn readers of "**the Antichrist,** the arch-deceiver," who falsely teaches that Jesus Christ did not live as a material human being (vv. 7–8). Urging his recipients to separate themselves entirely from any "deceiver" (false teacher), the elder orders congregation leaders not to "welcome him into your house" or even to greet him, for, in the elder's opinion, "anyone who gives him a greeting is an accomplice in his wicked deeds" (vv. 10–11). The elder concludes with a wish to visit the house church, adding that believers from his "sister" congregation send their greetings.

3 John

In a private note to his friend Gaius, the shortest document in the New Testament, the elder asks him to extend hospitality to some Johannine missionaries led by Demetrius (otherwise unknown). The writer encourages Gaius to welcome these travelers, who had also visited his home congregation, honoring their community's tradition of supporting those who labor to spread their version of "the truth" (v. 8).

Adding an ironic twist on his policy of denying hospitality to Christians whose opinions he deplores, the elder complains indignantly about Diotrephes, a "would-be [congregation] leader," who "refuses to receive our friends" and "tries to expel them" from the group (vv. 9–10). Accusing Diotrephes of behaving "spitefully," the writer seems unaware that his fellow leader is merely carrying out the same exclusionary procedures outlined in 2 John 10–11.

The Epistles' Legacy

Readers of the Johannine letters, with their exhortations to express love interspersed with scorching denunciations of former fellow Christians (people who had left the elder's community), may come away with mixed feelings. Is it possible to manifest divine love and simultaneously call dissenters "deceivers," spawn of the devil, and "antichrists"? Moreover, why does the Johannine tradition exhort us to love only believers who fully agree with our doctrines, whereas the Synoptic tradition presented a Jesus who commanded followers to "love [their] enemies" as well (Matt. 5:44–45; Luke 6:35)? What fear of doctrinal contamination inspires the elder to insist that true believers must utterly reject Christians who hold different opinions? Why does he demand that the orthodox refuse them a place in the congregation or even the courtesy of a greeting, essentially denying their common humanity? The charge that anyone who extends hospitality to a dissenter becomes "an accomplice in his wicked deeds" would probably surprise Jesus, who was notoriously "a friend of tax gatherers and sinners" (Luke 7:33–35, 39–40).

The elder's harsh methods to control the spread of what he considers false teaching may have seemed necessary to him, but the general adoption of his exclusionary tactics in the later church, when bishops—overseers of a whole region—tended to exercise iron discipline over their flocks, is ethically problematic. The elder's approach to church authority thus presents a troubling paradox in religious history: A community founded on the principle of mutual love later became rife with dissension that triggered a most unloving response.

Summary

A diverse anthology of early Christian literature roughly comparable to the miscellaneous "writings" of the Hebrew Bible, this section of the New Testament reflects the variety of ideas and practices prevailing in different parts of the international Christian community during the late first and early second centuries CE. The three documents traditionally ascribed to John, son of Zebedee, provide a window on the evolving Johannine community, which was apparently split between the writer's group and proto-Gnostic opponents. Writing in the names of the three apostolic "pillars"—Peter, James, and John—to whom Paul alluded in Galatians, pseudonymous writers dispatched letters and tracts to defend their positions on church order and beliefs. Probably the last-written book in the Judeo-Christian Bible, 2 Peter warns against "misinterpretations" of Paul's letters and defends traditional Christian eschatology—expectation of the Parousia.

Questions for Review

1. Define the term *catholic epistles,* and describe the general nature of these seven documents. According to tradition, to what specific group of authors are these works attributed? Why do many scholars believe that all seven are pseudonymous?
2. Identify and explain the major themes in Hebrews. How does the author's belief in a dualistic universe—an unseen spirit world that parallels the visible cosmos—affect his teaching about Jesus as an eternal High Priest officiating in heaven?
3. Almost every book in this unit of the New Testament—Hebrews and the catholic epistles—contains a theme or concept not found in any other canonical document. For example, only Hebrews presents Jesus as a celestial High Priest foreshadowed by Melchizedek; it is also unique in being the only New Testament work to define faith (11:1). Indicate which of the catholic epistles contains the following definitions or statements:
   a. A definition of religion
   b. A belief that Jesus descended into Hades (the Underworld) and preached to spirits imprisoned there
   c. A definition of God's essential nature
   d. A set of standards by which to determine the truth of a religious teaching
   e. An argument that actions are more important than faith
   f. A concept that human history is divided into three separate stages, or "worlds"
   g. A defense of the early apocalyptic hope involving Jesus' Second Coming (the Parousia)
   h. Citations from the noncanonical books of the Pseudepigrapha, including the Book of Enoch
   i. The New Testament's most severe denunciation of the rich

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Hebrews presents certain biblical characters like Melchizedek and Israel's High Priest as foreshadowing the later role of Jesus. Explain the author's methods of biblical interpretation, including his uses of typology, allegory, and symbolism. According to his view, what is the relation of Israel's sacrificial ritual to the death and ascension of Jesus?
2. From your readings in the catholic epistles, what seem to be the principal concerns of Christian writers during the last decades of the first century CE and the first part of the second century CE? In what ways is the Christian community striving to define itself and preserve its message in a sometimes hostile world?

Terms and Concepts to Remember

Aaron
the anti-Christ
apostacy
catholic epistles
Docetism
dualism
epistle
expiation
Gnosticism
the Incarnation
invective
Melchizedek
Parousia (delay in)
Pseudepigrapha
Tabernacle
tithes
typology
wisdom literature

Recommended Reading

Hebrews

Attridge, Harold W. "Hebrews." In M. D. Coogan, ed. *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Books of the Bible,* Vol. 1, pp. 361–367. New York, Oxford University Press, 2011. Analyzes the book's date, origin, and theology.

Bourke, Myles M. "The Epistle to the Hebrews." In R. E. Brown et al., eds., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary,* 2nd ed., pp. 920–941. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1990. A helpful introduction.

Buchanan, G. W., ed. and trans. *Hebrews.* Vol. 36 of the Anchor Bible. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1972. Provides the editor's translation and commentary.

DeSilva, David A. "Hebrews, Letters to the." In K. D. Sakenfeld, ed. *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible,* Vol. 2, p. 779–786. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007. Combines a general overview with a close analysis of the text.

Donelson, Lewis. *From Hebrews to Revelation: A Theological Introduction.* Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2000.

Johnson, Luke Timothy. *Hebrews: A Commentary.* New Testament Library. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006. A theological emphasis.

Kasemann, E. *The Wandering People of God: An Investigation of the Letter to the Hebrews.* Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984. A classic study.

James

Johnson, Luke Timothy. *Brother of Jesus, Friend of God: Studies in the Letter of James.* Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2004. A series of essays on James's origin and relevance to our understanding of early Palestinian Christianity.

_____. *The Letter of James: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary.* Vol. 37a of the Anchor Bible. New York: Doubleday, 1995. Argues that the author was Jesus' brother.

Lockett, Darian R. "James." In M. D. Coogan, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Books of the Bible,* Vol. 1, pp. 411–414. New York: Oxford UP, 2011, Argues that Jesus' brother is the author.

Moo, Douglas J. *The Letter of James.* Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000. Emphasizes the applicability of James to contemparary life.

Painter, John. "James, Letter of." In K. D. Sakenfeld, ed., *The New Interpreter's Bible,* Vol. 3, pp. 189–194. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008. Concludes that the book represents Jewish-Christian concerns of the Diaspora sometime after 70 CE, or even after the second destruction of Jerusalem (c. 135 CE).

1 and 2 Peter and Jude

Achtemeir, Paul. "Peter, First Letter of." In K. D. Sakenfeld, ed., *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible,* Vol. 4, pp. 462–468. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009. Carefully examines the letter's pseudonymous authorship and major themes.

Boring, M. Eugene. "1 Peter." In M. D. Coogan, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Books of the Bible,* Vol. 2, pp. 155–157. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Argues that the work is pseudonymous and was composed in the late first century CE.

Brown, R. E.; Donfried, K.; and Reumann, J., eds. *Peter in the New Testament; A Collaborative Assessment by Protestant and Roman Catholic Scholars.* Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1973. A recommended study of Peter's role in the New Testament tradition and literature.

Dalton, William J. "The First Epistle of Peter." In R. E. Brown et al., eds., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary,* 2nd ed., pp. 903–908. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1990.

Neyrey, Jerome H. "The Epistle of Jude." In R. E. Brown et al., eds., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary,* 2nd ed., pp. 917–919. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1990.

_____. "The Second Epistle of Peter." In R. E. Brown et al., eds., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary,* 2nd ed., pp. 1017–1022. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1990.

Perkins, Pheme. *First and Second Peter, James, and Jude.* Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995 (reprint 2012). A good introduction to the catholic epistles.

Perry, Peter S. "2 Peter." In M. D. Coogan, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Books of the Bible,* Vol. 2, pp. 137–160. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Concludes that the letter was written pseudonymously in the early second century.

Richard, Earl. "Peter, Second Letter of." In K. D. Sakenfeld, ed., *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible,* Vol. 4, pp. 469–475. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009. Concisely surveys the letter's main topics.

1, 2 and 3 John

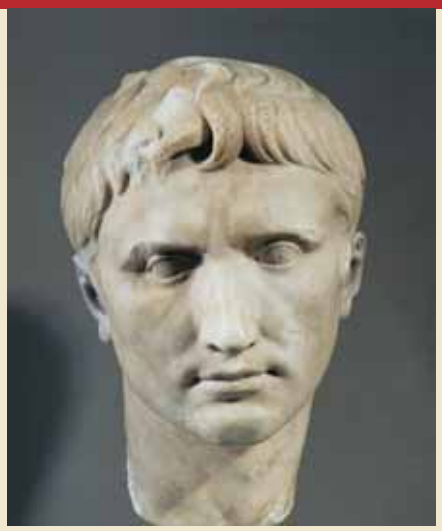
Brown, R. E. *The Epistles of John,* Vol. 30 of the Anchor Bible. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1982. A scholarly translation and commentary on the letters of John.

Mitchell, Margaret. "John, Letters of," In K. D. Sakenfeld, ed., *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible,* Vol. 3, pp. 370–374. Nashville: Abingdon

Press, 2008. Surveys the authorship, themes, theology, and historical context of the three documents, emphasizing the tension between the Johannine command to love and the sectarian in-fighting they reveal.

Stott, John R. W. *The Letters of John*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 2007. An Evangelical interpretation.

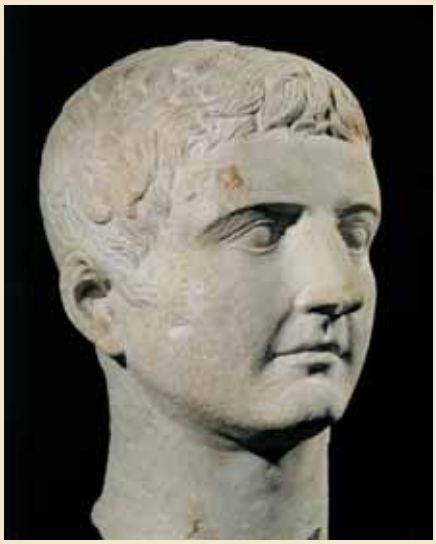
Van der Watt, Jan G. "1, 2, and 3 John." In M. D. Coogan, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Books of the Bible,* Vol. 1, pp. 472–477. Explores the probable setting and date of the letters and their connection to John's Gospel.



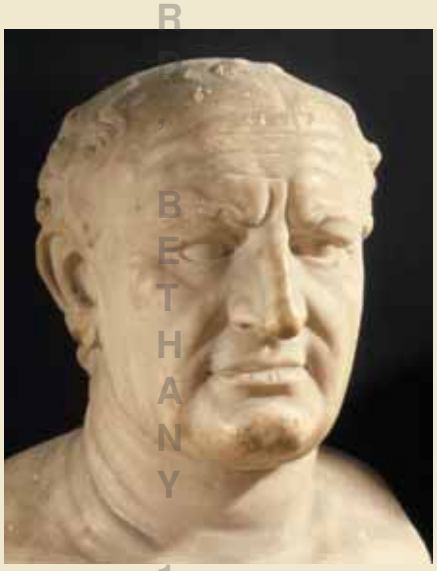
Augustus

The Faces of Roman Power

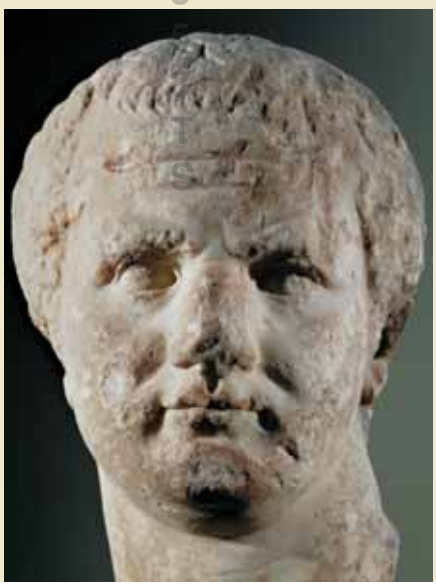
By the time John of Patmos recorded his apocalyptic visions (about 95 CE), Rome's emperors had wielded absolute power over a vast empire for more than a century, sparking a conflict with a tiny minority of Christians who regarded Jesus, now enthroned in heaven, as their real king. Born during Augustus's reign, Jesus was crucified by Pontius Pilate, the agent of Tiberius. Nero, the first emperor to persecute Jesus' followers, according to church tradition, executed the apostles Peter and Paul in the mid-60s CE. When Jews revolted against Roman domination (66–73 CE), Nero dispatched his general (later emperor) Vespasian to crush the



Tiberius



Vespasian



Nero (*far left*), Titus (*left*)

rebellion; Vespasian's son Titus completed the military operation, destroying Jerusalem and its Temple in 70 CE. Vespasian's younger son, Domitian, during whose reign John wrote Revelation, reputedly demanded worship as "lord and god." In John's view, the spiritual battle between good and evil will culminate in the fall of imperial Rome, shown below in a scale model (Rev. 17:1–19:2).

Domitian

CHAPTER 19

Continuing the Apocalyptic Hope

The Book of Revelation and Other Jewish/Christian Apocalyptic Works

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had vanished. . . . Now at last God has his dwelling among men! Revelation 21:1, 3

Key Topics/Themes Revelation affirms Christianity's original hope for an immediate transformation of the world and assures the faithful that God's prearranged plan, including the destruction of evil and the advent of Christ's universal reign, is soon to be accomplished. The book presents an *apokalypsis* (unveiling) of unseen realities, both in heaven as it is now and on earth as it will be in the future. Placing governmental tyranny and Christian suffering in cosmic perspective, Revelation conveys its message of hope for believers in the cryptic language of metaphor and symbol.

A study of Hellenistic-Jewish apocalyptic writings, such as 1 Enoch and 2 Esdras (the latter written at almost the same time as Revelation), helps to place the New Testament's only apocalyptic work in its literary context. A second-century-CE Christian work, the Apocalypse of Peter, reveals a historical shift from cosmic to personal eschatology, focusing on the condition of souls in the afterlife.

Although Revelation was not the last New Testament book written, its position at the end of the canon is thematically appropriate. The first Christians believed that their generation would witness the end of the present wicked age and the beginning of God's direct rule over the earth. Revelation expresses that apocalyptic hope more powerfully than any other Christian writing. Looking forward to a "new heaven and a new earth" (21:1), it envisions the glorious completion of God's creative work begun in the first book of the Bible. In this sense, it provides the **omega** (the last letter of the Greek alphabet) to the **alpha** (the first letter) of Genesis.

Revelation's climactic placement is also fitting because it reintroduces Jesus as a major character. Its depiction of an all-powerful heavenly Jesus provides a counterweight to the Gospels' portrayal of the human Jesus' earthly career. In Revelation, Jesus is no longer Mark's suffering servant or John's embodiment of divine Wisdom. Revelation's Jesus is the Messiah of popular expectations, a conquering warrior-king who slays his enemies and proves beyond all doubt his right to universal rule. In striking contrast to the Gospel portraits, the Jesus of Revelation comes not to forgive sinners and instruct them in a higher righteousness but to

inflict a wrathful punishment upon his opponents (19:11–21).

Revelation's depiction of Jesus' character and function, qualitatively different from that presented in the Gospels, derives partly from the author's apocalyptic view of human history. Like the authors of Jude and 2 Peter, the writer perceives a sharp contrast between the present world, which he regards as hopelessly corrupt, and God's planned future world, a realm of ideal purity. In the author's opinion, the righteous new order can be realized only through God's direct intervention in human affairs, an event that requires Jesus to act as God's Judge and Destroyer of the world as we know it. To understand Revelation's emphasis on violence and destruction, with its correspondingly harsher picture of Jesus' cosmic rule, we must remember that the author belongs to a particular branch of the Jewish and Christian apocalyptic movement.

Revelation and the Apocalyptic Tradition

The Apocalypse

"Revelation" translates the Greek term *apokalypsis,* which means "an uncovering, an unveiling, a stripping naked of what was formerly covered." An **apocalypse** is thus a literary work that discloses things previously hidden, particularly unseen realities of the spirit world (Heb. 11:1) and future events. Apocalyptic writers typically describe visions or dreams in which they encounter supernatural beings ranging from hideous monsters to angels who communicate God's future intentions (2 Esd. 3–9; Dan. 7–12). Sometimes, apocalyptists are carried out of their bodies to behold the Deity's heavenly throne or other celestial regions normally invisible to human eyes. Although some late contributors to the Hebrew Bible and many New Testament writers share an apocalyptic worldview, only two—the authors of Daniel and Revelation—frame their visions in the literary form of an apocalypse (see below).

Revelation

Author: John of Patmos.
Date: About 95 CE.
Place of composition: Western Asia Minor.
Audience: Seven churches of Asia Minor.

The apocalyptic tradition to which Revelation belongs is commonly regarded as an outgrowth of the prophetic movement in ancient Israel. Israel's great prophets had delivered Yahweh's messages to the people during the period of the Davidic monarchy (c. 1000–587 BCE). Following the monarchy's end and the Babylonian captivity (587–538 BCE), however, prophecy declined rapidly. Eventually, many Jews came to believe that authentic prophecy had ceased after the time of Ezra (c. 400 BCE). Priests took the place of prophets as Israel's spiritual leaders.

During the last two centuries before the Christian epoch, and for at least a century after, numerous Jewish writers attempted to fill the vacuum left by the prophets' disappearance. They composed innumerable books in the names of Israel's leaders who had lived before the death of Ezra. These pseudonymous works were attributed to figures like Enoch, Moses, Isaiah, David, Solomon, and Ezra. Many of them are apocalypses, containing visions of End time, such as Daniel (the only such work to become part of the Hebrew Bible), 1 and 2 Enoch, 2 Esdras, 2 Baruch, and the Essene War Scroll from Qumran. (Some noncanonical apocalypses are discussed later in the chapter.)

During the early centuries CE, many Christian writers contributed to the apocalyptic genre. We have already discussed the apocalyptic elements in the Gospels, especially Mark 13 and its parallels in Matthew 24 and Luke 21, as well as Paul's eschatological concerns in his letters to the Thessalonians and the Corinthians. Besides these canonical works, other Christian authors composed apocalyptic books, typically attributing them to prominent apostles, including Peter, John, James, Thomas, and Paul. The canonical

Revelation is unique in being ascribed, not to a figure of the distant past, but to a contemporary member of the first-century church named John. The work is also unique in being the only surviving document by a Christian prophet (1:3), which was a common function or office in the early church (Acts 2:15–17; 1 Thess. 5:19–20; 1 Cor. 12:10; 14:22, 24–25, 31–33).

Characteristics of Apocalyptic Writing

Besides the mystical, otherworldly quality of its content, **apocalyptic literature** is distinguished by several characteristics. The writers who chose the literary category of the apocalypse in which to express their views adopted most of the following assumptions of the apocalyptic worldview.

Universality In contrast to prophetic oracles, which focus almost exclusively on Israel and its immediate neighbors, apocalyptic visions are universal in scope. Although the writers' religious communities (Israel or the church) stand at the center of their concern, their work encompasses the whole of human history and surveys events both in heaven and on earth. Apocalyptists view all spirit beings, as well as all nations and peoples, as swept together in a conflict of cosmic proportions.

Cosmic Dualism The apocalyptic worldview borrows much of its cosmology from Greek philosophical ideas about parallel worlds of matter and spirit (see Figure 19.1). Postulating a dualistic two-dimensional universe composed of visible earth and invisible heaven, apocalyptists see human society profoundly influenced by unseen forces—angels and demons—operating in a celestial realm. Events on earth, such as persecution of the righteous, reflect the machinations of these heavenly beings.

Chronologic Dualism Besides dividing the universe into two opposing domains of physical matter and ethereal spirit, apocalyptists regard all history as separated into two mutually exclusive periods of time, a current wicked era and a future age of perfection. Seeing the present world situation as too thoroughly evil to reform, apocalyptists expect a sudden and violent change in which God or his Messiah imposes divine rule by force. In the apocalyptic vision, there is no normal historical progression from one age to the next and no real continuity between them. Thus, the Book of Daniel depicts God's kingdom as abruptly interrupting the ordinary flow of time, shattering all worldly governments with the impact of a colossal meteorite (Dan. 2:31–45).

Ethical Dualism In the apocalyptic view, there are only two kinds of human beings, just as there are only two epochs of world history and two levels of existence, material and spiritual. Apocalyptists see humanity as being divided into two opposing camps of intrinsically different ethical quality. The vast majority of people walk in spiritual darkness and are doomed victims of God's wrath. Only a tiny minority—the religious group to which the writers belong and direct their message—remain faithful and receive salvation. Deeply conscious of human imperfection and despairing of humanity's ability to meet God's standards, apocalyptists consistently see most people as destined to eternal condemnation.

Predestination Whereas most biblical writers emphasize that historical events are the consequence of our moral choices (e.g., Deut. 28–29; Josh. 24; Ezek. 18), apocalyptists view history as running in a straight line toward a predetermined end. Just as the rise and fall of worldly empires occur according to God's plan (Dan. 2, 7–8), so will the End take place at a time God has already set. Human efforts, no matter how well intended, cannot avert the coming disaster or influence God to change his mind. The vast complexity of human experience means nothing when confronted with the divinely prearranged schedule.

Exclusivism Many apocalypses, including Daniel and Revelation, were composed to encourage the faithful to maintain integrity and resist temptations to compromise with "worldly" values or

FIGURE 19.1 *Christ over New York City.* In this painting on a steel door, an unknown Ukrainian-American artist projects the image of a cosmic Christ above the skyscrapers of Manhattan. Depicting two dimensions of reality, the painter contrasts New York's towers of cold steel and concrete—monuments to modern commerce and banking—with his vision of Jesus' unseen presence. Encompassing the largely unaware inhabitants of America's secular society in his spiritual embrace, Christ extends his arms in a gesture that is both protective and beseeching. In his apocalyptic visions, John of Patmos exhibited a similar, if somewhat less compassionate, view of Christ's relation to the Roman Empire.

customs. Apocalyptists typically equate religious fidelity with a total rejection of the ordinary goals, ambitions, social attachments, and other pursuits of unbelieving society. Regarding most people as condemned, apocalyptists commonly urge their audience to adopt a rigidly sectarian attitude, avoiding all association with unbelievers.

Limited Theology Consistent with this strict division of history and people into divinely approved or disapproved units, apocalyptists usually show little sympathy for differing viewpoints or compassion for nonbelievers. All modes of life are either black or white, with no psychological or spiritual shades of gray in between. As a result of the authors' mind-sets, the apocalyptic picture of God is ethically limited. The Deity is almost invariably portrayed as an enthroned monarch, an omnipotent authority who brings history to a violent conclusion in order to demonstrate his sovereignty, confound his enemies, and preserve his few worshipers. The notion that God might

regard all humans as his children or that he might establish his kingdom by less catastrophic means does not appeal to the apocalyptic temperament or satisfy the apocalyptic yearning.

Portrait of a Violent God Assuming that the Deity achieves control over heaven and earth through a cataclysmic battle with a formidable opponent (the Dragon of Chaos or, in the New Testament, Satan), apocalyptists imagine this transference of power by picturing God as a destroyer who exterminates much of his sentient creation. Using the Exodus story of the ten plagues Yahweh inflicted on Egypt as their model, apocalyptists typically show God angrily punishing disobedient humanity with a devastating series of natural disasters, famines, and loathsome diseases. That the use of evil to defeat evil is ethically questionable does not seem to trouble the apocalyptic mentality.

Eschatological Preoccupations In addition to uncovering the mysteries of the invisible world, apocalyptists reveal the posthumous fate of people facing God's terrifying judgment. Because they were commonly written at a time when fidelity brought no earthly rewards but only potential imprisonment, torture, and death, apocalyptic works pioneered the way in popularizing new beliefs about compensatory blessings in the New Age. Apocalyptists were the first biblical writers to speculate about the nature of the afterlife, which they commonly portrayed as resurrection of the body rather than survival of an immortal soul (Dan. 12:1–3). The apocalyptists' rejection of the old Hebrew belief that human souls were consigned to eternal oblivion in Sheol (the Underworld) and their insistence that God makes moral distinctions between virtuous and wicked lives marked a theological innovation that was adopted by several later Jewish groups, including the Pharisees, Essenes, and early Christians.

The Use of Symbols and Code Words Perhaps because they are the work of sages immersed in arcane learning, almost all apocalypses contain deliberately obscure language that veils as well as expresses the authors' meaning. In addition, most were written during periods of crisis or persecution, which encouraged apocalyptists to use terms and images that their original audiences could understand but that will bewilder outsiders. In Enoch, Daniel, Revelation, and other apocalypses, the authors employ symbols from a wide variety of sources, both pagan and biblical.

In its broadest sense, a **symbol** is a sign that represents something other than itself, typically an abstract quality or religious concept. Symbols take the form of persons, places, objects, or actions that suggest an association or connection with another dimension of meaning. Both Daniel and Revelation depict Gentile nations as animals because, to the authors, they resemble wild beasts in their savage, irrational behavior. Kings who demand worship are symbolized as idols, and paying homage to them is seen as idolatry. Using code words for a pagan opponent, such as "Babylon" or "the beast," helps shield the apocalyptist's seditious message.

Authorship and Date

Who was the writer who created the bedazzling kaleidoscope of images in Revelation? According to some late-second-century traditions, he is the apostle John, the same person who wrote the Gospel and letters of John. However, other early Christian sources recognized the immense differences in thought, language, and theology between Revelation and the Fourth Gospel and concluded that they could not have originated with the same author. Eusebius suggests that another John, known only as the "Elder," an official of the late-first-century Ephesian church, may have written the Apocalypse (*History* 3.39.1–11).

Virtually all modern scholars agree that the Gospel and Revelation stem from different authors. A few accept Eusebius's theory about John the Elder of Ephesus, but the scholarly majority notes that we have no evidence to link the book with that obscure figure. Most scholars prefer to accept no more than the writer's own self-identification: He simply calls himself

FIGURE 19.2 Church on Patmos. According to Christian tradition, this domed church marks the site where John, banished to the island of Patmos, experienced the eschatological visions described in Revelation.

John, a "servant" of Jesus Christ (1:2). Because he does not profess apostolic authority and never claims to have known the earthly Jesus, most analysts conclude that he is not one of the Twelve, whom he categorizes as different from himself. In the author's day, the apostles had already become "cornerstones" of the heavenly Temple (21:14). Exiled to the island of **Patmos** (see Figure 19.2) in the eastern Aegean Sea, where he received his visions (1:9), the author perhaps is best described as John of Patmos, a mystic who regarded himself as a Christian prophet and his book as a highly symbolic preview of future events (1:1–3; 22:7–10).

By studying the contents of his work, scholars can infer something of John's background. He is intimately familiar with internal conditions in the seven churches addressed (Rev. 2:1–3:23), even though he seems to belong to none of them (see Figure 19.3). To some commentators, this indicates that John was an itinerant Christian prophet who traveled among widely scattered churches. Although he held no congregational office, his recognized stature as a mystic and visionary gave him considerable influence in the communities to which he directed his apocalypse.

Because he writes Greek as if it were a second language, phrasing idiosyncratically in a Semitic style, most scholars believe that John was a native of Palestine, or at least had spent much time there. A few critics suggest that he had some connection with the Johannine community, for, like the author of John's Gospel, he refers to Christ as Logos (Word), Lamb, Witness, Shepherd, Judge, and Temple. Both Revelation and the Gospel express a duality of spirit and matter, good and evil, God and the devil. Both regard Christ as present in the church's liturgy, and both view his death as a saving victory. Important differences range from the quality of the Greek—excellent in the Gospel and awkward in the Apocalypse—to the writers' respective theologies. Whereas the Gospel presents God's love as his primary motive in dealing with humanity (John 3:15–16), Revelation mentions divine love only once. The Johannine Jesus' preeminent command to love is conspicuously absent from Revelation.

Writing about 180 CE, the churchman Irenaeus stated that Revelation was composed late in the reign of Domitian, who was emperor from 81 to 96 CE. Internal references to government hostilities toward Christians (1:9; 2:10, 13;

FIGURE 19.3 The seven churches in Asia Minor (western Turkey) addressed in Revelation 1–3. These sites (printed in red) include Ephesus, one of the major seaports of the Roman Empire, and Sardis, once capital of the older Lydian Empire (sixth century BCE). John pictures the heavenly Christ dictating letters to seven angels who act as invisible guardians of the individual churches. With this image, John reminds his audience that the tiny groups of Christians scattered throughout the Roman Empire do not stand alone. Although seemingly weak and insignificant, they are part of God's mighty empire of the spirit and are destined to triumph over their earthly oppressors.

6:9–11; 14:12; 16:6; 21:4), policies then associated with Domitian's administration, support Irenaeus's assessment. Most scholars date the work to about 95 or 96 CE.

The Emperor Cult

Domitian was the son of Vespasian and the younger brother of Titus, the general who crushed the Jewish Revolt against Rome and demolished the Jerusalem Temple (see Figure 19.4). After Titus's brief reign (79–81 CE), Domitian inherited the imperial throne, accepting divine honors offered him and allowing himself to be worshiped as a god in various parts of the empire. We have no real evidence that Domitian personally enforced a universal observance of the emperor cult, but in certain areas—especially Asia Minor—some governors and other local officials demanded public participation in the cult as evidence of citizens' loyalty and patriotism. During this period, persecution of Christians for refusing to honor the national leader seems to have been local and sporadic. Despite the lack of a concentrated official assault on the faith, however, John clearly feels a growing tension between church and state, a sense of impending conflict that makes him regard Rome as a new Babylon, destroyer of God's people (see the discussion of the ruler cult in Chapter 5).

Because Rome had recognized their religion's monotheism, Jews were generally exempted from the emperor cult. Jewish and Gentile Christians, however, were not. To most Romans, their "stubborn" refusal to honor any of the many Greco-Roman gods or deified emperors

FIGURE 19.4 Bust of Domitian, emperor of Rome from 81 to 96 CE. Many historians believe that an overzealous cult of emperor worship in Asia Minor stimulated the attacks on Christians described in Revelation. To what extent Domitian personally encouraged his subjects to honor him as a god is uncertain. Most Greco-Roman historians thoroughly disliked Domitian's policies and presented him as a tyrant. This ancient prejudice makes it difficult for modern scholars to evaluate his reign objectively.

was not only unpatriotic but also likely to bring the gods' wrath upon the whole community. Early Christians denied the existence of the Hellenistic deities and rejected offers to participate in Roman religious festivals and other communal events. They became known as unsocial "atheists" and "haters of humankind." Rumors spread that they met secretly to drink blood and perform cannibalistic rites (a distortion of the sacramental ingesting of Jesus' blood and body). Labeled as a seditious secret society dangerous to the general welfare, early Christian groups endured social ostracism and hostility. When they also refused to pledge their allegiance to the emperor as a symbol of the Roman state, many local governors and other magistrates had them arrested, imprisoned, tortured, and even executed.

Only a few decades after John composed Revelation, Pliny the Younger, a Roman governor of Bithynia (located in the same general region as Revelation's seven churches), wrote to the emperor Trajan inquiring about the government's official policy toward Christians. Pliny's description of the situation as it was about 112 CE may also apply to John's slightly earlier time.

Although a humane and sophisticated thinker, Pliny reports that he did not hesitate to torture two slave women, "deacons" of a local church, and execute other believers. If Christians held Roman citizenship, he sent them to Rome for trial. Trajan replied that, although his governors were not to seek out Christians or to accept anonymous accusations, self-confessed believers were to be punished. Both the emperor and Pliny clearly regarded Christians as a threat to the empire's security (Pliny, *Letters* 10.96–97).

Purpose and Organization

The Christians for whom John writes were experiencing a real crisis. They were faced with Jewish hostility, public suspicion, and sporadic governmental persecution, imprisonment, and even execution. Many believers must have been tempted to renounce Christ, as Pliny asked his prisoners to do, and conform to the norms of Roman society. Recognizing that the costs of remaining Christian were overwhelmingly high, John recorded his visions of cosmic conflict to strengthen those whose faith wavered, assuring them that death is not defeat but victory. In the light of eternity, Rome's power was insignificant, but its victims, slaughtered for their fidelity, gained everlasting life and the power to judge the fates of their former persecutors.

Despite its many complexities, we can outline Revelation as follows:

1. Prologue: the author's self-identification and the basis for his authority—divine revelation (1:1–20)
2. Jesus' letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor (2:1–3:22)
3. Visions from heaven: a scroll with seven seals; seven trumpets (4:1–11:19)

4. Signs in heaven: visions of the woman, the Dragon, the beast, the Lamb, and the seven plagues (12:1–16:21)
5. Visions of the "great whore" and the fall of Babylon (Rome) (17:1–18:24)
6. Visions of heavenly rejoicing, the warrior Messiah, the imprisonment of the beast and Satan, judgment of the dead, and the final defeat of evil (19:1–20:15)
7. Visions of the "new heaven and new earth" and the establishment of a new Jerusalem on earth (21:1–22:5)
8. Epilogue: authenticity of the author's prophetic visions and the nearness of their fulfillment (22:6–21)

From this outline, we observe that John begins his work in the real world of exile and suffering (1:1–10) and then takes his readers on a visionary tour of the spirit world—including a vivid dramatization of the imminent fall of satanic governments and the triumph of Christ. He returns at the end to earth and gives final instructions to his contemporary audience (22:6–21). The book's structure thus resembles a vast circle starting and ending in physical reality but encompassing a panorama of the unseen regions of heaven and the future.

Alone among New Testament writers, John claims divine inspiration for his work. He reports that on "the Lord's day"—Sunday—he "was caught up by the Spirit" to hear and see heaven's unimaginable splendors (1:9). His message derives from God's direct revelation to Jesus Christ, who in turn transmits it through an angel to him (1:1–2). John's visions generate an intense urgency, for they reveal the immediate future (1:1). Visionary previews of Jesus' impending return convince the author that what he sees is about to happen (1:3). This warning is repeated at the book's conclusion when Jesus proclaims that his arrival is imminent (22:7, 10, 12).

Revelation's Use of Symbols

John's Prophetic Style Revelation's opening chapter gives a representative example of John's writing style. It shows how profoundly he was influenced by the Hebrew Bible and how he utilizes its vivid images to construct his fantastic symbols. Without ever citing specific biblical books, John fills his sentences with metaphors and phrases borrowed from all parts of the Hebrew Bible. Scholars have counted approximately 500 such verbal allusions. (The Jerusalem Bible helps readers recognize John's biblical paraphrases by printing them in italics.)

In his first symbolic depiction of a heavenly being (1:12–16), John describes a male figure with snow-white hair, flaming eyes, incandescent brass feet, and a sharp sword protruding from his mouth. These images derive largely from Daniel (chs. 7 and 10). To universalize this figure, John adds astronomical features to his biblical symbols. Like a Greek mythological hero transformed into a stellar constellation, the figure is described as holding seven stars in his hand and shining with the brilliance of the sun.

The next verses (1:17–19) reveal the figure's identity. As the "first and the last" who has died but now lives forever, he is the crucified and risen Christ. The author's purpose in combining biblical and nonbiblical imagery is now clear: In strength and splendor, the glorified Christ surpasses rival Greco-Roman deities like Mithras, Apollo, Helios, Amon-Ra, and other solar gods worshiped throughout the Roman Empire.

John further explains his symbols in 1:20. There, Christ identifies the stars as angels and the lampstands standing nearby as the seven churches of John's home territory. This identification reassures the author that his familiar earthly congregations do not exist solely on a material plane but are part of a larger visible/invisible duality in which angelic spirits protectively oversee assembled Christians. The symbols also serve John's characteristic purpose in uncovering the spiritual reality behind physical appearance. To John, the seven churches are as precious as the golden candelabrum that once stood in the Jerusalem sanctuary. Like the eternal stars above, they shed Christ's light on a benighted world.

The Lamb and the Dragon In asking us to view the universe as God sees it, John challenges his

FIGURE 19.5 Mesopotamian god battling a seven-headed dragon. Revelation's image of the archangel Michael's defeating a "great red dragon with seven heads" has a long pedigree, extending at least as far back as the Sumerian Early Dynastic period (c. 2800–2600 BCE), when this plaque showing a divine warrior battling the primal monster of chaos was designed. Biblical writers preserved aspects of this ancient conflict myth in references to Yahweh's struggles with Leviathan, another name for the primeval serpent (Ps. 74:12–14; Job 14:1–34; Isa. 27:1). Apocalyptic writers commonly reapplied traditions about the precreation struggles between forces of order and chaos to events of End time, as does John of Patmos, who also identifies the "original serpent" with Satan and the devil (Rev. 12:9).

readers to respond emotionally and intuitively, as well as intellectually, to his symbols. Thus, he depicts invisible forces of good and evil in images that evoke an instinctively positive or negative reaction. Using a tradition also found in the Fourth Gospel, the author portrays Christ as the Lamb of God, whose death "takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29, 36; Rev. 4:7–14; 5:6; 7:10, 14). Harmless and vulnerable, the Lamb is appealing; his polar opposite, the **Dragon,** elicits feelings of fear and revulsion. A reptilian monster with seven heads and ten horns, he is equated with "that serpent of old . . . whose name is Satan, or the Devil" (12:3, 9). (In the Eden story, the **serpent** that tempted Eve to disobey God is not described as evil. The Genesis serpent's identification with Satan is a much later development in Jewish thought [Wisd. of Sol. 2:23–24].)

In his vision of the Dragon waging war and being thrown down from heaven (12:1–12), John evokes one of the world's oldest conflict myths. Dating back to ancient Sumer and Babylon, the dragon image represents the forces of chaos—darkness, disorder, and the original void—that preceded the world's creation (see Figure 19.5). In the Babylonian creation story the *Enuma Elish,* the young god Marduk must defeat and kill Tiamat, the Dragon of Chaos, before the orderly cosmos can be brought into being. Echoes of these primordial creation myths appear in the Hebrew Bible, including the symbol of the dark, watery abyss (Gen. 1:2) and passages in which Yahweh defeats the chaotic monsters Rahab, Behemoth, and Leviathan (Pss. 74:13–17; 89:9–10; Job 26:5–14; Isa. 51:9). Consistent with the ancient chaos myth, the defeat of the Dragon in Revelation

returns him to the original **abyss**—the dark void that represents forces opposing God's light and creative purpose (20:1–3, 7).

To unspiritual eyes, the Lamb—tiny and vulnerable—might appear a ridiculously inadequate opponent of the Dragon, particularly because John views Satan as possessing immense power on earth as he wages war against the Lamb's people, the church (12:13–17). Although nations that the Dragon controls, figuratively called Sodom and Egypt (11:8), have already slain the Lamb (when Rome crucified Jesus), God uses this apparent weakness to eliminate evil both in heaven and on earth. John wishes his readers to draw comfort from this paradox: Christ's sacrificial death guarantees his ultimate victory over the Dragon and all he represents.

The Lamb's death and rebirth to immortal power also delivers his persecuted followers. The church will overcome the seemingly invincible strength of its oppressors; the blood of its faithful martyrs confirms that God will preserve it (6:9–11; 7:13–17). Although politically and socially as weak as a lamb, the Christian community embodies a potential strength that is unrecognized by its enemies. John expresses this belief in the image of an angel carrying a golden censer, an incense burner used in Jewish and Christian worship services. He interprets the censer's symbolism very simply: Smoke rising upward from the burning incense represents Christians' prayers ascending to heaven, where they have an astonishing effect. In the next image, the angel throws the censer to earth, causing thunder and an earthquake. The meaning is that the prayers of the faithful can figuratively shake the world (8:3–5). The author gives many of his most obscure or grotesque symbols a comparably down-to-earth meaning.

Limited space permits us to discuss here only a few of John's most significant visions. We focus on those in which he pictures the cosmic tension between good and evil, light and dark, Christ and Satan. In commenting on the notorious beast whose "human" number is 666 (13:1–18)—a favorite topic for many of today's apocalyptists—we also briefly review the author's use of numerology, the occult art of assigning arcane meanings to specific numbers.

Jesus' Letters to the Seven Churches

Having validated his prophetic authority through the divine source of his prophecy, John now surveys the disparate churches of Asia Minor, the seven lamps that contrast with the world's darkness. Like the contemporary author of 2 Esdras (14:22–48), John presents himself as a secretary recording the dictation of a divine voice, conveying the instructions of a higher power.

Christ's messages to the seven communities all follow the same pattern. After he commands John to write, Jesus identifies himself as the speaker and then employs the formula "I know," followed by a description of the church's spiritual condition. A second formula, "but I have it against you," then introduces a summary of the church's particular weaknesses. Each letter also includes a prophetic call for repentance, a promise that the Parousia will occur soon, an exhortation to maintain integrity, a directive to "hear," and a final pledge to reward the victorious.

After reading Jesus' messages to **Ephesus** (2:1–7), **Smyrna** (2:8–11), **Pergamum** (2:12–17), **Thyatira** (2:18–29), **Sardis** (3:1–6), **Philadelphia** (3:7–13), and **Laodicea** (3:14–22), the student will have a good idea of John's method. Church conditions in each of these cities are rendered in images that represent the spiritual reality underlying those conditions. Thus, Pergamum is labeled the site of Satan's throne (2:13), probably because it was the first center of the emperor cult. (John sees any worldly ruler who claims divine honors as an agent of Satan, and hence an anti-Christ, the enemy of Jesus.) The Balaam referred to here was a Canaanite prophet hired to curse Israel (Num. 22–24), and hence a false teacher, like those who advocate eating meat previously sacrificed to Greco-Roman gods (2:14). John's strict refusal to tolerate the consumption of animals slaughtered in

non-Christian rituals (which included virtually all meats sold in most Roman cities) is typical of his exclusivism and contrasts with Paul's more flexible attitude on the same issue (1 Cor. 8:1–13).

Visions in Heaven

John's initial vision made visible and audible the invisible presence of Christ; his second (4:1–11:19) opens the way to heaven. After the Spirit carries him to God's throne, John is shown images of events about to occur (4:1–2). It is important to remember, however, that John's purpose is not merely to predict future happenings but to remove the material veil that shrouds heavenly truths and allow his readers to see that God retains full control of the universe. The visions that follow are intended to reassure Christians that their sufferings are temporary and their deliverance is certain.

Breaking the Seven Seals

John conveys this assurance in two series of seven visions involving seven seals and seven trumpets. Seen from the perspective of God's heavenly throne (depicted in terms of Isa. 6 and Ezek. 1 and 10), the opening of the seven seals reveals that the future course of events has already been recorded on a heavenly scroll. In John's day, almost all writing was done on long, narrow strips of paper that were then rolled up around a stick, forming a scroll. Important communications from kings or other officials were commonly sealed with hot wax, which was imprinted while still soft with the sender's identifying seal. Because the scroll could not be opened without breaking the seal, the wax imprint effectively prevented anyone from knowing the scroll's contents until the intended recipient opened it.

In John's vision, the Lamb opens each of the seven seals in sequence, disclosing either a predestined future event or God's viewpoint on some important matter. (Breaking the seventh seal is an exception, producing only an ominous silence in heaven—the calm preceding the Lord's Final Judgment [8:1].) Breaking the first four seals unleashes four horses and riders—the famous Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse—representing, respectively, conquest, war, food shortages (including monetary inflation), and death, the "sickly pale" rider, followed closely by Hades (the grave or Underworld) (6:1–8).

Breaking the fifth seal makes visible the souls of persons executed for their Christian faith. While crying for divine vengeance, they are given white clothing and told to rest until the full number of predestined martyrs has been killed (6:9–11). In such scenes, John indicates that believers' willingness to die for their religion earns them the white garment of spiritual purity—and that God soon will act to avenge their deaths.

Showing how terrifying the great day of God's vengeance will be, John portrays it in terms of astronomical catastrophes. Apparently borrowing from the same apocalyptic tradition that the Synoptic Gospel writers used to predict Jesus' Second Coming (Mark 13; Matt. 24–25; Luke 21), the author predicts that the sun will turn black, the moon will turn a bloody red, and the stars will fall to earth as the sky vanishes into nothingness (6:12–14). As he clothes Jesus in astronomical images, so John also paints the End in livid colors of cosmic dissolution.

As the earth's population hides in fear, angels appear with God's distinctive seal to mark believers on the forehead, an apocalyptic device borrowed from Ezekiel 9. The symbolic number of those marked for salvation is 144,000 (a multiple of 12), the number representing the traditional twelve tribes of Israel. This indicates that John sees his fellow Jews redeemed at End time (compare Paul's view in Rom. 9:25–27). In chapter 14, the 144,000 are designated the first ingathering of God's harvest (14:1–5). Accompanying this group is a huge crowd from every nation on earth, probably signifying the countless multitudes of Gentile Christians. Both groups wear white robes and stand before God's throne. (In contrast, see John's description of those marked by the demonic "beast" [13:16–17].)

Sounding the Seven Trumpets

As if answering the churches' prayers (symbolized by the censer in 8:4–5), seven angels blow seven trumpets of doom. The first six announce catastrophes reminiscent of the ten plagues on Egypt. The initial trumpet blast triggers a hail of fire and blood, causing a third of the earth to burn (8:6–7). The second causes a fire-spewing mountain to be hurled into the sea, perhaps a reference to the volcanic island of Thera, which was visible from Patmos (8:8–9). Devastating volcanic eruptions like that of Vesuvius in 79 CE were commonly regarded as expressions of divine judgment.

The third and fourth trumpets introduce more astronomical disasters, including a blazing comet or meteorite called Wormwood (perhaps representing Satan's fall from heaven) and causing the sun, moon, and stars to lose a third of their light (8:10–12). After the fifth trumpet blast, the fallen star opens the abyss, releasing columns of smoke that produce a plague of locusts, similar to those described in Exodus (10:12–15) and Joel (1:4; 2:10). Persons not angelically marked are tormented with unbearable agonies but are unable to die to end their pain (9:1–6). These disasters, in which the locusts may represent barbarian soldiers invading the Roman Empire (9:7–11), are equivalent to the first disaster predicted (8:13; 9:12).

Despite the unleashing of further hordes as the sixth trumpet sounds (9:14–19), John does not believe that such afflictions will stop humanity's bad behavior. People who survive the plagues will continue committing crimes and practicing false religion (9:20–21). In fact, John presents the world's suffering as gratuitous and essentially without moral purpose. Revelation's various plagues compound human misery, but they fail to enlighten their victims about the divine nature or produce a single act of regret or repentance.

Eating the Scroll

Just as he borrowed his device of marking the saved from Ezekiel 9, John now draws upon the same prophet to describe the symbolic eating of a little scroll that tastes like honey but turns bitter in the stomach (Ezek. 2:8–3:3). The scroll represents the dual nature of John's message: sweet to the faithful but sour to the disobedient (10:8–11).

In the next section, John is told to measure the Jerusalem Temple, which will continue under Gentile (pagan) domination for forty-two months. In the meantime, two witnesses are appointed to prophesy for 1,260 days—the traditional period of persecution or tribulation established in Daniel (7:25; 9:27; 12:7). The witnesses are killed and, after three and a half days, resurrected and taken to heaven. (The executed prophets may refer to Moses and Elijah, to Peter and Paul, or, collectively, to all Christian martyrs whose testimony caused their deaths.) After the martyrs' ascension, an earthquake kills 7,000 inhabitants of the great city whose ethical reality is represented by Sodom and Egypt. Sodom, guilty of violence and inhospitality, was consumed by fire from heaven; Egypt, which enslaved God's people, was devastated by ten plagues. So Rome, the tyrannical state that executed Jesus and persecutes his disciples (11:1–13), suffers deserved punishment.

The seventh trumpet does not introduce a specific calamity but proclaims God's sovereignty and the eternal reign of his Christ. With the Messiah invisibly reigning in the midst of his enemies (Ps. 2:1–12), God's heavenly sanctuary opens to view amid awesome phenomena recalling Yahweh's presence in Solomon's Temple (1 Kings 8:1–6).

SACRED TEXTS 1 3 5

Signs in Heaven: The Woman, the Dragon, the Beast, and the Seven Plagues

Chapter 12 introduces a series of unnumbered visions dramatizing the cosmic battle between the Lamb and the Dragon. In this section (12:1–16:21), John links unseen events in heaven with their consequences on earth. The opening war in the spirit realm (12:1–12) finds

its earthly counterpart in the climactic battle of **Armageddon** (16:12–16). Between these two analogous conflicts, John mixes inspirational visions of the Lamb's domain with warnings about "the beast" and God's negative judgment upon disobedient humanity.

The Celestial Woman, the Dragon, and the Beast from the Sea

This section's first astronomical sign reveals a woman dressed in the sun, moon, and stars—resembling Hellenistic portraits of the Egyptian goddess Isis. Despite its nonbiblical astrological features, however, John probably means the figure to symbolize Israel, historically the parent of Christ. Arrayed in "twelve stars" suggesting the traditional twelve tribes, the woman labors painfully giving birth to the Messiah. John's fellow first-century apocalyptist, the author of 2 Esdras, similarly depicted Israel's holy city, Jerusalem, the mother of all believers, as a persecuted woman (2 Esd. 9:38–10:54). Like most of John's symbols, this figure can be interpreted in many ways, including the view that it represents the Virgin.

The Dragon, whom the archangel **Michael** hurls from heaven, wages war against the woman's children, identified as the faithful who witness to Jesus' sovereignty (12:13–17). Lest they despair, however, John has already informed his hearers that this satanic attack on the church is really a sign of the Dragon's last days. His expulsion from heaven and his wrathful conduct on earth signify that Christ has already begun to rule (see Figure 19.6). Satan can no longer accuse the faithful of unworthiness to God as he did in Job's time (Job 1–2). In John's mystic vision, the Lamb's sacrificial death and believers' testimony about it have conquered the Dragon and overthrown evil (12:10–12).

His activities now limited to human society, the Dragon appears in the form of a "beast," a monster with ten horns and seven heads. The reversed number of heads and horns shows the beast's kinship to the Dragon, who gives him his power (13:1–4). As scholars such as Richard Bauckham have pointed out, John's symbols

FIGURE 19.6 *The Fall of Satan from Heaven.* In this painting by Luca Giordano (1632–1705), inspired by Revelation's eschatological scenario, the archangel Michael, Israel's guardian "prince," expels Satan from the divine presence, along with a full third of his fellow members of the heavenly council. According to John of Patmos, Satan's expulsion signals the triumph of God's "sovereignty and power, when his Christ comes to his rightful rule" (Rev. 12:10). A revolutionary event in biblical eschatology, God's banishment of Satan from the celestial assembly represents his permanent rejection of "the accuser of our [human] brothers," the figure whose function was to plant doubts of humanity's value in the divine mind (Job 1–2).

of the "beast" and the "harlot" who rides on the beast (17:3) are a two-pronged attack on the power of Rome, a deliberate refutation of Roman political propaganda that presented the Roman Empire as sustained by heaven's highest gods and as a benefactor of humankind (see Figure 19.7). Particularly repellent, in John's view, were the public cults that honored the emperors as if they were divine, a practice that

FIGURE 19.7 *The Whore of Babylon.* In his vision of spiritual reality, John depicted the great city of Rome as "a woman mounted on a scarlet beast," a symbol of imperial corruption who brandishes "a gold cup, full of obscenities" (Rev. 17:1–14). Because Roman armies had destroyed Jerusalem (70 CE), Rome has become the "new Babylon," archetype of governmental opposition to God. From the Apocalypse series of woodcuts by Albrecht Dürer, c. 1498.

many Asian cities apparently promoted. John asks his readers to view Rome as God does—a vicious "beast" that built its sovereignty on brutal conquest and maintains its military supremacy through violence against and intimidation of its subject peoples. The beast is "blasphemous" because it promotes itself as humanity's political savior, a hideous distortion of God's kingdom.

Whereas the beast appears to represent tyrannical government, the "harlot" of chapters 17–18, who is closely associated with the beast, symbolizes Rome's exploitation of the world economy, a burdensome system that benefits the wealthy ruling class and condemns the majority to unending poverty. Although the "kings of the earth" revel in the "wine" of her economic prosperity, she is doomed to public exposure and disgrace because she greedily amassed enormous riches with no thought for the poor (17:9–18:20). Like the man wallowing in luxury who ignored the beggar Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31), the harlot's excessive possessions—unshared with the destitute—reveal her as no friend to God (cf. James 5:1–6).

In interpreting the beast's "mortal wound [that] was healed" (13:3–4), Bauckham suggests that the widespread political disorder following Nero's suicide in 68 CE represented a potential "death blow" to the imperial system, as the government threatened to disintegrate into chaos. When Vespasian finally became emperor a year later and founded a new dynasty, the Flavian, however, the imperial rulership was reborn, resuscitating Rome's "monstrous" tyranny—as well as the practice of deifying emperors.

A second beast then emerges, not from the sea like the first, but from the earth, to work miracles and promote public worship of the first beast. This duplicate monster, also called the false prophet (16:13; 19:20), proceeds to enforce the imperial cult by erecting an "image" of the beast. According to Bauckham, this perverse ascribing of godlike qualities to an idol probably signifies the policies of the state priests who encouraged emperor worship in the cities of Asia Minor, including those to which John wrote (see Bauckham in "Recommended Reading"). In a parody of the angelic sealing, the earth-monster allows no one to conduct business unless he bears the beast's mark. John then adds a key to this bestial riddle: The beast's number is that of a "man's name," and the "numerical value of its letters is six hundred and sixty-six" (13:14–18).

John's Numerical Symbols

The reader is aware by this point that John's use of particular numbers is an important part

of his symbolism. In this respect, John is typical of the Hellenistic age in which he lived. For centuries before his time, Greco-Roman thinkers regarded certain numbers as possessing a special kind of meaning. The Greek philosopher Pythagoras speculated that the universe was structured on a harmony of numerical relationships and that certain combinations of numbers held a mystical signification.

In the Jewish tradition, seven represented the days of creation, culminating in God's Sabbath ("seventh-day") rest (Gen. 1). Hence, seven stood for earthly completion or perfection. In contrast, six may represent that which is incomplete or imperfect. When John depicts divine activities affecting earth, as in the seven seals or seven trumpets, he signifies that God's actions are perfectly completed. When he wishes to represent a personification of human inadequacy or corruption, he applies the number six, tripling it for emphasis.

FIGURE 19.8 Coin portrait bust of Nero, emperor of Rome from 54 to 68 CE. According to the Roman historian Tacitus, Nero was the first emperor to persecute Christians. Nero's violence toward believers made him seem to some the image of bestiality in his savage attacks on God's people. In depicting the "beast" who demands his subjects' worship, John of Patmos may have had Nero—and other worldly rulers who imitated the emperor's methods—in mind.

The Mystical Number of the Beast To calculate the beast's numerical symbol, we must remember that in the author's day all numbers, whether in Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek, were represented by letters of the alphabet. Thus, each letter in a person's name was also a number. By adding up the sum of all letters in a given name, we arrive at its "numerical value." (The awkward system of having letters double for numbers continued until the Arabs introduced their Arabic numerals to Europeans during the Middle Ages.)

John's hint that the beast's cryptic number could be identified with a specific person has inspired more irresponsible speculation than almost any other statement in his book. In virtually every generation from John's day until ours, apocalyptists have found men or institutions that they claimed fit the beast's description and thus filled the role of anti-Christ, whose appearance confirmed that the world was near its End.

In contrast, most New Testament scholars believe that John (or the source he employs) refers to a historical personage—or a human political institution—of his own time. Who that person or institution might have been, however, is still hotly debated. Some historians believe that the man who best fits John's description of the beast was **Nero**, the first Roman head of state to torture and execute Christians (see Figure 19.8). Following Nero's suicide in 68 CE, popular rumors swept the empire that he was not dead but in hiding and planned to reappear at the head of a barbarian army to reassert his sovereignty. Or, as Bauckham has proposed, it was the revival of imperial rulership after Vespasian's ascent to power in 69 CE. (Both views explain the beast's recovery from its "deathblow" and his execution of those Christians who refused to acknowledge his divinity.) Proponents of this hypothesis point to the fact that in Aramaic the "numerical value" of the name Nero Caesar is 666.

Although it is widely accepted, the theory identifying John's beast with Nero leaves much unexplained. We have no evidence that the

author intended us to use Aramaic letters in computing the name's mystical significance. Other historians suggest that John intended to imply that Nero was figuratively reborn in Domitian, his vicious spirit ascending "out of the abyss" (17:8) to torment Christians in a new human form. Still others observe that we do not have "the key" (13:18) necessary to understand John's meaning.

Historians' speculations about the beast's identity have been disappointingly inconclusive. Whatever contemporary figure the author had in mind, his achievement was to create a symbol of timeless significance. Every age has its beast, a distortion of the divine image in which God created humanity (Gen. 1:27), who somehow gains the power to perpetrate evil on a large scale. In the universality of his symbols, John achieves a continuing relevance.

Methods of Interpretation

First Method Our brief scrutiny of John's mysterious beast illustrates the more general challenge of trying to find a reliable method of interpreting Revelation's complex system of symbols. In the tentative identifications mentioned previously, we have already touched on two possible methods. The first approach, favored by scholars, assumes that Revelation was composed for a first-century-CE audience familiar with apocalyptic imagery and that its chief purpose was to give an eschatological interpretation of then-current events. Reasoning that the book could not have been written or understood well enough to have been preserved had it not had considerable immediate significance to its original audience, the scholar looks to contemporary Roman history to supply the primary meanings of John's symbols. According to this scholarly method, Babylon (18:2, 10) is Rome, the beast personifies the empire's blasphemous might (represented in human form by the emperors), and the various plagues described are metaphorically intensified versions of wars, invasions, famines, earthquakes, and other disasters experienced (or feared) during this era.

Second Method According to a second view, favored by apocalyptists, Revelation is largely predictive. The visions may have had a contemporary application in Roman times, but John's main purpose was to prophesy about future events. Invariably, apocalyptist interpreters regard their own time as that which John predicted. During the past several centuries, such interpreters, comparing Daniel's use of "times," "years," and "days" with similar terms in Revelation (12:6, 14; 13:5, etc.), have tried to calculate the exact year of the End. In the United States alone, the years 1843, 1844, 1874, 1914, 1975, 1984, and 2000 were announced by different apocalyptic groups as the year in which Christ would return to judge the earth, slaughter the wicked, or establish a new world. Thus far, all such groups have been wrong, probably because apocalypses like John's were not intended to be blueprints of the future. To try to construct a paradigm of End time from Daniel's or Revelation's chronological or numerical symbols is to miss their purpose, as well as to ignore Paul's advice about computing "dates and times" (1 Thess. 5:1). Given human nature, however, it is unlikely that their predecessors' repeated failures will deter future apocalyptists from publicizing their ingeniously revised schedules of the End.

Third Method Although historians' attempts to correlate Revelation's images and symbols with conditions in the first-century Roman Empire are helpful, they do not exhaust the book's potential meaning. A third method recognizes that John's visions have a vitality that transcends any particular time or place. John's lasting achievement lies in the universality of his symbols and parabolic dramas. His visions continue to appeal, not because they apply explicitly to his or some future era, but because they reflect some of the deepest hopes and terrors of the human imagination. As long as dread of evil and longing for justice and peace motivate human beings, Revelation's promise of the ultimate triumph of divine rule over chaos will remain pertinent. John's visions speak directly

to the human condition as thousands of generations experience it.

In surveying Revelation's last chapters (17–22), we focus on those aspects of the book that dramatize the ever-repeated struggle and make John's visions relevant not merely to his End time but to ours as well. Readers may have noted that John's method in presenting his visions is to retell the same event in different terms, using different symbols to illustrate the same concept. Thus, to dramatize Christ's victory over evil, he does not proceed in a straight line from the opening battle to the devil's final defeat but turns back to narrate the conflict again and again.

After the seventh trumpet blast, we are told that Jesus is victorious and now reigns as king over the world (11:15). However, another battle ensues in chapter 12, after which John declares that Christ has now achieved total sovereignty (12:10). Yet, still another conflict follows—the infamous Battle of Armageddon (16:13–16)—after which the angel repeats, "'It is over!'" (16:18). But it is not finished, for Satan's earthly kingdom—Babylon—has yet to fall (chs. 17–18). When she does and a fourth victory is proclaimed (19:1–3), the empowered Christ must repeat his conquest again (19:11–21). In John's cyclic visions, evil does not stay defeated but must be fought time after time. Similarly, life is a continual battleground in which the contestants must struggle to defend previous victories and combat the same opponents in new guises.

Visions of the Final Triumph

In contrast to the cyclic repetitions of earlier sections, after chapter 20, John apparently (we cannot be sure) pursues a linear narration, presenting a chronological sequence of events. In this final eschatological vision (20:1–22:5), events come thick and fast. An angel hurls the Dragon into the abyss, the primordial void that existed before God's creative light ordered the visible world (20:1–3). With the Dragon temporarily imprisoned, Christ's reign at last begins. Known as the **Millennium** because it lasts 1,000 years, even this triumph is impermanent because at its conclusion Satan is again released to wage war on the faithful (see Box 19.1). The only New Testament writer to present a 1,000-year prelude to Christ's kingdom, John states that during the millennium the martyrs who resisted the beast's influence are resurrected to rule with Christ (20:4–6).

The Dragon's release and subsequent attack on the faithful (based on Ezekiel's prophetic drama involving the mythical **Gog** and **Magog,** symbols of Israel's enemies [Ezek. 38–39]) ends with fire from heaven destroying the attackers. A resurrection of all the dead ensues. Released from the control of death and Hades (the Underworld), they are judged according to their deeds (20:7–13).

The Lake of Fire John's eschatology includes a place of punishment represented by a lake of fire, an image drawn from popular Jewish belief (see Josephus's *Discourse on Hades* in Whiston's edition). Defined as "the second death" (20:15), it receives a number of symbolic figures, including death, Hades, the beast, the false prophet, and persons or human qualities not listed in God's book of life (19:20; 20:14–15). Earlier, John implied that persons bearing the beast's fatal mark would be tormented permanently amid burning sulphur (14:9–11), a destiny similar to that described for the rich man in Luke (17:19–31).

John's fiery lake also parallels that depicted in 2 Esdras (written c. 100 CE):

> Then the place of torment shall appear, and over against it the place of rest; the furnace of hell shall be displayed, and on the opposite side the paradise of delight . . . here are rest and delight, there fire and torments.
>
> (2 Esd. 7:36–38)

Although John uses his image of torture to encourage loyalty to Christ, his metaphor of hell incites many commentators to question the author's understanding of divine love. (For a discussion of other eschatological visions of the afterlife, see the next section.)

BOX 19.1 The Millennium

Although most religious groups recognize that John of Patmos consistently uses symbols and other forms of figurative language to portray his visions of heaven and the future, some interpreters take John's description of Christ's 1,000-year reign—the Millennium—literally. According to this view, after hurling Satan into the "abyss" (the primal "deep" that preceded creation in both Mesopotamian and biblical creation myths [Gen. 1:2]), the triumphant Christ will preside over a peaceful earth, to which the faithful dead will be resurrected (Rev. 20:1–6). When Christ's millennial rule is over, "the rest of the dead" are also resurrected, only to be tested severely when Satan emerges from the abyss to "seduce the nations," which seem to have survived the catastrophic plagues and other disasters John so vividly narrated earlier (Rev. 20:7–21:8).

Presenting Revelation's eschatological images as actual future events, the popular *Left Behind* novels by Jerry Jenkins and Tim LaHaye envision an imminent conflict between Christ and Satan in which the vast majority of humans are doomed. In this version of the apocalypse, Jesus rescues his true followers from a pre-Armageddon seven-year "tribulation" afflicting the rest of humanity by bodily taking them up to heaven in "the rapture," a term that occurs nowhere in the New Testament. Based on a nineteenth-century interpretation of Paul's description of Jesus' Parousia, the rapture concept is extremely popular among many Protestant fundamentalists. Most biblical scholars, however, reject this notion as a misreading of 1 Thessalonians 4–5 (see Chapter 14 for a discussion of the Roman analogy that Paul apparently uses in depicting Jesus' reappearance). As for a literalist view of the Millennium, most contemporary scholars agree with the early church historian Eusebius, who dismissed it as a failure to understand John's "mystic and symbolic language" (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.39).

The Wedding of the Lamb and the Holy City

John's primary purpose is to demonstrate the truth of a divine power great enough to vanquish evil for all time and create the new universe described in chapters 21–22. The author combines images from Isaiah and other Hebrew prophets to portray an oasis of peace contrasting with the violent and bloody battlefields of his previous visions. Borrowing again from ancient myth, in which epics of conflict commonly end with a union of supernatural entities, John describes a sacred marriage of the Lamb with the holy city that descends from heaven to earth.

The wedding of a city to the Lamb may strike readers as a strange metaphor, but John attains great heights of poetic inspiration describing the union. The brilliance of the heavenly Jerusalem is rendered in terms of gold and precious stones, the jewel-like city illuminated by the radiance of God himself. John draws again on Ezekiel's vision of a restored Jerusalem Temple to describe a crystal stream flowing from God's throne to water the tree of life. Growing in a new Eden, the tree's fruits restore humanity to full health. The renewed and purified faithful can now look directly upon God (21:1–22:5). With his dazzling view of the heavenly city, portrayed in the earthy terms of the Hebrew prophets (Isa. 11, 65, 66), John completes his picture of a renewed and completed creation. God's will is finally done on earth as it is in heaven.

Warning that his visions represent the immediate future and that the scrolls on which they are written are not to be sealed (because their contents will soon be fulfilled), John adds a curse upon anyone who tampers with his manuscript (22:6, 10, 18–19). In his final address to the reader, John again invokes Jesus' speedy return, a reminder of the intense fervor with which many early Christians—generations after Jesus' death—awaited their Master's Second Coming.

Other Hellenistic-Jewish and Christian Apocalypses

With its images of a warring Dragon, celestial woman, lake of fire, and bejeweled city descending from heaven, Revelation has such a strong impact on readers' imaginations that many people think of the book as unique. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, however, Revelation is only one of many similar apocalyptic works that Hellenistic-Jewish or early Christian writers produced between about 300 BCE and 200 CE. To place Revelation in historical perspective, it is helpful to review some other books representing the apocalyptic genre to which Revelation belongs: 1 Enoch, a composite work written in several stages by different authors from about 300 BCE to the first century CE; 2 Esdras (4 Ezra), a Jewish apocalypse composed about the same time as Revelation (c. 100 CE); and the Apocalypse of Peter, a Christian work dating from the second century CE.

These three apocalyptic books are noteworthy not only because they employ the same kinds of imagery used in Revelation but also because their portrayals of the spirit world and the fate of souls after death have been extraordinarily influential on Christian thought. Almost two millennia after they were written, the eschatology they present continues to shape popular beliefs about divine judgment, heaven, and hell. The persistence of these eschatological speculations about postmortem existence—particularly the Apocalypse of Peter's detailed descriptions of fiery torments afflicting the damned—results, at least in part, from their views of the afterlife being later incorporated into masterpieces of Western literature, such as Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. In contemporary Western culture, any student who has figuratively descended into Dante's Inferno or visited "the darkness visible" of Milton's hell has encountered ideas that were vividly articulated by the authors of 1 Enoch and the Apocalypse of Peter. (Traditions embodied in the Apocalypse of Peter were known to Dante through a late-fourth-century work, the Apocalypse of Paul, which incorporated concepts expressed in the earlier apocalyptic work.)

In tracing the chronological evolution of eschatological ideas expressed in both canonical and noncanonical apocalypses, readers will find a major shift in emphasis over time. The earliest apocalyptic visions, such as the previews of world history contained in 1 Enoch and the Book of Daniel (the only apocalypse admitted to the Hebrew Bible canon), tend to be cosmic in scope, presenting the rise and fall of political empires and the ultimate triumph of God's kingdom (cf. 1 Enoch 91:12–17; 93:1–10; Dan. 2; 7–11). Focusing on God-ordained changes in the macrocosm (the great world), Daniel says little about the microcosm (the smaller world of individual humans). Almost as an afterthought, Daniel's visions conclude with the Hebrew Bible's first explicit prophecy of an afterlife for both righteous and wicked persons: "Of those who lie sleeping in the dust of the earth many will awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting disgrace" (Dan. 12:3, Jerusalem Bible). Other than this terse allusion to physical resurrection of the dead, Daniel (c. 165 BCE) says nothing about the nature of their future lives. By the close of the first century CE, however, when Revelation and 2 Esdras were written, ideas about personal eschatology (the posthumous fate of individuals) receive greater attention. Destinies of good and evil persons are now sharply distinguished, with the former enjoying eternal bliss and the latter condemned to everlasting pain. By the time the Apocalypse of Peter was composed, in the second century CE, typical apocalyptic concerns about the future of the cosmos had been subordinated to microcosmic preoccupations with the unspeakable agonies awaiting those who have offended God (see Figure 19.9).

The historical transition from apocalypses devoted to global eschatology to those emphasizing personal eschatology may reflect a concurrent change in the church's evolving beliefs about Jesus' Second Coming. As the Christian

FIGURE 19.9 *The Damned.* The terror and anguish of souls condemned to hell are graphically rendered in this Christian bas-relief depicting the Last Judgment.

church gradually accepted the idea that Christ's Parousia would be indefinitely delayed, its attention inevitably moved from expectations of the world's End and universal judgment to contemplation of the posthumous judgment of individual souls (see the discussion of the Apocalypse of Peter).

1 Enoch (Ethiopic Book of Enoch)

A composite work including both cosmic and personal eschatology, 1 Enoch incorporates diverse material composed as early as the third century BCE and as late as the first century CE. Although the book, originally written in Hebrew and/or Aramaic, had fallen out of use centuries before the only complete copy was found in an Ethiopic translation in the eighteenth century, 1 Enoch was once widely read. Aramaic fragments of the book have been found among the Dead Sea Scrolls and at Masada, the Herodian fortress where the last survivors of the Jewish Revolt against Rome perished about 73 CE. Apparently accepted in some Christian circles, 1 Enoch is quoted as Scripture in Jude (see Chapter 18). Many scholars believe that traditions embodied in 1 Enoch also influenced the eschatological thought of Paul and the Synoptic authors.

First Enoch is the oldest of three extant books ascribed to the biblical Enoch, listed in Genesis as one of the patriarchs who lived before Noah's flood. A person of exemplary righteousness, Enoch did not experience ordinary human death because "God took him," presumably transporting him alive to heaven (Gen. 5:24). The tradition of Enoch's mysterious ascension into the divine presence inspired a host of legends about his unparalleled knowledge of celestial secrets, which are supposedly revealed in the books bearing his name. (A volume called 2 Enoch, describing Enoch's mystical journey through the ten levels of heaven, was composed in the first century CE; 3 Enoch dates from a much later period.)

The Pseudepigrapha Long before Christian writers ascribed letters and other documents to Paul, Peter, John, James, and other leaders associated with the early Jerusalem church, Hellenistic Jews had developed a widespread practice of pseudonymity (see Chapter 17). A collection of pseudonymous Jewish writings that were included in neither the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh) nor the Apocrypha, the **Pseudepigrapha** are Hellenistic works attributed to eminent figures of the biblical past, such as Enoch, Noah, Moses, Abraham, Isaiah, and Ezra. (Contemporary English translations of all extant pseudepigraphal writings, including the three books ascribed to Enoch, are contained in Charlesworth's *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha;* see "Recommended Reading.")

Incorporating some of the oldest examples of Jewish apocalyptic literature, the earliest parts of 1 Enoch anticipate visions of the spirit world and predictions of End time that later appear in Daniel and Revelation. Like the author of Daniel, the writer of 1 Enoch refers to angels as "the Watchers" and describes sessions of God's heavenly court. Written about 170 BCE, the section known as the Ten Weeks Apocalypse (91:12–17; 93:1–10) divides human history into epochs symbolically represented by successive "weeks," or years, culminating in eschatological separation of the righteous from the wicked. The book's latest segment, which many scholars think was added during the first century CE or slightly earlier, is the Book of Similitudes (Parables), which describes a heavenly figure called the "Son of Man," the designation that Mark applies to Jesus in his Gospel. In 1 Enoch, however, the "Son of Man" is identified as Enoch himself, the one whom God transported to heaven and who is allowed to reveal its sacred mysteries.

An ancient compiler, or editor, arranged 1 Enoch into five parts, perhaps to emulate the fivefold division of the Pentateuch and Book of Psalms. The first section, the Watchers (chs. 1–36), expands on the Genesis account of "sons of God" who mated with mortal women, producing a hybrid race of giants and heroes (cf. Gen. 6:1–4). Describing the fall of these rebellious divine "sons," Enoch is represented as making a tour of heaven and Sheol (the biblical Underworld), where he views a flaming abyss in which the fallen angels are punished (chs. 17–18, 21; cf. 108:3–7, 15). Enoch's portrayal of the angels' incandescent dungeon resembles the older Greek myth concerning the imprisonment of the Titans, divine giants whom Zeus overthrew and confined in Tartarus, the pit below Hades' realm (see Box 4.1).

Enoch's second section (chs. 37–71) contains a series of "similitudes," parables on a variety of topics, including the Messiah, the rewards of the virtuous, the coming judgment by the Son of Man, and other eschatological concerns. The third part, the Astronomical Writings (chs. 72–82), is a miscellaneous compilation of Hellenistic scientific ideas, including accounts of planetary and lunar movements that presuppose earth as the center of the solar system. In the fourth section, the Dream Visions (chs. 83–90), the author indulges in a typically apocalyptic device, surveying past events as if they were prophecies of the future, predicting the (then-imminent) global deluge. Having confirmed his prophetic authority, Enoch then offers an allegorical narrative of world history that portrays the covenant people as tame (and gentle) animals and the Gentile nations as wild beasts, symbolism also used in Daniel and Revelation. His account begins with Adam, signified by a white bull, and ends with the appearance of the Messiah as a "lamb" who becomes a "great animal" with black horns.

The final section, the Epistle of Enoch (chs. 91–107), incorporates some of the book's oldest material, including fragments from a Book of Noah or Book of Lamech that describe miracles attending the patriarch's birth. It also includes an eschatological vision of a new world order anticipating that in Revelation and 2 Peter:

> And the first heavens shall depart and pass away,
> And a new heaven shall appear. . . .
> And all shall be in goodness and righteousness,
> And sin shall no more be mentioned forever.
>
> (1 Enoch 91:16, 17; cf. Rev. 21:1–3; 2 Pet. 3:13)

The book concludes with Enoch's last words of encouragement for the pious who await their God's day of reckoning, a passage that foreshadows Revelation's invocation of Jesus' return.

2 Esdras

Unlike 1 Enoch, the Book of 2 Esdras is included in some modern editions of the Bible, such as the New Revised Standard Version and the Revised English Bible, where it is placed among the Apocrypha. Written about 100 CE, too late to be included in the Septuagint, it appeared in Catholic versions of the Old Testament until the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century, when

it was dropped from the canon. Because it was composed within a few years of Revelation and deals with similar apocalyptic themes and symbols, 2 Esdras provides valuable insight into the worldview that John of Patmos also expressed, particularly the tensions among Jews, Christians, and their Roman oppressors.

The present Book of 2 Esdras is a composite work; the central core (chs. 3–14) was written by a Jewish apocalyptist in either Hebrew or Aramaic about thirty years after the Romans had destroyed Jerusalem in 70 CE. After the book was translated into Greek, an anonymous Christian editor added the first two chapters (c. 150 CE). Approximately a century later, another Christian redactor appended chapters 15 and 16, providing a Christian framework to this first-century Jewish apocalypse.

Ezra's Theodicy Attributed to Ezra (Greek, Esdras), the priestly scribe credited with assembling the Mosaic Torah while exiled in Babylon (c. 557 BCE), the central section was actually composed by an unknown Jewish author who lived more than six centuries after Ezra's time. Like his ancestors during the Babylonian exile, the author of 2 Esdras 3–14 had witnessed the humiliating overthrow of Judaism's holy city and Temple, a catastrophic triumph of Gentile power over the covenant people that called God's justice into question. The pseudonymous writer, who finds himself in a position analogous to that of the historical Ezra, draws on the resources of apocalyptic discourse to find some meaning or purpose in the national disaster. Chapters 3–14 present a series of seven eschatological visions, of which the first three are cast in the form of philosophical dialogues between Ezra and various angels who defend God's handling of historical events. These angelic messengers counter Ezra's repeated questioning of divine ethics with attempts to justify the Deity's ways to humans. Most readers find Ezra's questions more penetrating than the conventional answers he receives.

If Babylon (Rome) is God's chosen instrument to punish people, Ezra asks, why are Babylonians (Romans) so much worse behaved than the Jews whom they oppress? Why has God allowed an enemy nation that mocks him to annihilate those who at least try to worship him (3:25–32)? Is it not better to remain unborn than to live and suffer without knowing why (4:12)? The angels' replies express the apocalyptic stereotype: God will dispense justice in good time. The flourishing of wickedness is only temporary; it will be terminated according to a foreordained timetable (4:27–32), and the divine schedule is not humanity's concern. As Ezra observes, however, he does not presume to inquire into celestial mysteries, only to learn that which human intelligence is able to comprehend:

> To what end has the capacity for understanding been given me? For I did not mean to ask about ways above [exclusively God's domain], but about things which pass by us every day, why Israel . . . whom you love [is] given to godless tribes.
>
> (2 Esd. 4:22–23)

The wrenching disparity between the divine promises to Israel and the miserable historical reality constitutes a paradox that God does not explain.

The Afterlife Ezra is concerned about not only the earthly plight of his people but also the condition of their souls after death. Reluctantly agreeing that many act wrongly while only a few are righteous, he nonetheless disputes the justice of condemning sinners to unending torment without any further chance of repentance. Chapter 7, vividly detailing the blessings of salvation and the agonies of the damned, offers the most complete description of eschatological judgment and the afterlife in the Old Testament Apocrypha.

In addition, 2 Esdras gives us perhaps the oldest biblical statement about original sin—the doctrine that all humanity inherits Adam's sinful nature and is therefore born deserving death, concepts that have been used to interpret Paul's views on the consequences of

Adam's disobedience (5:21–26; 7:46–48, 70–72; cf. Rom. 5:12–17; see Chapter 15). This belief in humankind's innate propensity toward vice has since become dogma in many Christian denominations (see Box 15.3).

Eschatological Future In chapter 9, the book changes from a Job-like theodicy to a more purely apocalyptic preview of the "last days." Ezra's fourth vision depicts a woman who, mourning her dead son, is suddenly transformed into a thriving city. Uriel, one of the book's angelic mediators, explains that the woman is Jerusalem, her lost son the destroyed Temple, and the splendid city a future glorified Zion (chs. 9–10; cf. Rev. 21–22). Chapters 11 and 12, with their portrait of a mighty eagle, evoke John's avian imagery in Revelation. This proud eagle (Rome) that now dominates the earth is destined to disappear when a lion (the Messiah) appears to judge it for its persecution of the righteous (11:38–12:34), an eventuality that John also prophesies (Rev. 17–19). The sixth vision emphasizes the certainty of the Messiah's expected appearance and his just overthrow of unbelievers who oppress Jerusalem (ch. 13).

The two final chapters, a Christian appendix from the third century CE, dramatize the Deity's coming vengeance on the wicked. Predicting a swarm of terrors and calamities (again reminiscent of Revelation's anti-Roman stance), the book assures readers that the ungodly nation (Rome), as well as all other empires that persecute the faithful, will fall and that the guilty will be consumed by fire (chs. 15–16).

The Apocalypse of Peter and the Shift from Cosmic to Personal Eschatology

Although it was ultimately excluded from the New Testament, the pseudonymous Apocalypse of Peter once stood on the margins of accepted Christian Scripture. The Muratorian Canon (late second to early fourth century CE), a list of books that the author regarded as canonical, does not mention such works as Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, or 3 John. But it does include the apocalypse ascribed to Peter, an originally Greek work that survives complete only in an Ethiopic translation discovered in the late nineteenth century. Despite the popularity this work formerly enjoyed—and its usefulness in converting people who hoped to escape the terrors of eternal punishment it describes—the church, probably because of its pseudonymity, rejected it, along with numerous other writings, such as the Gospel of Peter, also incorrectly assigned to Jesus' leading disciple. (The present New Testament, however, does contain two Petrine documents that most scholars believe are also pseudonymous; see Chapter 18.)

The Apocalypse of Peter opens with a familiar Gospel scene: On the Mount of Olives, Jesus' disciples ask about the "signs" of his Parousia and "the end of the world" (cf. Mark 13; Matt. 24). After first reiterating Jesus' warnings about false messiahs and future persecutions, the author soon switches to his main interest: the eschatological consequences of Jesus' return and the judgment of individual souls. The writer's point of departure is a phrase from Matthew's parable in which the Son of Man returns to divide all humanity into two classes, "sheep" and "goats." Judged adversely, the goats are dispatched to "the eternal fire that is ready for the devil and his angels" (Matt. 25:41). In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus makes several references to Gehenna and "eternal punishment" (see Box 8.5), but the Evangelists do not explore the implications of these allusions to posthumous suffering—an oversight that the author of the Apocalypse enthusiastically addresses.

Quickly moving from the Parousia to visions of the next world, the writer devotes the main part of his work to surveying the tortures endured by various kinds of sinners, in general following a principle of retributive justice in which the punishment supposedly fits the crime. It is difficult to be certain whether Jesus actually takes Peter on a tour of hell, as the spirit of the poet Virgil later guides Dante

through the Inferno, or whether Christ simply describes the different sinners' torments so graphically that Peter can virtually "see" them. In any case, the fate of those who have displeased God is to feel maximum pain with no hope of release, to suffer the highest pitch of agony imaginable for all eternity.

As many commentators have recognized, the Apocalypse of Peter focuses largely on sexual sins, punishing erotic behaviors with "cataracts of fire." Women who beautified themselves with cosmetics to seduce men hang by their hair (regarded as the chief feminine attraction) in a dark fiery pit. Expectant mothers who aborted their babies are submerged in pools of flaming excrement, while the spirits of their dead children stand nearby, piercing their mothers' eyes with lightning bolts. Men who enjoyed sex outside of marriage are strung up by their genitals over glowing coals. Souls who "doubted" God's "righteousness" are tortured with "red hot irons" that bore into their eyes, while other sinners, their bodies aflame, are devoured by immortal worms. Slaves who dared to disobey their masters gnaw on their own tongues (the organ of impudence) while immersed in fire. When souls try to repent of their misdeeds and cry to God for mercy, the angel Tatirokos suddenly appears to increase their suffering, angrily declaring that the "time for repentance" has passed—the Deity has made no provision to redeem souls in hell.

Endeavoring to account for the vindictive, sadistic tone of the Apocalypse of Peter, some interpreters have suggested that it reflects some Christians' negative response to Roman persecutions of their faith during the second century CE. Widespread persecution of Christians in Gaul (France) during the late second century CE involved brutal interrogations, mutilations, and other tortures. To some Christians, the Roman practice of burning martyrs alive invited divine retaliation, in which the persecutors would suffer the same kinds of torture, with the difference that their pain would not end at death. Tertullian, a Christian theologian of the late second and early third centuries CE, looked forward to an eschatological reversal in which familiar figures from Roman society would soon be writhing in hellish agony, providing an entertaining spectacle for the souls of their former victims. Anticipating the day of judgment, Tertullian states that he will not know whether to "laugh" or "applaud" at the sight of Roman administrators who had ordered Christians burnt at the stake now "melting in flames fiercer than those they had kindled for brave Christians." He delights at the prospect of "philosophers and their students" (promoters of rival beliefs) burning together, while tragic actors who had enraptured audiences in Roman theaters will bellow their lines in genuine anguish (see Fox and Turner in "Recommended Reading"). Offering better entertainment than any of Rome's circuses or athletic events, Tertullian's fantasy makes beholding the suffering of the damned one of the major rewards of the faithful. (It should also be remembered that in the only Gospel parable about the afterlife Lazarus's paradise is in full view of the rich man's fiery torments [Luke 16:19–31]; 2 Esdras portrays a similar juxtaposition of joy and suffering [2 Esd. 7:36–38].)

Summary

In Revelation, John asks his readers to see the course of human history from God's perspective. John's series of visions unveil the spiritual realities of the universe that are ordinarily hidden from human eyes. The visions disclose that events on earth are only part of a universal drama in which invisible forces of good and evil contend for control of human society. John shows that the battle between good and evil is an ongoing process by portraying the struggle as a cycle of repeated conflicts. God's forces win, only to find their evil opponents reappearing in a new guise. In combating spiritual and social evil, the faithful must be prepared to fight again and again.

Despite the cyclic nature of the struggle against chaotic powers, John assures his audience, through Christ's death God has already determined the outcome. The last part of Revelation

shows the Dragon finally defeated and creation renewed. The Lamb's marriage to heavenly Jerusalem, descended to earth, reveals that the end purpose of history is the joyous union of humanity with the presence and image of God. In John's ultimate vision, the original goal and essential goodness of creation are realized. In contrast to Revelation's emphasis on cosmic events and the ultimate completion of God's purpose, some later Christian apocalypses focus largely on personal eschatology. This shift from macrocosmic to microcosmic concerns is particularly evident in the Apocalypse of Peter, a second-century-CE work that graphically depicts the consequences of Jesus' Second Coming for individual sinners. Expanding imaginatively on Revelation's image of a "lake of fire," this pseudonymous apocalypse graphically describes the sufferings of the damned, a portrayal of eternal torment that influenced many later Western writers, including Dante and Milton.

Questions for Review

1. Define the term *apocalypse* as a literary genre, and explain how the Book of Revelation unveils realities of the unseen spirit world and previews future events.
2. Identify and discuss the characteristics of apocalyptic literature. When and where did this type of visionary writing originate, and what is its main purpose?
3. Connect John's visions with conditions prevailing in his own time. What events taking place during the late first century CE would cause Christians to despair of the present evil world and hope for divine intervention in the near future?
4. Identify and explain some of the myths of cosmic conflict that John incorporates into his vision of the universal struggle between good and evil. In the ancient view of the world, why is disorder commonly identified with evil and an orderly creation synonymous with good?
5. Why did Hellenistic-Jewish apocalyptists select Enoch as the bearer of eschatological revelations? What topics does the Book of 1 Enoch address?
6. In what way is 2 Esdras a theodicy, confronting issues about divine justice as it is manifested in Israel's historical sufferings? What portrayals of the afterlife do 2 Esdras and the Apocalypse of Peter provide?

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Discuss John's use of symbols and cryptic language. Do you think that the author deliberately made his mystical visions difficult to understand in order to confuse "outsiders" who might be hostile to his group?
2. Martin Luther thought that Revelation did not truly reveal the nature of God and Christ. Discuss the ethical strengths and religious limitations of John's view of the Deity and the divine purpose.
3. Revelation repeatedly shows God's kingdom triumphing only to be engaged again in further battles with evil, until the symbol and source of evil—the Dragon of Chaos—is finally exterminated by fire. Do you think that Revelation's frequently repeated battles between good and evil indicate a continuing cycle in which divine rule (the kingdom) alternates with wicked influences on humanity—a cycle in which each nation and individual participates until the final judgment? Cite specific passages to support your answer.
4. Apocalyptic works such as 1 Enoch, Revelation, 2 Esdras, and the Apocalypse of Peter contain horrific visions of the afterlife in which condemned souls suffer unending torment in hell. How do you reconcile Christianity's belief in an infinitely loving God with a doctrine of eternal punishment for sinners? If suffering on earth can be a learning process that brings insight and wisdom, what ethical purpose does the pain of the damned serve? Would a sane human father condemn a disobedient child to unendurable torment—without hope of release? Why do many religions ascribe this practice to God? In what ways do officially endorsed fears about the afterlife tend to support religious authorities and institutions?
5. Although their suggestions were later condemned by the church, some early Christian leaders, such as Origin, believed that God's unlimited love would eventually result in the redemption of all human souls. If God desires the salvation of all souls, how do you think he would accomplish this objective? How would Origin's doctrine of universal salvation work to enhance human appreciation of divine glory?

Terms and Concepts to Remember

the abyss
alpha
apocalypse (literary form)
apocalyptic literature
Armageddon
Domitian
Dragon
Enoch
Ephesus
Ezra
Gog
Laodicea
Magog
Michael
Millennium
Nero
Patmos
Pergamum
Philadelphia
Pseudepigrapha
Sardis
Serpent
Smyrna
symbol
Thyatira

Recommended Reading

Revelation

Barr, David L., ed. *Reading the Book of Revelation: A Resource for Students.* Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003. A collection of essays analyzing Revelation in its historical and social context.

Batto, Bernard F. *Slaying the Dragon: Mythmaking in the Biblical Tradition.* Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992. Devoted mainly to the Hebrew Bible; also shows how New Testament writers used archetypal myths to express their understanding of Christ and the cosmic battle between God and the primordial Dragon of Chaos.

Bauckham, Richard. *The Theology of the Book of Revelation.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Collins, A. Y. "The Apocalypse (Revelation)." In R. E. Brown et al., eds., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary,* 2nd ed., pp. 996–1016. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1990. A close reading of the text that places John's visions in their original Greco-Roman social and historical context.

———. *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse.* Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984. A carefully researched, clearly written, and rational analysis of the sociopolitical and theological forces affecting the composition of John's visions.

Collins, J. J. *The Encyclopedia of Apocalyptism,* Vol. 1: *The Origins of Apocalyptism in Judaism and Christianity.* New York: Continuum, 2002. A collection of essays, many insightful, on the apocalypic worldview.

Duff, Paul B. "Revelation." In M.D. Coogan, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Books of the Bible,* Vol. 2, pp. 256–271. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Examines the book's historical context and reviews traditional and scholarly interpretations.

Fiorenza, Elizabeth Schussler. *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment.* Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985.

Josephus, Flavius. "Josephus' Discourse to the Greeks Concerning Hades." In *Josephus: Complete Works.* Translated by W. Whiston. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel, 1960. Presents first-century Jewish views of the afterlife similar to those postulated in the Synoptic Gospels and Revelation.

Metzger, Bruce M. *Breaking the code: Understanding the Book of Revelation.* Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993 (reprint, 2006). A concise and accessible introduction to the book's complexities, emphasizing the author's use of symbolism.

Osborne, Grant O. *Revelation.* Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2002. Argues that the apostle John wrote Revelation and that the book is a prophecy of future events, views different from those presented in our text.

Perkins, Pheme. *The Book of Revelation.* Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1983. A brief and readable introduction for Roman Catholic and other students.

1 Enoch

Charlesworth, James H., ed. *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha,* Vol. 1: *Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments,* pp. 5–89. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983. Includes a translation and extensive explication of 1 Enoch (the later books of 2 and 3 Enoch are also included).

Nickelsburg, George W. E., and Vanderkam, James C. *I Enoch.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004. A new English translation based on all available texts, including the Dead Sea Scrolls.

2 Esdras

Humphrey, Edith M. "Esdras, Second Book of." In K. D. Sakenfeld, ed., *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible,* Vol. 2, p. 309–313. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007. A perceptive reading of the Jewish apocalypse, with attention to the later Christian additions.

Meyers, Jacob M. *1 and 2 Esdras.* Anchor Bible. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1974. Translations with helpful commentary.

The Apocalypse of Peter

Bernstein, Alan E. *The Formation of Hell: Death and Retribution in the Ancient and Early Christian Worlds.*

Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993. A comprehensive study of evolving ideas about the afterlife and the influence of Greco-Roman beliefs on Christian eschatology.

Ehrman, Bart D., ed. *The New Testament and Other Early Christian Writings: A Reader*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. Includes the complete text of the Apocalypse of Peter.

Fox, Robin Lane. *Pagans and Christians*. New York: Knopf, 1987. Includes discussion of Christian eschatology, the legal basis of Roman persecutions, and the cult of martyrdom.

Turner, Alice. *The History of Hell*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993. Discusses the social and legal environment of Rome in the second century CE that provides a context for Christian ideas about hell.